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TABLE OF CONTENTS

5	Infected by Liz Zemlicka
10	Quiet Contemplation by Pj Kneisel
11	The Thing in the Nursery by Donna L. Greenwood
16	The Return of the Count by John Grey
17	Skeleton Dance by John Grey
18	What I'm Doing Here by John Grey
19	The San Francisco Incident by Jake Rowland
28	Middling Shade by Pj Kneisel
29	Lethal Beauty by Linda M. Crate
34	Untitled by Lohman Scott
35	Forget Me When I'm Gone by Chip Jett
40	Musca Daemoniac by Pj Kneisel
41	Wires by F. F. Amanti
49	Rakshasa by Michael Cid D'Angelo
54	Dried Bone by Pj Kneisel
55	Biographies

INFECTED

BY LIZ ZEMLIKA

I don't know where it came from, but I can tell you what happened when everything went to shit. By everything, I mean the whole world; at least it appeared to be happening everywhere before the stations went off the air for the last time.

I was one of the unfortunate ones that got stuck in the middle of the city when it all started. By some miracle, I have not been infected, but soon we will run out of food and have to make it out, or at least try.

I was at work when the screaming started, blood curdling screaming. The kind that sends the hairs on the back of your neck to stand up. Everyone ran to the windows to see what was happening. All I could see was blood everywhere and people running in every direction. "What the hell happened out there?" someone asked. It appeared that a fight had broken out in the middle of the street, cars were stopped and honking at a man kneeling over someone who wasn't moving, their blood pooling around him. We thought he was performing CPR, until he raised his head and looked right at us in the window, chunks of flesh dangling from his lips, blood smeared over his whole face and his eyes...oh my god his eyes, they were blank, no life in them. That's when panic broke out. I don't remember much of what happened next but I know that person in the road was no longer there when I got out of the building.

I ran. Driving would have been pointless. By this time cars were abandoned in the street and people were herding themselves in every direction. I started seeing more people shambling aimlessly, attacking anyone in their way. When I got away from the crowd, I stopped to catch my breath. The heavy smell of copper hung thick in the air and I watched in shock as one of them limped toward me, covered in blood, the flesh on his cheek ripped clean off. He got closer and I couldn't move. I just stared at his blank, cloudy eyes and the gaping hole in his cheek, when someone grabbed my arm from behind me and pulled me back into a building.

"Are you stupid girl?" he screamed in my face once the building was secured behind us. I couldn't speak, but looking around the room, there were three more people, all looking scared.

“I get it, we’re all scared, but you almost got yourself killed. Name’s Randy” he stuck out his hand and I slowly reached out to shake it. “Gr...Grace” I stuttered. He was a big man, his face chiseled, and hard looking, hair buzzed neatly close to his scalp, military style. My eyes drifted to the 45 strapped to his side and he patted it lightly and smiled. “Never leave home without her” he chuckled.

“This here is Max and Abigail and that is Isaac over there” he pointed to a man in his early twenties sitting on a crate by himself with his head in his hands. He didn’t look up. I shook hands with the young couple, whom looked terrified.

“What’s happening out there?” I asked finally. Randy stared off for a minute, then answered quietly.

“The news is saying some new drug hit the streets, and it’s making people go crazy. That don’t look like drugs to me, I saw a guy get killed in the street then get up and attack another person. That ain’t drugs.”

“I think I saw that happen too, I mean I saw a guy EATING someone and the next thing I knew that person was gone and I don’t think he was eaten” I mumbled, not believing the words were even coming out of my mouth.

Randy just nodded and ran his hand over his jawline thoughtfully.

The room was silent, while outside was chaos. Just then, a woman, soaked in blood, slammed into the window, sending spider web cracks in every direction.

“C’mon! We gotta get outta here.” Randy led the way deeper into the dark building.

We followed Randy through the building to an emergency exit, where he stopped.

“We need to find a safe place, then we need weapons and food,” he told us flatly, as he pulled his gun from its holster and checked the magazine. “Stay close to me.”

He pushed open the exit door slowly and peeked out into an alleyway, then waved his hand for us to follow.

We made our way across the city streets, careful to stay away from main roads. “There’s an armory a few blocks down...” Randy said, catching his breath. “We can make it if we stick to side streets and alleys, we will be safe there. They should be setting up a safe zone for survivors.”

“They? Who are THEY?” Abigail asked.
Randy looked annoyed “The military, now c’mon!” he snapped.

We made it to the armory, barely. One of them grabbed Abigail by the hair, attempting to drag her into an alley, his jaws snapping next to her ear as she screamed. Randy didn’t hesitate; he barely aimed and shot it right between the eyes. “Who are you?” I asked, stunned. He shook his head and stood silently as Max picked Abby off the ground.

Randy approached her, putting both hands on each side of her face, he turned her head to the side.

“What the hell are you doing man?” Max screamed.

“Shut up a second!” Randy yelled back.

He was looking in Abby’s ear; finally, he dropped his hands and muttered

“You’ll be fine.”

“What the hell was that?” Max continued to yell at Randy’s back as he continued on to the Armory.

“Just checking to make sure she wasn’t infected” Randy said calmly.

“If you know something about what’s going on here you need to tell us man!” Max insisted.

Randy stopped suddenly, staring directly ahead of us.

“I will tell you what I know when we get there. For now, shut up and follow me or you’re gonna get us all killed!” he snapped at Max without looking at him.

We continued on in silence. Max had his arm around Abby, who was still shaking and Isaac walked next to them, head still down.

We made it to the Armory as dusk was settling in; the sirens and shots from the main roads in the city had begun to grow silent but the screams still rung out from all directions. The Armory stood silently in front of us, dark and abandoned.

“So much for your safe zone” Max muttered bitterly.

Randy didn’t seem to hear him, he stood frozen in front of the door, his calm demeanor was starting to falter.

“Shit!” he yelled and kicked the door. “God dammit!”

The door swung open and the coppery smell of blood hit us all, Randy went in first and waved at us to stay back as he disappeared into the dark.

After a few minutes he reappeared, looking defeated “It’s clear, shut the door.”

Max and Randy barricaded the doors and windows with wood they got from broken furniture, while the three of us sat in a small office.

“Is he ok?” I whispered to Abby and nodded toward Isaac, sitting by himself in a corner.

“Don’t bother, he hasn’t said a word since we met him, I’m not even sure how Randy got his name out of him. Maybe that’s not even his name,” she whispered back.

The guys came back in the room then, “That will have to do for now.” Randy sounded tired now.

“Now tell us what the hell is going on, you know something about this.” Max was still angry.

Randy pulled a chair out of a corner and sat down. “I work for the military, retired actually, I was reactivated this morning to try and contain this....thing. I guess I’m deactivated again now” he sighed.

“Thing?” I asked.

“I don’t know where it came from, if we created it or it’s some crazy supernatural...anomaly, hell from what I’ve seen today, I’d believe either. It’s a parasite, a black nasty leech looking thing that feeds on brain matter...Those THINGS out there, they aren’t people, not anymore, they are infected.”

The room was silent; we stared at him in disbelief.

“That’s what you were looking for in my ear” Abby whispered. Randy nodded and hung his head.

“It spread so fast, there was nothing we could do.”

A heavy silence hung in the room.

Max wrapped his arm around Abby and she dropped her head onto his shoulder.

Isaac finally looked up from the floor; he stared at Randy, rage burning in his eyes as he slowly stood up. He never broke his stare as he stood for a few moments, hands balled into fists at his sides. Suddenly he was on top of Randy, pounding at his face and chest, screaming, “You killed her!” over and over.

A stunned Randy grabbed his arms and subdued Isaac. “You got your shots in kid, but I didn’t kill nobody.”

Isaac burst into tears and Randy dropped his arms. Keeping his eyes on him he said, “Isaac’s girl got infected, I had to put her down. I’m sorry kid but she was going to kill you.”

“Put her down?” Abby sounded disgusted “she was a person!”

“Not anymore she wasn’t” Randy was still staring at Isaac.

“You should have let her kill me!” Isaac sobbed

Randy walked away from him “Jesus Christ!” he shouted and walked out of the room.

Now here we are, silently sitting in a little office, waiting. Waiting for the silence to come outside, the silence that means everyone is gone, that means the infected have taken over the streets. Then we can make our move to leave the city, to find safety if there is any left. To survive.



QUIET CONTEMPLATION

BY PJ KNEISEL

THE THING IN THE NURSERY

BY DONNA L. GREENWOOD

Harry moved his boot so it was directly above the spider and then he brought it down with such force, he jarred his ankle. The creature exploded into a squelch of green matter and leg hair. He moved his boot and looked at the remains. Disgusting. He hated spiders. He took off his glasses and cleaned them on a small corner of cardigan whilst watching his wife's car drive slowly up the street and pull into the driveway. Martha was back with her new arrival. A boy, she'd said on the phone. He put his glasses back on and continued to stand at the bottom of the garden. He made no movement towards his wife; he simply watched her take her little bundle into the house. There was a feverish shine to her eyes and he felt a little resentful that he was excluded from her obvious joy. He'd been tidying the play area beneath the large oak tree, just as Martha had instructed,

“So that it's all ready for the new baby, Harry. You can do that, can't you?”

Yes, he could do that. He didn't like it but he could do it. The play area was Ben's. It always would be, no matter what interloper decided to descend upon them. Harry smiled; he could see two year old Ben playing under the tree, looking up at him and laughing at the mess that sand and water made when you swished them together. He had just started talking, “Baddy, Baddy, de wawa!” And though nobody else could understand him, Harry always knew what his son was saying, “Daddy, Daddy look at the water!” The vision of his lost son dissolved before him and Harry's smile melted. He felt resentment fizz through his veins. It was Ben's play area. It didn't belong to this new *thing*.

