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# Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 15, ISSUE 9  
8TH SEPTEMBER 2019

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by  
Gavin Chappell

PUBLISHED BY:  
Schlock! Publications  
([www.schlock.co.uk](http://www.schlock.co.uk))

Schlock! Webzine

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## SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 15, Issue 10  
8<sup>th</sup> September 2019

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!

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Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews and art. Submit fiction, articles, art, or links to your own site to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk). We no longer review published and self-published novels directly, although we are willing to accept reviews from other writers. Any other enquiries, including requests to advertise in our quarterly printed magazine, also to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk)

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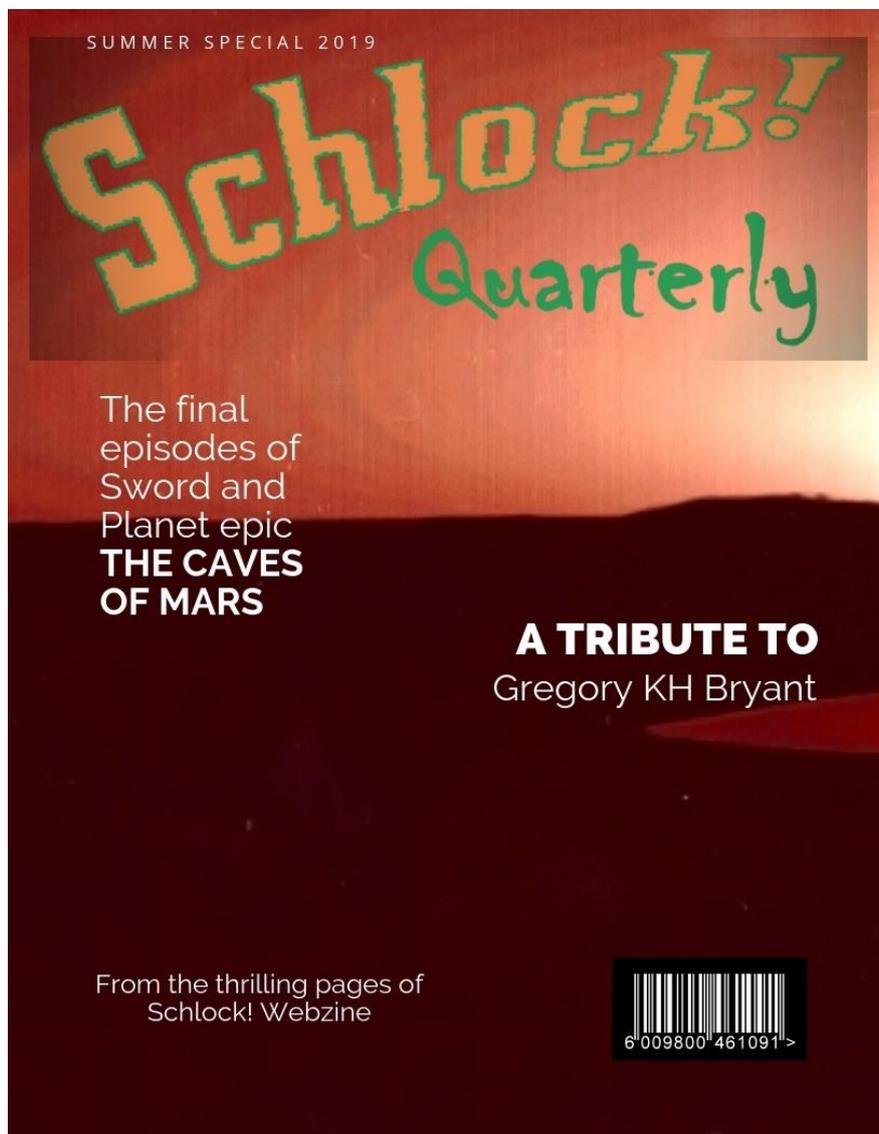
## EDITORIAL

This week, an ageing teacher seeks immortality. Kasimir Kohl shows his guest around the castle. An adventurer struggles to slay one of the undead. A man falls through the sky. And a psychotic meets his match.

In Cumbria, Matt Johnson experiences a final revelation. Following the professor's death, Lensman finds his every second occupied. And in his icy domain, Polaris has his first introduction to civilisation, but he has another, sweeter discovery to make.

—Gavin Chappell

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

## IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



**"SO MR. IGOR, DO YOU HAVE ANY ADDITIONAL SKILLS BESIDES ASSISTANT WHO DELIGHTS IN FULFILLING HIS MASTER'S WISHES?"**

*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.*

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## BEAST OF THE LAKE by John Jones

Immortality. That was the reward, that was the promise, and he knew it was his. Soon he would live forever. Nobody would have taken it seriously. Nobody who thought rationally that is. He knew that should he have told anybody of this belief, then they would either have laughed at him, or politely made their excuses and left. Yet, he was convinced that it would happen, and soon he would no longer fear death.

Kenneth Ambrose was a primary school teacher. He was 38 and basically lived a solitary life. Nine years ago he had been divorced, their eleven-year old daughter in the custody of the mother, and her new solicitor husband, 14 years older. Since then he had remained hopeful but realistic of getting back with her. It basically was never going to happen, and every two weeks, he would visit his daughter, and take her wherever she wanted to go. He hardly ever changed style in clothing and usually wore dour black pleated trousers and checked shirts. The typical dull attire of a school teacher was epitomised by him.

During one lunchbreak, he was in a side room of the school library where the children were not allowed to go. It was basically a storeroom for old books and furniture that had done their time in the main room, but were too good to throw away, and nobody took responsibility for, so the place was crammed, with barely any walking space. He was searching for something unusual to use in one of the lessons, when he came across a book that piqued his interest: 'Welsh Folklore, The Truth about the Legends.'

Most of it was about people, strange and eccentric, witches and cults, and one which got him most interested was the beast beneath Lake Brenig. It had the power to grant immortality upon the person who raised it from the waters into the physical world. A portal lay beneath the lake, closed by a Welsh farmer in 1519. The book explained more about the creature, and its world, and as he read, a feeling within him grew, and he knew there and then that it was true. He simply knew it, rather like a believer of religion who 'knew' their beliefs were right, and correct, without any physical, scientific proof. They just 'knew.' To them it was real, and truth, a blurring of the line between belief and fact, when a believer could only believe, not 'know.' Kenneth 'knew', and could not see that it was belief.

To him this creature was yearning to be allowed through into the physical world, not to cause destruction or chaos, but to explore, to learn about nature and humans. If, however, in pursuit of this, it caused devastation, then that did not matter.

This was of no concern to Kenneth who only saw the chance to live forever by a creature that lived in a parallel universe, its unopened portal needing four objects to activate its aperture. A recited, memorised prayer, spoken on the lake itself. Spilling of his own blood into the waters to symbolise devotion. A gift of the acolyte's choosing, and a fresh guilty mind.

He wondered what type of gift to get. A creature would have no concept of human objects, so he opted for items that were aesthetically pleasing, which also told the beast that he was willing to spend as much as he could to please it, to receive immortality. He spent as much as he could buying jewellery and gemstones, in the hope that the creature would like them. The guilty mind was the hardest to come by, but he did it, and now drove along the winding country roads to the lake. He knew he was only five minutes away. Having looked at the lake a few days earlier to plan his strategy, he saw that there were wooden boats for hire at the north end, and that he could park at the water's edge. When he was there, a surge of emotions

within him had stirred, as he was close to the portal. 'Soon' he had said aloud. Nobody had been around him.

'Soon you'll be here.'

As he approached, that same stirring whirled inside him in anticipation. He was soon pulling up to the water's edge and leaving the vehicle. He stopped and looked across the lake, and beyond it at the trees and hills where there was a slight mist, some of which rested on the water. Two boats were out there, seemingly not moving. A light wind ruffled his hair, and he trudged around hundred metres to the boat hire shed, and was soon in a white flaking craft that seemed to have been made in the early 18th century.

It creaked its way slowly through the water, Kenneth doing his best to guide it to the shoreline where he had parked the car. Eventually he did it, and crossed to the left rear door of his Kia Rio, and stopped as ahead, on the narrow road that led to and away from the lake, a van drove by, then disappeared from view. His heart was racing at the anticipation of being caught, and that he was soon to see the creature whom he venerated, and who would bestow upon him his gift.

He opened the door and reached inside and took out a supermarket carrier bag, wrapping its consignment almost airtight. Locking the car, he was soon back on the lake, rowing towards the centre. The other two boats had gone from his sight. There was silence, a light mist surrounding him as though watching out of curiosity. He stopped rowing, and the boat simply drifted slightly. There was no wind. The sky was white, and the surface of the lake rippled slightly, caused by the slight rocking of the boat as Kenneth stood up near the front, the adrenaline surging through him. He looked around him as though somebody might hear him, and began to recite the prayer over the lake.

After three minutes, it came to an end:

"...endowed with grace, majesty and faith. Your ever graceful, eternal disciple, sacrificial mortal animal, and devoted believer". He held out his left arm over the water, and from his trouser pocket took out a pen-knife. Without hesitation, he sliced into his palm, and blood immediately streamed into the water, the sound of splashing the only sound. A bolt of pain shot through him, and he winced, almost falling over. He did not mean to cut so deep. He knelt over the front, breathing heavily for a few seconds and putting his hand beneath the water. Reaching into his jacket pocket he pulled out a small plastic money-bag. It was full of jewellery.

"I offer you my gift," he said, and tipped them into the water. They all sank into the murky depths. He reached back, and picked up the carrier bag. It was slightly heavy, and with his other hand aching, he pulled it from the water and took out the human brain, then threw the bag back into the boat. He held it out with his injured hand which still dripped blood.

"A guilty mind," he said, holding it forth as an offering, then dropping it into the water, where that too, vanished into the depths.

In one of his classes, there was a six-year old boy who always talked. What his young mind could fathom and comprehend, he vocalised, so anything that happened in his family, he spoke of to anybody who would listen.

‘My mum does this, my mum does that.’ ‘My Dad’s drives a taxi. My dad makes loads of money...’ Kenneth hardly ever listened to little James, knowing that what he said was of no significance. It was simply a child with a loud mouth, talking about nothing and everything, until Kenneth remembered that James had periodically mentioned his brother.

‘.....my brother’s in jail. My brother beat someone up. My brother stabbed someone...’ Kenneth had taken the boy to one side, and asked him about his brother, and James told him everything he could. Seventeen years old, out of prison, and living at home with his parents.

“What does he do?” “Where does he go?” were questions Kenneth asked, along with others, to try and fathom how he could get the youth alone. He looked through the class files to find the address, and then began to follow

James’s brother as he left a friend’s. He watched him take a shortcut through a park, took a sledgehammer to the back of his head, and dragged him into a copse, where he took out his guilty mind.

Kenneth spread his arms and stared across the lake. He then noticed that the boat was slowly starting to sink. The surface of the water grew closer, and more fear shot through him as it spilled over the edge, and rapidly filled the vessel, where Kenneth also sank, as though his feet were attached to the wood. His fear became even more intense as the cold water came to his chest, then to his shoulders. He took in a deep breath and two seconds later his hair went beneath the surface. The boat drifted silently towards to the bottom of the lake. As Kenneth watched the daylight above recede, he realised he didn’t need air, and after the around three minutes, when the boat stopped, and the daylight vanished, the craft disintegrated, its particles vanishing into the blackness.

Kenneth stood at the bottom of the lake, surrounded by silence and gloom. He realised that down here there must be the portal, and that he had to go to and welcome the beast into the new world. His fear still surged through him, and he managed to take three steps, the ground like walking through a muddy riverside in autumn, when his jaw began to open far wider than normal, and pain shot through him as the skin tore, and his hair was dragged down his back. His bones began to snap, his innards forcefully moving and altering shapes. His forehead cracked and expanded, as a new eye formed, then another, then another.

New sharp shark-like teeth began to emerge in the cavity that had become his mouth, and from his chest began to emerge long tendrils, or arms, each with eight talons. Twelve of them tore slowly from his torso, his legs fusing together, then into his midriff, his bones rearranging and expanding. Sixteen tennis ball sized eyes circled its expanding head, and hundreds of teeth circled its gaping maw, with a tongue that had become curled, like that of an iguana, and transparent. Its arms were also circled around it like an octopus, the large hands on the end of each giving it poise and balance. When it had stopped, and the pain had gone, it was the size of an expensive house. Kenneth’s memories filled its mind, also of what it was, and also its name: ‘Orami’ entered its psyche.

What Kenneth could not have known, was that the story of the beast beneath Lake Brenig had been passed down through the ages, altering as it did so, so that it was twisted unintentionally

by the author of the children's book. They wrote of the truth surrounding the fables, but got them in a disorganised order so as not to reflect their reality. Kenneth, nor the author did not know that performing the rituals written, and believing wholeheartedly in its truth, he was to become the beast of the lake, and as it walked slowly in the depths, in the darkness, another realisation came in Orami's mind. It was immortal.

