

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 16
19TH AUGUST 2018

THE TRAINS RUN ON TIME

BY BRYAN
BLEARS
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SOCIAL
PROBLEMS
HAVE
VANISHED...*

MOMMY DEAREST

BY ELLIS
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*EDDIE'S
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FEAR CELL ROB BLISS

THE ARTIST STEVEN HAVELOCK

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Steven Havelock, Gregory KH Bryant, Bryan Blears, Percy Greg, A Merritt*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 13, Issue 16

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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, Toilet Traumas and art. Submit fiction, articles, art, or links to your own site to editor@schlock.co.uk. We will also Toilet Trauma published and self-published novels. Please contact the editor at the above email address for further details.

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Another time, another place, a sojourn* by [Fridjiit](#). Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

This week, a man ponders about the solution to a social problem. Eddie experiences mother issues. A clinic develops a cure for phobias. A sister seeks vengeance for her brother. And a sick man finds horror in a very private place.

On Earth, General Howe continues his address. On Mars, the Astronaut rises for the last time. And in the Pacific, Throckmartin reaches the Place of the Sun King.

—Gavin Chappell

Available from Rogue Planet Press: [*Lovecraftiana: Lammas Eve 2018*](#).



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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"WELL PHILIP, JUDGING BY THIS X-RAY IT LOOKS LIKE WE'RE GOING TO HAVE TO PUT A CANDLE IN THERE!"

Vincent is an artist who has consistently been on assignment in the art world for over twenty years. Throughout his career he has acquired a toolbox of diverse skills (from freehand drawing to digital design, t-shirt designer to muralist). His styles range from the wildly abstract to pulp style comics.

In 2013, his work in END TIMES won an award in the Best Horror Anthology category for that year. When Vincent is not at his drawing board he can be found in the classroom teaching cartooning and illustration to his students at Westchester Community College in Valhalla NY.

He lives in Mamaroneck NY with his wife Jennie and dog Skip.

<https://www.freelanced.com/vincentdavis>

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THE TRAINS RUN ON TIME by Bryan Blears

We used to have a homeless problem around here. Three years ago, if you walked from one side of town to the other, you'd pass at least two dozen people sleeping rough, wrapped up in wet bundles in the doorways. They'd ask you for change as you walked beneath the railway bridge, sorry-faced, frightened. As if they knew what was coming.

Now, you won't find a single one.

You don't even get the old gypsy woman playing the accordion outside Footlocker anymore, or the Africans, selling their knock-off sunglasses and umbrellas from their stalls.

All of the city's social problems have vanished, it seems. But you won't see any politician mention it, and the media seems to pretend that nothing has happened.

When I ask, nobody seems to have the faintest idea what I'm talking about. They scratch their heads as though I was mentioning something from forty or fifty years ago.

"Don't you remember how it was around here?" I ask.

A glassy look comes over their eyes and they say, well, it's nice now, so what are you worrying about?

But it was 2016, I insist. Here, look at this picture. They look down at the photograph in my hand—the only one I have left—like it's a blank piece of paper. Here's the funny thing. All of the digital ones have been corrupted somehow.

People talk to me as though I'm going crazy. You need to relax, they tell me. Stop worrying about things so much.

But I do worry. I worry about the flashes in the middle of the night.

About the vanishings.

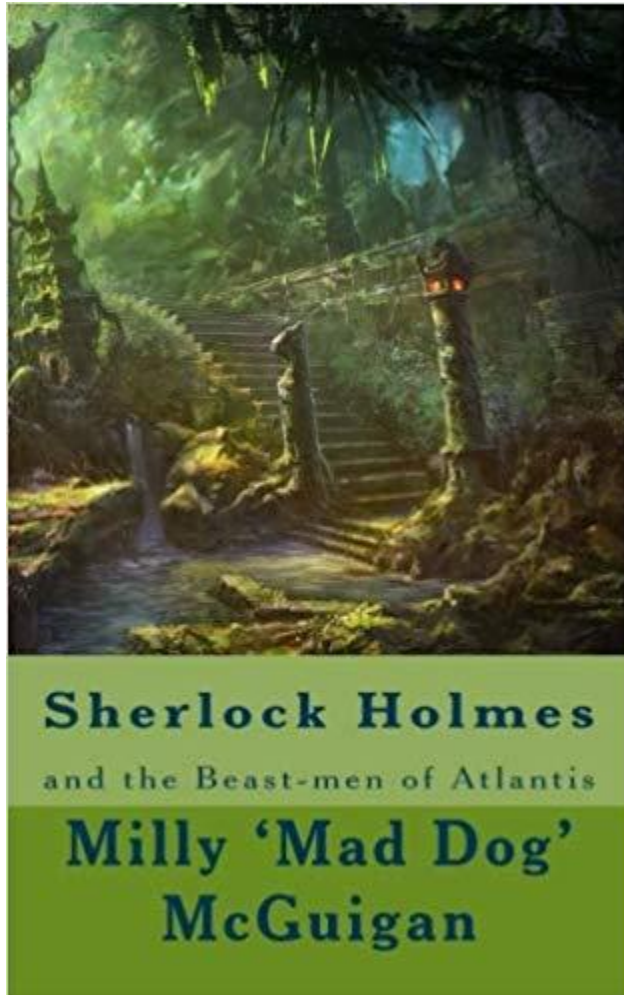
But nobody seems concerned about that. All they know is that now, the trains run on time. You can get from Manchester to London in thirty minutes now. And there's not a homeless person in sight.

THE END

Bio: Bryan Blears is a writer of fiction and non-fiction from Manchester, England. He currently works for the National Health Service.

Twitter: @bryanblears

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MOMMY DEAREST by Ellis Hastings

It was a cloudy day in 2004 when Edgar “Eddie” King was first assaulted by his childhood bullies. Up until that dark moment in time, which would remain embedded like a scar in his memory for the remainder of his life, Eddie had simply been picked on and called names. He was known throughout the school not by his birthright, but by the pseudonym “Mama’s Boy” cast unto him like a dark cloud hijacking a sunny day. That was okay, however, because it never bothered him much. In fact, the young boy was more curious as to why it was such a taboo in childhood to be considered a mama’s boy. What was so wrong with having a mother you love? He often wondered.

“I know it’s hard, Ed, but you have to empathize with those bullies,” Eddie’s father would tell him one day after school. “Not every kid is fortunate enough to have a mother that loves them as much as yours loves you.”

Three years after offering this encouragement to his son, Eddie’s father was killed in a massive car pile-up on his way to work one cold December morning. The police report revealed the driver at fault, a nineteen-year-old Biology major from Georgia Tech heading home on winter break, had drank one too many malt beverages the night before. The impairment, coupled with a patch of black ice and worn brakes, caused the driver to lose control of his vehicle in the middle of a busy intersection. Amongst the sound of a dozen car horns blazing and the squeal of rubber on pavement, the top-heavy Tahoe spun sideways, where it struck a pothole and flipped three times, bulldozing Eddie’s father’s 1999 Saturn on the third rotation. It lost its momentum after turning the Saturn into a crushed beer can. No one else—not even the drunk driver—suffered more than a few broken bones.

Eddie still remembers how his mother broke the news. It happened when he was in English class—which he excelled in due to his studious nature. Interrupting the teacher’s lesson covering run-on sentences, the intercom rang. Every child in the room cast their eyes to the small circle on the ceiling. Watching it as if a disembodied arm would fall from it and pull one of them into the static above.

“Mrs. Carr?” an old and raspy voice called down.

“This is she,” Eddie’s teacher replied disinterestedly; eyes remaining fixed on the dry erase board with several example sentences scrawled across the surface in red and green marker.

The voice paused, and the sound of shuffling papers was heard, “Can we have Edgar King for checkout?”

The teacher dropped her marker and glanced over her shoulder to make sure the young boy hadn’t gone to the restroom or skipped class. Not that the bright child would ever consider such a thing. “He’ll be right there.”

The class went silent and turned to the quirky child. Eddie felt a pit the size of an apple core expand in his stomach. Something wasn’t right, his gut instinct told him. His dad or mom never

checked him out from school unless it was his birthday. They didn't even check him out when his dog had gotten run over by a distracted driver two months prior. He didn't know what was wrong but knew that something dreadful awaited him at the end of that long, dimly lit walk to the front office.

A faint smile spread across Mrs. Carr's lips, "Mr. King, I guess it's your lucky day."

Eddie nodded quietly; beads of sweat slowly beginning to form on the ridge of his widow's peak. He wiped them away absentmindedly and packed up his stuff, then threw his plain black bookbag over his shoulder and left the room.

When Eddie got to the office, his mother was standing there waiting for him. She had a comfortable outfit on that said she had been at home on the couch prior to checking him out; sweatpants and, oddly enough, one of his father's shirts which was a size too large and, as a result, bagged down to her waist like a mini-skirt. Her strawberry blonde hair was brushed to one side but remained frizzy and unkempt in other parts, signalling that she hadn't spent much time getting ready before heading to the school. The strangest thing in the picture, however, was that she was wearing a pair of sunglasses indoors.

"Mom?" Eddie said.

"Hi..." she managed, before having to clear her throat. "Hi, Eddie. I just thought I'd take you out to get some ice cream."

Now, Eddie's concern had become a raging wildfire. "Why, mom?"

"Oh, you've just been doing so well in your classes, and I know how upset you've been over those mean kids taunting, so I thought you deserved a break from school."

This was an obvious lie, a twelve-year-old Edgar King realized, but to make his mom feel better, he decided to play dumb until after they got their frozen treat.

After that day, Eddie's world was flipped on its axis. He had always been closer to his mother than his father, but he still loved his dad more than words could express. Although he wasn't much into sports, Eddie still loved watching them with his father to bond. His mother would watch with them sometimes, but she never shared the same infectious enthusiasm as Eddie's father had.

Now that he was left bastardized in such a cruel and unforgiving world, Eddie's only means of influence in his life was his mommy dearest. As a result, Eddie became less masculine than he already was at his pre-pubescent preteen age and became more of what his tormentors would call a sissy.

When the year 2004 rolled around, Eddie had been without a father for nearly a year, and the changes in his behaviour had become obvious—a broken thumb jutting from an otherwise undamaged hand. Eddie hadn't noticed how much more "girly" he had become, but the other

kids in school did, and they weren't going to let the sissy-boy get by the rest of junior high unscathed.

On a cloudy day in the spring of eighth grade, the bullies left school early and headed to Eddie's house where they waited for him in the bushes. Upon Eddie's approach up the stone walkway to his porch, the kids pounced, hitting him with anything they could find; large sticks, rocks, and even an old gym sock filled with quarters, not stopping until the boy's face was beaten raw.

Once she heard the cries of her only child, Mrs. King's motherly instinct kicked in. She rushed outside right on time to see Eddie's childhood bullies running up the street, and her son lying semi-conscious in the front yard. His nose was broken, hooking so dramatically to the left that he would no longer be able to smell from that nostril. His right eye socket was fractured and had swollen to the size of an orange, with the bloody eye in the centre resembling the naval. Various dark purple, almost black, pockets of blood were arranged randomly across his face. When Eddie saw his mother, he began to bawl. Mrs. King could see that a few of his front teeth had been knocked from his mouth during the beating.

"Oh, Eddie!" she shrieked, rushing to her son's aid and taking him in her arms, cradling him like a baby. "What have they done to you?" She showered his forehead with kisses and began to cry, herself.

"We are going to go to the police, Eddie. Yes, we will. And those policemen are going to find those devil children and take them to jail for a long time. And if those bullies try to fight back, the policemen are going to hurt them real bad first. Yes, they will!"

Mrs. King took Eddie to the hospital where he was treated for several facial fractures. A few days later, she used money from her late husband's will to pay for dental implants for Eddie's missing teeth. The small King family then pressed charges against the few attackers Eddie was able to remember. After a short-lived battle in court, Eddie and his mother lost due to there supposedly being an insufficient amount of evidence. On this day, Edgar King discovered that sometimes there's no such thing as justice. But like the mean names the kids in school called him, Eddie didn't care much. At least he had his mommy dearest: the first and most important woman in a young boy's life.

Three years later, when Eddie was a senior in high school, he had surprisingly found a date to the school prom. By this time in his life, his glasses had gotten thicker, his teeth needed more dental work, and his midline had grown significantly. In the months leading up to the prom, Eddie had asked a shy girl in his math class that he found cute if she would go with him, but she turned him down. He then asked another crush of his to accompany him, but she too had declined. With a sigh, Eddie decided that prom wasn't for him.