Harry trudged into the house and watched his wife fuss around the tiny little creature in her arms. She looked happy.

“Come and meet your son,” she said to Harry as he walked into the kitchen.

I already have a son, thought Harry, but he trundled over to the table where Martha was sat and peered into the blanketed bundle she was holding. His eyes widened and he jumped backwards. Harry felt sure he'd just seen a black, hairy leg hiding in the folds of the blanket.

“Harry?” said Martha.

Harry said nothing. He took off his glasses and started to clean them, all the while staring at the bundle in his wife's arms.

Martha was a saint. Over the next few days, her patience with the new arrival caused hot tears of pride to spring into Harry's eyes. If Ben hadn't died at such a young age, Martha would have blossomed and had more children. But Ben's death had broken her. For twelve long years she'd had the look of someone who had misplaced something; her face permanently screwed up as though she were trying to remember where that something was. Now she looked relieved. Even though Harry felt nothing for this unnecessary addition to their family, he had to concede it had reanimated Martha and this warmed his heart.

Harry remembered that the first few weeks with Ben had been very difficult – the sleepless nights, the constant worry over every little cry and hiccup - but those early days with Ben were nothing compared to the torture this new cuckoo inflicted upon them. It wouldn't eat. Everything that Martha offered, it spat back up and then made this god awful mewling sound that lasted for hours. Harry watched as his wife's happiness disintegrated into a permanent state of anxiety.

“He's not eating, Harry. What should I do? How is he going to grow and flourish, if he doesn't eat?”

Harry shrugged his shoulders and cleaned his glasses. How would he know? Ben had just drunk his milk and shut the hell up. Not like this... this sack of shit and vomit.

It was worse at night. He and Martha would get settled, pull on their pajamas and climb into bed; they'd just be about to close their eyes and it would start. Such a deafening caterwauling came from the nursery that Harry feared their neighbors would ring the police. Every night he watched Martha get back out of bed and shuffle down to the nursery – her eyes red and unseeing, her actions like that of battered marionette.

Ben's body had been a mottled blue when Martha had gone to wake him in the morning. When Harry had pried his stiff little body away from her – he had felt how ice cold they both were. The paramedic had taken his body from Harry and disappeared with it. Neither Harry nor Martha saw their little boy ever again. Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. You think your baby is safe when they're sturdy enough to run and play in the garden. But they're not. The darkness can creep in and steal the breath from even the hardiest of children.

Every night, the thing squalled. And every night, Martha flung off the duvet and zombie-walked her way towards the noise, eyes unseeing, mouth down-turned in grim determination. Harry was sure that she was losing weight. Her grey silk pajamas hung

from her, trailing past her hands and feet, giving her a wraith-like look. He offered to go instead but she shook her head, causing her thin, black hair to fall into her eyes. It was unwashed and greasy. The thing in the nursery didn't allow Martha one minute to herself.
Not even for personal hygiene

And every night, despite his concern for his exhausted wife, Harry fell into a dull and dreamless sleep. Sometimes he would wake in the blackness and feel the empty space beside him. In the silence of the night, he would raise his head convinced he could hear a noise coming from the nursery – a strange, inhuman sound that sounded like the skittering of spindly legs on a wooden floor.

One morning, four weeks after their lives had been turned upside down by this squalling little critter, Harry came downstairs to find his wife sat at the kitchen table, slack-jawed and staring into space. She was stark naked.

“Martha!” he yelled, running over to her and grabbing her shoulders, “What the hell are you doing?”

She looked at Harry for a moment as if she didn't know him. A little bit of drool fell from her lip.

“Harry?” she whispered. And then she looked down at her naked body and said, “Oh.”

“Martha, are you okay? What's going on? Were you sleep-walking?”

“Oh yes. Sleep walking,” said Martha and stood up from her chair, “Need to feed the baby, I need to feed the baby,” she mumbled under her breath as she left the kitchen. Harry stared after her, cleaning his glasses with his cardigan. Now he had seen her naked, it was clear just how much weight his wife had lost. He could see each one of her ribs poking through her skin and her stomach was now a yawning black hollow. She reminded him of those prisoners of war he'd seen in documentaries. She looked like something was eating her from the inside out.

Week five and, as always, the night air was shattered by the sound of impatient screams coming from the nursery. Martha sat bolt upright like Nosferatu from his coffin, and then began to move towards the screaming.

“I'll go,” said Harry. “Martha, you get back into bed and go to sleep. I'll sort it.”

“No. No, Harry. I have to go. It's me he wants.” And then she delivered the punch – a direct hit that took the breath from Harry's lungs. “You made me go back to sleep the night Ben died.”

Harry let her go then. He put his hand on his heart to see whether he could feel the ragged hole his wife had just blasted there but all he could feel was a soft heartbeat that accelerated slightly when he began to sob.

It was getting bigger. He could tell because the shape beneath the blue blanket had grown. Martha was very possessive of her new treasure and Harry didn't even get a look in. Not that he wanted one. He just couldn't stand watching his wife deteriorate whilst the thing in the blanket blossomed. Harry wanted to smash his large fist into the swaddled shape. But Martha never left the two of them alone, and sometimes, when he walked towards Martha and her little bundle of joy, she moved it away from him.

“Don't,” she'd say, “You'll wake him.”

So Harry kept his distance and watched the little fiend slowly suck the life out of his wife. And whilst he watched, a dark plan began to form in his weary mind. *He* was the head of this household and Martha was his wife. That thing had had her attention for long enough. Tonight he was going to put an end to this nonsense. Tonight he was going to take charge of the situation like he should have done right from the very start. He would never have let things get this far with Ben.

That same night the squawking started right on cue and, like a well-trained donkey, his wife trotted off to the nursery. Though an unnatural exhaustion hummed through his bones, Harry quietly climbed out of bed. He put on his glasses and followed his wife down the long corridor towards the nursery, not forgetting to grab the little surprise he'd hidden under his pillow.

As he approached the door, he could hear his wife cooing,

“Don't fret. Mama's here, my baby, mama's here and everything's going to be just fine.”

And then the never ending, brain-searing, nails-on-the-blackboard screeching finally stopped.

Harry pushed open the door and walked into the room.

The first thing he saw was his wife sitting in the rocking chair beside Ben's old crib – a crib that was now covered in huge, black cobwebs, so thick and sinewy they looked like the ink-black tentacles of an octopus. Martha was rocking to and fro with a lunatic smile fastened to her face; both her breasts were exposed and luminous like two pendulous moons. The thing that she was nursing was still wrapped in the dirty, blue blanket. Harry

stared at the blanket as it began to move. He watched as one long, hairy leg crept out. And then another. And another, until eight black legs had circled themselves around Martha's shoulders and back. The creature chirped softly as it crawled nearer to Martha and nestled into her breasts. It opened its jaws, its *chelicerae*, and closed them around one of her nipples. Blood began to puddle up and trickle down his wife's breast and stomach. One of the creature's black legs circled the breast as if claiming it for its very own. It turned its head towards Harry, triumph shining in each of its eight eyes; it seemed to be goading him - *She's mine now. What are you going to do about it?*

Harry grasped the hammer in his hand a little more tightly and walked towards mother and baby.

THE RETURN OF THE COUNT

BY JOHN GREY

It's seems so long ago
that I saw that face
but now those strange eyes,
pale cheeks, crimson lips,
the courtly manner,
the ubiquitous cape,
appear out of a crowd
in the ballroom
of a stately English home.

My body shakes
from a sudden unexplained chill
in the air.
My last time in his presence, I recall,
ended badly.

For when I was twenty,
my beloved Anna
was found down by the river,
blanched and bloodless,
a bloodstained bite on her throat.

Seeing him here
reminds me of that tragedy.
Being in the very same room
with that devil,
I can feel her clammy skin,
witness the frozen stare,
hear the sigh
that in one perforating plunge of teeth
bucked into a stilled scream.

I do not wish
to reacquaint myself
with the Count
but, I must admit,
at the time,
he taught me well.

SKELETON DANCE

BY JOHN GREY

In the thick of darkness,
bones dance, skulls sing,
enlivened by memory
of mellifluous melodies,
riotous dance steps.

Hairline fractures shake their heads.
Busted clavicles twist and twirl.
It's all coming back to them.
The past, the present,
construct from what's available,
clack like castanets
as midnight approaches.

Trust death to try to justify existence,
with some skeletal choreography,
to honor the whole
with what fragments get up to.

WHAT I'M DOING HERE

BY JOHN GREY

So why am I wandering
this cold hilly graveyard
when not one of those buried here
is kin to me?

I don't admire
the mossy stones,
the unkempt angels,
the withered stalks
that may have once been
flowers of mourning.

And there's more
amiable places.
Like my own parlor
with a glass of wine
and a blazing fire.
But I'd have to be
alive for that,

It's midnight
and we phantoms roam.
Is that a good enough reason?

THE SAN FRANCISCO INCIDENT

BY JAKE ROWLAND

#

Memorandum: The following is a transcript of the sole audio recording recovered from SFPD Headquarters at 3:46am Monday, March 19 1934, after what is internally being referred to as the "San Francisco Incident."

#

[TAPE BEGINS]

#

Lieutenant Baker: "Ok, is this thing on?"

Unidentified Male: "Yes sir, should be good to go."

Lt Baker: "Thanks, you can leave now."

UM: "Yes sir."

#

[DOOR CLOSES]

#

Lt Baker: "Ok Danny, I know this has been a long night for you, hell, for all of us, but the Chief wants your statement recorded now."

Officer Simmons: "Pleas lieutenant, I just want to go home."