THE END

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## THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

### Chapter 21

The feast was finished, plates and platters cleared, and belts loosened as Gustav made his rounds freshening wine goblets and lighting cigars.

Idle talk was bandied about, crude jokes passed to and fro, as I entered and took my place at the table's head. I sipped my Bordeaux and considered an idle fantasy, as I looked through the deep red liquid held in the crystal at the laughing faces beyond the liquid. Wouldn't it be lovely to one day conquer France? One would not have to venture as far to acquire a bottle of the finest wines ... if one held the keys to the vineyard.

I sipped and smoked and let the cabal relish their joy. A true leader knew when to let his troops relax, and when to rouse them to their feet to march into battle.

And it was soon time to war.

But first, I wanted to give our prized guest a short tour of my pride and joy. Not just the castle, but the bodies, the skeletons, of those who once denied my right to rule. To see if this fresh-faced lad would catch a fright and wish not to be inducted into the Brotherhood—would his conscience call off his destiny to lead? I would tell him all I knew or surmised about the id and the superman and natural selection as we toured.

He walked beside me as the cabal milled about behind us, admiring the portraits of my royal blood line. I asked the youth about his parentage, but he seemed shy about his origins. I understood his fear. I laid a hand on his shoulder as I answered him with my adage: that from humble beginnings rose great kings. If his father was a cobbler and grandfather a boot black, it would not matter. Was not Christ the son of a carpenter?

His mood lightened after that. I whispered in his ear—literally and metaphorically—that great things were afoot for the Brotherhood. The New Brotherhood. That he was a young man who was soon to accomplish great things, and that he had nothing to fear in being poor and abandoned by the world. That would be his strength. With the right help one could climb to fortune. What one did not have or could not earn by the talent of one's hands, one must take by force. To the strong was the future!

He agreed joyously. Told me of his fascination with Nordic and Teutonic mythology, of the operas of Richard Wagner. He averred that he was ready to take what was rightfully his, that he was tired of being impoverished, of having doors slammed in his face, watching other, lesser species of men receive what was his due. He saw certain types of people band together to strengthen one another while shunning the outsider. He was a Teutonic man, and deserved to inherit the nations of his ancestral people. When the outsider became the leader, he created a new inner circle of society, which had the duty of shutting out those societies, those vermin, who kept themselves separate to undermine the nation.

Alas, no more. Those bastardized tribes—whether banded together by race, creed, religion, political affiliation, or some hidden agenda—all of them would be flushed out, stripped of their wealth and prestige, and forced to feel what it was to be the outsider, and if need be, destroyed. Allowing only a society of the New Brotherhood of the Ouroboros to heal the

world of its manifold wounds, to cleanse its soul of those lesser entities, those rats of humanity.

He and I saw eye to eye, and I was overjoyed to converse with him during the castle tour. Herr Hitler would be our boy-god whom we raised to a golden throne. Of course, as in every religion, the priests who claim that the child is god are the ones who wielded true power. The boy merely sits and waits for his crucifixion while the priests, like Saint Peter, whisper denials of ever having known the messiah, making good their escape when the centurions arrive to retrieve their divine sacrifice. It is the priests, and not the god, who builds the everlasting church.

I led the boy to an old room which hadn't been opened in years. A thick layer of dust coated the door latch and a waving mesh of cobwebs spanned the doorway. On my keyring were a few rusted keys, and one of these needed a touch of force to turn the crunching lock. Rust and web flew up with dust as the door creaked open. The air was fetid and cold, the windows shuttered, but the clock-like ticking patter of rain on the sill echoed through the room.

Collectively, the candles in each hand of the cabal lit the room adequately for Herr Hitler to see the chairs and lounges, the wooden benches and beds piled haphazardly throughout the vast space with a tableaux of the unclothed dead sitting, reclining, intertwined—a mass of clothed bone. They were all old victims, victims of my younger days after the decease of my family, so only skeletons remained. I didn't want to frighten the boy too quickly. Both of his parents were dead, I was informed, so I felt death in the family would allow his conscience for a greater acceptance of seeing a corpse lounging on a Louis XIV chair.

He impressed me. He felt no fear. In fact, he laughed, hopped where he stood, and slapped a knee in a jig. It was as though he were facing a circus of macabre clowns who were positioned for his amusement. We all laughed with him, and the tour resumed.

I next showed him a room with corpses in various states of decay. Skin still on many of them, but with bone revealed beneath, eyes missing, hide toughened to leather. The former living who had seen their demise come in a multitude of methods: drowning, by fire, stabbed, shot, crushed, necks sliced by blade and thin steel wire, bled out like swine. All of them for myself to see how a man died by both simple and complex methods, quickly and by slow degrees. All of it a study worthy of the most elite educational institutions; at the doctoral level, where one should attain one's credentials by finding a new manner of murder and performing it for the professors and the class. A little idea I had been pondering for the future.

Herr Hitler studied the dead with a quizzical mortician's eye, moving from corpse to corpse, touching nothing, hands loosely clasped behind his back ... doing the rounds. We watched him as he returned to us waiting by the door of the room, many of the cabal covering their noses to attempt to block the stench. The boy wrinkled his nose and smiled, commenting that the smell was almost as bad as a rooming house for impoverished men. We broke into uproarious laughter as he passed through our numbers and headed down the hallway. I caught up to his side and directed his steps to the final room.

Fresh kill dwelled here. The smell was overpowering, bodies bloated with internal gases slowly escaping. The windows were thrown wide to allow cool air and driving rain to enter, the door sealed tight. Maggots and flies swarmed the dead.

Our members coughed and retched and spat on the hallway floor, but none of them ventured into the room. Except for Herr Hitler. He took a candle from my hand and paced a slow step across the wooden floor as he held the light to each bloodied and bloated corpse, again inspecting with his critical eye. He breathed calmly through nostrils and never coughed or choked on the stench.

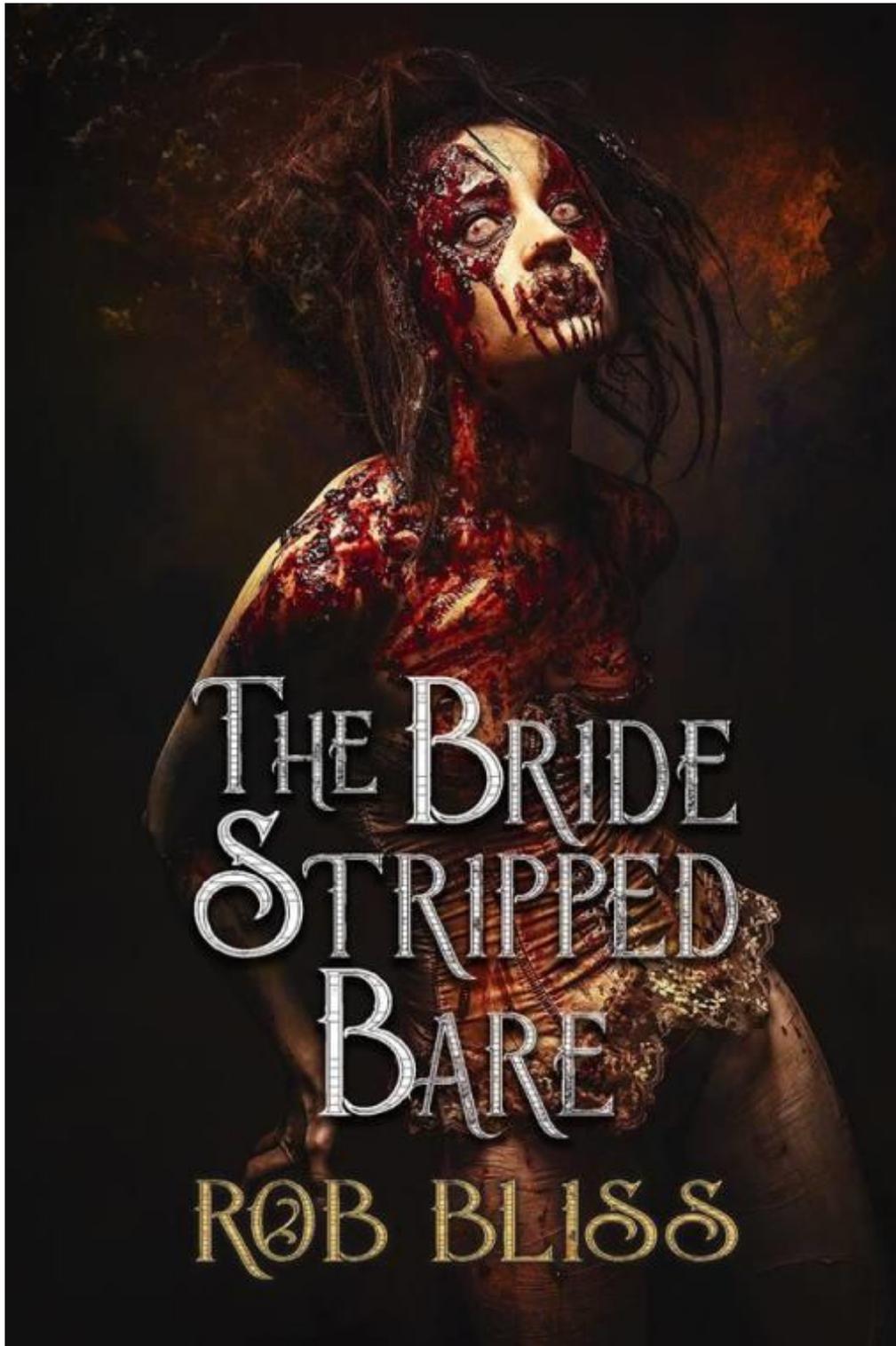
He stood and faced us as we peered in through the doorway. The candle held to the side in one hand, the other arm reaching to widen his embrace. His face was a mask of the Übermensch, eyes black and piercing, mouth a tight, thin line as he held our gazes, waited for our coughing to dwindle to silence.

Then he spoke, older than his years, a clenched fist hammering the air to accentuate his words. “Do not be afraid of this, gentlemen. We must embrace the dead in order to create a better world for the living. This is the future—it must never be feared. Instead, it must fear us!”

We were silenced, faces blanched as we gazed at this prophet standing with rigid posture amongst the slumped dead. He stepped slowly away from the corpses toward us; we separated to make way for him. Our boy-god. He returned the candle to my grasp and strode, hands clasped at his tailbone, down the hallway into the darkness.

We were so in awe that we almost forgot to close the door and lock in the vile air. I found it difficult to relieve my face of its permanent smile. I felt like a proud father.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



Available from Necro Publications.

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## TOO HARD TO KILL by Chad Wilson

Brock plopped down in the middle of the path and pulled off his right boot. He began rubbing the foot gently, ignoring the days of grime, gradually increasing pressure on the arch and front. What he needed was a horse. If Blenton paid him enough, he would buy one. He had had a horse once before, but it only lived about four months. He had been tracking a particularly wily, rogue bugbear for a week, and the first thing the creature did when it realized Brock was following it was to put an arrow through his horse. The bugbear didn't live long afterwards.

But that was ten years ago, he reckoned. He had walked for ten years before that, and he had been walking ten years since. But now he was in his mid-fortys, and he was feeling every step.

Brock put the boot back on and climbed slowly to his feet. His left knee hurt when he got up. Growing pains, he told himself and smiled at his own joke. He resumed his walk, pondering how he should have had his own castle by now. He should have amassed a pile of gold and had vassals who did all his work for him. But Brock had made his living as a mercenary for over twenty years, mainly because he was careful. That's why he was still alive. Maybe it was also why he didn't have that pile of gold. The risk-takers were the ones who got rich, but they were also the ones who got killed.

Brock figured he should be in Blenton by sundown. Only a few more hours and then a nice, cosy, bed-bug littered mattress in a ratty tavern in a nothing town that people only stayed at because they were passing through. For Brock, it was a destination. He had heard they had a problem with livestock being killed in the fields. Brock had just finished dealing with a band of goblins in Oakmouth and was enjoying a few days recuperating in the local tavern when he had overheard someone talking about Blenton's problem.

"A single cow!" the man exclaimed. "Every night! Dead, alone, in the middle of a field. Only two puncture marks on the throat, drained of all blood. I'm glad I got out of there when I could. It's cursed, I tell ya. Unless someone knows how to kill a vampire without becoming one!"

"Not me! I'm not going there!" said one of the other travellers.

"I bet they'll pay to get rid of it!" said another.

"Hell yeah! Even before I left, they were talking about getting together 10 gold pieces for whoever could kill the sucker."

And that was all Brock needed. Ten gold pieces would set him up for months. Hell, he could even buy a horse and still live well. The goblins he had just finished dispatching had only paid a single gold piece. But goblins were easy. What it really came down to was how much the traveller knew and what was really going on. Ten gold pieces might be a lot, or it might be way too little.