On the Wednesday just days before the big dance, Eddie was approached in the hall by a stunning girl; a blonde-haired bombshell who was one of the most popular girls on the cheerleading team. As expected, she had been dating the starting quarterback—who just so happened to be the same kid that had broken Eddie's nose with the sock full of coins three years prior. She was set to go to prom with the football captain until she caught him cheating on her

with another, more voluptuous member of the cheerleading squad. Upon this discovery, she called it off, then walked up the hall where she found Eddie, and asked the young man with the disfigured nose if he would like to take her to prom that Friday instead.

When Eddie got home that afternoon, he found he was happy in what felt like the first time since his father was alive. He rushed down the hall to the living room where his mother resided in her favourite hand-me-down chair, drinking a tall, steaming mug of chamomile tea.

“Hello, dear,” she said, getting up from the recliner to hug her beloved son. “You seem happy today. Is there any news you would like to share?”

“I’ve got a date, Mom!” Eddie declared, on top of the world.

Her expression of joy instantly soured, “A date?”

Eddie nodded, “Uh huh. It’s with one of the prettiest cheerleaders in the whole school. We’re going to prom on Friday. But guess what else!”

“What?” The lack of enthusiasm was obvious in her tone.

“She asked me!”

“Eddie, I don’t know...”

At this, the young man rolled his eyes, “Oh, come on, Mom. I mean, I know it seems too good to be true, but at least I can go to prom this year. If she was just playing around with me, she wouldn’t have been able to hold back laughter when I said yes.”

“It’s not that, Eddie,” His mother sighed. “You’re a scrumptiously cute boy, and any girl would be beyond lucky to have you. But girls can be so mean. So... vicious.”

“But, Mom—”

“You don’t need any of those soul-suckers in your life, honey. You’re too good for them. The only woman you need is Mommy Dearest.”

Upon her last statement, Eddie visibly cringed. When he was younger he’d delighted in calling his mother “Mommy Dearest,” because that was what she was to him. But now, in High School—and after his acne-infested goth phase—Edgar King had outgrown that part of his life. He still loved his mother, but he was no longer that weird kid coddled by his over-protective widow of a parent.

He was seventeen and had a full scholarship to the University of Georgia waiting for him. He was a man now—or so he liked to consider himself, as most seventeen-year-olds do. Deciding he was going to live his life for himself, not his mother, the shy chubby kid with the disfigured nose went to prom with a cheerleader. Yet, still, he couldn’t shake the worry in the back of his mind.

Part of him feared his mother was right; that he would show up to prom only to find his date dancing with someone else, and that he would become the laughing stock of the entire school. He'd read the book *Carrie* a couple years ago; he knew how savage teenagers could be—especially when it came to the spring dance.

Years had passed since prom night. At first, the young lady had gone with the shyest kid in school to spite her cheating ex-boyfriend. However, during the slow dance, when the lights were dimmed, and all that was illuminated beneath the blue glow above was the soft, innocent face of Edgar King, something changed in the cheerleader's heart. She found herself oddly charmed by the young man. Sure, he had a little more weight hanging from his hips than she cared for, but that could be changed.

She discovered that she and Eddie shared quite a bit in common. They listened to the same music, had a soft spot for romantic comedies, and were both secret aficionados of horror literature. At the end of the night, when Eddie dropped her off in his mother's old, half-broken Chrysler convertible, she sent him a text saying that she had a great time and would like to go to dinner with him before graduation. Now, a decade later, the two of them were still together.

Mommy Dearest had nearly lost her mind when her son came home to visit during the Winter break in his senior year of college. The first thing out of her son's mouth when he walked into the living room—neglecting to give her a hug, mind you—was an inquiry as to whether or not he would be able to “borrow” his grandmother's old wedding ring. The one with not a diamond, but a beautiful red ruby engraved in the centre in the shape of a heart.

“You need this for?” she asked rhetorically.

Eddie, no longer overweight, but still a tad reserved, looked at his feet embarrassed, then laughed softly. “Mother...”

“Don't you mother me, young man,” She snapped, “I know what you want that ring for, and you can't have it. I forbid it!”

Eddie shot his gaze towards his mother; face growing red with fury. She had tried to keep him from going to prom with Amber, and now she was trying to prevent him from marrying her: the love of his life, and the newly most important woman in the world to him.

“You can't forbid me. I'm a grown man!”

“Oh, please. You said that shit when you were seventeen!”

“Of course I did. I was seventeen, Mom. But I'm not a kid anymore; I've landed a job with the firm I've been interning at for after graduation, and they even gave me a hefty sign-on bonus. I'll be able to buy my own apartment after I'm out of the dorms. I can take care of myself, so I should be allowed to marry Amber.”

Marry Amber, those words struck a sour note in Mommy Dearest's heart. For the first time since her husband's death, she felt an odd, overwhelming sense of; anger, grief, betrayal, and even a hint of mourning all blended together in one colossal shit smoothie.

"I said no," The haggard old widow held firmed; unmoved by his plea.

"You do know this isn't going to stop me from marrying her, right?"

Mommy Dearest didn't respond. Her face held tight in her favourite chair in the living room; thin lips pulled back in a snarl. Suddenly, a single tear sprouted from her right eye, running down her cheek and dropping from the chin. A faint plopping like the sound of a pebble skipping across a lake was heard as the droplet landed in her cup.

This tear opened the flood gates, and she no longer resembled a witch, but instead what she actually was in reality; an underweight, stressed and depressed woman who, with every year she lived, took one step closer to the grave. Her physical appearance said it all, especially when she was most vulnerable—like in this moment.

Eddie sighed, "I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to upset you."

Mommy Dearest continued her pitiful weeps into the old scarf Eddie had given her for Mother's Day when he was in High School: the one with the hearts and the phrase, "I love you now and forever. Happy Mother's Day," stitched into the fabric.

"Mom. Don't cry, please. You know I'll always love you."

She looked up; her blue eyes broken and filled with tears, "But you love her more. What ever happened to me being Mommy Dearest: the first and most important woman in your life? You know, that's what your father always said when he was alive, that a mother is more important than a wife. He held strong to those convictions up until the day your grandmother passed away."

"It's not that I love her more. It's a different type of love, Mom. You were married to dad for fifteen years, you should know that."

"But you put her above me. Remember when we used to go to the mall and I'd buy us a pastry at the bakery every Friday after school? What happened to those days, Eddie?"

The warmth of guilt began to grow inside Eddie. His mother was right. After he began dating Amber, Fridays had stopped being Mother-son days, and were instead replaced with Amber-Eddie date nights.

"But, Mom. You know I love you more than the world itself, and I always will. I'm sorry, but I'm a man now and I need to prioritize starting a family of my own. You should know that. Plus, look on the bright side, maybe in a few years you'll be Grandma Dearest."

The old woman's eyes bulged from her skull, "No!" she shrieked.

Eddie flinched; taking a large step back.

"I don't want to be Grandma Dearest. I want to be Mommy Dearest! There's only one Edgar King and he's mine not Amber Goretzka's!"

"Mom, you have to move on. Are you even hearing yourself right now? You sound like a crazy person."

"Oh, I'm the crazy person? I'm not the one moving out and abandoning his dear old mother in her old age. What if I fall, Eddie? What if I fall and crack my skull on that table over there and can't get back up? Do you really want to come home to visit one day only to find my rotting body covered in flies and with my brain dried on the floor like spilt oatmeal?"

Eddie grew nauseated and guiltier. His mother was clearly not okay mentally; it was obvious she hadn't been since the day her husband died. Eddie knew something was different about her when he saw her wearing his father's oversized shirt and those sunglasses to conceal the tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not going to let you guilt me into moving back in after college. In a perfect world, what did you think was going to happen when I grew up?"

"Well..." Mommy Dearest thought about it for a moment, then said, "The plan was that after college you would take a job close to home and move back in to care for me like the good boy you always were growing up. Then, after I died, I figured you would find yourself a nice, respectful lady to marry and of whom you would live with in this house with my ashes in a jar on the mantel."

Eddie didn't know how to respond. It was an odd feeling, but for the first time in his life, Edgar King found himself legitimately frightened of his mother. His mother: the woman who nurtured and loved him when no one else would, for God's sake. That wasn't natural, but then again, nothing about his relationship with his mother growing up ever was. Sigmund Freud would love me he thought bitterly.

"Mom, you need help, but I'm afraid I'm not the person who can get you to where you need to be... mentally."

By now, Mommy Dearest's crying had ceased. She now sat in silence; eyes red and stinging from the salt.

"I can pay the rent for you to live in a nice home—"

"A home? Why? So you can completely abandon me and move in with that whore you want to marry? You know fragile old women like myself don't live long after they're stuffed into one of those places!"

“Mom, please just listen to me,” Eddie begged.

“You know, Eddie, I think that’s precisely what you want to happen, isn’t it? You want to put me in one of those prisons, so I’ll end up withering away and die within the year. That way I’ll no longer be a nuisance to you. Tell me the truth, Eddie. You can’t lie to me, I’m your mother.”

The young man looked his mother directly in the eyes and said, without flinching, “That’s not true, Mom. I want you to live somewhere you can be looked after and cared for every day. I can’t be there for you all the time anymore,” He sighed. “Look, I’m not going to force you to go to an assisted living facility, but please believe me when I say I think it’s for the best.”

“An assisted living facility? Oh, please. You can’t even say what it really is: A God damn death camp for the elderly!”

Eddie cringed, “Mom, please stop calling it that.”

“I’m done arguing, Eddie. I’m not going. I’m going to stay right here in this living room, in this chair, drinking my chamomile tea. Go marry Amber if you want, but just know that I’ll always be here for you waiting, Eddie. I’m not going to get remarried, I’m not going to date anyone, and I’m not going to make any friends. You’re my world, Eddie dear, and I know that deep down you know I’m your world, too. You’re just afraid to admit it to yourself, but that’s okay. I understand, and I will be right here waiting for you with open arms for when you’re done with Amber and decide to come back to your Mommy Dearest. Do you understand and agree?”

Eddie didn’t understand anything she said anymore, and in the back of his mind he wondered if his old mother was even anywhere in that woman, or if she was just an empty shell. However, to humour her, he said, “Okay, yes. I agree.”

A warm smile spread across Mommy Dearest’s face, and for a brief moment, Eddie caught a glimpse of the compassionate, loving woman she once was.

“Good. I’ll see you soon?”

“Okay.”

“Perfect. I love you, Eddie dear.”

“I love you too, Mom,” Eddie leaned down and gave his mother a hug and kiss on the cheek, then he left.

In the following months, Eddie found himself unable to muster the courage to even check on his mother, except calling her and wishing her a happy birthday, as well as sending her a half-assed card and thoughtless gift, in the February following that real-life nightmare before Christmas.

Now, it was July—the most humid month of the year in Georgia—and Edgar King hadn't so much as heard from his mom in nearly five whole months. Deep down he still loved and cared for her, and worried about her every day, but he was no longer brave enough to speak to her. Every time he did he found that he had trouble sleeping at night and looking his now-fiancé in the face.

Sometimes, when Eddie's lips met the lips of Amber Goretzka—who was set to become Amber King this November—he would pull back after breaking the kiss and see his mother's tight and thin-lipped face grinning evilly back at him.

I told you a mother is always the most important woman in a man's life the horrid expression on Mommy Dearest's face would say. The image would remain burned into Eddie's mind until he closed his eyes and counted to ten. Fortunately, after reopening his eyes, Amber's beautiful and concerned face was always peering back at him.

“Are you alright, Ed?” She would ask. Eddie had asked her to kindly stop calling him Eddie after that incident with his mother. Although Amber was confused as to why, she did as asked without question.

Eddie would then lie to Amber and tell her he was just having a bad migraine and that he was feeling better now. He had never had migraines before in his life, and Eddie could sense that Amber knew he was holding something back, but she never asked him what was truly on his mind. Thank God, Eddie thought. What would I tell her if she asked what was really wrong? That I can see my fucking mother's face in the place of hers sometimes when we kiss? Thankfully, Amber would simply kiss him on the cheek and tell him that a good night's rest would make everything better. She would then roll onto her left side and pull the covers up to her chin. It was how she always slept; Eddie found the habit endearing.

One day in July when Eddie was at work finishing up a project at his desk, he received a text around five in the afternoon from Amber. It read: Ed, is there any way you could take off work a little early? I've been feeling in the mood lately and was thinking we could have a romantic home-date tonight. I'll even let you have dessert before dinner ;).

Glancing over his shoulder to make sure there wasn't a nosey co-worker of his spying on his texts, he sent back: I'm just about done with things at the office. Will be on my way soon. He wanted to say something sexy, but Eddie always thought he sounded stupid when he tried to talk dirty. A few minutes later he felt his upper thigh spasm as his phone vibrated with another message from Amber.