Lt Baker: "I know son, but this is important, you know we need to hear everything, for the recording."

Ofc Simmons: "Yes sir."

Lt Baker: "Ok, so lets start from the beginning. You and Officer McDaniels answered a call regarding suspicious activity down at the docks, correct?"

Ofc Simmons: "Yes sir, we got the call around 10:30pm and arrived on the scene at approximately 10:43pm."

Lt Baker: "Then what happened. In detail, please."

Ofc Simmons: [SIGHS]“Steve, uh... Officer McDaniels and I approached the warehouse in question cautiously. It was at that time that we heard chanting, in what appeared to be Latin.”

Lt Baker: “Latin?”

Ofc Simmons: “Yes si--”

#

[DOOR OPENS]

#

Lt Baker: “What the hell... who the hell are you?”

Agent 13: “Thank you lieutenant, but we’ll take it from here.”

Lt Baker: “Like hell you will! I demand to know what the hell is going on!”

Ofc Simmons: “Lieutenant?”

Agent 13: “I thought I explained that already? Did I not explain that already?”

Agent 9: “You did, I know I heard you loud and clear.”

Agent 13: “I thought so. Look, lieutenant...?”

Lt Baker: “Baker. Now who the hell are you?”

Agent 13: “Ok Baker, my colleague here and I will be taking over from here on out, so we would appreciate you leaving the room now.”

Lt Baker: “Bullshit! This is my investiga--”

Captain Anderson: “Carl, these men are handling everything from this point on, so come with me please.”

Lt Baker: “But sir! I--”

Capt Anderson: “This came down from above the Chief’s head Lieutenant, it’s not my place, and especially not yours, to question.”

Lt Baker: “But--”

Agent 13: “But nothing. You heard your boss, scram.”

Lt Baker: “Bull--”

Agent 9: “We’ll take two coffees on your way out Carl. Black with two sugars please.”

Lt Baker: “Fuck you.”

Capt Anderson: “Baker! Now!”

Agent 13: "Bye Carl."

#

[DOOR SLAMS]

#

Agent 13: "Sorry about that kid. Simmons, is it?"

Ofc Simmons: "Yes sir."

Agent 13: "I knew a Simmons back in the war. You know a William K. Simmons?"

Ofc Simmons: "No sir, can't say I do."

Agent 13: "Good. Guy was a weasel. You can call me 13. This here is my friend 9."

Agent 9: "Howdy."

Agent 13: "Can we get you anything? Coffee? A pop? I think your pal Baker back there has some bourbon in his top left drawer if you prefer that?"

Ofc Simmons: "No sir, I'm ok, thank you. Are you fellas with the Bureau?"

Agent 13: "Yeah, you can say that"

Agent 9: "Mmmhmm."

Agent 13: "Did I hear you correctly earlier? You heard what sounded like Latin coming from inside the warehouse?"

Ofc Simmons: "Yes sir, at least it sounded an awful lot like it."

Agent 9: "Wow, you to speak Latin? Color me impressed. You must be a real brain. College?"

Ofc Simmons: "Yes sir, graduated the year I before I joined the force."

Agent 13: "Nice, kid. Now, what happened next? And please, tell us everything, no matter how... odd."

Ofc Simmons: "Sir?"

Agent 13: "Look son, you can tell us everything. No one is going to think your crazy, at least not in this room."

Ofc Simmons: "I don't... I mean, I... I..." [BREATHING HEAVY]

Agent 13: "Breathe kid, breathe. 9 and I, well, let's just say we have experienced some... things. We may be able to help you, but you need to tell us everything that happened tonight."

Ofc Simmons: "I [VOICE CRACKS] I don't know what I saw..."

Agent 13: "Sure you do, just walk us through it. You and your partner were about to enter the warehouse. Then what happened?"

Ofc Simmons: "Right. McDaniels and I heard some strange noises and chanting coming from inside, so we approached with caution."

Agent 9: "Smart."

Ofc Simmons: "We quietly made our way inside, and that's when things started to get odd."

Agent 13: "Odd? How so?"

Ofc Simmons: "You see, inside we saw about [5-6] suspects... in purple robes, chanting in a circle around some symbols and candles on the floor."

Agent 13: "You don't say?"

Agent 9: "Odd indeed."

Ofc Simmons: "No sir. The next part is when it starts to get... odd. McDaniels, he... he got nervous, we both did, and that's when we were going to make our move. Only..."

Agent 13: "Only what, son?"

Ofc Simmons: "I can't explain it sir, you see, it seemed as if it was some sort of ritual or something."

Agent 9: "A ritual? What were they doing?"

Ofc Simmons: "I don't know sir, we didn't exactly feel like walking up and asking. But then... oh, God... that's... that's when it happened..."

Agent 13: "What Simmons, what happened next?"

Ofc Simmons: "Oh God..."

Agent 9: "Simmons. Focus, kid. You need to tell us what happened."

Ofc Simmons: "Right before we were about to approach the suspects, the markings on the ground began to... to glow... and this, this, oh God, I don't even..."

Agent 13: "Simmons, you need to focus. Hey, [snapping sound followed by a whistle] you need to focus dammit."

Ofc Simmons: "Sir, I don't know what the hell I saw, but hell is the only way I can describe it! Oh, God, it was awful! As they were chanting, this... thing began to... climb... or crawl out of the glowing hole in the ground!"

Agent 13: "Shit."

Ofc Simmons: "That's when McDaniels got spooked and fired his gun at the thing. And that's when everything went to shit. Just... to shit."

Agent 13: "Explain."

Ofc Simmons: "You see sir, I think they were trying to control the thing, because when McDaniels shot at it, it went insane, and it, it just pounced on one of the men and..."

Agent 9: "And what? What did it do?"

Ofc Simmons: "It ripped him to pieces. Oh God, it was horrible... so much blood... that's when the screaming began..."

Agent 13: "Simmons, you need to keep going. What happened, what did the... thing look like?"

Ofc Simmons: "The screams were deafening. They men in robes began yelling. That's when they noticed us. One had a gun and started shooting back at us, or maybe at that... beast. I don't know for sure, but that's when we began to return fire. I know we hit a few of them, most likely killed them, but that creature... it was a bloodbath... Eventually, it noticed McDaniels and I. That's when I noticed it. It had wings, and stood upright, like a man. Only it had a head like a dog, or, I don't know what I saw. It had a long face like a snout. And claws. And fangs."

Agent 9: [IN A LOW VOICE] "Christ. That sound like a [REDACTED] to you?"

Agent 13: [WHISPERING TO 9] "This is bad. This is just like Boston and Liverpool."

Agent 9: "I'll go make the call."

#

[DOOR OPENS AND CLOSES]

#

Ofc Simmons: "Where is he going?"

Agent 13: "Had to pee. You're doing great kid, try to bring us home, what happened next."

Ofc Simmons: "That's when it... that's when it flew over towards us. We opened fire at it, but bullets didn't seem to do a damn thing to it. It flew right at McDaniels. Poor bastard didn't have a chance. The thing picked him right up off the ground and into the air and... and, bit into his neck... [Sobbing] Oh God, Steve is dead! The thing chewed on him and threw him out the window! Like a rag doll! I fired off a few more rounds but it took off out the window. I tired to run after it and pursue it in the car, but I lost it in the darkness."

#

[DOOR OPENS AND CLOSES]

#

Agent 9: "They're on the way."

Agent 13: "Ok. Simmons, look, you tried to kill the thing, and that's a damn brave thing to do, ok? Get that into your head. Now, do you know what happened to the others there, in the robes?"

Ofc Simmons: "Dead I think. Or ran off, if they were lucky, but there were a lot of bodies when I chased after it. Sir, what in God's name was that thing that killed my partner?"

Agent 13: "I'm going to level with you. Based on what you described, it sounds like a [REDACTED]."

Ofc Simmons: "A what?"

Agent 9: "A nasty little shit if there ever was one. You believe in demons kid?"

Ofc Simmons: "Demons!? What? Is that what that was?"

Agent 13: "Sure, let's call it a demon. Probably easier to swallow that way. Look Simmons, you've been through hell tonight. You've seen some shit that would make a normal man piss himself, and that is why I need to shoot straight with you. [REDACTED]'s don't like it when you try to kill them. They're ornery like that. The thing is, it's going to want to get even, and it won't stop until one of you are dead."

Ofc Simmons: "Oh my God..."

Agent 9: "Don't worry kid, 13 and I are going to see you make it home by morning, and we have some more of our... colleagues, on the way as we speak. If we're lucky, this is its first time here, so maybe it will have a hard time finding your scent."

Ofc Simmons: "Its first time... in San Francisco?"

Agent 9: "No, in this dimension."

Ofc Simmons: "I... I don't understand."

Agent 9: "Don't worry, kid, neither do we half the time."

Agent 13: "We'll gut the damn thing and get some pay back for your partner. I know I would want the same thing. We just need to make some arrangements and prep--"

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[INAUDIBLE NOISE]

#

Agent 13: "Christ..."

Agent 9: "That was fast. I thought we'd have a little more time."

#

[INAUDIBLE NOISE]

#

Ofc Simmons: "Did you hear that! It found me already!"

Agent 13: "Here kid, take this."

[GUN CLICKS]

[LOUD SCREECHING]

Ofc Simmons: "Jesus!"

Agent 13: "Keep your head on kid! We got this!"

[LOUD SCREECHING]

[SHOUTING FROM OUTSIDE THE ROOM]

Agent 13: [TO 9] "It's been an pleasure 9."

Agent 9: [TO 13] "If you think this gets you off the hook for the five bucks you owe me, your wrong..." [LAUGHING]

[LOUD CRASH]

[SCREECHING]

[INAUDIBLE NOISE]

[SHOUTING]

[INAUDIBLE NOISE]

[GUNSHOTS]

Agent 13: "This is it! Get Ready!"