There were a few alternative explanations. First, any part of the story could have been either embellished or simply made up. Maybe there were no puncture wounds or no drained blood, and the traveller had made it up. Or maybe the traveller had never been in Blenton and heard

the story from some other source. Stories had a way of changing once they were passed from person to person, Brock knew. Or maybe the people of Blenton were embellishing it themselves. Maybe the drained blood wasn't even a part of the actual story, but the guy who found the cow was powerless to stop the rumour.

As a mercenary, Brock made his living from rumours, so he had learned to be suspect. It was probably just a pack of wolves that were hungry but not starving. It was spring, after all, and they left carcasses behind. Or maybe it was a single wolf. Or even a boar. He had heard of a boar killing for sport. Unusual, but it did happen. If the blood really was drained, it could be a pack of stirges. They could look like vampire bites, but they were really just giant mosquitoes. Get a few on a cow, and they could drain it easily.

What is probably was not was a vampire. He certainly hoped it wasn't a vampire. Vampires were quite rare.

And damn hard to kill.

The woods began to thin, and Brock figured he was getting closer to Blenton. He stopped at the first farm he came to and asked if they had had any livestock disappear. "Nope, not here," the farmer's wife told him. "That's the other side o' town. Cross right on; you'll get there."

The woods opened up, and the town was nestled at the foot of a large hill that rose up in the North, maybe 1000 feet tall. Blenton wasn't much of a town, like most of the towns scattered around. There was an inn and a few other buildings, most indiscernible from the path, which became a wider road in the centre of town. Behind those buildings were a few smaller buildings, most likely homes. The farms were scattered around, anywhere from a few hundred feet to probably a few miles outside Blenton.

Brock debated going straight past Blenton to one of the farms on the outskirts, but he was sore, and he needed a bath. The inn was a good idea.

The next morning, he took off looking for the Rasturson farm, which had had a killing only two nights before, according to the innkeep. "We know what wolves are; we've killed our share, I'm tellin' ya. And this ain't no wolves. There's something else. Besides, there's the other guy who went after it and didn't come back."

Brock didn't say this, but there always was something else, at least in the minds of those experiencing it. For them, it couldn't be the everyday. It always had to be something really bad, preferably something supernatural. But nine times out of ten, it wasn't—it was just a wolf.

The innkeep was ready to get rid of whatever it was, too. Her inn was empty. She was more than willing to draw Brock a bath, even a hot one, being that he was willing to pay for it. He sat in it until it got too cold, and the innkeep kept coming in to check on him, smiling as she did so, bringing him more ale each time. Brock didn't care. He was too old. And the bath was a good rest for his muscles.

“Five gold pieces,” she told him. “They gathered it from all the farmers. Figure they lose more than that if they keep losing cows. Six dead already, I think. Town needs to be safe. No one wants to come with a vampire out there. The guy two weeks ago wanted the five gold pieces up front, but they wouldn’t give it to him. And he never came back to claim it.”

When Brock saw the first dead cow, he almost told farmer Rasturson he should keep the gold and get out of town himself. Move the farm.

Despite all of Brock’s certainty that it had to be something else; despite his making fun of those who embellished tales to the point of unrecognizability; despite his twenty years as a mercenary killing just about everything under the sun; this one really did look like a vampire.

The cow was already beginning to rot, but creatures weren’t eating it. That was a sign, Brock knew. Everything stayed away from vampire kills. Not even vultures would touch a vampire-drained body. Brock found the puncture wounds, and they weren’t from stirges. There were two of them, right there on the left side of the neck. Two of them, spaced exactly like human teeth. Brock sighed and stood up. Then he walked back to Rasturson, who was standing a few yards back.

“Well, Rasturson, you’ve got a problem.”

“I already knew that much,” Rasturson grunted, spitting. “Got a damn vampire problem.”

Rasturson was a big guy. About as tall as Brock, but more round. The man worked. He had probably killed his fair share of wolves. He wasn’t soft. Brock was surprised that he hadn’t tried to take on the vampire himself. He obviously wasn’t foolhardy.

“Is this your first cow?”

“Yeah. Six farms. Six cows. One from each. Over the course of a few months, I suppose. We all just keep hoping it will stop.”

“Hmm,” Brock muttered and glanced over the land, turning as he scanned. He had come from the East, and the town proper was back that way. He could see the inn in the distance. There was another farm between the Rasturson one and Blenton, and they had not had a killing yet. To the south were grasslands all the way to the Nimian Mountains, which he could make out in the distance. To the East and West were more scattered forests and grasslands. And to the north was the hill they called Monbar.

“Any castles around here?” Brock asked, looking up at Monbar.

“Castles? No, sir. Just farms. And the town.”

“Hmm. And which farms were hit so far?”

Rasturson pointed southwest. “The Mallon farm was hit first. It’s the farthest out.” He moved to point further West. “Then the Skewns. They were next, I think.”

“Okay, okay,” Brock said. “The Mallon farm was hit first. So its home is probably closest to there.” He couldn’t spot a farm that way. There were still scattered trees. But it was beginning to open up into grassland, even here at the Rasturson farm.

“But why would it not keep killing the Mallon livestock if that’s where it lives?” Rasturson asked him.

“Well, I can’t say for sure, but I think because it knows what it’s doing. Imagine if it kept killing one farm’s animals. The people there would get upset, and they might convince everyone else to go after it. But one animal here, one there, one over there. It’s easier to overlook that. Especially over the course of a few months.”

“But that’s why we want it gone!”

“Yeah, but if it had killed six of the Mallon animals, the Mallons would have moved by now. So it would move on to the Skewns. And then they would leave, and so on. This way, it’s a slower attrition.”

“Hmph! I guess.”

“The farmer woman I met on the other side of town, she seemed to think it was just an issue with this side of town. Eventually it will get to them, but not for a while. And they would leave long before that if it were decimating an entire farm before moving on to the next.”

“Hmm. Makes sense.”

“Trick is to find the sucker.”

“Really? I thought it would be to kill it.” Rasturson was scanning the landscape, too. Deadpan.

“Yeah, that’s part of the trick, too. Any ideas on that front?”

“You’re the mercenary. I’m a farmer.”

“That may be, but I’m no vampire hunter. That’s an art unto itself. And it will cost you a lot more than five gold pieces to hire a real vampire hunter. In the hundreds, last I heard.”

“We’ll just have to move, then.”

“Yeah, sounds like a good solution. Except the vampire is liable to move with you. If the town moves, so does his food source. He’s like a hunter-gatherer; he’ll just move with the food.”

“We have to put another town between us and him, then!” Rasturson was no longer scanning. His fists were balled, and he was staring at Brock.

“Yeah, but what about when that town moves and you’re next again?”

“Then we’ll move again! Are you saying that no one can make a living now that there’s a vampire around?” He took a step toward Brock.

Brock stepped back, just about smiling, hands raised. “Now, now. There’s a solution. We just have to find it.”

“Huh. Good plan. So how you gonna kill it?”

Brock laughed.

“Stake through the heart?”

“Won’t work. It’ll just turn to vapour, go back to its lair, and recuperate.”

“I thought stakes killed ‘em.”

Ah, the rumours. Brock knew ‘em, too. But he had learned about vampires from a true vampire hunter.

“If they’re staked in their coffins, sure. Well, even then, you have to burn it, cut off the head, whatever you can, even after you stake it. But it’s gotta be in the coffin itself, and finding a vampire lair is next to impossible. Thing probably has all kinds of wards guarding it even if you did find it.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah. Stake one in the open, and it will just vaporize and go sleep it off. You think you killed it, but it’s back the next day. If you even get that far. It’s more likely to kill you before you get that close.”

“Holy water?”

“Eh, it hurts ‘em, but not much. Running water will do it if you can trap one in it. Got a river nearby?”

“River, nah. Just a stream a bit north of us coming off Monbar. We use it to irrigate some.”

“No way to get the sucker to it, though. Even if you did, how do you trap it?”

“No way to kill one?”

“Not unless you’ve got a pretty powerful mage around,” Brock said, still examining the scenery.

Rasturson spit. “Hell, no. We would’ve run ‘im outta town a long time ago if we did have one. Don’t trust witches.”

Brock sniffed. “Don’t blame you. But you might need one before this is all over.”

“So what’s your plan?”

“Wait until nightfall,” Brock said, and began walking back toward Rasturson’s house. Rasturson stood there a minute, looking toward his dead cow. Then he spat again and followed.

He was watching from behind a copse of water oaks on the Wokalian farm when he saw something decidedly not a cow begin walking through the pasture. He had been out there the last seven nights and hadn’t seen anything. Like usual, the cows were scattered, but now they began to move around. Not running away exactly, but just moving, like they were shivering. A few low bleats, too. Everything was staying the way it was, but there was a tension. The moonlight wasn’t helping. Brock shook involuntarily. This was the first time he had ever even seen a real vampire.

The vampire walked slowly. It’s not being careful, Brock thought. Probably didn’t think it had to be. Brock looked at the ground and shook his head. This is a mistake. I need to get up and walk away, he thought.

But he didn’t. Instead, he sighed, raised his bow, and nocked the arrow. It may not be a stake, but it would act the same way. Not that it would hit the target, though.

The vampire was walking directly toward a single cow that just stood there staring at him. It was a scrawny looking cow, its legs shorter than the others. Not a runt, but not the best of the bunch, either. Brock could see the cow’s mouth moving around as it chewed its food yet again. The vampire reached the cow, reached out, and began...petting it. He lowered the bow and watched. The vampire knelt in front of the cow, which bent its knees and laid there in front of the killer. The vampire kept stroking its head, then its face.

The arrow was true. It flew straight towards the creature. The vampire didn’t move at all.

As soon as he let the arrow loose, Brock set the bow down next to his sword and scabbard and then stood with his arms raised.

What happened next was difficult to follow. All Brock was sure of was that the vampire was not dead, and that he was right there in front of him, one hand wrapped around Brock’s throat, the other holding the arrow.

“Are you so sure of yourself?” the vampire asked, his hand squeezing Brock’s throat even tighter, lifting him off the ground.

Brock couldn’t breathe. His hands fought at the vice-like grip involuntarily. He swatted and pulled, but the vampire didn’t budge. He just stood there, one hand raising Brock a foot off the ground, staring at him with squinting eyes, moving his gaze to the sword and bow on the ground by the trees, then back to examining Brock’s face yet again.

He set him back on the ground, and Brock fell to his knees, coughing and gasping. He had to explain himself before the vampire decided he wasn’t worth the effort and drained him instead.

He lifted one hand in protest. "I'm sorry," he muttered, his voice raspy, the pain worse when he tried to speak. He knelt there coughing a few more times, keeping his right hand raised to try to stop the vampire from doing whatever he wanted to do.

Finally, he managed to look up at the towering figure.

"Are you finished?" the vampire asked. His right hand was twirling the arrow. The left was on his belt. His clothes were immaculate. All black with gold lace and buckles. His face was almost ivory, but mixed with gold. Not shining, more like bronze. It didn't make any sense.

"I'm sorry," Brock said again.

"Repetitive creature," the vampire said, still twirling the arrow.

"I knew it wouldn't hit you. I just wanted to get your attention," Brock managed to get out, beginning to regain his voice and his composure. He managed to get up, the pain in his knee even worse than it had been.

"You have it," the vampire said, his smile flashing in the moonlight, even brighter than the gold and white of his skin. "Are you sure it's the attention you wanted? You don't seem like the sacrificial type."

"No, no. I represent Blenton." Brock was standing now, a meter from the vampire, his hands raised in front of him, both in defence and resignation.

"Blenton, huh? I suppose they're upset because I'm killing their decrepit cows."

"I know. You picked the worst ones."

"I don't want to cause an uproar. Don't want their posse coming after me." The vampire snickered, then laughed quietly to himself, as if to point out his already obvious sarcasm. "You don't know how many humans have come after me. It's a bit tiresome."

"Why do you only eat the cows?" Brock asked.

The smile faded, and the vampire stepped closer to Brock, who tried not to move, but leaned back a bit, trying to get away from the bloodsucker without running. "First, I don't eat cows. I drink their blood. And second, don't analyse me, you mortal fool. You will be dead in five years. Me? I'm immortal."

Brock cringed, his face turning to the side to get as far away as possible. "I know," he said, "but you only kill the cows. You don't kill the people."

"I don't want to kill the people."

"Why?"

"I've had enough of that. I just want to be left alone. That's why I'm out here in the middle of nowhere." He stepped back, his arms raised, gesturing to the countryside, the arrow pointing

in each direction, still in his hand. “I could be in any major city and live just fine, no one the wiser. But it’s boring. I’ve done it. Now? I’m ready to just live.”

“But you can’t keep killing their cows,” Brock countered.

The vampire laughed again and stepped back towards the failed assassin. “I can’t? How dare you tell me what I can and cannot do? Why can’t I keep killing their cows? What will they do? Hire more like you? Hah! I have lived for thousands of years. Do you know how many so-called vampire hunters I have killed in my time? More than you can count. And it looks like I may add another to the list.”