Unrelated: I saw your mother earlier today. She came by the apartment with flowers. I invited her in, and we talked over some tea. She sat me down and admitted that she wasn't very fond of me since we started dating because she was afraid I was trying to steal you away from her. What a silly thing for her to think, right? I told her that I would never dream of doing such a thing and that a mother is the first and most important woman in a man's life. She apologized again for her cold behaviour and told me that she was just working through a tough time, with the anniversary of your father's death recently passing, and that she had finally come to terms with the

relationship. We talked some more, and she even revealed to me that she had finally started dating again. I am so happy for your mother. I'm sure she's already told you about the tall, long-haired young blond fellow she's been seeing. She says she doesn't know his age but that he must be no more than thirty-five, if that. I never took your mother for the dating type, Ed, but especially not as a cougar! We definitely need to have a double date with her and her new accessory soon. Can you promise me that you'll call your mother after dinner? Please?

Eddie rolled his eyes, then felt a sudden pang of paranoia strike him. He hadn't felt this sixth sense since the day he heard his name come over the intercom. Without trying to worry Amber, he shot back a short and sweet: Ok. I promise. Then, Eddie logged off the outdated desktop computer he was forced to use for work, threw his jacket over his shoulder, and left.

When Eddie arrived at his apartment, he found the door locked. He slid the key in and twisted it to the right until hearing the pop of the bolt retracting. He pushed the door open slowly and entered. The lights weren't off but were adjusted so the room was dimly lit. A smell of honey citrus wafted from the open bedroom. Amber was wearing Eddie's favourite perfume, and for the time being, Eddie completely forgot about the rotten feeling in his gut.

Something small crushed beneath Eddie's shoe when he took a step forward. He flinched, although he didn't know why.

"Force of habit," he said to himself, turning his gaze to what lie beneath his feet. Rose petals decorated the tiled floor, leading in a meticulously organized trail to the darkened bedroom. A devious grin spread across his lips. Without saying a word, Eddie slipped off his shoes, removed his nice, navy-blue jacket, and tiptoed into the bedroom. What he found inside caused his heart to sink.

Amber was lying on her left side; beige comforter pulled up to her chin. She had fallen asleep waiting for him to get home. Sighing, Eddie took a seat on the bed; his fiancé's head bobbing rhythmically with the rocking. It all seemed fake—contrived—that her head unnaturally nodded with the vibrations. She must be playing a prank on me, Eddie thought.

"I know you're awake," he said.

He received no response. Eddie laughed bitterly and shook his head. It seemed to him that Amber would often fall asleep before his arrival home.

"Guess I'm not sexy enough," Eddie joked.

Since him and Amber had started dating years ago, he'd lost a few dozen pounds and replaced them with muscle. His nose was still disfigured, as it had been for all his young adult life, but Edgar King knew that, now fully-matured, he was a deadly handsome man.

"Awake yet?" He nudged Amber gently. Her head bobbed again; she was out cold. Eddie decided not to disturb her, but she really owed him his dessert tomorrow night. He got up to make dinner but changed his mind upon realizing he wasn't very hungry. He'd eaten a late lunch

at work and was honestly quite tired himself, so he decided to hit the hay like Amber.

“Goodnight, my love,” Eddie said. He leaned forward and kissed his sleeping beauty’s temple. Instead of being greeted by the warm touch of her skin against his lips, he felt frozen wax. His eyes went wide.

“Are you feeling under the weather?” he asked, attempting to wake her. “Amber?”

He received no response.

Now, Eddie’s paranoia had given way to panic. He stripped the covers from the bed and almost fainted upon seeing Amber’s head turn to the right. It now faced the same direction as her pale and blood-spattered back. Crying out, Eddie lunged away. The sudden movement caused Amber’s head to topple from the bed, landing on the floor with a dull thud.

Her unmoving eyes were now locked on Eddie accusingly. With a quivering hand, Eddie removed his phone from his pocket and reread Amber’s last text, sent a little less than an hour ago—too short for her to have turned cold.

She was afraid I was trying to steal you away from her. What a silly thing for her to think, right? I told her I would never dream of doing that, and that a mother is the first and most important woman in a man’s life.

“Oh God, Mom!” Eddie declared.

He ran to the end of the room and flipped on the lights. The bed was covered with a crimson veil: rose petals and blood.

“What did you do!?! Oh fuck, what did you do?” His legs went out from under him, and he fell into a sitting position on the floor; back pressed against the wall. He couldn’t remove his eyes from the gory spectacle.

“Oh God, Mom. You couldn’t have done this. Not this,” His eyes, blurred with tears, fell upon the dresser. Sitting on the edge was Amber’s phone; a green notification light blinking from the top. He stumbled to his feet and dashed for it. Simultaneously waking the phone up and snatching it from the table, Eddie typed in Amber’s password. Below the time was a single notification that read: 1 new voicemail from 678-967-3065.

The number, Eddie immediately recognized, was his mother’s. The voicemail was left at 7:52. It was now 8:01. Eddie felt a chill run down his spine, raising the small hairs on the nape of his neck as he realized the texts—or at least the last one—may not have been from Amber at all. Swallowing his courage, and with tears in his eyes, Eddie laid the phone back on the dresser and pressed play.

“Eddie dear, are you coming home soon to visit your Mommy Dearest? I’m waiting for you with open arms and lots of hugs and kisses. Oh, and white macadamia nut cookies—your favourite. I

hold no grudges against you, dear, so don't be afraid to come back home. I hope to see you soon. Bye now, sweetie."

Eddie stood frozen in place for several minutes before his mind processed the message. He listened to it again and again, praying that his mind was just getting the better of him and that he'd wake up from this nightmare soon. Finally, after his tortured mind could comprehend the matter of fact, Eddie decided to pay his mom a visit. He dialled the police and gave them his mother's address, then laid a gentle hand on Amber's headless body.

"I'm sorry," he managed, lip quivering. "I'm so God damn sorry. I did this to you. Mom needed help, but I let her stay in that damn house instead of taking action when I should have. I'll make this right, Amber," Eddie left his apartment and got in his car. He cranked in on then sped off towards his childhood home.

By the time Eddie reached the house, the police had already barricaded it with crime scene tape. Stepping over the golden line at the base of the driveway, Eddie followed the old, moss-covered stone walkway to the front porch. He was stopped by a middle-aged police officer, who laid a gentle-yet-firm hand on his shoulder and told him not to enter. Eddie shrugged it off and opened the door.

His mind was brought back to an earlier memory. One that was identical every day after school, where he'd walk this same path. He'd enter his home and venture down the hall to the living room where he'd find Mommy Dearest sitting in her floral-pattern recliner with a cup of chamomile tea beside her on the coffee table.

I'm sorry, Mom, Eddie thought as he crossed the threshold into his old home, ducking beneath the cobwebs draping from the light posts above. I made you do it, didn't I? I should've visited more. I should've made you go to a nursing home. I should have done something.

A group of police officers were standing in the living room when Eddie entered. They were distracted with their cups of gas station coffee and small talk. They barely seemed to notice him. Eddie froze in his tracks.

"Mom?" he called out, "I'm home."

This immediately caught their attention.

"You shouldn't be here," one of the cops said, bounding towards him.

Eddie sidestepped the officer and turned to the right. His eyes fell upon his mother sitting in her favourite chair with a half-empty mug of chamomile tea beside her. The liquid had grown cold and rotten. Mommy Dearest was dead. Her face drooped low, as if the skin was about to slough off; revealing the skull beneath. Her withered lips were pulled back in a permanent snarl. Her hands curled in on themselves and rested in her lap, and her eyes—two sunken craters—seemed

to watch him with disdain, no longer recognizing the man who had once been her son.

The fixed expression of death on Mommy Dearest's face seemed to say what every child dreads to hear from a parent: I'm not angry, I'm just disappointed.

He broke into tears and began to fall towards the ground but was caught by one of the officers.

"Woah. Take it easy, man," The startled cop said as he helped Eddie to his feet. "We told you not to come in here for a reason."

"How long?" Eddie asked through tears.

"What?"

"How long has she been like... this?"

The cop looked at Mommy Dearest who had long passed the stages of rigor mortis. Her skin was pale except for her swollen ankles which were a deep, blackish-purple from the accumulated blood beneath the flesh.

"I'm no expert, but I'd say it's at least been several days," The young cop took him gently by the arm and led him outside to an ambulance waiting at the curb.

"Hey, Lewis?" The officer called to the technician unloading the stretcher—a red contraption labelled Ferno—from the back.

"What?" asked the EMT named Lewis. He pulled the bed all the way out and depressed the red handle at the foot, lowering the wheels to the ground.

"You guys won't be needed for much. Just a confirmation."

The EMT relayed the information to his partner—a balding man in his early thirties named Speagle. Reloading the stretcher into the ambulance, Lewis approached the man now without a father or mother.

"Are you alright?"

Eddie nodded, although he didn't hear what the EMT had said. His mind was still stuck on the image of his mother sitting dead in the recliner, watching him, waiting for him. She died before Amber. But the voicemail?

"You sure don't look alright. If you want to go to the hospital to get checked out, we'd be happy to take you. Not every ailment's physical."

"I'm fine," Eddie mumbled.

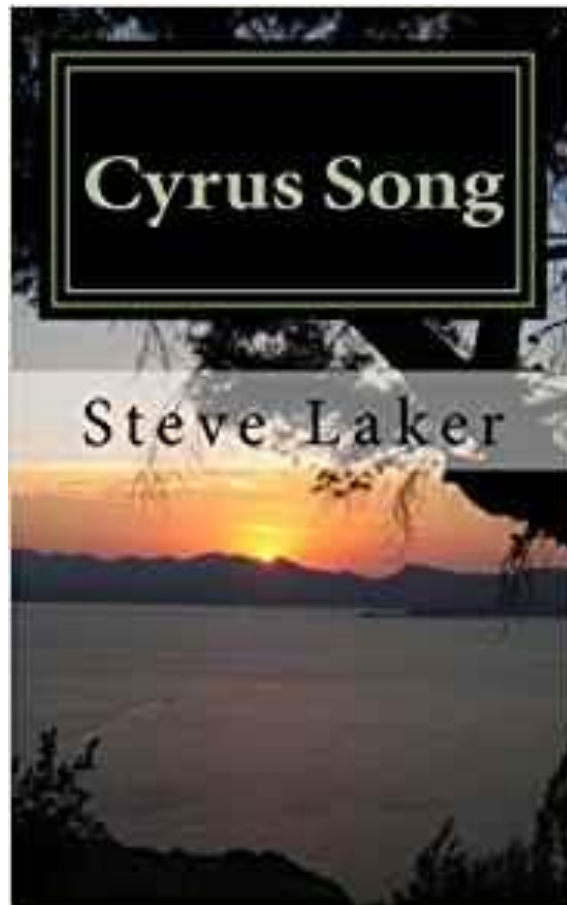
Lewis frowned, “Alright. Well, you know where to find us if you change your mind,” He held up a peace sign. “Station 2, down in Ellenwood.” The EMT climbed into the ambulance, turned the red and white flashing scene lights off, and drove away.

Eddie stayed on scene, sitting on the curb at the base of the driveway, long after the police and ambulance personnel left. When he finally got up to leave, he looked at his watch. It was a quarter past five in the morning.

He drugged to his car, then looked back at his childhood home one last time. Standing where he had sat moments earlier was a thin, and fairly tall man with long, bright blond hair—looking almost white beneath the streetlight—stopping at his shoulders. His complexion was pale and unblemished, and his clothes were uncharacteristic. The man’s unblinking eyes were green like an emerald and haunted Eddie—perhaps even more than the discovery of both his fiancé and mother’s dead bodies combined.

Silently, the green-eyed man lifted one long, thin arm and waved kindly at Eddie. A gesture that said; goodbye for now. Eddie didn’t know why, but temporarily losing control of the muscles in his arm, he waved back at the man. When Eddie blinked the man was gone.

THE END



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FEAR CELL by Rob Bliss

Medicine is not without its radical treatments. All sciences must attempt new methods or stagnate into antediluvian voodoo. Phrenology, after all, went the way of the dodo, yet it was once a legitimate medicine.

We here at the Clinic have pioneered the 'Fear Cell'. Despite its controversy, it has been quite successful. Nothing is perfect, of course, but we come close to perfection.

Essentially, the subject comes to us wishing to alleviate themselves of a phobia. Or they have been referred to us by a qualified psychiatric establishment. If they confess to suffer to more than one phobia, we only work on one at a time. Residual curing may occur, however. But, generally, over-stimulation of the fear impulse can too often have negative, anti-social results.

And unfortunately these peculiarities have made our method somewhat controversial.

For example, a common phobia: fear of snakes. The subject is put into the 'Fear Cell'. It is a rectangular walled bed with a lid (some have termed it a coffin—we do not favour this moniker) which is composed of a silicon-plastic compound with prismatic projection properties. A mouthful, I know, but I can't reveal too much, since its composition is a trade secret.