Ofc Simmons: "Oh God!"

[LOUD CRASH IN THE ROOM]

[SCREECHING]

[GUNSHOTS]

[INAUDIBLE NOISE]

[SHOUTING]

Agent 13: "9!"

[INAUDIBLE NOISE]

[GUNSHOTS]

[SCREAMING]

[CRASHING]

[SCREECHING]

[INAUDIBLE NOISE]

[STATIC]

#

[3 HOURS OF WHITE NOISE]

#

Agent 5: "This was a bloodbath. Find anyone alive? 13? 9?"

Agent 27: "No, sir. We believe this might be what is left of 9, and that looks to be 13's hat, but that is all we could find."

Agent 5: "Dammit. Just like Shanghai and Buenos Aires."

Agent 21: "And Toronto."

Agent 5: "Ok. We need to move fast. 27, get a hold of our contact at the Post. Tell him there was a gas leak. A smoldering cigarette set off an explosion. Tragically, there were no survivors."

Agent 27: "Yes sir."

Agent 5: "21. Take your team and get rid of any evidence connected to what really happened here, then torch the building. There can be nothing left for the police and fire crews when they get here, copy?"

Agent 21: "Yes, sir."

Agent 5: "Now go, you have less than 30 minutes. Start by grabbing that recorder. Give it to one of the desk jockeys and see it gets transcribed in detail. I want it included in the report, and I want it done by breakfast."

Agent 21: "Yes, sir."

Agent 5: "The Council is going to want to hear about this."

Agent 21: "Yes, sir."

#

[TAPE ENDS]

#

END



MIDDLING SHADE

BY PJ KNEISEL

LETHAL BEAUTY

BY LINDA M. CRATE

Edwina was enjoying a soft, cool night as blue as her cerulean eyes. There were few nights better than those in October, she thought, as she glanced up at the dark blue night full of the diamonds of stars proliferating the sky and the softness of the silver white moon.

An owl hooted desolately as she walked past the pub on the sidewalk, her arms swinging at her sides.

Mostly everyone mistook her for a child.

She looked up when she heard someone following her into the alleyway. He was a large, deranged looking man with shaggy strands of unkempt black hair and honey brown eyes. His nose looked like an abnormally large mushroom that was slapped onto his face, he was missing a few teeth, and his large hands looked as if they were large enough to snap the neck of anyone who would dare to mess with him.

Reading his mind told her all the she needed to know about him.

The petite blonde was used to it. Everyone suspected her to be a frightened, fragile child so easily broken for their wanton desires. It's what gave her an edge as a predator, she thought. No one suspected her to be half as strong or lethal as she was.

This ignoramus, however, was really annoying her. He had a rusty knife which annoyed her, the most, because if one was going to be a killer why be so thoughtless and sloppy? That would just leave marks on the body that one would discover on the body, and once they found out it was rust they would track down the type of knife and presto this moron would be behind bars.

"You know you shouldn't walk alone at night at this hour."

"Why's that? Three in the morning my favorite hour," she retorted.

She would spare the authorities the efforts of having to deal with the idiot.

"Little girl, we're going to have some fun."

"Are we?"

"Didn't your parents tell you not to speak to strangers?"

"Not those exact words," she replied.

"What's your name?"

"Edwina Davenport."

"Edwina?" The man laughed and laughed.

Yes, he could laugh and laugh all he wanted. This wouldn't change his fate.

She stood there calmly assessing the man. He wouldn't be hard to take down. This wouldn't be much of a fight. Yet she would do it anyway. She didn't like his drunken stupor, his vacant eyes, or the way she could smell the sweat coming off his dirty body all this miles away. She didn't like his torn white t-shirt covered in filth and muck, the way he spoke in jagged half-words poorly strung together, or how he looked at her as if she were some little morsel that he would devour.

Edwina wasn't about to become anyone's prey. Especially not to this fat, drunken oaf. He reminded her of an ogre. Not that she had seen one in the realm of humans for at least six hundred years.

"What would your parents say now, beautiful?"

"It's kind of hard for dead people to speak. It's why zombies are poor conversationalists ordinarily. There's always an exception to the rule."

He blinked at her stupidly. Clearly, he did not understand.

"What would your parents say now, beautiful?" he repeated.

"Nothing, as they're dead."

"Well, it's a good thing you're about to join them now, isn't it?"

"I don't think I'll be the one joining them."

"Oh, you're a funny kid, eh?"

Well, she wouldn't consider herself a kid. Unless, of course, they had changed the age of adulthood far past one thousand years.

Edwina had enjoyed the changes of the people all around her throughout the ages. She had evolved with each century of people. They were all so different, but one thread remained the same. Humans were resilient, they bounced back from anything. Especially the things that were supposed to kill her.

The best of them amused, inspired, and made her curious. The worst of them like this buffoon made her scoff in all their foolishness and arrogance.

"What would your mother say?"

"Huh?"

"What would your mother say about giving birth to such a large, stupid waste of a person? Clearly, you could do the universe a favor and kill yourself to spare it the trouble."

"How old are you, you little brat?"

"You could ask my children."

"Children?"

"Oh, yes, I have five of them. I ask them to write their dear mother every once in a while, but they're too busy with their own families to actually give me the time of day which is rather sad. Perhaps, I should go about punishing them, soon?"

"How old are you?"

"One thousand years old."

"What?" he asked, mouth hanging stupidly open. He then laughed. "Don't be stupid. Tell the truth."

"It is the truth."

"That's not even possible. Humans don't live past one hundred years old."

"I never said I was human."

He gave her another daft look. "Not human? What are you talking about?" he protested.

She smirked, revealing her fangs sliding down over her eyeteeth.

Edwina stood in the full moon's light so he could see her in all her menacing glory. Her childlike innocence that she wore to lure men and sometimes even women in gone, she was certain that her disdain for him was shining in every reflective surface of her dark blue eyes.

Her long blonde hair blew wildly all around her.

The man looked at her and considered her several moments as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

That was a typical reaction, and she wasn't too surprised. Few humans wanted to admit that there were monsters in the world that they couldn't fathom or reason with. They didn't want to believe in the things of myths, fairy tales, nightmares, or horror novels. It didn't make these things any less true. Much to their dismay, of course.

She waited for him to address her again. Surely, he had something to say.

"Not human," he choked out, realizing his mistake all too late.

"That's right," she smirked. "I suppose idiots like you do know something," she scoffed. He tried running, but she was too fast for him. She pounced on his shoulders, biting heavy and hard into his grotesque, fatty throat. She didn't want to do it, but she also didn't want anyone to have to die by this idiot's hand. "Leave the killing to me, I'm more efficient and a better murderer," she whispered into his throat before draining him of all his life blood.

Surprisingly, it didn't taste disgusting like the sweaty, bumbling fool that he was.

When she was finished Edwina took her own dagger from within the deepest pocket of her cloak and slashed her hand, putting it to the man's wound, so that it closed.

The authorities would have fun trying to figure out the case of the bloodless human, she thought. That was, if they found him. She kicked his body down the alleyway until she found a low pier near the bay and kicked his body into the waters.

"Farewell, fool, none shall miss you."

Edwina gazed at the moon with a small, dark smile. "Let us go, shall we? The night is still yet young and I'm still ravenous." With that the small vampire disappeared into the shadows of the night and none were any the wiser of her villainy except the dead man in the water. But he wasn't going to speak to anyone any time soon.

UNTITLED

By LOHMAN SCOTT

Roiling Kettle of Blood and Bone

FORGET ME WHEN I'M GONE

BY CHIP JETT

I live in a small town called Winwood, Nebraska that has one traffic light, one police cruiser, and a castle. When I was younger, the police force consisted of my uncle Steve, his son Travis, and the elected sheriff, a lady named Janice Hood. Sheriff Hood always ran for reelection every year, unopposed, on the platform of a zero percent crime rate. I'm not sure of what zero was a percentage, but it's what made the need for multiple cruisers obsolete.

Uncle Steve told me they used to park the car off the road, near the traffic light, to keep passers-through from running it. The light used to just be a single flashing caution. In the eighties they upgraded to the three-light variety – green, yellow, and red – because State money had to be spent. It's 2018 now, and most people still run the light anyway because there's never any traffic lined up and waiting.

We did get a little traffic from time to time, back in the day, usually around Halloween, so I guess that last part was a lie. And that's where the castle comes in.

Winwood Castle sits up on a hill in a part of the county the locals call Devil's Kitchen. The main building has been renovated so many times over the years it hardly looks like a castle at all, not in the sense that most people think of castles. There are no turrets, no spires, no moat; it's just a big old house with stone siding and trees. Big trees, full of the Spanish Moss you see hanging in the ancient East coast oaks of Charleston or Savannah.

You never find it this far inland, yet here it is. It helps give the house that haunted look you'd expect in a place called Devil's Kitchen.

All manner of stories surround the house, but I don't think anybody but me knows the truth. People say moonshiners used to do their business in the woods where the river runs deep and wide. Many of them were killed due to run-ins with either the law or each other. Rumors say a woman was strangled there, some love triangle or other. They found her body in a well, decayed beyond recognition. Kids have been swept away in the creeks, teenagers have disappeared trying to break in to see the ghosts for themselves. But these things happened long ago.

At Halloween, sometimes, the traffic light organizes the crowds and ferries them down the road leading to Devil's Kitchen. Teenagers dare each other to cross the gated drive, climb the front steps, knock on the door, step inside. Uncle Steve and the crew try to keep the kids away, but there are always some who make it through. Usually nothing happens; the kids scare each other and post videos of nothing up on YouTube. But there are always rumors.