“What if we can make a deal?” Brock asked.

The vampire turned away and then cocked his head back to Brock, an upturned lip and a squinting eye.

“Yes?”

It took a while to convince the people of Blenton to agree to it, but Brock eventually got them to see that it was best for everyone. They would set up a farm just for Tulane, their new benefactor/vampire. They would build a farm for him, provide him with the basic necessities, and teach him how to take care of the cows. He would pay for all of the expenses, including paying for the cows he had already killed. He would also help them with their own problems such as keeping wolves away, dealing with bandits, and whatever else they needed. Tulane even agreed to learn butchery so he could drain the blood before drinking it, just like any of farmers normally did. And then he would butcher the cows to give to the people of Blenton. He didn’t need the meat, after all. And Tulane figured it gave him something to do. He was interested in learning something new.

“It all comes down to money for most people,” Brock mused one night after they had all agreed to the new plan.

“It always does, doesn’t it?” Tulane smiled his usual smile, the one that suggested he knew the conversation before it even started. “Luckily for everyone, I have my fair share. And I’m no hoarder. I’m not even sure gold does me any good anymore.”

Brock sipped from his flask. The people of Blenton had agreed to pay Brock his 5 gold pieces, owing to the fact that he did stop the cow massacre. And he did manage to get them all paid for the ones that were killed.

“You know, if it doesn’t do you any good...”

“Hah! I’m no miser, but I’m no fool, either. I will double your five gold pieces, mercenary. If this works out, it’s worth it. If it doesn’t, I’ll come find you.”

Brock’s mouth opened just a bit. Then he pulled another swig from the flask. He glanced around the newly fenced area, far away from Blenton.

“I hope I’m long gone by then.”

That ubiquitous vampire smile. “I have plenty of time.”

THE END

*Chad Wilson is a professor at the University of Houston, where he works with engineers and pines for his own fantasy world. His work has been presented at numerous conferences on popular culture and higher education.*

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## FALLING by Paul O'Neill

The man fell through a dark and endless sky remembering nothing. The sky he tumbled through was devoid of life and all colour; there shone no light from distant star, moon, or sun. All was black save the illumination cast from a murky grey light high above. By that slight light the falling man could see his flailing limbs as he tumbled end over end. He could see no horizon in any direction.

What the hell is happening to me? I'd do anything to just stop falling he thought and continued to fall through the acrid air for what felt like days.

The air in that dark, awful place was different, somehow less substantial. The wind did not contort his face as he plummeted towards whatever fate awaited him. As he looked to his outstretched arm, feeling the wind buffeting through his open fingers, a memory finally took hold of him.

It was his first day at school.

“And what's your name? Can you spell it?” said his first ever teacher.

A longing tugged at his heart for that boy who once was. A boy whose voice still screamed at him whenever he donned his corporate suit; each time was a step away from the dreams he once held of putting an end to trophy hunting, planting trees and getting his hands dirty doing his bit to save the planet.

The boy from long ago stood up shakily and said, “H-h-hi. My name is something. My mom can't be here, she's at work.” He looked down to his wrestling thumbs, something he always did whenever tears threatened. He had done this so much that the teachers took to calling him ‘thumbs’.

On his first day, she used a kinder tone. “That's okay, son. You sure are brave coming to school on your first day all on your own. Can you spell your name? Can you spell something?”

“S-s-sure. E-L-I-J-A-H, that spells...”

Elijah, the falling man thought. My name is Elijah.

He hit the ground. His impact did not shatter the earth, he merely stood up and dusted himself off, surprised that he still lived.

He could recall only his name and age (32). No memories of a job or where he lived surfaced no matter how much he furrowed his brow or rubbed at his temples. The dusty ash enveloped his feet and ankles.

As he breathed in the ash laden air, he was reminded of a time he and his dad had burned down an old shed. Elijah had breathed in some of the smoke on that day; a cloying, woody smell that remained in his throat for days after. The air in this dark world tasted sweeter.

Nothingness swelled at him from every direction. The grey light above did not sparkle like any star he'd ever seen; it cast everything in a dreary grey that made him think of sad, rainy days.

He patted himself down to remove the dust and ash from his clothes but it was no use, the ash was everywhere; he tasted it in each breath.

Knowing not what else to do, he walked. He walked until his calves ached and he continued if only to stay ahead of the ash cloud he was kicking up with each passing step.

"Hello," he shouted into the void. "Is anybody else here? Anyone? Please help me."

Nothing.

Eventually, he crossed his legs and sat down, covering his face up to his eyeballs with his jumper so as to not inhale his weight in dust.

The cloud dissipated after a slow age. He examined his pockets, finding no wallet, keys or any belongings save for a ticket stub. Underneath pictures of Santa and reindeer the ticket read:

St Mark's School of Dayton is proud to present the Little Actors' rendition of The Nativity. Join us at the school for 7pm on the night of 18 December.

The Christmas imagery made him recall the dry turkey that his mum made each year and how he and his dad would wax lyrical about how scrumptious it was; all part of the ritual before she died. He smiled at the memory of his mother.

Did I know someone taking part in this play? Did I have a little niece or nephew? Why can't I remember?

After walking for miles through ash and dust seeing nothing and no one, he lay in the ash, defeated. It was then that another memory surfaced, he was driving a car during a snowstorm.

"I wish we had taken Brad up on his offer of a lift. You always did laugh at him for buying that huge thing but a big car like that sure would be handy right about now," said a woman from the passenger seat.

"The first time it snows in the last twenty odd years and you want to abandon our electric princess and jump in a gas-guzzler?" Elijah said.

My wife, Cindy! I remember now. We were driving in the snow to see that play.

Back inside the darkness he sat up and heard someone wailing. He looked up towards the sound and saw a figure somersaulting through the sky. As the figure hit the ground, ash erupted everywhere and he ran towards it.

As Elijah approached the figure rising from the ash, dusting herself off, his heart leapt.

“Cindy, is that you?” he said and hugged his wife close.

“Who?” his wife said, startled.

“It’s me, Elijah. Don’t you remember me? Did it feel like you’d ever stop falling?”

“Elijah, is that you?” She held him close and kissed his dusty lips. “What the devil is this place?”

They walked together through the vast and empty space. Elijah was the only one doing the talking.

“You okay, poppet?” he said breaking another lengthy silence.

“Okay? Why do you think I’d be okay? We’re stuck here, alone in this awful nothing of a place. My hair feels like it’s made of dust and you’re prattling on and making your rubbish jokes. Just shut it will you,” Cindy said, voice rising.

“Wow, it’s not my fault we’re in here.”

“Isn’t it? How can you be so sure?”

“We’re both in the same boat, just calm down, Cind. Everything will be fine.”

“Calm down? You calm down!”

“I am calm.”

“Yeah, you always are, aren’t you? Mr cool-head always knows what to do. Well, what are you going to do about this, eh?”

“Why are you so angry with me?”

“I...I...I don’t know.” Her shoulders slumped and the anger floated out of her. She spoke quietly. “Sorry, I don’t know what it is. I just look at you and want to rip that stupid, curly hair off your head. Let’s just not talk for a while, okay?”

“It must be aliens. That’s it. That’s the only logical explanation,” Cindy said.

“Logical explanation? Really? In what way is that logical?” Elijah said.

“Think about it, it must be, like, some weird experiment. They zap our memories and make us think we’re falling. I bet we weren’t really falling at all, it’s some kind of test to see how we do as a couple. Don’t you see? It could only be aliens.”

“Sounds more like reality TV. I saw you falling and hitting the ground, though. How do you explain that?”

“Em, ray-guns?”

“What? That’s ridiculous. Would you listen to yourself?” On seeing Cindy’s nostrils flaring he quickly added, “But I can’t think of a better explanation so you must be right. It’s weird though, I still can’t remember everything.” Elijah took out the ticket stub. “Does this mean anything to you?”

She took it and gasped, “Oh, my god, we have a daughter. Lilly! Her play was tonight. That must’ve been what we were doing driving in all that snow.” They both turned as they heard someone else landing in the dark ash. “Oh my God, Lilly, is that you?”

As Cindy ran towards the small person, Elijah remembered his daughter, ashamed that he had forgotten her. That he had forgotten the way she made him tie her hair up each and every morning, the way she smiled when he pulled silly faces, the way she made him feel like the best father in the world and the worst. He ran toward the little figure rising from the ash.

“You’re not Lilly,” Cindy said as Elijah caught up, coughing up dust.

The girl was dressed in white with wings and a halo. “Hello, my name is Amelia,” the angel said, puzzled. “I think I’m lost, can you help me?”

“Aw, we’re lost, too, sweetie,” Cindy said.

“I don’t want to be late for my play. Mrs Appleworth will be real mad,” Amelia said.

“Is that why you’re dressed as an angel?” Elijah said.

“Yes, sir, but I’ll never make it on time now; I fell for the longest time. Why’s it so dark in here? It’s scary, I don’t like it.”

The trio walked together an unknown time. Amelia begged them both to make snow angels in the dark ash. Cindy refused but Elijah joined in heartily, swallowing ash as he lay on the ground, arms and legs spreading out, in and out again. Amelia and Elijah pelted Cindy with black snowballs until her temper thawed and she finally joined them in the making of fun in the colourless place they journeyed through.

Our daughter was in that play, why isn’t she here with us? thought Elijah as they walked on further into the unchanging darkness.

“You okay?” Elijah said looking at Amelia as they walked hand in hand.

“I was just thinking about my grandad and grandma. Grandad helped me build a snowman in the garden. I had just put the carrot on the snowman’s face when grandma fell off the porch into the snow.” Amelia laughed at the memory and Elijah’s heart sighed with the sound. “She

was *maaad*. I don't think us laughing at her helped. She stomped back into the house and nearly fell again with all the snow on her shoes. I wish it would snow like that every year."

As Amelia grew silent, two figures appeared in the sky, flailing, falling together until they finally hit the ground. Amelia ran toward them.

"Must be her grandparents," Elijah said to his wife.

"You think, Sherlock?" Cindy said, eyes rolling.

"So," the grandfather, John, said after they were all introduced. "Just where in blue blazes are we?"

"Once we find the aliens, we can ask them," Cindy said and shot Elijah a warning look.

"Aliens? Are you off your rocker?" said Elsa, the grandmother. "Trust someone like you to be the one to come up with something ridiculous like that."

"Someone like me? What's that supposed to mean?"

"You might think the dust in here is covering up your skin but I can still see the taint in your blood. Come on you two." She took John and Amelia by the arms. "We're not hanging around the likes of this one."

"Fine by me," Cindy said, indignant. "I'm proud of my Egyptian roots."

"Easy, Elsa," John said. "I think it would be best if we all stuck together, don't you? Stop being an old racist biddy. Apologise now or we're all leaving you behind."

Elsa grudgingly apologised and the five continued walking aimlessly in the dark.

Cindy took Elijah by the hand. "I just want to give them time to figure it out on their own," said Cindy, letting go of her husband's hand once they were a small distance behind the other three.

"Sounds good. Are we okay? Were we having an argument in the car? I keep getting flashbacks of you raging at me," Elijah said.

"Raging? Yeah, I was raging. I still don't remember why though, but I still want to punch holes in you."

"Whatever I did, I'm sorry." Although they argued often, he had never seen her this upset. He hoped he could make it right again.

Cindy let out a large sigh. "I think it was coming to an end."

“What do you mean?”

“We, I mean. Come on Elijah, we’re not happy anymore. I’m not anyway.”

Elijah stopped walking. Fear and panic rode through him at the sudden thought of a broken family. “You’re not happy?”

Cindy stopped walking but didn’t turn to face her husband. “I was going to finish things between us. I had the date picked out and everything.”

“You picked out the date? When?”

“25 January.”

Elijah tugged at his hair and spoke to his wife’s back. “Why are you telling me this now, here in this weird, rotten place?”

“I think that’s what we were talking about when we were in the car, that’s what we were arguing about.”

“You’re unbelievable, you know that?” He struggled to hide the anger that rose within him. “And why would we be talking about ending it on the way to Lilly’s play if you had the date of our demise so thoroughly planned?”

“Maybe I just blurted it out or something, I don’t know. Or maybe you had the stones to finally admit why you went away that weekend without your wedding ring.”

“We’ve been over that before, I forgot is all.”

“Yeah, right.” They stood alone for a while, her back still to him. He wished that she would just turn around and look at him, that if she turned to look into his eyes they could fix all of their problems. Instead, she only looked at the ground and kicked up dust. “I guess the conversation about us can wait until we figure out just where we are and what the aliens have planned for us.” She walked off.

“Let me talk this out, maybe that will help us figure out why we’re here,” Elijah said to everyone. They had stopped walking and stood in a circle. “We were all heading to the school for the play. It was snowing heavily. We were all on the road and then...that’s all I remember. Something must’ve happened.”

“Aliens,” Cindy said.