Within the box is projected film and photographic images of the phobia. We actually use claustrophobia as a tool. If the snake is far removed from the subject, then the fear is lessened and the treatment not as effective; therefore, we surround the subject with the object of their fear, passed their comfort zone to force them to acknowledge and deal with the snake.

A radical cure, but one that works. Cruelty is a matter of perspective.

The subject has snakes writhing across their body, slithering by their feet, hissing with gaped mouths beside their necks. All are images projected on the inside lid and walls of the coffin (my apologies), and the subject will mentally project the two-dimensional images into the third dimensions and see—even feel—the serpents entwining around their limbs. The coffin is sound-proof so the subject is allowed to scream at will.

After the first day, the subject is, of course, traumatized. After the first week, however, there is a marked improvement. The daily increments start at three hours a day, then six, then eight, up to ten hours a day seeing, hearing, feeling, even smelling the phobia, all senses coming into play. The human brain is an incredible mechanism, which we are still exploring to know its full potential and power.

The subject soon sees a snake in every cylindrical, phallic object. A pen, twisted wires, a straw, a garden hose, human hair. Even, if male, their own penises. Females have sometimes even projected snake-like properties on their clitorises or nipples, if these body parts are longer than average. Men are terrified to urinate at first and a catheter must be inserted. Masturbation and sex are impossible. There are side-effects, naturally.

But soon enough, since the subject perceives snakes in everything, they become accustomed to them. Snakes become a part of their newly-constructed world; instead of expending energies avoiding snakes, fearing them, the subject now embraces the fear, allows the reptile a place in the new order of their world. Acceptance, in a word.

I mentioned peculiarities and controversy. You have assuredly heard of Alex S., our former patient. A snake phobic whom we cured, I assure you. The difficulty came when he became so accustomed to snakes in his world that he needed them. Constructed them when they did not exist. Not many snakes in a bachelor apartment in the crowded city where he lived.

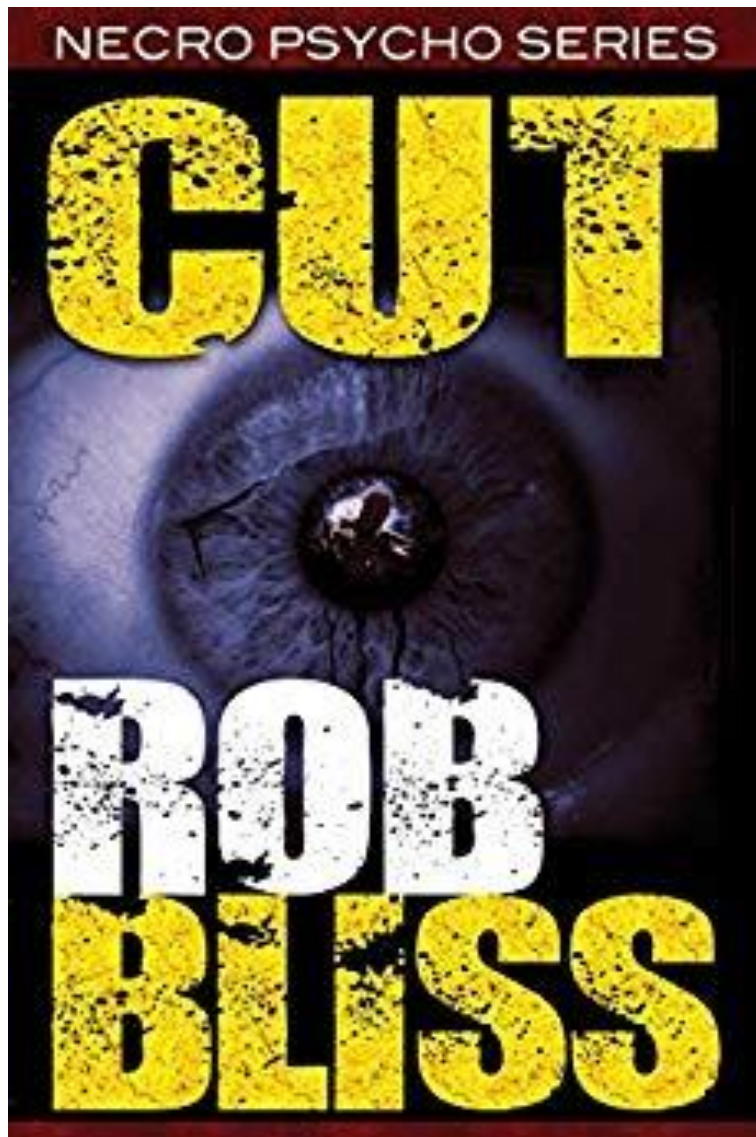
Yes, it's true that he had once been a heroin addict. But we residually cured him of that as well. (Now our 'Fear Cell' is being studied for the substance addict, to our honour.) However, in the case of Alex S., instead of injecting his veins with syringes, he tied two of them to his inner left wrist and filled them with bleach, anti-freeze, sometimes with heroin, various other poisons. Allegations that he once tried to solicit an AIDS-infected person for a vial of their blood have never been proven.

Wearing long sleeves, Alex S. approached random persons on the street, in stores, and stabbed them with his 'serpent's fangs', as he called the syringes. Many were made sick, some died. We mourn their loss. As you may have heard, Alex S. has yet to be apprehended and his whereabouts are unknown. But we assure you as we have assured the authorities that the 'Fear Cell' is eighty-six percent effective. Some patients of ours are peculiarities.

As I said, no medical procedure, ancient or modern, is perfect. We are human beings, despite also being doctors and scientists, and, thus, we are imperfect. Please do not take this the wrong way, but sometimes a few people must die in order for potentially millions to live.

It is the natural order for both animal and homo sapiens alike. If there was a god, we would merely be doing His will. So our methods are not wrong. More than likely, it's the people, not the science, who are unsound. They need help. We help.

THE END



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THE ARTIST by Steven Havelock

Above her, Deanna slipped.

A second ago Emily had looked down. Hundreds of metres below her lay their base camp. Deanna had been nearing the peak of the mountain.

As Deanna passed, Emily's hand snaked out and grabbed Deanna's hand. For a second, all time seemed to stand still. A smile spread across Deanna's face, and then Emily said it...

Emily had been dating Deanna for six months. They had met at her brother's funeral and things had just developed.

I believe Deanna loves me, yet I have a dark secret, an ulterior motive...No one must know...Ever...

All I have now is memories.

"Hey, little brother!" said Emily, sneaking into Dan's bedroom and whispering as loud as she dared.

"Hi, big sister," replied a drowsy Dan.

"Shush! Not so loud! They will hear!" whispered Emily back. "They're both asleep. Let's go down and see what Christmas presents we've got."

They headed downstairs, all the drowsiness gone from them and replaced with the excitement of getting new toys.

Tears came to Emily's eyes. *Only memories...*

"This restaurant is super kool," said Rachel.

"Not cheap but worth every penny," replied Deanna. "Dan's a multi-millionaire. Not self-made, his father left him a large fortune in his will. His fortune's only exceeded by his ego."

"Oh wow," Rachel's voice dropped to a whisper, "Are you serious about this?"

"Bet your life I am."

"What's he like?"

“Total fool, not a clue about the value of money. He’s twenty three and has climbed several of the world’s largest mountains already.”

“They say he’s a playboy who’s bedded hundreds of women. I can’t believe you’re dating him. “

“Well, he’s never met a woman like me before.”

They stared deeply into each other’s eyes and knew how the night would end.

Emily lay in bed, under the duvet, tears streaming down her cheeks.

I’ve been lying in bed the past four days. Dead? No, I can’t believe it! I won’t believe it! The story the press bandied about was that Dan had died during a mountain climbing expedition in the Himalayas. I don’t believe it. My brother was a very fit and experienced climber. There’s no way he slipped and fell to his death. I’m going to do some digging. Something just doesn’t feel right about this.

A few weeks later, as Emily sat in her large house on the hill, tears once more streamed down her cheeks.

Murdered...The detective I hired has...Oh God...No...

Emily held Deanna’s hand, saving her from certain death. The air was thin and cold. In a split second, the last few months of Emily’s life flashed before her. She remembered: the detective had broken into her dead brother’s girlfriend’s house and stolen the hard drive.

His ex-girlfriend had pictures on her computer of....

Then she remembered reading the emails between her brother and his new girlfriend.

From: D.Short:

To: Dan.F

Hi Dan, thank you for the fabulous meal last night. I am amazed at how many of the world’s largest mountains you’ve climbed. I’m all set to tackle Everest with you. You are the love of my life, and we will tackle the world’s highest peak together.

Yours Deanna.

From: Dan.F

To: D.Short.

Hi, I’m so pleased to finally find a girl that not only loves my sense of adventure and accomplishments but also wants to be there with me on my biggest test yet. We are all set to leave in two days.

From: D.Short:

To: Dan.F

Two days! I can't believe it, we've only known each other a short time but it feels like I've known you my whole life.

Deanna,

From: Dan.F

To: D.Short.

Yes I know what you mean, it feels totally right. See you later tonight hun.

Dan

Emily remembered the other emails she had found on the hard drive.

From D.Short

To: Rachel Johnson

Hi Rachel, how are you? Missed you last few weeks, I've been working on that idiot millionaire, my plan is slowly coming together. The idiot's wealth is only matched by his giant ego. Never done a day's work in his life and hasn't got a clue about the value of money!

D.

From: Rachel

To: D.Short

Congratulations beautiful, I've missed been with you whilst you been working on the idiot millionaire but it's gonna be worth it, we're gonna be stinking filthy rich! Then we can spend our lives jet setting round the world!

Just me and you babe!

Rachel.

Emily saw the relief in Deanna's eyes, relief that she knew was soon to be...

My plan was to get her to the top and then do the dreaded deed, but now it must be done this way.

"Why did you do it?"

Deanna saw Emily's hard cold stare and her hope and relief vanished in an instant.

Emily saw the fear grip Deanna like death's cold hand.

"What? Two-timing you?" Her voice was high pitched with fear.

"No. Why did you do it, kill Dan?" Emily screamed over the noise of the shrill wind.

"What?" Deanna's eyes showed confusion.

“Tell me the truth and I will let you live!”

In a millisecond Deanna’s eyes registered understanding.

She doesn’t love me; she planned this from the start! She knows!

“Tell me the truth and I will let you live!” Emily repeated.

Deanna opened her mouth, and gave a low answer...Suddenly she felt her grip slipping and fear coursed through her body.

“The truth!” Emily screamed.

Emily saw the eyes of her victim, the wide eyes, fixed in a pale, ugly death grimace of fear.

Were Dan’s eyes the same when he fell to his death?

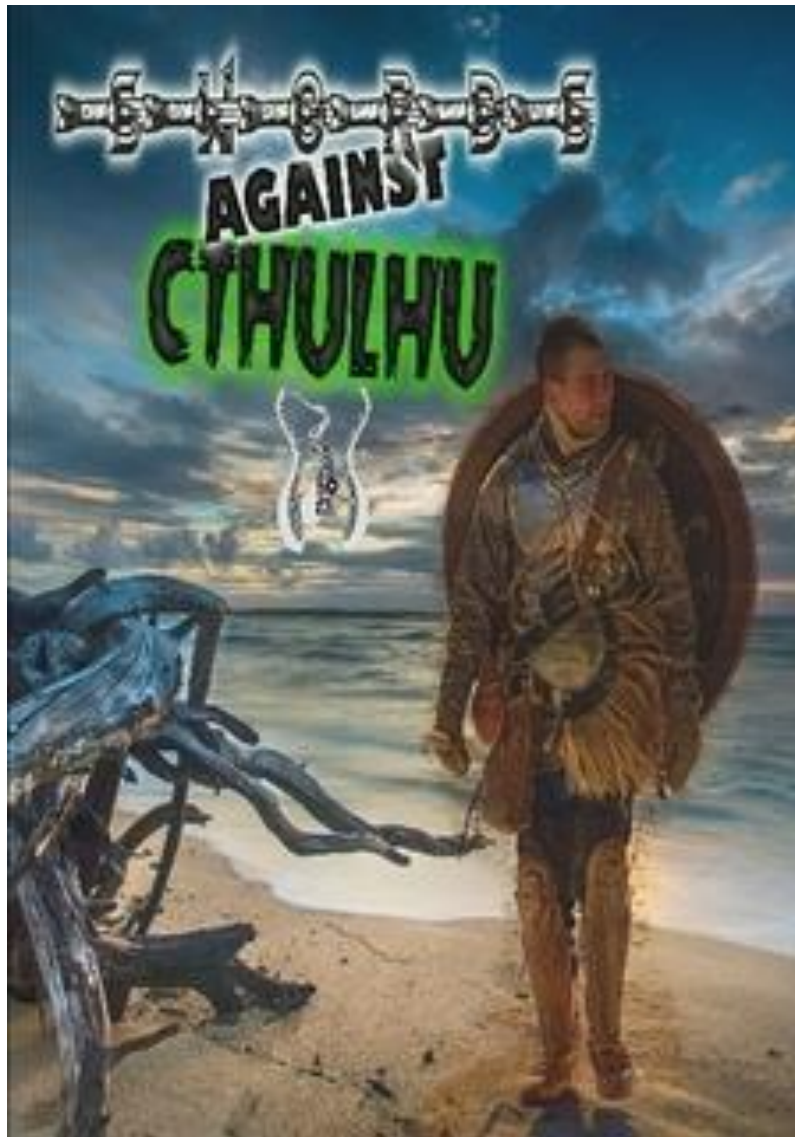
Deanna opened her mouth but Emily never heard her answer; the wind snatched it away before she could. Even if she had, it wouldn’t have made a difference. She already knew. She saw Deanna falling, disappearing into the distance with every passing second, getting smaller and smaller until she was just a speck.