In the Halloween of '48, a young man and his girlfriend took a bet to spend the night in the castle. They made it inside, according to friends who dropped them off, but they were never heard from again. There are dozens of stories like that, but you can never tell what's true. It's like some sort of folklore or legend; there's at least a grain of truth in there somewhere, but they're mostly exaggerated fairy tales meant to frighten children.

These tales come and go through time, and so much is forgotten to history. All that remains is a scary looking house on a hill covered by years of stories and Spanish Moss.

Until Mary, that's what I believed.

I met Mary Winwood the first day of school, senior year. She was blind. The guidance counselor asked me to escort Mary around campus her first day, and that's how we came to know one another.

Mary was, to say the least, a little different. For starters, she wore lots of make-up. Not pretty-looking stuff, although she was pretty – beautiful, in fact. Mary wore so much base on her face you couldn't tell the true color of her skin. The rest of her was covered as well. She wore white gloves, hooded jackets (even in the heat), boots, and sunglasses.

As I said, Mary was blind. Blindness is not a strange thing, of course, but combined with other things about her that truly were odd, people felt they were justified in discussing her many eccentricities behind her back.

Perhaps most odd of all was the bus Mary took every day to school that picked her up at the end of the long driveway leading to Winwood Castle. The castle, at that time, had stood empty for nearly thirty years. Somebody was rumored to pay the taxes on the property and perform general maintenance now and then, and I know that's a fact. My aunt Jean worked at the County Tax Assessors office; she processed the checks herself every November and recalled how, every year, a check would roll in signed by some Winwood or another. Taxes were paid, no questions were asked. It was into this mortgage-free, well-manicured home that Mary moved in the Fall of 1978.

How no one ever put the disappearances together with Mary's arrival in town as more than a coincidence is, I suppose, a matter of prejudice. Who would suspect a blind girl capable of the things most foul happening in our little section of the world? No one did.

I became Mary's only friend. She was shy, but it was much more than that. She never spoke up in class or answered questions, and teachers left her alone. It was if they knew better than to push Mary too far. When Mary wanted things from the store or from the next town, she would ask me to get them for her. I always did.

"You're too good to me," she would say from time to time. "If you were smart, you'd turn from me and run."

But I wasn't smart.

I was with Mary one day, in her room, deep within the castle, looking through her collection of old school yearbooks. There were three of them lined on a shelf in her bedroom, 1918, 1948, and 1968.

"My family is in them," Mary told me.

In 1918, I found Lilith Winwood, captain of the basketball team and editor of 'Yours Truly,' the title of the volume.

"She looks exactly like you," I told her, wondering if she had ever seen the photograph, now fading with age, and Mary, now blind. She made no comment.

In 1948, Ruth Winwood appeared. Her hair was shorter than Mary's, but her eyes were exactly the same, only Ruth wasn't blind.

"It's uncanny," I said.

In both books, the women in the photographs were different in many ways from Mary but exactly the same in many more. The hair styles and lengths changed, and the clothes changed as well. But the eyes were the same.

"Look at the 1968 book," Mary said. "Tell me what you see."

I knew she wasn't talking about the sports teams or yearbook staff. I turned to the senior class page and flipped to W.

A gulf of time existed between 1918 and 1948, enough to make it seem as if the people populating the one yearbook were from a different part of the world than the other. But 1968 was only ten years before. Maybe that's why I could see so clearly what Mary no longer could. Yet she knew.

Although the name next to the '68 photograph said 'Rebecca,' there was nothing to distinguish the girl in the book from the girl sitting with me in Winwood Castle on that hot afternoon.

"Tell me what you see," she said again.

It was then that I knew Mary for what she was. I wasn't afraid, for you see, love is indeed blind.

"I see you."

Mary stared into the depths of the castle. I don't know what she saw; nothing, I guess. Or everything. She seemed so helpless and vulnerable, and I only wanted to help.

As a kid, I had always heard the old stories; that summer, it became a new generation's turn to be afraid.

Mary couldn't see, but she needed to feed. I found the easiest prey for her. Even though she was what she was, her lack of sight prevented her from taking full advantage of her strength. I did everything she asked. I lured them, I disposed of identification, I made sure the fingers in town pointed anywhere but back at Mary.

"You probably want to make it look like an animal," I advised her our first night out. "That'll throw everyone off and make them look for things that aren't there."

In the dead of night, we used the parked police cruiser to stop cars. I would flip the switch and let the lights on the top of the cruiser flash for a moment, long enough for a panicked driver to slow down enough to find himself snatched through the window by a blind vampire. I drove the empty cars miles away and left them in distant parts of the river. As far as I know, none have been found to this day.

Bodies began piling up, so to speak. Most looked to have been ravaged by some monstrous beast. The State game warden was called in. Hunters went out, usually in the evenings, looking for a rogue bear, or maybe a big cat. Nothing was found. In all, six people went missing from our town. Additionally, four out-of-towners were never missed by any of our citizens, but I knew their names.

I loved Mary. I would have done anything for her and often did. I never knew what she felt for me, if anything at all. We never really talked about those things; I was content to sit in her company, ignorant of anything she felt or believed.

One day, near the end of our time together, Mary opened her heart to me more than she had before.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I didn't mean for you to become a part of this."

That evening, the last night I saw her, we walked by the river behind Castle Winwood. She told me her time was up and she needed to go. She didn't kiss me, like I'd hoped, and she didn't touch me. She just told me to go and forget I ever met her. Like the obedient lackey I had been to her, I did as she said.

The next morning, Sheriff Hood came knocking. It seems Mary hadn't shown up somewhere she was meant to be and people were worried. A poor, helpless blind girl needn't be all alone like that, they said. When Mary hadn't answered her door, the sheriff went in. The castle was as she had left it; there was no sign of Mary. Gone, too, were her yearbooks, though I doubt anyone noticed that. Given the current climate of the town and its disappearances, people were concerned.

An anonymous tip came in that I had been spotted at the river the night prior, walking with Mary. I was held until she returned, which she did not, and eventually charged, circumstantially, with her disappearance.

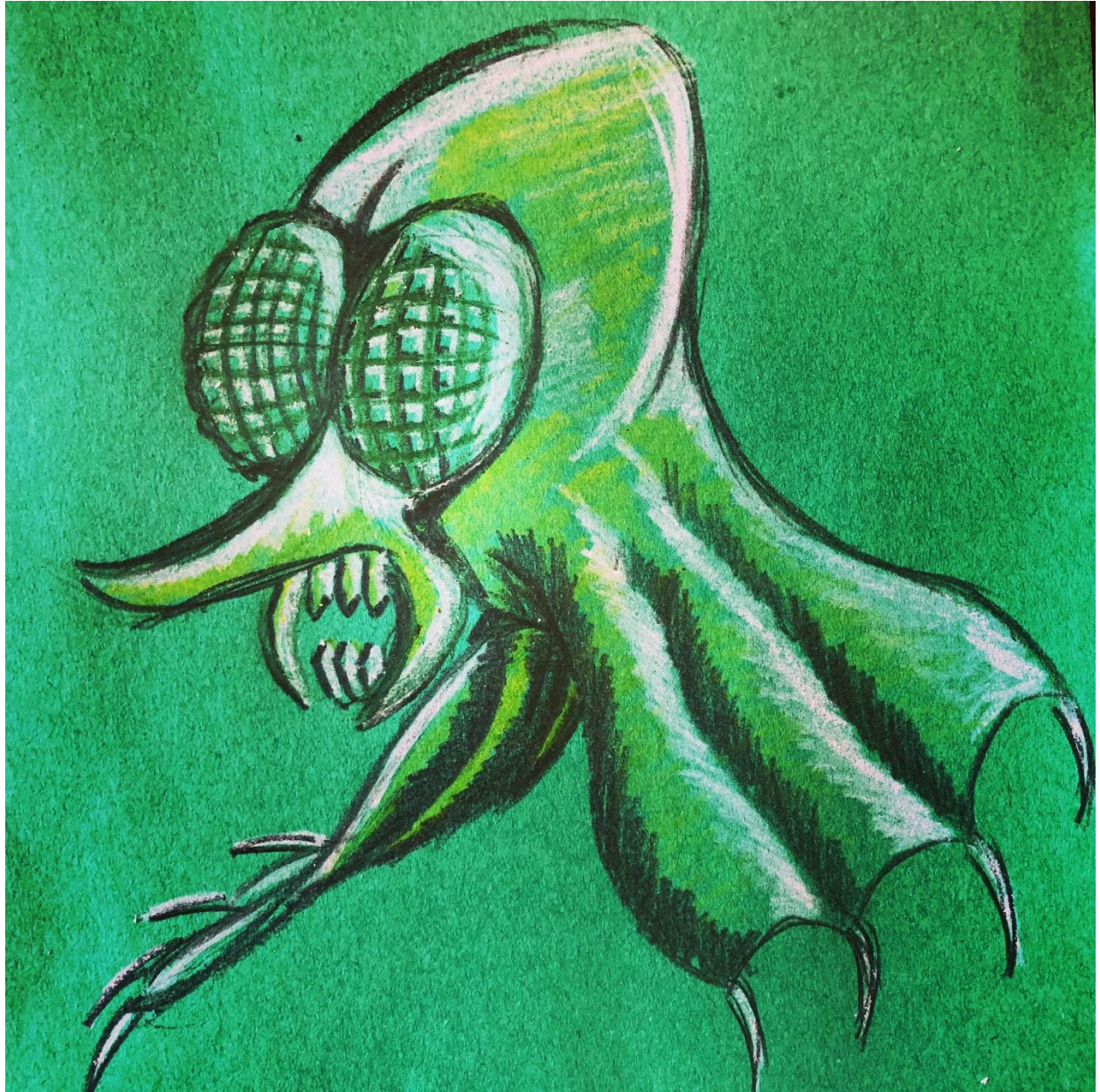
I guess that was Mary's last defense for herself. With me locked up, she could clear out of town for probably the next fifty years. No one would believe the pleas of desperation I might cry, nor would they believe any fantastical tales of vampires in the night, had I decided to tell.