“Aliens, or something more plausible happened and now we’re here in this...magical place.” Elijah spread his arms out like a magician’s assistant.

Amelia was walking ahead and John gave her a look that warmed Elijah’s heart. It was the same way that he looked at Lilly.

“Ow.” Amelia tumbled into the ash making a little cloud.

“You okay?” John said, helping her up.

“I tripped on something. I hurt my butt.”

Amelia and Elijah rummaged in the ash to find what had caused the angel to fall.

“What is it, son?” John said to Elijah. He held a small item in each hand.

“I...I...This is our car,” Elijah said and held up a model of a Prius to show John and then collapsed to the ground. A moan surfaced from deep within him.

“Jeez, what the hell is the matter with you?” Cindy said, rushing over.

John knelt beside Elijah, putting an arm around him. Elijah lay inside the ash and dust, head buried in his knees sobbing.

“What’s the matter, son? It’s okay, just let it out,” John said.

“It was me. I did this to you all.”

“Did what?”

“I remember now.” Elijah remained curled in a ball, unable to speak as the memory took hold.

“We’re going to be late. Damn it, why can’t this hair dryer of a car go any faster?” Cindy said from the passenger seat.

“I’d rather get there in one piece, this little tin can wasn’t made for this snow, you know. God, I can hardly see a thing,” Elijah said leaning forward, peering out onto a snowy road. He turned the music down.

“At least Lilly is at the school already and it looks like we won’t be the only ones late.” She leaned over and turned the music back up. “Should’ve bummed a ride with Brad and his huge car.”

“Yeah, so you keep saying. That big thing must eat ten times as much fuel as my green princess here.” Elijah slapped the dashboard lovingly.

“I know, I know. You tell me that every time you see him, let it go already.”

Elijah turned the non-stop Christmas music down in the long pause that ensued. Cindy turned it back up.

“Would you stop doing that? I’m trying to concentrate on the road,” Elijah said.

“Concentrate with your eyes, dummy, it’s not even that loud.”

Elijah gripped the steering wheel tight. “You know, I hate when...woah!”

Their car hit a pile of snow and skidded onto the wrong side of the road. Elijah jerked it back, saving them from smashing into a truck. The truck blared its horn as it passed.

They calmed themselves in a long silence before Cindy said, “I think once Christmas is done, we need to have a long chat.”

“What about?” Elijah said, dread rising within him.

“About us.”

“What about us?”

“Come on, we both know it’s not working anymore. Are we staying together just for Lilly? Can you truly say you’ve felt happy these last few years?” The window wipers wiped futilely at the falling snow, making the only sound for a time before Cindy added. “Well, aren’t you going to say anything?”

“I’m trying to drive in this damn snow and you drop that on me? I mean, what the hell, Cind.”

“Look out!”

A car was on their side of the road. Elijah jerked the wheel, avoiding it but now it was they who were on the wrong side of the road. That’s when they hit the mini-van.

“Yup, that’s my mini-van, alright,” said John who now held the model in his hand. “Does that mean we’re all...?”

“Dead,” Cindy screamed into the abyss. “You killed us, you son of a bitch, and now we’re in some weird limbo.”

“If you hadn’t decided to try and end our marriage when I was driving we might not have crashed,” said Elijah standing up, tear tracks down his dusty face.

“Hey, wrong skin, you leave him alone,” Elsa placed herself between Elijah and Cindy. “I think a woman should pick her time to announce such things, don’t you?”

“Wrong skin? What’s your problem grandma?” Cindy shouted in Elsa’s face.

“You heard me,” Elsa said and laid a hand on Elijah’s back. “A fine man like this should be with someone he deserves, not some weird mixed stock or just whatever the hell you are.”

“Would you all stop, you’re scaring me. Does this mean I’ve missed the play?” Amelia said, her small voice cracking.

They all comforted the angel covered in ash.

Yeah, I guess we're all missing the play, thought Elijah. We're dead and it's all my fault.

"What do we do now?" Elsa said.

"I guess there's nothing for it but to keep on walking," Cindy said.

"I never asked you, half-breed."

"Wow. Elsa, you stop that right now, ya hear?" John said.

"Sorry," Elsa mumbled.

They began walking again, the dark surroundings taking on new meaning.

"Maybe there are other people in here, somewhere. It can't just be us, there has to be someone else," Elijah said, hearing the desperation in his voice.

"Only if you killed them, too," Cindy said.

They all walked on ahead of Elijah, leaving him to his misery. After an undeterminable time cursing himself, he was caught off guard by a black snowball smacking his nose. He tumbled into the ash and Amelia nearly burst with laughter, a sound most beautiful and out of place.

As they walked, Amelia slid her hand into Elijah's and upon feeling its warmth, he wiped a tear from his eye.

"I'm real sorry, Amelia, I mean it. It was a stupid accident, you have to believe me," Elijah said.

"It's okay. I know you didn't mean it," Amelia said.

He tried to conceal his tears. "You're not mad?"

"No. I guess someone else will be playing the angel now though, huh?"

"You're everyone's angel in here, sweetness. Don't worry about the play, it will be fine."

"Shame you won't see Lilly on stage."

"Yes, that is a shame." He thought of his beautiful daughter looking out into the audience with those beautiful hazel eyes, not finding him. He cried some more.

"I'm sure she'll do great."

"You really are something, kiddo. Thanks for not being mad."

“It’s okay, I forgive you.”

A mechanical noise made them look up and before Elijah could react, a glass ball enveloped Amelia and she floated toward the grey light high above.

“John, Elsa, come quick,” Elijah shouted.

The four adults stood rapt as their little angel reached the grey light which brightened as Amelia was sucked into it. The light quickly returned to the dim light they had all gotten so used to, casting everything in deathly grey.

“What did you do to her?” Cindy said and took a step towards Elijah.

“Nothing, I swear,” Elijah said, moving backwards. “We were just talking and then she was in that bubble thing, floating up.”

“What was it you were talking about?” John said, looking upwards, trying to catch a glimpse of Amelia.

“She...she said that she forgave me for what happened, for the crash. She’s a pretty amazing young girl,” Elijah said.

The four strode on saying nary a word, each thinking about the joy that Amelia had brought them. Now they had to face the never-ending dark without her.

Much time passed before John broke the silence. “I have a theory,” he said.

“Go on,” Elsa said.

“Forgiveness.”

“What do you mean?”

“Amelia said that she forgave Elijah right before she went up in that glass bubble thing, right before she ascended. Ain’t that right, Elijah?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Elijah said, looking down into the dust.

“Ascended? You think that she went to heaven? And that heaven is a grim grey dot up there?” Elsa said.

“Maybe, who knows about these things? I have to believe that she’s gone to a place better than this colourless nightmare,” John said. “Our Amelia always was the most wonderful little kid. You know, it breaks my heart that she’ll stay that age forever.”

“I’m so sorry. You have to believe me, I didn’t mean to do this,” Elijah said.

“I know, son. I don’t blame you. I blame the idiot you had to swerve.” John placed a hand on Elijah’s arm, stopping them both. “I think I can forgive you.”

“Do...do you really mean that?” Elijah’s eyes filled with tears once more.

“It still hurts like crazy, but I’ve grown too old to hold on to grudges. We were in the bonus round anyways, Elsa and I. You patch things up with that wife of yours and maybe she’ll forgive you, too.”

As Amelia did before him, John floated up, a serene look on his face, into the grey light and the three remaining watched in wonder.

“I forgive you, I forgive you!” Elsa shouted to the black sky. Nothing happened. “Why doesn’t it work? It worked for the other two.”

“You can’t just say you forgive him, you have to mean it,” Cindy said.

“Look here, you little bitch. Your pathetic looking husband caused all this mess. How can you expect me just to forgive him? My John always was a sap. I don’t give in that easy.”

“Bitch?”

“Wow, easy you two,” Elijah said and held the two at arm’s length. “Stop trying to claw each other’s eyes out.”

As the two tried to reach each other, Elijah gave a shove and accidentally knocked Elsa down. “Oh, I’m sorry. Let me help you up,” he said holding a hand out.

She slapped the proffered hand away and slowly got to her feet. “I think I’ll go it on my own from here. I’ll never forgive you for wrecking our lives; for robbing Amelia of her future.”

Elijah and Cindy watched as Elsa strode off into the distance until they could see her no more.

“Are we over?” Elijah said to his wife as they walked side by side, hand in hand, through eternal darkness.

“I think everything we’ve ever known is over now,” Cindy said. They continued walking.

“Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?”

“For the crash? I know it wasn’t your fault.”

“Not just for the crash, but for everything. How did we let it get to the stage where we were heading for divorce?”

“I don’t know. Piece by little piece, I guess we lost whatever we had.”

“I’d do it all differently. If we had the chance, I would’ve changed. You know you and Lilly mean everything to me. I love you.” He had never meant anything more.

“I know. I love you, too.” They held each other tight.

“Forgive me, Cindy, please? You need to get out of here. As much as I don’t want you to leave me, there’s a better place up there.”

“How can you be sure?”

“There has to be.”

“I guess it wasn’t aliens after all.” They both laughed and wiped the tears from their eyes. “I do forgive you. I know it wasn’t your fault.”

“I wish we could go back to the start.”

“Me, too. I love you so much. You need to learn how to forgive yourself for the accident.” She started floating and called down, “Forgive yourself, I need you to join me, please? I can’t live without you.”

“I don’t know if I can ever forgive myself,” he whispered into the dusty nothing.

Now he was alone.

Elijah stopped walking. After screaming at the boundless, empty sky until his voice was nought but a croak, he lay on the ground among the black, black ash. He wondered at the amount of time that had passed and then wondered if time even existed in here.

Nothing happened. Nothing at all but the tormenting voices from inside telling him that he deserved this; that it was all his fault.

“I can’t forgive myself, not ever,” he said and stood up for the first time in an age. “I need you to forgive me, God, if you’re there. If you even exist. Please? I’m begging with everything I have. Do whatever you will to my soul but please forgive me.”

He sobbed into the ash and his prayers went unanswered. Some unfathomable time later he saw a bright orange light flicker above. A wave of flames consumed the sky and rushed down toward him. As the flames engulfed him, he realised what the black ash was.

THE END

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BOO by Glenn J Cunningham

## Chapter One

She is 5' 6" tall in three-inch heels, with beautiful wavy auburn coloured hair and penetrating amber eyes. Her body is toned and athletic, with bronzed skin. She is a psychiatric nurse and works the graveyard shift at the psychiatric ward in Richmond General Hospital, located in British Columbia. My name is Gordon Winthrop; I suffer from severe Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, also known as OCD. Having OCD can be for lack of a better word—torture. For me to deal with my unrelenting anxiety, I must be positively conscious of other people's height, hair and eye colour, body type, and skin tone. But not necessarily in that order. I like to switch things up a bit; it gives me the false illusion that I have some control over my OCD. Personally, I am 5' 8" tall in stocking feet, with coppery coloured red hair, and bottle green eyes, pastel white skin, and an average every man build.

I first met her on Monday, in the wee hours of January the eighteenth. I was admitted to the psychiatric ward during the morning shift. It was a little past 2:00 A.M., and I had to use the washroom. She was in the process of doing bed checks. As I came out of the restroom, I accidentally bumped into her, causing her to drop her flashlight.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you there," I said as I bent over, and picked up her flashlight.

"What are you doing outta bed?"

"I had to pee," I said.

"What's your name?"

"Gordon Winthrop."

"Please go to your room, it's way past lights-out."

I nodded, handed her back her flashlight, and went to my room as she instructed.

The next morning I had an appointment with my psychiatrist Dr. Smith. He is a thin man, roughly 5' 10" in dress shoes, with short, curly salt and pepper coloured hair, and dusky skin.

His office smelled of bleach, and hints of lingering vomit; there were old dust-covered VOGUE magazines stacked up five feet high in the corner of the room.

The chairs we were sitting on were coal-black in colour and made of hard counterfeit leather.

Dr. Smith peered into my eyes; it was strange because it was at this point that I noticed he had cop eyes—when he stared at me I felt like I was guilty of some sort of crime. I couldn't take his glaring anymore, so I directed my eyes onto the floor, and watched as an enormous wolf spider scurried under the stack of outdated journals.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Dr. Smith broke the silence.

"How are you doing today, Gordon?"

I remained silent, and once again shifted my eyes staring at the clock on the wall of his office.

“Gordon, did you hear me?” he shouted.

Suddenly it was as if an electric Taser was fired into my chest, and I sprung up out of my seat several inches.

“I’m sorry!” I shrieked, then quickly calmed down and said, “I guess I was distracted for a few seconds.”

“You seem to have a great deal of energy flowing through your body today. Why are you so jumpy?”

“It’s my OCD,” I said. “Sometimes it gets the better of me.”

He nodded, and pulled out a yellow notepad attached to a clipboard from his desk drawer, along with a fancy gold plated pen from the breast pocket of his button-down collar shirt.

“I’m going to ask you several questions, would that be alright?”

“Yes.”