Tears came to Emily’s eyes. She remembered...

The hard drive the detective gave me showed Deanna out clubbing at wild parties, at parties, where all the revellers were female...And then I knew...

THE END

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TOILET TRAUMA by Ross Jeffery

Toilets are such strange places, so peaceful, with only really two outcomes, but if you let your mind wander the façade slowly ebbs away, sloshing down the U-Bend. And I guess you are left with the worst possible thing...your inquisitive mind.

Since my diagnosis they have become a place of refuge. Bladder cancer is one awkward cancer to deal with. The medication only serves to bind my guts, causing an excruciating bout of constipation, like I'm passing boulders out of my arse; and the side effect of the cancer as it eats away at my bladder is the constant need to relieve myself. It doesn't matter if I've only just been, the pulling sensation, the panic that comes with wetting oneself in public, is constant, and so I have no alternative but to run to the nearest toilet and sit there twiddling my thumbs until the urge passes. Only for the whole sorry experience to start all over again. This isn't life; it's survival.

Toilets are one of the few places I can take a much needed breather; fool myself that things will get better. For those who don't have bladder cancer, it normally boils down to a simple decision if it's going to be a number one or a number two. I do find public toilets, like the one I'm squeezed into now, a little bit confining and claustrophobic, not enough space to spread legs and adopt an optimum shitting or pissing position. This particular toilet is in the middle of nowhere. I went for a walk to clear my head, taking the overgrown path through the woods to reach the lake where I aimed to sit and watch the swifts swoop down and quench their thirst, taking small nips of the swelling lake, but I didn't make it that far. The urge to piss hit me and I bolted. I remembered seeing this public toilet on my previous reconnaissance of the woods. I don't go anywhere anymore unless I know where the nearest toilet is. I managed to push my way through the door, a plume of ammonia hitting my nostrils as I scurried in, choosing the farthest toilet from the entrance. Locking myself inside. When using a public toilet, there is a constant juggling of limbs, of not wanting to touch anything for fear of contracting some type of STD or malicious bug. As I say this my hand is dipped between my legs, deep into the toilet to prevent my penis from touching the filthy bowl encrusted with the pebble dashing of someone's high fibre diet.

This toilet is slightly larger than a coffin; cheap plywood, hastily constructed and repainted by someone who doesn't give two hoots about the quality of their work; resigning themselves to the fact they are merely delaying the inevitable of repainting due to graffiti. It would appear there are many writers, or people who think they can write, who visit this toilet. Or they could be the scribbings of kids high on crack. Who in their right mind would stay here any longer than necessary? Maybe there are others with my condition, a commune of people with bladder cancer living in a tented community nearby, shunned from society for pissing themselves involuntary... I wonder if they have room for me.

Bogs are also places of joy, the discover of pregnancy; clutching that stick of salty warm piss in your hands and watching the lines appear, like a fruit machine dropping cherries in a line. It must be incredible, the feeling of impending parenthood, until the reality of the crippling debt associated with bringing a child kicking and screaming into this world strikes; like winning the lottery and not being able to find the ticket. Then there are drunken fumbings, office quickies in toilets across the country. The affairs that start with a drunken fumble, a flirtatious glance at the

intern; who is later discovered to have a cocaine addiction, using the same toilet to sniff away his septum into sweet oblivion.

Toilets are also places of despair and turmoil. Death sentences lurk within these walls. A discovery of a lump here, or a bump there, or blood seeping from down below, soaking into the shitty tissue you can't help but stare at; like panning for gold and uncovering cancer. The toilet is the place where people often discover their time on earth is almost up. Hope. Despair. Joy. A precursor to your exit from this earth; that is if you can actually afford a funeral. I've been doing my research, what with the gallows looming before me, and who knew that dying was so expensive. Your whole life spent trying to make ends meet and when you finally pop your clogs, or shit out your innards, a family, widow, loved one is left to foot the bill and pay some vampiric grave diggers to stuff you in the ground.

I guess sitting here with your thoughts isn't so bad; in my haste I'd failed to realise there were already people in here, in the next cubicle. Holding hands is frowned upon but I often wonder if I put my hand under the cubicle would anyone hold on, would they join me on my journey of despair, keep me company whilst I dropped my insides? Hushed voices emanate from the cubicle next to me and I can make out two shadows moving beneath the cubicle wall, merging into one wriggling mass, like a bag of kittens waiting to be drowned, limbs flying, straining at the confines of the shadows, stretching and pulling the darkness in various disjointed directions. It's frenzied and I think they might be having sex, but I can't be sure. The banging on the partitions suggests some high tempo bashing of uglies, but I just sit and listen, what else can I do? I try not to make any noises whilst I squeeze out some rubble, praying their possible love-making isn't interrupted by a sudden plop. They are utterly oblivious to me and so I quickly grab some toilet roll and stuff it past my contracting arsehole; preparing a landing platform for my tired turd. Although the way things are, I'm pretty sure it would plummet right through and split the pipe.

To take my mind off the proceedings next door, I explore my surroundings. The toilet is a Crap-O-Matic 2000, a nod to Thomas Crapper. It has a large basin and even bigger U-Bend, installed in public bogs to prevent blockages, what with the recent spate of tramps flushing stray cats down the toilets. I glance around the walls, which are spattered with their chocolate or crap; I am not going to decipher which. Small blood spatters on the wall, possibly from someone's H-Fix during a morning jog, or whilst walking the dog, or perhaps something more sinister still. I look behind to check for a toilet brush; and there it sits, the magic wand of the toilet, bristles caked in a mixture of shit and soiled tissue. I can never understand why people replace the brush in such a manner; so unsanitary, like using a hand towel to wipe your arse and leaving it for someone to dry their hands with. Thanks.

I return to reading the graffiti on the wall to distract me from my faulty waterworks and the steamy sex next door. Some of these people are very articulate. Educations not dead yet people. Some of the words are in fancy calligraphy; some are scrawled in pencil, whilst others have been etched into the wood with a knife. Such a safe community we live in. Some of the etchings are funny, others poetic, some are downright offensive. A tiny glimpse into our human and social decline. The joy is in imagining who wrote what, and reading the responses.

‘I was going to write something profound but I realised I have nothing profound to say...that’s when you just draw a dick.’

An orgy of cocks surrounded it. The first a fully-realised penis, foreskin and hairy balls and the attention to detail was remarkable. There were other drawings etched with a childlike innocence. Some of the cocks had jizz popping out. One even had a smiley face.

‘A fart is the lonesome cry of an imprisoned turd.’

This made me laugh, a high pitched bottom burp escaping my cheeks. I froze; feeling awful for disturbing the lovemaking next door. I sit in silence, I wait but they were still banging away, so with my panic abated, I return to the ramblings.

‘If you ever feel powerless, just remember that a single one of your pubic hairs can shut down an entire restaurant.’

This was a call to arms, especially for the local estate community who were disempowered and treated as sub human. Such a message of hope could start a revolution, one pubic hair at a time.

‘Describe your shit w/ the title of a movie or TV Show...’

This had some serious mileage, with many others adding to its call.

‘Meet the Burns’

‘Chunk’

‘The Curse of the Black Pearl’

‘The Firm’

‘There will be Blood’

A personal favourite.

‘The Creature from the Black Lagoon’

‘Trainspotting’

I reach into the breast pocket of my shirt, a feeling of rebelliousness sweeping over me. What should I add? MISERY. That seems quite apt given my current situation. I pull my pen out but fumble and it tumbles to the ground, hitting my shoe and spinning away under the gap beneath the cubicle wall into where the love-makers dwell. The banging against the wall stops. I hear a muffled voice, as if a hand is pressed over someone’s mouth; then a guttural growl that shakes the cubicle wall. It stops. Did they reach climax? Is it safe to talk?

“Hello...? Sorry for that...”

They resume, this time louder than before. I guess they didn’t finish. Are they doing this for me? Are they exhibitionists...oh my, am I partaking in a strange type of Dogging? Bogging? They know I’m here; I’m literally a captive audience, trapped until I drop my overdue payload or empty my leaky bladder? Both would be a dream, so here’s hoping.

“Hello? Sorry to be a pain...but could I just...”

The noises from within the cubicle are even more animalistic than before, two people reaching a climax. I slump down to see if I can grab the pen. I can see it. I stretch out my hand, the floor covered in dried pools of urine and a carpet of public hairs like tiny veins. I stop and think to myself how unsanitary this public toilet is, and ponder writing a strongly worded email to those responsible for cleaning this shit hole, but first things first, my pen. My fingers search under the gap, touch the pen briefly, before clumsily and unwillingly pushing it further away. I give up and consider my options. Once again in my seated position I notice another piece of graffiti.

‘Things I hate

1. Vandalism
2. Irony
3. Lists’

I search the cubicle for an implement which might help me grab the pen. The toilet brush is the only thing long enough, but I’d have to hold the shitty end, so that’s a non-starter, unless I wanted to contract dysentery. Near the toilet roll dispenser, slightly hidden from view is an arrow etched on the wall. I crane my neck and discover something written in pencil. GLORY HOLE. The L of GLORY scratched out so it reads GORY HOLE. The writing is just above a hole in the cubicle wall, the edges smoothed out, splinters are a no-no here. I’d read about these things in an article once, where peeping Toms can watch other people get up to all sorts, but I’d never seen one in real life. I think carefully about my next move and then slowly hoist up my trousers, leaving my arse out in case the need to shit should strike, I stretching my penis back, like a turkey’s neck on a butchers block, thus enabling the constant trickle of piss into the toilet. Leaning forwards I put my eye to the hole. I can’t see anything. I read that people put all kinds of things through the hole to seek intimate relations with a stranger. This is different, I’m not a leech or a degenerate, I just wanted my pen back. It was a gift from my wife, the last thing she’d bought me before my diagnosis, and it was etched with the words, I will always love you. A sentiment I was slowly losing sight of as she gradually became my full time carer, not that I minded, it was just getting a bit too much, suffocating, restricting my daily routine, that’s why I am here, I came out to escape and enjoy some fresh air. She had good intentions but I could tell my plight was too much for her to bear. The pen reminds me of a time before the cancer, a time when she loved me for me, not because she felt a duty of care, or worse, pitied me. Because who would leave a guy with cancer?

“Excuse me? Sorry to bother you, but could I just get my...”

I didn't want to, but knowing there was no alternative, I poked my finger through the hole, gesticulating.

"It's just down there..."

Suddenly something hit the wall and I panicked and pulled my finger back. Shock dislodging my insides like I'd been disembowelled; I heard a wet thud and plop as my crap hit the rim of the toilet and tumbled down into the bowl, water splattering my exposed arse. A brown slug trail now clung to the bowl, as if a large gastropod had escaped my bowls and slithered its way into the toilet. Someone's going to have to clean this shit up, I thought to myself, before I saw a blood shot eye staring at me through the Gory Hole. What type of sexual deviant enjoyed watching a man drop his innards? In its unflinching stare I notice that it's not normal. The pupil wasn't round, but an elongated horizontal slit; cold and deranged. I was transfixed, trapped in its unblinking hypnotic glare until an almighty roar shook the walls of the cubicle, nuts and bolts twisting and squeaking.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

A shadow hit the floor. The sound of ripping fabric. I hurriedly tried to finish my business; wiped, wiped again, but I couldn't get out of there fast enough. I reached down to pull my trousers up and that's when I saw it, seeping like ooze from the cubicle next door, a red gelatinous, creeping mess. Pubic hairs became entangled within its blob-like texture; like branches in a tsunami, engulfed in its ever increasing current. It was blood. A lot of blood. I squirmed away, tussling with my trousers and struggling to swallow the chunks rising in my throat. Keep the damn pen.