But I didn't tell. I would never have done anything to hurt Mary. I kept her secret and covered her tracks, but not because I was afraid.

These things happened over forty years ago. I've been locked up ever since. My cell has a window facing the direction of Devil's Kitchen. I have to climb up on the sink to get a really good look out, and when the lights go down, that's exactly what I do. For years I've looked, and for years I've seen nothing. The view of Devil's Kitchen is unobstructed, and on clear nights you can sometimes see the roof of the castle glowing in starlight, outlined against the blackness of the universe. Lately, I've noticed a tiny pinprick of light seeming to come from one of the many rooms in the back of the castle. But I could be wrong; the nights may be clear, but my eyes aren't what they were when I used to use them to see for Mary.

I like to believe Mary is out there, somewhere in my field of vision. Maybe she is. I'll never know. She stays away for different lengths of time. I guess she decides to come back when the town's fear has died down. Sometimes it's ten years, sometimes fifty. Time really means nothing to either one of us.

I'm eligible for parole again in twenty years, but I'll probably be dead by then. If staying locked up is what I have to do to protect Mary's secret, I will. It's what she would want me to do.



MUSCA DAEMONIAC

BY PJ KNEISEL

WIRES

BY F. F. AMANTI

Martin Hall slammed his phone down. The bell inside his phone's thick plastic body rang out with a single pathetic ding.

He scowled at it. From that pitiful sound, you would hardly guess at the infernal racket it could make. In the middle of the workday, it was enough to rattle teeth. It was bad enough when time wasters called. It was worse when the only thing on the line was static.

Hall got up, crossed his office, made a beeline for the far corner. There, on top of a small cabinet, he kept a coffee maker. Years ago, what sat on that cabinet wasn't a drip coffeemaker, but a pair of highballs and a bottle of Jack. The coffee maker with its permanently stained carafe was what his wife once called "progress." Apparently, he had needed civilizing. Back then, he drowned his anxiety in bourbon. Now, he did it with caffeine and handfuls of ibuprofen. Either way, his guts paid the price.

He walked back to his desk. In one of its drawers he found a pack of Dorals. He pulled one out and shoved it in his mouth. He was searching for matches when the phone rang again. Its rubber feet danced on his desktop.

"Hall."

Static.

Goddamnit.

"Hall," he said it again, this time louder.

The phone merely buzzed and crackled.

Hall tossed the phone's handset away from him. It clattered on the desk and bounced off of it, suspended in midair by its cord. He spit his cigarette out onto a stack of papers as he stood up. When he got to the door of his office, he pulled it open.

"Miss Alder?"

His secretary had her back to him. She was typing memos on an electric typewriter. (An IBM, latest model, Hall had insisted on them regardless of cost.) The machine's type-ball spun furiously behind beige plastic, whacking out letters with impossible speed.

“Miss Alder!”

“Yes, Mr. Hall?” She didn’t turn, but instead kept typing. Martin Hall paid his employees to work.

“Have you sent for the telephone repair?”

“Yes. Just like you asked earlier this morning.”

“And? Did they say when they would be by?”

Miss Alder’s typing stopped. The sudden silence felt odd. “No, they did not. Shall I—”

“Find out.”

“Of course, Mr. Hall. Anything else?”

“No.” He turned, changed his mind, turned back. He rested his hand on the sill of the door. “Actually, yes. With my phone out, maybe I can get caught up. See that I’m not disturbed this afternoon.” He drummed his fingers on the door.

“You just let me know when you’d like me to come in and take your files.” Miss Alder turned back to her typewriter.

Hall closed the door. It made a soft metallic click when its latch touched the jamb. His secretary’s typing came through the thick wood of his door like muffled, distant gunfire.

Hall made his way back to his desk. He let himself fall into his chair. It creaked under his sudden weight. He rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger. The disorganized stacks of files on his desk looked like a paper mountain range. What a mess. He grabbed the phone handset still dangling off his desk. It was beeping. He put it back on its cradle and reached out for the cigarette he had abandoned.

Only it wasn’t there.

"You gotta light, cowboy?"

Hall jolted in his chair, practically jumped out of his skin.

“You all right there Marty?” A woman sat in the chair in front of his desk. Her skirt slid up her thigh and pooled around her hips.

Hall blinked at her. She hadn’t been there before. He glanced from her to the door and back again. She wasn’t... how did... It wasn’t possible. *She* couldn’t be possible.

“Pulled it off your papers.” The woman in the chair held his cigarette between slinky fingers. “You don’t mind do ya?”

Hall shook his head. He opened his mouth, but the words wouldn't come. He sat there, slack jawed, a fish who couldn't breathe.

"Didn't think so." She wagged the cigarette at him. "So, how 'bout that light?"

Hall pulled open his desk drawer. He rummaged through it until his fingers finally found a book of matches. They had the name of a gas station on the cover.

"Just toss," the woman said, "I can light myself. We're emancipated now, you know."

Hall tossed the matchbook. With unbelieving eyes, he watched her fold the cover over on itself. She pinched a match and pulled it through. It popped and flared. In a minute, Hall thought, his eyes would blur over, he would blink, they would clear and the overstuffed chair in front of his desk would be empty. Then he would take the pot of coffee to the washroom, pour it down the sink.

"Ashtray?"

Hall pushed his cup of coffee to the edge of his desk, towards her.

"How civilized." She dropped the match in.

"What are you—" His voice a whisper, as dry as the leaves of October.

The woman tilted her head amusedly. She took a drag on the cigarette.

"What are you doing here Mary?"

"You remember me," Mary laughed. She clapped her hands together, the way a child does.

"You know, for a while I was actually worried."

Martin Hall looked at his wife. His dead wife. He breathed slowly, as if to calm himself, and the smell of her perfume filled his nose.

"Of- of course I remember you."

"I should hope so, Goddamnit." She took a long drag on the cigarette, pursed her lips and let the smoke out slowly. It lingered around her, cast her in haze.

"Mary," Hall's voice was thin.

Mary sniffed and pinched her nose. She looked the same. How long had it been? Ten? Twelve years? Could it really have been that long? Already? She looked untouched by time, by... death. It was as if she were cut out of a postcard, peeled from the billboards on 2nd Avenue, the ones in front of Beekman's where they would go when it was far too late, and they were far too drunk and looking for a place to sit in the dark. The films that flickered there in that darkened theatre, Coppola, Schaffner, Kubrick, he hardly remembered. How could he remember them, when all he saw, all he wanted to see, was *her*?

“Mary,” Hall stretched his arm towards her, across the gaping mahogany landscape of his desk, fingertips straining to touch the curve of her jaw, her nape, “how are you... alive?”

She leaned forward and flicked her ash into his coffee cup. “How are any of us alive, cowboy?” Her eyes, blue touched by gray, watched him.

“But, I- I saw-”

She smiled, took a long pull on the cigarette. When she finished, she examined what remained of it. Hall watched her, unable to peel his eyes away. She must have noticed because she leaned forward once more. This time she gently thrust the red tip of her smoke into Hall’s coffee mug.

Hall instinctively inhaled. It was just a short, tiny gasp, a miniscule sucking in of breath, that had it been anyone else across the desk from him, would have gone unnoticed.

She smiled. “Always the addict.”

Hall’s eyes dropped.

The cigarette fell from her fingertips. It sizzled in his coffee as it died.

“You never did have self-control, did you?”

Martin looked up from his desk, looked into her eyes.

“Did you, Martin?”

What could he say after all this time? What was still left to say? Sorry? Was that it? Would that heal the scars? Was that what she was expecting; why she appeared here? To hear him apologize for all the things left unsaid, all the moments left unspoken, passing silently between them when they were still married like ships passing each other in fog? If he was guilty, then so was she. Who was she to lecture him? She who left half her breakfast chopped on a compact mirror while she tended to a nosebleed. She who had the eyes of every man at her constant attention. What good would it do now to speak the words he could not say when she was in bed, beside him pretending to sleep while he watched the rain hit their bedroom window? In the darkness, she would lie there, silently sobbing, rubbing her jaw, her shoulder, her arms while he watched the droplets leave miserable streaks on their windowpane. The knots that rose in his throat, the guilt that consumed him never did erase the jealousy. Did they? Did she feel guilt? For all the times he waited to hear her key at the door at some ungodly hour? For every time he smelled a whiff of cologne on her skin? If she did, she never said it. So why would speaking now somehow right the wrongs?

It didn’t then.

It wouldn’t now.

Martin Hall said nothing.

“As usual, my husband, always the conversationalist, hmm?”

“I watched you die,” he yelled. He pounded his desk with both fists. The pens, paperclips, coins, the detritus of a man’s working life, everything on his tabletop suddenly got up and danced. His chair flew out from underneath him as he stood. It hit the wall and toppled over.

“I can’t deny it.” Her voice was as it had been before, distant, unimpressed. She crossed her legs, rearranged the fabric of her skirt. “To tell you the truth, between us and these four, miserable walls, if I got the chance, sweetheart, I’d pull that trigger all over again.”

Whatever Hall was about to say, whatever words had been forming in his mind, they died in his throat. He leaned forward, pressing his weight into his knuckles, using them for balance.

“That bother you, cowboy?”

“You miserable bitch.”

“Mmmmm,” she purred, “now it comes out.”