“Do you feel like taking a tally of my height, hair colour, eye colour, skin tone, and body type?”

“I already have.”

Dr. Smith nodded. “Interesting,” he said knowingly.

Suddenly I snapped, “Can’t I just take a pill for my OCD?”

“There aren’t any quick fixes for OCD,” Dr. Smith said. “Only extensive therapy, patience, and time will mend your psychosis.”

The cavalcade of questions went on relentlessly for about an hour. When Dr. Smith was through with his interrogation, I was mentally exhausted. All I wanted to do was sleep. When all was said and done, Dr. Smith prescribed me forty milligrams of Seroquel, an antipsychotic. The small pill was oval-shaped and bright yellow. It looked more like a fruit-flavoured tic-tac than a psychiatric medication.

In the early morning hours, I woke up at precisely 3:05 A.M. Once again, I had to use the washroom. I climbed out of bed and slipped my hospital-issued slippers on. Like my meds, my slippers were bright yellow as well. They were all out of men’s slippers; thank God I have small feet. I plodded towards the washroom and peed. Like clockwork, I ran into her again.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Don’t worry, I’m on my way back to my bedroom.”

She stared at me strangely.

“I didn’t know your favourite colour was yellow?” she said, smiling at me.

It was then that I realized she was staring down at my slippers.

I smirked. “Actually my favourite colour is pastel lavender.”

She laughed. It was a very high-pitched feminine kind of giggle. Wasting no time, she escorted me back to my room.

“Do you have a name?” I said casually.

“Why do you want to know my name?” she said sheepishly.

“Come ‘on,” I said coming on rather strong. “We’re old friends, and besides I made you laugh, shouldn’t we know each other on a first-name basis on that fact alone?”

She shook her head, smirked, then rolled her eyes. “Okay, okay, if you must know,” she said, “It’s Gwendolyn, but everyone just calls me Gwen.”

I smiled and gave her a devilish wink. “It’s nice to meet you, Gwen.”

She nodded. “Now get some sleep.”

The next day I woke up with an abundant amount of energy. My entire body felt like it was on fire. I had a quick shave and jumped into a lukewarm shower. After getting dressed, I practically ran to the common area, where I noticed Gwen in the nurses’ station talking to Dr. Smith. It was at this point that our eyes locked on to one another’s. She flashed me a tiny grin and gave me a little wave. It was like someone hammered me with a metal baseball bat right across my exposed chin. Under the incandescent lights, I could really appreciate just how beautiful she was. I could not keep my eyes off of her. When she left the nurses’ station and was out of my sight, it was as if my heart had sunk down to my shoes. For the rest of the day, all I could think about was Nurse Gwen. That evening I made sure that I’d stay awake so that I could talk to her again. It was a little past midnight. I cracked open my bedroom door and covertly peeked into the nurses’ station. But there was no sign of Gwen. Just as I was about to climb back into bed, I felt someone touch me on the shoulder. When I turned around to see who it was, I noticed Gwen’s pearly whites beaming at me through the darkness of my room.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” she said jokingly. “Or people will talk.”

“Trust me, I can keep a secret,” I said with a smirk.

Suddenly her mood shifted like night and day. “Seriously, you really should get back to sleep. If the head nurse finds out that I’m talking to you after lights out we could both be in hot water.”

It was odd how her mood changed so abruptly; it was almost like Jekyll and Hyde.

“I’m sorry I must have had too much coffee today,” I said. “It always keeps me awake.”

“Forget about it and try to get some shut-eye,” she said now grinning from ear to ear.

For the rest of the night, I tossed and turned, unable to get to sleep. It was at this point that my bedroom door slowly swung open. The beam from a flashlight burned into my eyes.

“Still can’t sleep?” a woman’s voice said.

When my eyes adjusted to the flashlight’s glimmer, I was shocked to see that it was Gwen. In her other hand, she was holding a large Styrofoam cup.

She gently handed it over to me. “Be careful not to spill it, it’s scorching.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s milk.”

I shook my head. “Can’t you get in trouble for this?”

“The head nurse is on her hour break; don’t worry, she’s clueless. Now drink it before it gets cold.”

I did as I was told and sipped on the hot concoction until it was gone.

“Now give me your feet.”

“My what?”

“Your feet.”

“Once again, I did as I was told.”

“Besides hot milk, a foot massage is a sure cure for insomnia,” she said.

She began rubbing the balls of my feet. I’m not going to lie it sexually aroused me. When I was on the verge of falling asleep, she gave me a peck on my forehead with her moist red lips.

Before I knew it, I was awakened by a rap on my bedroom door, and a male nurse’s voice blaring out, “MEDICATIONS!” I slowly climbed out of bed, and plodded to the nurses’ station, and fell in line with all the other patients, waiting to be given our medicine.

## Chapter Two

That day must have been the longest in my entire life. All I wanted to do was to see Gwen again. I had to see that beautiful face of hers, with those penetrating amber eyes. Like I said

the minutes dragged like a sloth hanging upside down on a branch, leisurely entwining. Finally, midnight arrived. I pretended to go to the washroom just to get a gander at Gwen. But she wasn't anywhere. I even knocked on the nurses' station door and bluffed like I needed a Tylenol for a headache. As the nurse on duty fetched my Tylenol, I cunningly scouted the nurses' station for Gwen. Unfortunately, there was no sign of her; so many things were going through my mind. Did she call in sick? Did she have car trouble? Where in the hell was she?

I couldn't take it anymore I had to know.

I went for broke, and just blurted out, "Is Gwen on duty tonight?"

"And why is her absence so important to you?" a heavysset female nurse, with black eyes, jet-black hair, really blotchy skin, and roughly 5' 7" in height," said.

"Just curious, that's all," I remarked nonchalantly.

The nurse blew out a malcontent breath of air. "If you must know, she's working in another ward tonight."

I tried to react like I wasn't upset, but inside, inside my gaping soul, it was as if I were five years old again, and someone had told me that Santa Clause didn't exist; I was devastated. Except for another romance in my past that ended badly, I have never felt like this over anyone. And I really didn't even know Gwen. Why am I so obsessed over a lady I don't even really know? I turned around and trudged back to my room.

It must have been a few hours later that I woke up to someone gently stroking my forehead. As my eyes focused, I noticed that it was Gwen.

"Hi Boo," she said in a low erotic voice. "I've decided that my new nickname for you is going to be Boo," she said giggling. "It's what I call my precious little cat."

For the first time in my life, I was speechless; I WAS WITHOUT SPEECH!

"Did you miss me?" she said.

I swallowed a giant ball of spit. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm visiting you, stupid," she said half-serious. "Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Aren't you gonna get into trouble?"

"Do you want me to leave?" she said irked.

"No."

"Well then shut up, Boo, and give me a kiss!"

I sat up and kissed her on the lips. We must have smooched for over ten minutes. It was at this point that Gwen slowly moved her hand down to my crotch. Like before I was so very,

very, sexually aroused. Before I knew it, we were both naked, and made mad, passionate love to one another.

“I think I love you!” I blurted out without thinking of the repercussions. But then again, I didn’t give a damn about the implications, I LOVED HER! I LOVED HER WITH ALL MY HEART, AND SOUL!

“But you don’t even know me,” Gwen responded in a cold, uninterested manner.

“But we just made love,” I said as my eyes became glassy and tears trickled down my cheeks.

She shook her head. “That wasn’t love; that was nothing but sex. SEX! Understand? It was nothing more than fulfilling our animal cravings; like a human’s basic need for food.”

In a huff she quickly got dressed and marched out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

I felt like an idiot like I had just been used. I was humiliated. I felt like an innocent teenage Vestal Virgin, who was just fucked by the star quarterback of his high-school football team, then kicked to the kerb, without so much of a thank you.

### Chapter Three

The next morning I didn’t have the motivation to shave, take a shower, or even brush my teeth; and my red hair which is usually my best physical feature, and traditionally groomed to perfection looked like a tornado had landed on it. Still, in my wrinkled pyjamas, and bright yellow slippers, I trudged down to the Starbucks on an hour pass. As I was sitting there by myself sipping on a hot coffee, I noticed Gwen talking to a pretty lady in a white lab coat—she was 5’ 4” tall, with dirty blonde hair, greenish-blue eyes, a very curvy build, and olive skin. I told myself to ignore Gwen and that she was bad news. Suddenly, she called out my name.

“Gordon!”

I ignored her.

Once again, she called out, “Gordon!”

I didn’t have a choice, I knew that she was aware that I had heard her call out my name.

So I acknowledged her with a cold wave. She made a b-line towards my table.

“Hey, stuck up. I know you heard me.”

“Hello,” I said coldly.

“May I sit with you?” she said.

“It’s a free country,” I said in a frosty tone. “Do as you please.”

She pulled out a chair and sat down, facing me.

“Don’t take it personally, but you look like shit this morning,” she said giggling. “Is that wild hairdo the latest thing from Paris?”

I was silent and didn’t react to her feeble attempts at humour.

Suddenly her mood changed like night and day. “What the fuck’s wrong with you?” she exploded.

“I’m not feeling too hot today,” I replied in an aloof manner. “Can we just leave it at that?”

“Something’s wrong. And I’m not gonna stop asking until you tell me the truth!”

I shook my head. “One guess?”

The clenched muscles in her mouth reshaped to pout, and in an apologetic voice said, “I’m really sorry about last night, I was simply terrible. Can you ever forgive me? You don’t understand my car wouldn’t start, and my stupid dog peed all over my brand new Persian rug. But enough of that, I have some great news, I’m switching to the morning shift. Isn’t that the most, to say the least? I’ll be able to spend more time with you.”

Was this lady for real? One minute she’s hotter than a 3 alarm, extra spicy tamale, and the next she’s as cold as a frozen slab of beef hanging in a meat locker.

“Is that what you really want, to spend more time with me?” I said.

“Don’t be silly, of course, it is—you’re my Boo.”

She looked around to make sure the coast was clear, then slowly extended her left hand across the table. Gently, she grabbed my right hand. Then once again, she looked around to make sure the coast was clear, then she kissed me on the knuckles.

“I love you too, Boo.”

All at once, everything was okay again. Gwen had won back my heart, my soul.

“I love you more, pretty lady.”

“This is going to be complicated. We have to be very cautious; there are eyes and ears everywhere. You’re gonna have to follow my lead. I’ve been working here for six years. I know where all the blind spots are on the ward. All the places we can make lovey-dovey and not get caught.”

I sat there for a few seconds, not saying a word, and then I broke the silence.

“I just don’t want you to get fired.”

“Let me worry about that,” she said, smiling.

I nodded, and then just like that she pushed her chair back, stood up, and left. The next day I was so excited. I jumped out of bed at 6:00 A.M., and quickly got ready for the day. Gwen's shift didn't start until 8:00 A.M. I found myself pacing back and forth, cracking my knuckles charged with nervous energy, waiting for my pretty lady to show up for work. It certainly seemed as if time was standing still. I kept eyeballing the clock on the wall. All of the other patients were busy eating breakfast. There was this one patient named Joel who had greenish-silver eyes, a pudgy body, ashen skin, and stood about 5' 6" tall who could be very snoopy. He noticed that I was extremely anxious.

"Why are you walking back and forth with that silly look on your face?" he said.

"Why don't you mind your own fucking business, Joel!" I snapped.

Joel despised profanity. He's a devote Mormon and believes that using expletives is blasphemous.

"I'm warning you," Joel said. "Clean up your language... one more curse word out of that filthy mouth of yours and I'm going to the nurses' station, and I'm going to report you."

I snickered and flipped him the bird. "Go fuck yourself!"

Wasting no time Joel darted to the nurses' station and alerted the staff of my vulgar language.

But I could honestly care less if Joel went to the staff. All I wanted to do was to see Gwen. I stared at the clock on the wall again, it read 8:14 A.M.; she was fourteen minutes late. Where the hell could she be? Was she having car trouble again? Did her dog piss on her Persian rug again?

I decided to take an hour pass and go down to the hospital Starbucks. There was a long line, so I decided to take a seat and wait for it to die down. As I sat there people watching, I heard a high-pitched, very feminine giggle. I turned my face towards the racket and observed Gwen flirting with a rather handsome young man. He was six feet tall, lean muscular build, tanned skin, and the bluest eyes I've ever seen. I was absolutely furious; my blood began to boil, as my face mutated to beet red, and my hands began to shake, and my legs began to wobble. All I wanted to do was walk up to both of them and execute severe bodily harm. How dare she humiliate me in this manner! I could now feel my fingernails digging into the palms of my hands. It was at this point that my heart began pounding, and I found it hard to breathe. Then it happened. Gwen noticed me. She casually gave the man a hug, and a peck on the cheek then started walking towards me.

"Hey Boo," she said without a care in the world.

I remained sitting there brooding in a silent rage, as the veins in my forehead felt like they were about to blow up.

"What's wrong? You look like you've lost your best friend."

I bulldozed my table forward in a heated rage. “Who’s the guy?”