"It's OK, I don't need the pen, you keep it..."

I reach for the cubicle door when the one next to me opens with a thud. I glance down at myself and witness a wet patch soaking through the fabric at the front of my trousers. I'd pissed myself. My bladder had finally given up, and I watched the trickle of piss snake its way down my leg. The ominous shadow crept to the front of my cubicle, sharp taps hitting the floor, crawling like a large centipede. I instinctively checked the door was locked. There's no way I would go out there now, to face this thing or face the ridicule of being a grown man who's pissed himself. I could call my wife. She could pick me up or bring a change of clothes, like she was used to doing. I felt like a kid at pre-school. I pull my phone out, it was warm and wet, coated in piss and slippery. The screen lit up and displayed a lack of signal. Fucking great. The door rocked on its hinges and I leapt back with fright, slamming the toilet seat down, I jump up onto my porcelain stallion, and hide like a scared school boy from a bully.

BANG.

BANG.

BANG.

The onslaught continued and with each BANG I regressed further up the toilet seat and further back into a child. I wondered how long the hinges would hold against this aggrieved pursuer. All I wanted was my pen; to write MISERY on the wall, was that too much to ask;

BANG.

BANG.

Silence.

I sit cradling my knees, hoping the cleaners might arrive but then remembering the state of the toilet. The salvation I was clinging to was not likely to come. I was in the middle of nowhere, with no one nearby to help. I watched the thing bob back and forth under the door, like a snake preparing to strike. Had it tired itself out? Was this the time to escape? That's when it began prowling outside the door again, like an animal, though it was me who was caged, its shadow contorted and twisted, like it didn't have any bones, morphing from one shape to another, clicking and snapping with each contortion, a frisson of fear wracks my body.

Guttural sounds rang out from its mouth, drips of what I can only assume was blood mixed with saliva, peppering the floor outside the cubicle; the small gap beneath the door affording me a glimpse of my fate, if I were brave enough to attempt an escape. I glance up and see my salvation; a window. It was small, but I can fit. I'll make myself fit. Standing on the toilet seat; my body shaking I try the handle; pull it toward me, nothing. It doesn't work. The shape bangs on the door again; I almost slip off the toilet seat into the bowl, I inspect the window further and discover it's been screwed shut; for safety or is this a trap. I search the frame for a weak spot and turn up nothing other than a poem, etched on the recess of the window frame, someone's last thoughts, epilogue or parting words of wisdom?

*'You can paint this bathroom stall
mask the writing on this wall
hide the slanders once here sketched
cover up the dicks we've etched.
But no matter how you strain
all your efforts are in vain
every word will be rewritten
as long as man still sits here shittin'*

Since writing on toilet walls is done neither for critical acclaim, nor financial rewards. It is possibly the purest form of art.

BANG.

It's not letting up. I need a way out or a patsy to arrive and quench this beast's appetite. I stand on the toilet cistern; trying to see if I can attract attention, lure an innocent bystander into the mouse trap, replace me as the cheese, a sacrifice to appease this thing, but there is nothing, only empty forest thickets everywhere. My foot slips, and stamps down on the flush. The whooshing noise takes the shadow by surprise and it momentarily stops its stalking. I peer over my shoulder seeing the darkness grow and become larger beneath the door. I hear it sniffing, like an animal deciphering between pray or predator, fight or flight. The tension is palpable; I can feel the shadow leering in, getting closer, laying hold of me, imagining it strangling me, feel its suffocating embrace, squeezing the air out of my lungs. A noise invades the silence, a deep guttural cry which builds to a deafening crescendo. I drop onto the toilet seat, clutching my ears, trying to drown out the sound, my elbows resting on my damp trousers. The shadow backs away from the door, fluid in its motions, like an octopus on the ocean floor. Is it looking for another way in? My heart beats faster, my breathing is sharp and rapid, my hands feel clammy on my ears. I pull my hands away, to only be engulfed by the sound of the toilet cistern filling, its dribbling water, oddly comforting me in my time of need.

The heaving mass returns. I hear bones crunching; its determination to break in, unrelenting. It rattles the door, I check the hinges. What the fuck. The screws holding the top hinge in place are moving, like worms surfacing from the soil following rain. Another shudder of the door and a screw pops loose and clinks to the floor.

Silence.

The light catches the small metallic screw and it glints up at me, slowly rocking back and forth like a baby in a manger. I watch in abject horror as clawed fingers appear in the gap beneath the cubicle door. The flesh mooring these blades of nails are dark and necrotic, a miasma of foulness swept in with its intrusion, the nails scrape at the screw; rapidly retreating with their catch, leaving a blood trail behind, gouges scratched into the floor. I hear it sniffing again and it laughs loudly; a deep, smoker's laugh, which catches at the back of its throat, probably on the torn flesh of its last victim still ebbing their way into my cubicle in various hews of mucus.

I wasn't going to be his next victim. I stood up, defiantly but cautious, not wanting to get too close to the edge of my cell and fall foul of his talons. I strain and twist as if performing my own yoga routine, trying to pick up the toilet brush. I turn as the creature hits the door, holding what looks like a shitty wand in my hand. Faecal matter and stained tissue spattering off the end and up the walls as if I'd cast a shit spell. Holding it in front of me I quickly realise my mistake and discard it with a clatter to the floor. The cistern is filling up when an idea forms in my mind, another tinkling sound, like a bell, cuts through the plethora of noise in my cramped coffin. I notice another screw lay lifeless on the floor.

I lift the toilet seat with a clank. Stare into the bog, and out of options I place my foot onto the basin and undo my soggy shoe laces, I pull off my damp sock. I repeat the procedure on my other foot. I discard my shoes and socks near the back of the cubicle and peel my wet trousers off. I strip out of the rest of my clothes and add them to the heap. I gingerly place my right foot in the toilet; the coldness of the water shocks me, but I soon ignore the discomfort when another screw hits the floor.

Thank goodness this was a Crap-O-Matic 2000, with the wider u-bend. This crazy plan just might work; I couldn't let him get me. I forced my foot down, my toes disappearing into the pipe. I started flushing, the bowl filling up with water, the pressure building around my ankle. With my ankle at an awkward angle I put all my weight on it and felt a pop, I feel the joint hanging loose at the end of my leg; the pain instantaneous. Horrifically broken most likely, I was just glad I couldn't see it. With the added water pressure; and my leg less structurally sound I push down even further. I slide in up to my knee, avoiding snapping my shin bone, but the time would come, I was sure of it. I forced my other leg down the shitter too. Each time the cistern filled, I pumped the handle again. Bones cracking, ligaments torn from moorings, skin splitting, the pain astounding, bright and white; settling right behind my eyes. I felt like a snake shedding its skin, the water splashing out of the toilet in crimson spurts with each pump of the handle. Compound fractures hidden from view. I pass out.

I awake with a thud, I try to lift my head, to abate the pain. I can feel the blood rushing back, down my spine in a calming trickle. I am hip deep in the toilet now, trapped, the water overflowing, pooling on the floor, brown, red and oily, noisome in its odour. My legs feel as one, as if I have somehow morphed into a snake or a slug. I can't move them independently, they lay contorted, hidden from view, folded and broken most likely swaying in the U-Bend like a bloody fringe. Are they still attached? Was the GORY hole just a ruse, my pursuer adopting the tactics of an angler fish, bobbing a lure in front of its gaping jaws, before clamping down on its confused and inquisitive prey? It worked, it had lured me in with the Gory Hole, reeled me in, dangling a proverbial carrot before my eyes, something tantalising and lustful; pulling me closer and closer to my inevitable demise. It was a trap and I was the prized catch. How many travellers or people with cancerous bladders, those suffering from IBS had fallen foul of the same fate?

BANG.

The sudden noise clears my fogged brain, pulling me out of my stupor. I crane my neck to look at the door, only one screw holding the top hinge in place. Then I feel a crack in my hip, my pelvis cleaves in two and my lower body crumbles in on itself, bone shards stabbing at my organs like an internal pin cushion. A metamorphosis taking place. As I lay snug in my porcelain cocoon, I can feel parts of me becoming entwined, legs stretched and twisted, intestines sucked from my prolapsed anus, floating away like jellyfish tendrils, long, thin and rubbery, pulled further into the toilets current. How I am still breathing is anyone's guess, but the pain keeps me alive. I slide further down the toilet, my ribs, the next obstacle to overcome, and I reach out and grip the flush, pulling it down, the marbled water splashing up at my face. I wriggle around, trying to force my ribs down the tight bend. They give way and my ribs crack one by one, folding in on themselves on the lip of the U-Bend, consuming me like a Venus flytrap, snapping around me ensnaring my lungs. I start coughing up brown bile, clotted chunks, burning my throat as I expel them into the waste I'm nestled in. The crushing of my body and organs backs up my guts and stomach contents, forcing it out of the only available exit. It burns as clots dribble from my mouth into the water, I choke the rest back down as best I can, but it's a fruitless exercise. I ferment in a fetid mixture of juices.

CRACK.

POP.

CRACK.

I slide further down, spinning around as I go. Facing the ceiling, I notice one final piece of graffiti.

‘It’s a trap’

Scrawled in what looks like blood. It’s my turn to be the vermin awaiting extermination, and like a rodent fleeing for its life, I am escaping down the shitter. My head lies in the pan, arms now nestling across my chest. I take a strange comfort from my position, unable to see the impending doom, lurking, stalking and slashing away at the door. I slide one arm into the bowl, knowing that my shoulders will be the toughest part. The door rattles and I hear it giving way. I pump furiously at the flush, not giving it time to refill. I struggle to breathe, my lungs collapsing under the stress, slowly suffocating. My head light and airy, my vision slowly going black. DON’T PASS OUT. I scream at myself as the door rattles. I flush again. My shoulder pops and crunches, wrenches out of its socket, pulled and extended down into the toilet, my hand wriggling over various oily masses, which are being towed away from me in tendrils of loose flesh. I’m up to my neck now; flushing like crazy so I don’t drown in the remaining water, my arm outstretched and gripping onto the flush with clawing searching fingers.

I...need...to...keep...flushing.

My head begins to feel constricted, like a melon about to pop. I take one final breath and let the water fill up, before one final flush. The water rises, covering my mouth, entering my nose, the pressure building. My lower jaw wrenches loose, like a snake dislocating its jaws around its prey. My teeth clatter and snap against the porcelain. I take on water, lungs filling like a burst lifeboat, ragged and flapping uselessly within my chest, deflated and redundant. At least this is the end I chose, not one dictated by external factors, or the impending cancerous death growing within me. The water continues to rise, parts of me floating within the whirling water; that’s when I hear it, the noise I hoped would never come. The slow rhythmic tinkle as the last screw hits the floor. With my outstretched arm I pull the flush, succumb to my fate, whatever that may be. I slide further down, snaking my way inside, my nose breaks in a bloody eruption, my stinging eyes peer out of the murky water. I see a black shape enter my blurred field of vision. Obscured within the bubbles of the water. I see it loom over me, peer unflinchingly down, two slits of eyes. My eye socket crumbles under the pressure, my field of vision clouded by a grey milky explosion. I feel my body being dragged away. Wherever I end up will be better than this. And with that parting thought I was gone.

THE END

Ross Jeffery is a Bristol based writer and Executive Director of Books for STORGY Magazine. Most often than not found collaborating with Tomek Dzido and Anthony Self with either pen or camera. He is an avid reader of an eclectic mix of fiction and is a lover of the short story form.

Ross has been published in print with STORGY Books Exit Earth (Daylight Breaks Through), Project 13 Dark (Bethesda)—his work has also appeared online at STORGY Magazine, About Magazine TX (After He's Gone) and Idle Ink (Judgements). Ross lives in south Bristol with his wife (Anna) and two children (Eva and Sophie).

If you would like to follow him he's on Twitter @Ross1982.

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Twenty-Four

General Howe took several steps around the table, in a move meant to infuriate Secretary Benson. It was only three short steps, but all the while he was taking those steps, it was he who was the centre of attention, not Secretary Benson. For himself, Howe did not care, of course. He would have been perfectly content to spend the afternoon on his patio, with a book and a pot of coffee. But the gesture, small as it was—indeed, even as petty as it was—was a carefully calculated move intended to keep Secretary Benson off balance. And this flouting of protocol, however insignificant it may have been, was all that needed to throw Benson off balance for the rest of Howe's presentation.

"Those Scroungers," General Howe continued, "most of whom were not much more than children when they were driven out from the established bases, had already developed some rudimentary survival skills when they landed at some of the abandoned bases scattered through the Vastista Borealis region north of the Tharsis Montes.

"This decision, an attempt to avoid the outright slaughter of thousands of near-adults that no one had taken any interest in, proved to be disastrous. As I have already said, these near adults had learned many skills in the alleys of Schiaparelli City, Lowell City and other established bases.