A little hole appeared on her temple. Small, no bigger than a pinprick. It marred her features nonetheless.

She smiled. “In all this time, did it ever occur to you that maybe I wasn’t the one who pulled the trigger?”

“What?”

“That perhaps, you might have had something to do with it?”

“I never even knew you had a gun.”

“Pour me a drink, Martin. For old time’s sake?” The little hole in the side of her temple was bigger now, the size of a pencil eraser. With the way Mary sat in the chair, slightly turned to one side, Hall still hadn’t seen it. He was still in their apartment, still in bed in the dark, thinking about what he could have done differently, and if thinking about it incessantly like he had for twelve years made him weak.

“You know where you keep it,” she said.

“I don’t drink. Not anymore.”

Mary looked at him crossways.

He pointed at the coffee maker in the corner.

She turned her head to look at it. The hole in her temple now had a drop of fluid collecting at its bottom edge. When she turned her head back to him, that drop ran from out from its little black hole, down the side of her face, tracing a line to her jaw.

Hall at last saw it, the hole, the droplet of blood. He watched the drop linger, crimson on cream skin, at the corner of her face, where her flesh curved gracefully into her neck

Hall's mouth fell open. The hole didn't seem to bother Mary. She was, after all, already dead. That the dead, ghosts, whatever she was now, didn't feel pain quickly crossed Hall's mind. She certainly didn't seem to notice the wound being there. But Hall, he did feel pain. Watching the wound get bigger, watching it ooze blood he was gripped by the need to say something, to say anything. He felt like he needed to expunge himself. Not just of words, but guilt. Rage. Shame. Something visceral that lay within. Instead, he turned from her. *Just like always.* He could practically hear her saying it. He opened the cabinet with a silver key. It took a few tries. He had forgotten which key it was.

When he finally unlocked the cabinet, its door swung smoothly open.

"Neat?" The glasses tinkled in his hands. "I- I don't have ice."

"I never asked you for ice."

He poured, slid her glass across his desk. When he took his hand back, it was shaking.

"Been a while?"

Hall nodded. "Very much so."

"Well," she raised the tumbler, "here's to us."

The bourbon ran down his throat, fumes invading his sinuses. The heat of the alcohol burned his throat. It felt like coming home.

"Mary," his voice was a whisper, "why are you here?" He asked. It was all he could get himself to say. His eyes lingered on the side of her face.

"You remember the concert on the green?" Mary sat her glass on the edge of his desk.

"Where it started to rain?" She laughed. The sound of her was intoxicating. "We got separated, and I ran across the field to find you. And when I got to the other side, I was wearing someone else's shoes. Do you remember that?"

"Mary—"

The phone on his desk began ringing.

"I ran across the grass and somehow ended up with someone else's shoes on my feet. Do you remember?"

He remembered. How could he not remember?

“You were so angry about those stupid shoes. You kept asking me where I had gotten them. I didn’t know, Martin. I- I still don’t know. I ran across that field, ran across the wet grass and I must have slipped. It’s not impossible, is it? Both of us were drunk. My shoes came off in the grass, and in the dark, I put someone else’s back on. I thought it was funny.”

The wound on her face was huge, gaping. It poured blood.

“But you, you were so, furious. You didn’t hear me. You didn’t want to hear me.” Her eyes glassed over. “You were, so angry. Martin, I- I never—”

Mary slid off the chair. Her skirt bunched up around her waist, exposing long legs, skin so pale it was translucent. “I never did what you always accused me of.”

Hall dropped his drink. It fell and soaked the rug.

“I couldn’t. I couldn’t do it. Not the way it was. Don’t you understand?”

No. He didn’t understand. He had never understood. Not then. Not now. He had come home. It had been late; the sun had long left the sky. Just another day. There were dishes in the sink. The smell of something in the oven. And from their bedroom, as he walked down the hallway, the sound of a gunshot. How? How could he, how could *anyone* understand?

Mary fell off the chair sideways. The blood from her temple soaked his carpet, mixed with the stain of his bourbon. She passed her hand across her belly. “Martin, I- I never told you...”

Hall dropped to his knees. The phone on his desk kept ringing, making an unholy racket.

Hall screamed, ran to her, took her head in his hands.

Her mouth opened, the color in her lips faded. A stream of blood came from her nose. There was no warmth in her body. No warmth to the phantasmal liquid seeping from her pretty face, coating his slick fingers as he cradled her. Her eyes rolled backwards, under their lids, exposing the whites.

“I can’t do this again. Don’t make me do this again. Mary, I couldn’t do it the first time. Please.” For the second time in his life, her ribs cracked under his palms as he pressed feverishly against her chest. Her breath escaped her then, twelve years ago, as it did now, with every compression.

The phone was ringing, ringing, its noise insane, bouncing off the walls.

He didn’t hear it. He kept pressing her ribcage, rhythmically squeezing her chest, forcing her to breathe.

She made a shallow gasping sound as she took in one last breath of air. She whispered something, a word that made Hall's hair prick, his blood run cold.

Hall pressed his face into Mary's. "Say that again. Mary, Mary for God's sake, say it! Say it again!" He grabbed her shoulders, but she evaporated under him, disappeared back into whatever void she had come from. His clenched hands rested upon his office rug. The stain of her blood, the fragments of brain and bone, all of it gone. Like smoke. All that was left was the smell of spilled bourbon, its stain like some amber poison.

He sat there, next the chair, next to the heavy mahogany legs of his table. When his tears would no longer flow, when his eyes had dried red, he didn't know what time it was. What she had whispered, it wasn't possible. It couldn't have been possible.

The phone was still ringing. Ringing.

Martin Hall stood up, staggered towards his desk. He was alone. Alone as he had always been. His feet kicked the tumbler on his carpet, sent it spinning.

He picked up the phone.

"H-hello?"

Behind the static there was a voice. One that he had never heard before but that he recognized instantly. A voice that belonged in the past, his past, a past that he had not realized existed, a past that like his wife, reached out to touch him. At last he understood, what Mary had done, what he had once had, what he, and he alone let slip away.

"Daddy," the voice said, as he pressed the handset to his ear, as the heart in his chest went out of its normal rhythm, fluttered into fibrillation, as he slid down the wall to the floor, shirt pulling out of his pants, exposing the white of his back, "Daddy, is... is that you?"

RAKSHASA

BY MICHAEL CID D'ANGELO

“The one thing you must remember, it always will be someone you trust.”

“Always?” Sabu said, with a skeptical sneer. His grandfather was fond of passionate fantasies.

“That’s the way it kills you. It becomes what you trust, and then, once you embrace – ahh!” The old man spouted for accent, throwing his arms up in the air for effect, and then slapping his knees.

Sabu had graduated Magna Cum Laud at Harvard, but he often shared his grandfather’s fun. “So, how do you know?”

“I once spent a year in Tibet looking for the Rakshasa!”

The idea of seeing the old man running about in the cold mountains of Tibet on an errand to hunt a demon was pure comedy; the vision of his gangly legs and bony arms doing anything remotely physical was enough to make the younger man snicker.

Grandfather’s face, which had shone bright whimsy, suddenly turned sour. It actually turned into a prune.

“You laugh!” And then, “Oh the folly of youth!”

Sabu held up a hand submissively. “Sorry, tell me how you hunted the Rakshasa.”

The old man shook his head. “No. You think I’m a fool. What happened to that young boy I knew once?”

“He grew up, grandfather. He went and studied physics at Harvard.”

“And is not physics the tool of Vishnu?”

Sabu shrugged: he often said how he hated it when the old man mingled religion with science.

“So, you are silent. You are uncertain, eh?”

“I believe in Vishnu, grandfather.”

“Then you should believe in the Rakshasa!”

The younger man got to his feet from where he'd been sitting at yoga, the sunlight warm on him through the reed blinds of his grandfather's house. The old man knew his grandson didn't like debating Hinduism with science; Sabu believed each held separate domains in men's souls.

“I'm thirsty, do you want some juice?” Sabu asked the other who was still rigidly at yoga, sitting with his eyes closed on the reed mat.

“No.”

The older man's health was failing, which should be expected, considering he was in his late nineties. Most of grandfather's life was mystery, because he disliked close relatives, and his personality – well – everyone like Sabu and their relatives thought he needed to relax a little bit.

Sabu got a drink and went to stand in the open doorway of the house. The southern Indian air was thick, but it had cooled much since he'd flown down a week ago from Bangalore.

“Tell me more about your hunt.”

The old man smiled, but his eyes were still closed and he hadn't moved an inch. “I don't know - it is not within your 'science'.”

“Come on, I swear, I really want to hear about it.”

“Do you know what a Rakshasa looks like?”

Sabu thought a moment. “I saw one in the text. A hairy monster with fangs the size of a tiger's.”

“And claws!” The old man added, still smiling. “His claws are like...”

“Like those of a tree sloth, yes.”

“Better to rip manflesh from the bones.”

Sabu sat next to him. “Okay. If this thing is so powerful – then why doesn't it just go around ripping up people?”

“I'll tell my story and you can judge why.”

The young man ceased his questions and let grandfather have his say.

“Many years ago, I went to Tibet. It was before the communists took it over, and a man could move about on pilgrimage without hassle. I was there to breathe, not to hunt anything, but I was told that the Rakshasa lived in the caves outside one of the cities. I –

being young – had the sense of youthful immortality to find out if these caves existed; and I was much like you: I did not believe in anything.

“Long I explored those mountains, where the snow remains all year, and the howl of the wind on the cragged peaks sounds like the children of Indra. There are trees there, and they don’t shed their leaves. There is no death there in Tibet, or, at least one can see. The old men who live there just get older, nobody knows what happens to them – they just don’t die. I went to see this magical land, and when I heard that the evil Rakshasa lived there, I wanted to see if the legends were true.