“What guy?”

“Don’t play stupid! The guy you were all over like a cheap suit!”

“You mean Randall? If you must know he’s my brother in law, you stupid jerk! He’s here to have a CT scan performed,” she barked angrily, then added, “I can’t stand jealousy if you’re that kinda guy this relationship isn’t gonna work! That’s the number one reason I dumped my old boyfriend. He thought he owned me; nobody owns me, you got it?”

I shuddered and shoved my chair back from the table in utter fear, and for a second thought, she was going to hit me. Almost a minute had passed, and just when I thought that Gwen had calmed down, and thought the squabble was over she exploded again, and said through clenched teeth so nobody else could hear in the confines of the hospital, “Do you understand what I’m fucking talking about! Nobody controls me!”

For several seconds I was baffled and simply couldn’t understand how one second she could be as lovely and gentle as a newly born kitten, and the next second mean as a pissed-off rattlesnake. It was like her entire being was cut down the middle, and it scared the pants off of me. But I still loved her, so I broke down and whimpered.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to get jealous, but you’re just so beautiful. You can probably have any guy you want. Sometimes I feel so inferior to you. You have this great job as a nurse; you’re really making a difference in the world. And what am I? Nothing; nada. I get a monthly disability check, and to make matters worse, I suffer from severe OCD; you have to understand that the insides of my brain are defective; I’m damaged goods. You can’t begin to understand how a person like me, a person with a mental illness feels about someone like you. I’m just so afraid of losing you, Gwen. When I close my eyes, in my head I see you breaking it off with me; and I can’t make the nightmare stop, no matter how hard I try the horror is in my head twenty-four seven. It’s like a screen projector that’s gone haywire; it keeps playing that same disturbing picture over, and over again.”

“You’re paranoid,” she said as her voice cracked and her eyes became glassy. “Once I’m with someone they’re it, understand? Boo, you have to know you’re the only one for me, and I’ll never leave you.”

## Chapter Four

For the next few weeks, life was spectacular. Gwen and I had really grown close to each other. We would have these secret rendezvous in the shower room. Gwen would pretend to go to the break room, then covertly meet me for a little sexual mischief. But then it all came to an abrupt end. It was 2:04 P.M., and as usual, we were in the shower room really going at it, when Joel yanked open the shower curtain.

“I’m going to the staff! And I’m gonna tell them you were both doing filthy, sacrilegious things to each other!” he said in a self-righteous manner.

I tried my best to reason with Joel, but it was pointless, as a devote Mormon he felt it was his duty to put an end to all things that we're sinful and profane. We were... "in between a rock and a hard place," and literally caught with our pants down. Nothing happened to me, but Gwen was fired on the spot. It's been two days since I've seen her. I was in the middle of having my lunch when someone from the nurses' station called out my name.

"Gordon, you have a telephone call. You can take it on the patient phone."

I walked to the phone and picked up the receiver. "Hello?" I said.

"Is this Gordon Smith?" a man's voice asked.

"Yeah, may I ask who is calling?"

Suddenly, there was a loud feminine giggle on the other line.

"How's my Boo doing?"

"Who's the guy?" I said a bit jealous.

"Just a friend," Gwen said in a cheery tone.

"How close of a friend?"

"Come 'on, there's no reason to be suspicious," she said giggling. "I had to use John so that I could fake out the nurses, or else they would never have directed my call to the patient phone. Remember, Dr. Smith has prohibited all contact between you and me."

Considering she just lost her job, Gwen was in pretty good spirits. I, on the other hand, felt so very guilty.

"I'm so very sorry," I said.

"It ain't a thing, but a chicken wing," she said in a cavalier manner.

"How can you be so laid back about your predicament? You'll never be a practicing nurse again."

There was a brief pause. "Let me worry about my life, okay?" she said without a care in the world.

"What are you going to do about a job?" I said.

"I've already got a job interview set up. It's not nursing, but for now, it'll do until I can find something better. Now enough about me, let's talk about us. Get better quick, so we can be together again. No more sneaking around. I think we should really move in together." All of a sudden, she switched gears, and said, "I have to get going... chow for now, hugs and kisses Boo."

As I heard the phone click and go dead. I decided to make it my sole mission to get better fast. To get out of the hospital quickly, I would have to tell Dr. Smith everything he wanted to hear. If he said the sky was bright yellow with purple polka-dots, I would agree. If he said that pigs could fly, once again I'd agree. I'd say anything, and everything to get me out of this fucking hospital, and back with Gwen.

I met with Dr. Smith the next morning at 10:00 A.M.

I must admit I was a little nervous. I totally believed that I was in store for a severe tongue lashing. But instead, Dr. Smith was calm, relaxed, and collected.

“How are you this morning, Gordon?”

“Fine, thanks.”

“Now I'm not gonna beat around the bush. You're an intelligent, logical adult. However, it's come to my attention that you have engaged in sexual intercourse with Nurse Gwendolyn Page. I want to hear it from your mouth, is this true?”

It was the oddest thing all I could think about was that I never was aware of her last name.

“Is that her last name, Page?”

“Let's stay on the subject,” Dr. Smith said in an annoyed voice.

For some reason, I let out a tiny smirk.

“Do you find this amusing?” Dr. Smith said abruptly.

I shook my head. “No, I love her Doc,” I said as my smirk transformed to a sombre expression. “She's the love of my life.”

Dr. Smith inhaled deeply, so deep that I could see his ribs through his thin, tight-fitting polyester turtle neck. Then he quickly blew out a breath of air.

“I have to do it,” he said under his breath. Then his voice became louder. “You leave me with no other choice. What I'm about to tell you could end my career. But I like you Gordon, and I suppose I owe you that much. But I must warn you that if you tell anyone what I'm about to disclose to you, I will deny it, do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said in a low voice.

Suddenly he barked loudly. “No! I have to know if you get the gravity of your situation.”

I shook my head like a bobble doll, and said in a thunderous voice, “YES!”

“Okay, so we understand each other?”

Once again, I nodded.

“Gwendolyn Page suffers from a mental condition referred to as Borderline Personality Disorder.”

“Excuse me, what?”

“I’ll make it simple. In layman’s terms, Borderline Personality Disorder is characterized by severe mood swings, extremely impulsive behaviour, and difficulty forming stable relationships.”

In a huff, I bulldozed back my chair and leaped to my feet, and with my hands on my hips, I screamed, “YOU’RE A STONE FACED LIAR! THERE’S NOTHING WRONG WITH HER! YOU’RE ALL JUST JEALOUS OF OUR LOVE!”

Dr. Smith shuddered and blew out a disheartened sigh. “I didn’t want it to come to this,” he said as he handed me a sturdy, navy-blue binder that was thicker than a phone book.

“What the hell is this?” I said.

“Just read it,” he said with sincere regret in his voice. “It’ll explain everything.”

I opened up the large file, and paged through the subject matter, cautious not to miss a single word. It must have taken me an hour to read through just a quarter of the large text. As I studied the file, my heart sunk down to my feet, and tears began trickling from my eyes splashing onto the report, smudging the doctor’s handwriting. Even though I didn’t want to believe what I was staring at, the hard evidence was there. Why would Dr. Smith’s report defame Gwen’s character? What could he possibly gain from slandering her? Absolutely nothing! It was at this point that I had to stop reading; I just couldn’t take anymore. As I closed the file, my gut began doing flips. It was as if giant bats were fluttering around in my belly. I began to feel dizzy, and my breathing became erratic and shallow. It was then that I dropped the binder to the floor, and collapsed to both knees, and threw my face into the palms of my trembling hands.

“I’m really sorry, Gordon, I just thought you should know the truth,” said Dr. Smith.

“But she was a nurse,” I said slowly rising to my feet. “How can someone with a mental illness be a psychiatric nurse?”

“She wasn’t diagnosed with her mental condition until last year. I should know, I was her designated doctor. She spent four months on this ward,” he divulged. “Besides,” he added, “there is no law stating that you can’t work as a nurse if you have a mental illness.”

“Exactly like before,” I said, as I continued sobbing, and sniffing. “Exactly like before—”

Before I could go on, Dr. Smith cut me off, “I’m sorry, what was like before?”

“Three years ago, her name was Amy. We were deeply in love, but she suffered from chronic schizophrenia. At first, it was like a dream. She was the perfect woman, but in time everything changed drastically; like a perfect storm came the hostile voices, the

hallucinations, the delusions. I tried my damndest to make it work, I really did, but in the end, she just couldn't live with her psychosis anymore and wound up taking her own life. I came home one day and found her in an overflowing tub of warm water with her wrists' slit. I promised myself that I would never go through that agonizing torture again."

Dr. Smith nodded. "I understand."

"So what do you think I should do?" I said, wiping my swollen eyes with my arm.

"You're a grown man. I can't make your decision for you. But if it were me I'd stop seeing her; nip it in the bud, before it really gets out of hand. Because I'm telling you—she's a loaded gun!"

"So what you're telling me is that there's no light at the end of the tunnel?"

He shifted in his chair, and scooted closer to me, staring into my eyes. "Did Gwen talk about moving in together, yet?"

"How could you possibly know that?"

"Gordon, I've been doing this for fifteen years. I've worked with several patients who suffer from Border Line Personality Disorder. In most cases, I know them better than they know themselves."

All at once, my deep-rooted obsession for Gwen had gone away, and I had flashbacks of her severe mood swings, and erratic behaviour; her Jekyll and Hyde persona. It was so very peculiar, but all of a sudden at that very moment I honestly felt nothing for her. It was as if we never met. It was as if we never spent any time together or made love. Like Amy, all of my deep, insane desire, and out-and-out lust for Gwen had mutated into something dreadful, something frightful. Granted I felt like a complete asshole for wanting to break it off with her, and was riddled with guilt; however, the cold reality of Gwen's mental condition outweighed any chance of me wanting to have any kind of relationship with her. I was simply no longer attracted to her in the least, instead, considering what I read in her file, and what Dr. Smith told me, I was terrified of what she was capable of.

The phone on the ward began to ring, and ring. And each time I knew it was Gwen. Her calls had to be cleared through the nurses' station before it was directed to the patient phone. So she had her friend John bypass the nurses' on duty, but she wasn't fooling me, I knew it was her. Each time she called, I told the nurses, 'I was busy. Finally, after the tenth time, I decided to answer it.

"Hello?"

"What's your fucking problem?" she barked.

I was silent searching for just the right excuse, and all I could come up with was, "I just need a break, Gwen; I'm feeling sick."

All of a sudden, she erupted like a violent hurricane. "YOU BIG BABY! I lost everything because of you. And now you're gonna tell me that you're not feeling well. Well, you know

what I'm gonna do? YOU BIG PUSSY! I'm gonna spread it all over the hospital that you Gordon Winthrop, has a tiny, little prick. What do you think about that? You wanna play with me? Let's play!" Before I could say a word, she slammed the phone down, and all I could hear was a dial tone. A few seconds later, a nurse called out, informing me that I had another phone call.

"Dammit," I said under my breath.

I knew it was her again. I was afraid to pick up the receiver. But I was even more terrified if I didn't. So, I slowly walked over to the phone.

"Hello?"

"Boo, I'm sorry. I just miss you so much. I want you inside me again. I want things to be like they used to be. You have to know you're my soul-mate. You're never gonna get rid of me."

## Chapter Five

I requested an emergency session with Dr. Smith.

"What can I do for you, Gordon?"

"It's Gwen. I'm terrified of her. She's totally off her rocker."

"How can I help?"

"I need to get her off my back. I need to get away, as far away as possible."

"I understand."

"No, doc, I don't think you do. I have enough problems dealing with my relentless OCD. It's pure hell just trying to stay sane. I can't take on another person's mental illness again. I'm one step away from falling into the abyss. I can't afford to have some totally crazed woman stalking me. I don't know what she's capable of, and it scares the hell out of me. Please, Dr. Smith, help me!"

"Have you ever given much thought to moving out of Richmond?"

"Like renting a U-HAUL, and relocating?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Maybe you need a fresh start. Why not move to Surrey, British Columbia; it's a nice community. And it's big. You can easily get lost in it."

He made it sound so easy. A week later, I was finally discharged from the hospital. I was still literally out of my mind, but I managed to fool Dr. Smith that my OCD was under control. That's the secret; tell the doctor, the hospital staff, your family, and friends what they want to hear. I should've gotten an Academy Award for my performance. In the end, it's all relevant.

## Chapter Six

The phone calls from Gwen have stopped; thank God I never gave her my cell phone number. All I wanted to do was check the internet for apartments in Surrey, British Columbia. It took nearly three weeks, but I finally found a nice and clean one-bedroom apartment. The ad said that it was right next to a bus stop, and a grocery store. The place was perfect for me. I even loved the name of the complex, Serenity Gardens. It would be a fresh start! I had a three o'clock appointment with the landlord. I buzzed the office.

"Yes?" a man's voice asked.