"Left to their own resources, and what they could find in the abandoned bases where they had been—'exiled to' is not too harsh an expression to use—the Scroungers established themselves very quickly. In very few short years, their numbers grew and their skills sharpened. They felt no loyalty to either the Martian colonists who abandoned them to the wastelands of Mars, or to the Earthian corporations that built these colonies.

"Embittered against the Martian colonists, the Scroungers took to raiding small colonies, first the smaller encampments, and then, as time went on and their confidence in their skills grew, they began attacking larger encampments. Over time, the Scroungers held control over huge swaths of Mars, mostly in the rugged southern regions. There, they were able to take advantage of the mountainous terrain to hide their bases.

"At first, it seems the Scroungers survived by scavenging earlier bases that had been abandoned by their investors. It was not too many years before they began raiding active bases.

"It is from this point on that we first begin developing any real information about the Scroungers. Their raids on the bases were all carefully documented.

"The Scroungers had organized themselves well. Their harassment of the established colonies caused sufficient problems that the Martian bases, with the support of the corporate interests on Earth the colonists were able to establish a campaign against them. This campaign lasted...hm, 'indefinitely' is the correct term to use in this case, as the campaign has never ended. But it did bring about two results. The first is that the Martian colonists developed their own military force, something that had never been necessary before, The second result was not so happy a one for

us, for the campaign imposed a rugged, martial discipline upon them, which only made campaign that much more difficult—even impossible—for the colonists to prevail.

“The Scroungers seem to have understood that the campaign against them had come to a stalemate. No matter how hard, how long, or how intelligently the two sides fought, neither would ever overcome the other.

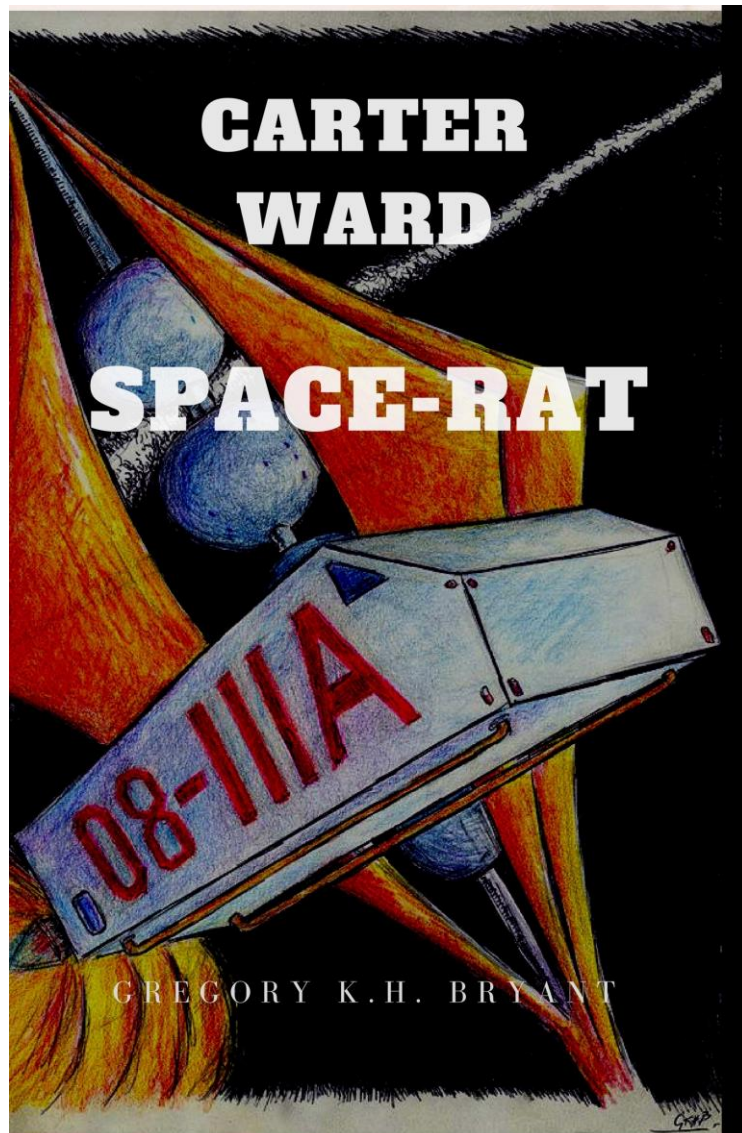
“The Scroungers had no particular loyalty to Mars, which provided them a rather easy solution to the dilemma. They moved their operations from attacking local Martian traffic to preying upon the shipping between Earth and Mars and the near asteroids. They seem to have learned to operate in small numbers, making it impossible for us to get any good, reliable information about their numbers. Were there hundreds of them? Thousands? Tens of thousands?

“Until the attack on Callisto, we had no way to know. But afterwards, we know that an attack of that magnitude could only have been planned and executed by no less than several tens of thousands. But it is far more likely that the numbers range from a hundred thousand or more, to even as many as a million.”

A barely stifled gasp went around the room.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

Now available from Schlock! Publications: [*Carter Ward—Space Rat*](#) by Gregory KH Bryant.



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ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter XXX—Farewell!

My task was not quite done. It was well for me in the first moments of this new solitude, of this maddening agony, that there was instant work imperatively demanding the attention of the mind as well as the exercise of the body. I had first, by means of the air pump, to fill the vessel with an atmosphere as dense as that in which I had been born and lived so long; then to close the entrance window and seal it hermetically, and then to arrange the steering gear. To complete the first task more easily, I arrested the motion of the vessel till she rose only a few feet per minute. Whilst employed on the air pump, I became suddenly aware, by that instinct by which most men have been at one time or another warned of the unexpected proximity of friend or foe, that I was not alone. Turning and looking in the direction of the entrance, I saw, or thought I saw, once more the Presence beheld in the Hall of the Zinta. But commanding, enthralling as were those eyes, they could not now retain my attention; for beside that figure appeared one whose presence in life or death left me no thought for aught beside. I sprang forward, seemed to touch her hand, to clasp her form, to reach the lips I bent my head to meet:—and then, in the midst of the bright sunlight, a momentary darkness veiled all from my eyes. Lifting my head, however, my glance fell, through the window to which the Vision had drawn me, directly upon Ecasfe and upon the home from which I had taken her whose remains were now being carried back thither. Snatching up my field-glass, I scanned the scene of which I had thus caught a momentary and confused glimpse. The roof was occupied by a score of men armed with the lightning weapon, and among them glanced the familiar badge—the band and silver star. Clambering over the walls of the wide enclosure, and threatening to storm the house, were a mob perhaps a thousand in number, many of them similarly armed, the rest with staves, spears, or such rude weapons as chance might afford. Two minutes brought me immediately over them. In another, I was descending more rapidly than prudence would have suggested. The strife seemed for a moment to cease, as one of the crowd pointed, not to the impending destruction overhead, but to some object apparently at an equal elevation to westward. A shout of welcome from the remaining defenders of the house called right upward the eyes of their assailants. For an instant they felt the bitterness of death; a cry of agony and terror that pierced even the thick walls and windows of the Astronaut reached my ears. Then a violent shock threw me from my feet. Springing up, I knew what wholesale slaughter had avenged Eveena and her father, preserved her family, and given a last victory to the Symbol she so revered. In another instant I was on the roof, and my hands clasped in Zulve's.

“We know,” she said. “Our darling's esve brought us a line that told all; and what is left of those who were all to me, of her who was so much to you, will now be returned to us almost at once.”

We were interrupted. A cry drew my eyes to the right, where, springing from a balloon to the car of which was attached a huge flag emblazoned with the crimson and silver colours of the Suzerain, Ergimo stood before us.

“I am too late,” he said, “to save life; in time only to put an end to rebellion and avert murder. The Prince has fulfilled his promise to you; has repealed the law that was to be a weapon in the hands that aimed at his life and throne, as at the Star and its children. The traitors, save one, the worst, have met by this time their just doom. That one I am here to arrest. But where is our

Chief? And,” noticing for the first time the group of women, who in the violence of alarm and agony of sorrow had burst for once unconsciously the restraints of a lifetime—”where ... Are you alone?”

“Alone for ever,” I said; and as I spoke the procession that with bare and bent heads carried two veiled forms into the peristyle below told all he sought to know. I need not dwell on the scene that followed. I scarcely remember anything, till a chest of gold, bearing the cipher which though seldom seen I knew so well, was placed in my hands. I turned to Zulve, and to Ergimo, who stood beside her.

“Have you need of me?” I said. “If I can serve her house I will remain willingly, and as long as I can help or comfort.”

“No,” replied Ergimo; for Zulve could not speak. “The household of Clavelta are safe and honoured henceforth as no other in the land. Something we must ask of him who is, at any rate for the present, the head of this household, and the representative of the Founder’s lineage. It may be,” he whispered, “that another” (and his eyes fell on the veiled forms whose pink robes covered with dark crimson gauze indicated the younger matrons of the family) “may yet give to the Children of the Star that natural heir to the Signet we had hoped from your own household. But the Order cannot remain headless.”

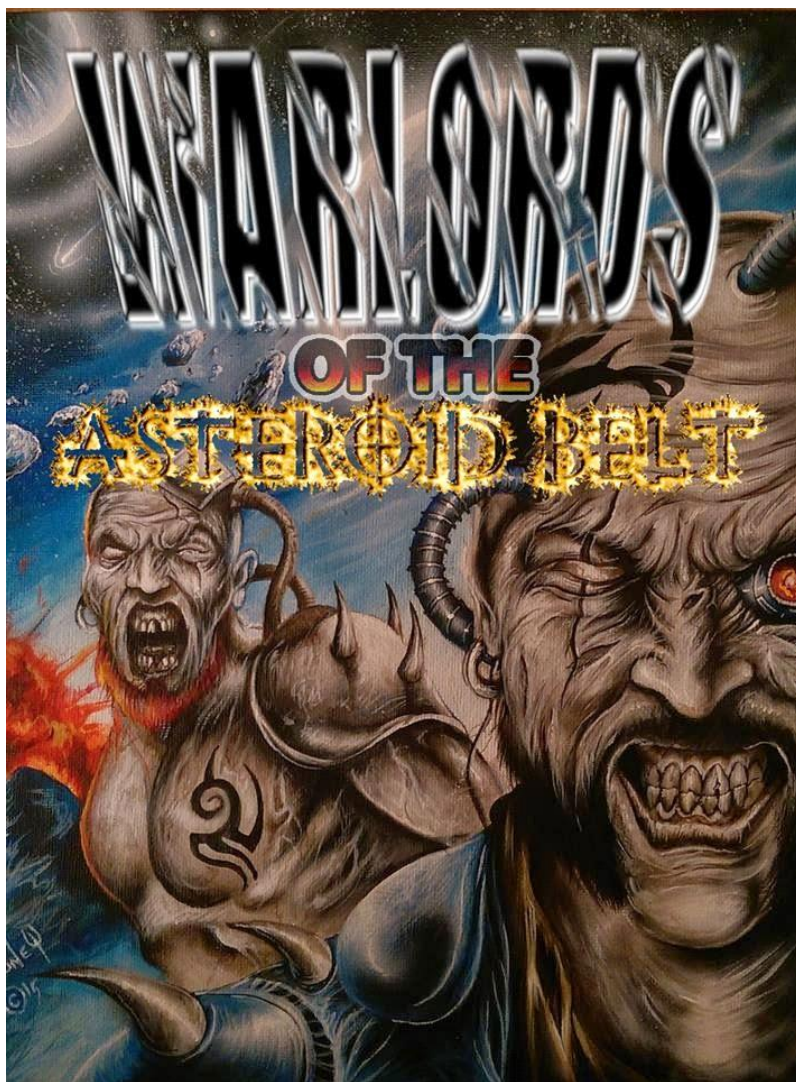
Here Zulve, approaching, gave into my hand the Signet unclasped from her husband’s arm ere the coffer was closed upon his form. I understood her meaning; and, as for the time the sole male representative of the house, I clasped it on the arm of the Chief who succeeded to Esmo’s rank, and to whom I felt the care of Esmo’s house might be safely left. The due honour paid to his new office, I turned to depart. Then for the first time my eyes fell on the unveiled countenance and drooping form of one unlike, yet so like Eveena—her favourite and nearest sister, Zevle. I held out my hand; but, emotion overcoming the habits of reserve, she threw herself into my arms, and her tears fell on my bosom, hardly faster than my own as I stooped and kissed her brow. I had no voice to speak my farewell. But as the Astronaut rose for the last time from the ground, the voices of my brethren chanted in adieu the last few lines of the familiar formula—

“Peace be yours no force can break,
Peace not Death hath power to shake;”

“Peace from peril, fear, and pain;
Peace—until we meet again!
Not before the sculptured stone,
But the All-Commander’s Throne.”