“In the village I met a young girl who would be my guide for a small fee, and this was good because I had little money. She was young, perhaps no more than nine-years-old, but she was smart and knew the country. She was a goat tender and spent much time on the mountainsides. I still remember her name – Lajena – and how she reminded me of my sister. We had a good friendship, and she took me high on the mountains, but we could never find the caves where the terrible Rakshasa lived.

“It became winter, and the weather was getting rough. I knew that I was running out of money, but though hunting the Rakshasa had been once an idle pursuit, it now had become an obsession. Every day I took to the mountains, with little Lajena in tow, until the wind became hard and the snows began to fall. It had occurred to me that I had been sent as a messenger of Vishnu, perhaps, to find out about the Rakshasa, and believe me; I did not know what I was up against. I did not know how the demon could change his shape to lure an unsuspecting person to his jaws. I thought it was some beast like the Yeti, who lives in the snows of those mountains too.

“One day it was very cold, and there was a hard wind. I did not find Lajena, and I was feeling guilty about forcing her to guide me anyway, so I took out on the side of the mountain by myself. I did not understand why I did this thing, only that some strange and horrible compulsion kept me looking for the Rakshasa. I was enslaved, spellbound by the demon’s magic.

“The next thing I knew, I was lost. The trail had fallen away into whiteness, and the light snow, which had begun to fall, now came down as a sheet. Soon I could not make out a few feet in front of me, and as I staggered on, I became turned around. The next thing I knew was that I was on the edge of a precipice, struggling not to fall over in the wind. I suddenly fell flat on my belly, my feet hanging over the edge, and I was screaming for Vishnu to save me. The cold rocks I held began to pull free because of my weight, and in a moment, I would plunge into the whiteness below!

“Suddenly, above me, there was little Lajena, standing against the wind and the snow. I didn’t know how she could have found me, but this question was given over to the fact that she was there. She got on her knees and held her little hand down for me to take, and I

remember thinking that Lajena could not be strong enough to pull me up – I would drag her with me! I hesitated, telling her to go get help and I may be able to hold on a little longer, but suddenly the edge became splintered, and I lost my grip. Lajena caught my wrist and asked me to trust her – she will be strong enough.

“Facing death I told her I trusted her, and behold! Suddenly her little form turned into a great hairy monster – with blazing eyes and fangs longer than my head, and its claws were the length of my forearm! It pulled hard on me, and I was lifted up toward its ghastly mouth, but as it brought its head down to tear my throat, I struggled and the rest of the precipice fell away. Both the Rakshasa and I tumbled down into the white valley and caused an avalanche.

“The next thing I remembered was that I had been dug out of the snow, half-frozen. I was so cold that I was ice itself, but somehow I lived. I never knew what happened to the Rakshasa, but I left Tibet a month later, never to return.”

Sabu grinned. “So Lajena all the while was the Rakshasa?”

The old man opened his eyes. “No. I saw her not long after being dug out. Her parents had forbidden her to brave the mountain, though they needed my money. I never told anyone there that I met the Rakshasa!”

The younger man obviously liked the story; yet, the grin that remained on his face still told of his skepticism.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” Wailed the old man.

“Let’s face it, Grandfather, it is hard to swallow.”

“Here!” The old man held out his right arm for inspection. “Do you see the long scars of Rakshasa’s claws?”

Sure enough, there were long streaks of once-torn tissue, where something had ripped into the forearm. Anything could have made them, but the evidence seemed enough for the old man himself who was beaming in satisfaction.

“This is your proof,” Sabu said. “Okay, I believe you.”

“You don’t, not really.”

“Sure I do, Grandfather. I’ve always listened to you.”

“Then, trust me that what I tell you is the truth.”

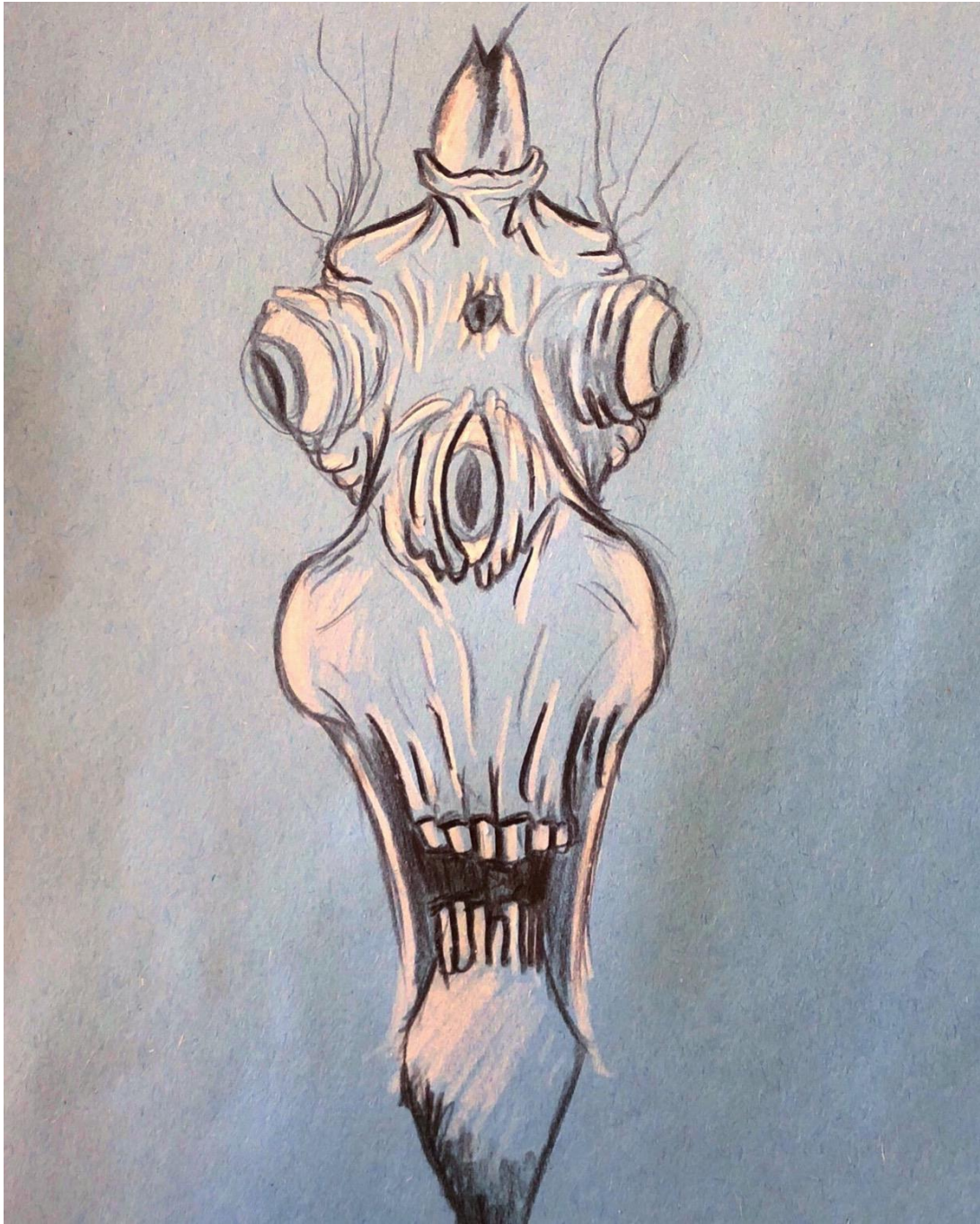
Sabu gestured with his arms wide. “You trust me, don’t you – and am I a Rakshasa, right?”

The old man nodded. “Yes, I do, I know you.”

“Wrong!” Shouted Sabu as he reached for his grandfather. “It hasn’t been easy to find you after all these years.”

The young man’s shiny dark skin turned to hair, his handsome face twisted into fangs and blazing eyes, and his foot-long claws pulled the screaming old man’s face off.

THE END



DRIED BONE

BY PJ KNEISEL

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F.F. Amanti holds a B.A. in English from Williams College. His short stories have previously appeared in “Under the Bed”, “Storyteller,” “Five on the Fifth,” and “Corvus Review.’ He lives with his wife and children in Palm Harbor, Florida and is currently working on his first novel. He is online at ffamanti.com

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M cid D'Angelo writes because he believes in literature; he believes that the art of words is louder than sound, more colorful than paintings. His stories are written not because of the pursuit of money or even success, but in the FAITH that they exalt our experiences; that not only do they give us enjoyment to read them, but they are meant to open worlds that a reader may not ever imagine. M Cid D'Angelo has been published in literary journals such as EUREKA LITERARY MAGAZINE, AIOFE'S KISS, SILK ROAD, THIRD WEDNESDAY, ADELAIDE LITERARY MAGAZINE, MIDWAY JOURNAL, MILITARY HISTORY, and LOST TREASURE.

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Scott Lohman is a Senior level technical support specialist, who in his free time is an avid geek of almost all kinds - Comics, RPG's, Video Games and of course World of Warcraft. He is a lifelong reader and has decided it is time to start putting pen to paper and contribute to the literary world, and hopefully leave a

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Liz Zemlicka started writing as a teenager, over the years she had gone more in the genre of Blogging than storytelling, but has always stayed an avid reader. With inspiration from great writers of horror fiction like Stephen King, Anne Rice, Ray Bradbury, Edgar Allen Poe and many more, she has improved her writing style and found her niche in storytelling and entertaining. Born and raised in the Midwest, with a fascination with the unseen, because there is nothing scarier than something that can play with your mind and terrify you beyond the reach of your 5 senses.

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