THE END

NEXT WEEK WE BEGIN SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE’S CLASSIC OF ADVENTURE,
THE LOST WORLD!



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THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter III: The Moon Rock

“I do not intend to tell you now,” Throckmartin continued, “the results of the next two weeks, nor of what we found. Later—if I am allowed, I will lay all that before you. It is sufficient to say that at the end of those two weeks I had found confirmation for many of my theories.

“The place, for all its decay and desolation, had not infected us with any touch of morbidity—that is not Edith, Stanton, or myself. But Thora was very unhappy. She was a Swede, as you know, and in her blood ran the beliefs and superstitions of the Northland—some of them so strangely akin to those of this far southern land; beliefs of spirits of mountain and forest and water werewolves and beings malign. From the first she showed a curious sensitivity to what, I suppose, may be called the ‘influences’ of the place. She said it ‘smelled’ of ghosts and warlocks.

“I laughed at her then—

“Two weeks slipped by, and at their end the spokesman for our natives came to us. The next night was the full of the moon, he said. He reminded me of my promise. They would go back to their village in the morning; they would return after the third night, when the moon had begun to wane. They left us sundry charms for our ‘protection,’ and solemnly cautioned us to keep as far away as possible from Nan-Tauach during their absence. Half-exasperated, half-amused I watched them go.

“No work could be done without them, of course, so we decided to spend the days of their absence junketing about the southern islets of the group. We marked down several spots for subsequent exploration, and on the morning of the third day set forth along the east face of the breakwater for our camp on Uschen-Tau, planning to have everything in readiness for the return of our men the next day.

“We landed just before dusk, tired and ready for our cots. It was only a little after ten o’clock that Edith awakened me.

“‘Listen!’ she said. ‘Lean over with your ear close to the ground!’

“I did so, and seemed to hear, far, far below, as though coming up from great distances, a faint chanting. It gathered strength, died down, ended; began, gathered volume, faded away into silence.

“‘It’s the waves rolling on rocks somewhere,’ I said. ‘We’re probably over some ledge of rock that carries the sound.’

“‘It’s the first time I’ve heard it,’ replied my wife doubtfully. We listened again. Then through the dim rhythms, deep beneath us, another sound came. It drifted across the lagoon that lay between us and Nan-Tauach in little tinkling waves. It was music—of a sort; I won’t describe the

strange effect it had upon me. You've felt it—"

"You mean on the deck?" I asked. Throckmartin nodded.

"I went to the flap of the tent," he continued, "and peered out. As I did so Stanton lifted his flap and walked out into the moonlight, looking over to the other islet and listening. I called to him.

"That's the queerest sound!" he said. He listened again. 'Crystalline! Like little notes of translucent glass. Like the bells of crystal on the sistrums of Isis at Dendarah Temple,' he added half-dreamily. We gazed intently at the island. Suddenly, on the sea-wall, moving slowly, rhythmically, we saw a little group of lights. Stanton laughed.

"The beggars!" he exclaimed. 'That's why they wanted to get away, is it? Don't you see, Dave, it's some sort of a festival—rites of some kind that they hold during the full moon! That's why they were so eager to have us keep away, too.'

"The explanation seemed good. I felt a curious sense of relief, although I had not been sensible of any oppression.

"Let's slip over,' suggested Stanton—but I would not.

"They're a difficult lot as it is,' I said. 'If we break into one of their religious ceremonies they'll probably never forgive us. Let's keep out of any family party where we haven't been invited.'

"That's so,' agreed Stanton.

"The strange tinkling rose and fell, rose and fell—

"There's something—something very unsettling about it,' said Edith at last soberly. 'I wonder what they make those sounds with. They frighten me half to death, and, at the same time, they make me feel as though some enormous rapture were just around the corner.'

"It's devilish uncanny!' broke in Stanton.

"And as he spoke the flap of Thora's tent was raised and out into the moonlight strode the old Swede. She was the great Norse type—tall, deep-breasted, moulded on the old Viking lines. Her sixty years had slipped from her. She looked like some ancient priestess of Odin.

"She stood there, her eyes wide, brilliant, staring. She thrust her head forward toward Nan-Tauach, regarding the moving lights; she listened. Suddenly she raised her arms and made a curious gesture to the moon. It was—an archaic—movement; she seemed to drag it from remote antiquity—yet in it was a strange suggestion of power. Twice she repeated this gesture and—the tinklings died away! She turned to us.

"Go!' she said, and her voice seemed to come from far distances. 'Go from here—and quickly! Go while you may. It has called—' She pointed to the islet. 'It knows you are here. It waits!' she

wailed. ‘It beckons—the—the—’

“She fell at Edith’s feet, and over the lagoon came again the tinklings, now with a quicker note of jubilation—almost of triumph.

“We watched beside her throughout the night. The sounds from Nan-Tauach continued until about an hour before moon-set. In the morning Thora awoke, none the worse, apparently. She had had bad dreams, she said. She could not remember what they were—except that they had warned her of danger. She was oddly sullen, and throughout the morning her gaze returned again and again half-fascinatedly, half-wonderingly to the neighbouring isle.

“That afternoon the natives returned. And that night on Nan-Tauach the silence was unbroken nor were there lights nor sign of life.

“You will understand, Goodwin, how the occurrences I have related would excite the scientific curiosity. We rejected immediately, of course, any explanation admitting the supernatural.

“Our—symptoms let me call them—could all very easily be accounted for. It is unquestionable that the vibrations created by certain musical instruments have definite and sometimes extraordinary effect upon the nervous system. We accepted this as the explanation of the reactions we had experienced, hearing the unfamiliar sounds. Thora’s nervousness, her superstitious apprehensions, had wrought her up to a condition of semi-somnambulistic hysteria. Science could readily explain her part in the night’s scene.

“We came to the conclusion that there must be a passage-way between Ponape and Nan-Tauach known to the natives—and used by them during their rites. We decided that on the next departure of our labourers we would set forth immediately to Nan-Tauach. We would investigate during the day, and at evening my wife and Thora would go back to camp, leaving Stanton and me to spend the night on the island, observing from some safe hiding-place what might occur.

“The moon waned; appeared crescent in the west; waxed slowly toward the full. Before the men left us they literally prayed us to accompany them. Their importunities only made us more eager to see what it was that, we were now convinced, they wanted to conceal from us. At least that was true of Stanton and myself. It was not true of Edith. She was thoughtful, abstracted—reluctant.

“When the men were out of sight around the turn of the harbour, we took our boat and made straight for Nan-Tauach. Soon its mighty sea-wall towered above us. We passed through the water-gate with its gigantic hewn prisms of basalt and landed beside a half-submerged pier. In front of us stretched a series of giant steps leading into a vast court strewn with fragments of fallen pillars. In the centre of the court, beyond the shattered pillars, rose another terrace of basalt blocks, concealing, I knew, still another enclosure.

“And now, Walter, for the better understanding of what follows—and—and—” he hesitated. “Should you decide later to return with me or, if I am taken, to—to—follow us—listen carefully to my description of this place: Nan-Tauach is literally three rectangles. The first rectangle is the

sea-wall, built up of monoliths—hewn and squared, twenty feet wide at the top. To get to the gateway in the sea-wall you pass along the canal marked on the map between Nan-Tauach and the islet named Tau. The entrance to the canal is bidden by dense thickets of mangroves; once through these the way is clear. The steps lead up from the landing of the sea-gate through the entrance to the courtyard.

“This courtyard is surrounded by another basalt wall, rectangular, following with mathematical exactness the march of the outer barricades. The sea-wall is from thirty to forty feet high—originally it must have been much higher, but there has been subsidence in parts. The wall of the first enclosure is fifteen feet across the top and its height varies from twenty to fifty feet—here, too, the gradual sinking of the land has caused portions of it to fall.

“Within this courtyard is the second enclosure. Its terrace, of the same basalt as the outer walls, is about twenty feet high. Entrance is gained to it by many breaches which time has made in its stonework. This is the inner court, the heart of Nan-Tauach! There lies the great central vault with which is associated the one name of living being that has come to us out of the mists of the past. The natives say it was the treasure-house of Chau-te-leur, a mighty king who reigned long ‘before their fathers.’ As Chan is the ancient Ponapean word both for sun and king, the name means, without doubt, ‘place of the sun king.’ It is a memory of a dynastic name of the race that ruled the Pacific continent, now vanished—just as the rulers of ancient Crete took the name of Minos and the rulers of Egypt the name of Pharaoh.

“And opposite this place of the sun king is the moon rock that hides the Moon Pool.

“It was Stanton who discovered the moon rock. We had been inspecting the inner courtyard; Edith and Thora were getting together our lunch. I came out of the vault of Chau-te-leur to find Stanton before a part of the terrace studying it wonderingly.

“‘What do you make of this?’ he asked me as I came up. He pointed to the wall. I followed his finger and saw a slab of stone about fifteen feet high and ten wide. At first all I noticed was the exquisite nicety with which its edges joined the blocks about it. Then I realized that its colour was subtly different—tinged with grey and of a smooth, peculiar—deadness.

“‘Looks more like calcite than basalt,’ I said. I touched it and withdrew my hand quickly for at the contact every nerve in my arm tingled as though a shock of frozen electricity had passed through it. It was not cold as we know cold. It was a chill force—the phrase I have used—frozen electricity—describes it better than anything else. Stanton looked at me oddly.

“‘So you felt it too,’ he said. ‘I was wondering whether I was developing hallucinations like Thora. Notice, by the way, that the blocks beside it are quite warm beneath the sun.’

“We examined the slab eagerly. Its edges were cut as though by an engraver of jewels. They fitted against the neighbouring blocks in almost a hair-line. Its base was slightly curved, and fitted as closely as top and sides upon the huge stones on which it rested. And then we noted that these stones had been hollowed to follow the line of the grey stone’s foot. There was a semi-circular depression running from one side of the slab to the other. It was as though the grey rock

stood in the centre of a shallow cup—revealing half, covering half. Something about this hollow attracted me. I reached down and felt it. Goodwin, although the balance of the stones that formed it, like all the stones of the courtyard, were rough and age-worn—this was as smooth, as even surfaced as though it had just left the hands of the polisher.

“‘It’s a door!’ exclaimed Stanton. ‘It swings around in that little cup. That’s what makes the hollow so smooth.’

“‘Maybe you’re right,’ I replied. ‘But how the devil can we open it?’

“‘We went over the slab again—pressing upon its edges, thrusting against its sides. During one of those efforts I happened to look up—and cried out. A foot above and on each side of the corner of the grey rock’s lintel was a slight convexity, visible only from the angle at which my gaze struck it.

“‘We carried with us a small scaling-ladder and up this I went. The bosses were apparently nothing more than chiselled curvatures in the stone. I laid my hand on the one I was examining, and drew it back sharply. In my palm, at the base of my thumb, I had felt the same shock that I had in touching the slab below. I put my hand back. The impression came from a spot not more than an inch wide. I went carefully over the entire convexity, and six times more the chill ran through my arm. There were seven circles an inch wide in the curved place, each of which communicated the precise sensation I have described. The convexity on the opposite side of the slab gave exactly the same results. But no amount of touching or of pressing these spots singly or in any combination gave the slightest promise of motion to the slab itself.

“‘And yet—they’re what open it,’ said Stanton positively.

“‘Why do you say that?’ I asked.

“‘I—don’t know,’ he answered hesitatingly. ‘But something tells me so. Throck,’ he went on half earnestly, half laughingly, ‘the purely scientific part of me is fighting the purely human part of me. The scientific part is urging me to find some way to get that slab either down or open. The human part is just as strongly urging me to do nothing of the sort and get away while I can!’

“‘He laughed again—shamefacedly.

“‘Which shall it be?’ he asked—and I thought that in his tone the human side of him was ascendant.

“‘It will probably stay as it is—unless we blow it to bits,’ I said.

“‘I thought of that,’ he answered, ‘and I wouldn’t dare,’ he added soberly enough. And even as I had spoken there came to me the same feeling that he had expressed. It was as though something passed out of the grey rock that struck my heart as a hand strikes an impious lip. We turned away—uneasily, and faced Thora coming through a breach on the terrace.

“‘Miss Edith wants you quick,’ she began—and stopped. Her eyes went past me to the grey rock. Her body grew rigid; she took a few stiff steps forward and then ran straight to it. She cast herself upon its breast, hands and face pressed against it; we heard her scream as though her very soul were being drawn from her—and watched her fall at its foot. As we picked her up I saw steal from her face the look I had observed when first we heard the crystal music of Nan-Tauach—that unhuman mingling of opposites!”

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