"Hi, my name is Gordon Winthrop, I have a three o'clock appointment with the landlord. I'm sorry, I'm afraid that I'm a little early—"

Before I could go on, he buzzed me into the building.

The hallway smelled like someone had just sprayed it with Febreze. For some odd reason, I took the fresh scent as a good omen; a brand new start. I knocked on the door, and a young man with dyed purple hair, brown eyes, lanky build, bad skin, and 5"11" in height, answered.

"Hi, you must be Mr. Winthrop. I have the contract all set to sign. On the phone, you said you were looking for a one year lease?"

"Yeah, that's right."

Before I knew it, he thrust a pen into my hand and had me sign a full-service lease.

The young man smiled and handed me the keys to my apartment. "Welcome to Serenity Gardens, Mr. Winthrop."

It was at this point that I noticed just how young the landlord was. He couldn't have been more than nineteen at the most.

"Excuse me," I said curiously. "But aren't you a little young to manage an apartment complex?"

He smirked. "Oh, I'm not the landlord, I'm only the caretaker. I just fill in for the landlord when the landlord isn't in the office. The landlord is just running a little late today. The landlord should be here soon."

Suddenly from out of nowhere, I heard a high-pitched feminine giggle. NO! DEAR GOD IT COULDN'T BE! I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention, as my heart nose-dived to my gut. I turned around to face the familiar high-pitched feminine giggle. All at once the fear, the utter horror came back to me like a prison riot. And I had flashbacks of her sick, demented identity. It was at this point that I wished someone would just do me a favour and blow my head off. Was she stalking me? Was she some kind of unrelenting venomous poison, who wouldn't take no for an answer? Something I thought I could get away from, but now realize that it's a lost cause. And in this sick twisted game, she is the winner.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I asked, shaking like a leaf in a hurricane, and my eyes bulging out of their sockets.

“Remember when I told you about that job interview? Well, I was hired. I’m the new landlord of Serenity Gardens. Just think, we’ll be together for a whole year. Isn’t that the most, to say the least, Boo?”

THE END

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## DOMESTIKA

Nine

It was mid-morning when Matt Johnson woke, jerking and sitting bolt upright in bed after a terrible dream, one so damned real, one in which he suffered and experienced all the torturous pain of an ugly demise—such was crucifixion. Secretly, he harboured this way of dying as his biggest fear, since being very much the Catholic boy he recalled Sunday lessons at his Saint Benedict's school in Workington and the sordid descriptions of this way of death cropping up in Bible teachings, always to his dismay. Indeed, Jesus suffered vastly for His cause and this never failed to horrify a juvenile Matt.

As he lay on the bed looking up at the ceiling, he pondered if anything over the last three days actually occurred or whether perhaps it had all just been one obscene nightmare, if Dennis Henderson died the horrible way he did, or if there existed a Lillian and George Carpenter. However, the story was too lurid for them not to have existed, because Matt did not have the imagination to dream up such illustrious characters and innovative ways of meeting The Reaper. It had to have happened.

He was just glad to be alive.

In his nightmare, however, he recalled he had received a phone-call from his Workington KLF News offices from his colleague Peter King, and had told him he did not wish to pursue any story based around the grisly acts committed in Whitehaven. For some odd reason, he had chosen to stay away from all that shit, because if anything, the entire scenario spooked him as well as turned his stomach. For example, he remembered the colourful way in which George Carpenter had sickened him as he compared fingering his dead wife's pussy to dipping his fingers into a cold can of mushy peas plucked from the freezer.

The dumb old fuck hadn't a clue. He was a hard-bitten, die-hard bigot and serial racist, blaming the night's intruders on, as he said, a gang of niggers which he somehow chased from the house and managed to scare off single-handedly, yet only after something strange occurred with Lillian Carpenter, something which left her for dead—and yet still somehow very much alive—until the next morning in the West Cumberland Hospital where they confirmed her well and truly a dead woman, after all.

Everything was fucked up.

However, as he lay there in bed, it dawned on him he wasn't actually in his bedroom at home, yet lying in a foreign bed in somebody else's house. Looking around at the furnishings and pictures on the wall, nothing sprung to mind to enlighten him, just bewildered confusion as to how the hell he ended up here.

He didn't recognize this bedroom. He'd never been here before.

“Where is this place...?” he said, as he climbed from under the duvet and walked across to the adjacent bathroom in the corner next to the window. The first thing he did was go towards the toilet bowl to empty his bladder into the pan, which he did to great relief, moaning a pleasurable sigh in the process.

Next, he'd wash his hand, ever keeping up the hygiene factor. But he captured his reflection in the bathroom mirror above the sink. It horrified and puzzled him. The nightmare, it seemed, continued.

The reflection looking back at him was not Matt Johnson but his work colleague Peter King, a balding, bearded man, with beady brown eyes and ginger hair. Matt stared into the mirror's reflection slack-jawed and wide-eyed as he tried to possibly decipher or fathom how this could have been? He was Matt Johnson. Yet he was looking directly at Peter King and Peter King was looking directly back at him.

Suddenly, Matt recalled a conversation over the phone. He'd said to Peter, "What scares you?" when, without much consideration, Peter had fired back, "Hmm, I'd say spiders."

To Matt's left outside the tiny en-suite bathroom there had suddenly manifested a huge mansion lobby, and leading upwards and onwards into the heavens, a high, elongated red-carpeted staircase, one with silver and solid 28-carot gold banisters, a plush ornamental feature which befitted a huge stately home, which emanated regency and a certain wealthy and regal flair. It led to the skies.

Then, the master of ceremonies appeared, a tall red-skinned monster in top hat and tails with trusty pitchfork close by, grinning down towards his catch as only Lucifer possibly could. There was a smell of decomposition in the atmosphere. Yes, the scorching furnaces of Hell burnt well at all hours of the day and night, as many former wrongdoers roasted and their putrid scent wafted up through the floorboards.

The Devil beckoned him on by pointing his finger and gesturing for him to ascend the staircase.

Matt—or Peter—did not wish to, though, which disappointed the beast.

And so, Peter King's greatest fear was confirmed and summoned by satanic order to act a part in his final earthly transition. Suddenly, a mass of blackness appeared at Lucifer's feet, one which swarmed from the very top to the very bottom of the stairs, an ocean of tiny wolf spiders, intermingled with Black Widows, tarantulas as well as plain old Recluse of the like seen in the Americas, and also British house spiders, an entire en masse variety. It was not long before they were on Matt, crawling over his entire body, creeping across his face and head. But these spiders bit his flesh and their nips and bites stung and drew blood from their tiny incisions, and together acting as a vicious man-eating team they served to take big chunks out of his flesh. Collapsing from the heavy weight of the swarm, Matt screamed and yelled as he convulsed on the floor, once the spiders had him in their grip and set about devouring him. This was Peter King's biggest fear, just like Matt's was crucifixion.

Matt wanted to beg for mercy as the creatures entered his mouth and sank their teeth into his tongue. Yet, he also wanted to curse Satan.

The spider contingent penetrated his eyeballs.

Matt gargled and choked once great lumps of black fur and spindly legs scoured his throat and made a path towards his stomach. Seconds later, they filled his belly to bulging point and

scrabbled about inside like a crazed insanity at play, where they began to feast on his spleen and intestines, making Matt feel every laceration, every nip of his innards.

Somewhere, a mobile phone chimed. It was answered automatically, citing it was a call from Peter King to Matt Johnson, both workmates at KLF News in Workington. Peter's voice spoke, "Hi, Matt, did you get some sleep? Hey—such a shame we had to get eaten by all those fucking crawly bastards eh? Yeah, I fucking hate spiders..." and he laughed, stating as a joke, "...yeah, they really get up my nose!"

The red-skinned figure on the staircase descended on the spotlessly clean and plush red carpet.

"Your torture has still yet to begin..." the Devil said, its face contorting into a grin.

And then, through eyes clouded with blood and bile, Matt spotted something in the distance, something sat at the top of the staircase which was utterly unbelievable.

A black cat sat there.

Luther, the dictator, the leader of every domestic killer sat there, and as Matt felt his life ebb away in bloody torrents, he remembered this animal—this docile little cat—and remembered everything, the radioactive spill, mutilated Dennis Henderson, and his own death by crucifixion.

Matt Johnson had died long ago.

THE END

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PLANETOID 127 by Edgar Wallace

Chapter V

“THEN it was Mars!” cried Chap triumphantly.

“Of course it was not Mars,” interrupted his sister scornfully. “Mr. Colson told us distinctly that there was no life on Mars.”

“Where is it, Tim?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” Tim shook his head. “I have been questioning his assistants—there were two at the house—but he never took them into his confidence. The only hint they can give me is that when poor Mr. Colson was listening-in to these mysterious voices he invariably had the receiving gear directed towards the sun. You know, of course, that he did not use the ordinary aerial, but an apparatus shaped like a convex mirror.”

“Towards the sun?” gasped Chap. “But there can’t be any life on the sun! Dash it all, I don’t profess to be a scientific Johnny but I know enough of physics to see that it’s as impossible for life to exist on the sun as it would be to exist in a coke oven! Why, the temperature of the sun is umpteen thousand degrees centigrade... and anyway, nobody has ever seen the sun: you only see the photoscope... “

“All this I know,” said Tim, listening patiently, “but there is the fact: the receiving mirror was not only directed towards the sun, but it moved by clockwork so that it was directed to the sun at all hours of the day, even when the sky was overcast and the sun was invisible. I admit that the whole thing sounds incredible, but Colson was not mad. That voice we heard was very distinct.”

“But from what planet could it be?” insisted Chap, pushing back his untidy hair and glaring at his friend. “Go over ‘em all: eliminate Mars and the Sun, of course, and where is this world? Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune—pshaw! You’re not suggesting that it is one of the minor planets, are you? Ceres, Pallas, Juno, Vesta...?”

Tim shook his head.

“I am as much puzzled as you, but I am going to spend my life onwards looking for that world.”

He went back to the house. The body of the old man had been moved to a near-by hospital, and the place was alive with detectives. Mr. Stamford was there when he returned, and placed him in possession of a number of names and addresses which he thought might be useful to the young man.

“I don’t know that I want to know any stockbrokers,” said Tim, looking at the list with a wry face.

“You never know,” said Mr. Stamford. “After all, Mr. Colson expected you to carry on his work, and probably it will be part of your duties to continue his operations. I happen to know that he paid minute attention to the markets.”

He indicated a number of financial newspapers that lay unopened on the table, and Tim took up one, opened it and glanced down the columns. In the main the items of news were meaningless to him. All he saw were columns of intricate figures which were so much Greek; but presently his eye caught a headline:

*“BLACK SEA OIL SYNDICATE.  
CHARLES HILDRETH’S GLOOMY REPORT  
TO THE SHAREHOLDERS.*

*“A meeting of the Black Sea Oil Syndicate was held at the Cannon Street Hotel yesterday afternoon, and Mr. Hildreth, Chairman of the Company, presiding, said that he had very little news for the shareholders that was pleasant. A number of the wells had run dry, but borings were being made on a new part of the concession, though there was scarcely any hope that they would be successful.”*

Tim frowned. Black Sea Oil Syndicate...? Hildreth? He put a question to the lawyer.

“Oh, yes,” said Mr. Stamford. “Hildreth is deep in the oil market. There’s some talk of his rigging Black Seas.”

“What do you mean by ‘rigging’?” asked Tim.

“In this case the suggestion, which was made to me by a knowledgeable authority,” said Mr. Stamford, “is that Hildreth was depressing the shares issuing unpromising reports which would induce shareholders to put their shares on the market at a low figure. Of course, there may be nothing in it: Black Sea Oils are not a very prosperous concern. On the other hand, he may have secret information from his engineers.”

“Such as—?” suggested Tim.

“They may have struck oil in large quantities on another part of the property and may be keeping this fact dark, in which case they could buy up shares cheaply, and when the news was made known the scrip would go sky-high and they would make a fortune.”

Tim read the report again. “Do you think there is any chance of oil being found on this property?”

Stamford smiled. “I am a lawyer, not a magician,” he said good-humouredly.

After he had gone, Tim found himself reading the paper: the paragraph fascinated him. Black Sea Oil...

Suddenly he leapt to his feet with a cry. That was the message which Mr. Colson had written on the paper—the Oilfields of the Inland Sea!

He ran out of the room and went in search of Stamford.

“I am going to buy Black Sea Oils,” he said breathlessly. “Will you tell me what I must do?”

In a few moments the telephone wire was busy.

Mr. Hildreth had not been to his office that day, and when he strolled in to dinner, and the footman handed him his paper, he opened the page mechanically at the Stock Exchange column and ran his eyes down the list of quotations. That morning Black Sea Oils had stood in the market at 3s. 3d., and almost the first note that reached his eye was in the stop-press column.

“Boom in Black Sea Oils. There have been heavy buyings in Black Sea Oil shares, which stood this morning in the neighbourhood of 3s., but which closed firm at 42s. 6d.”

Hildreth’s face went livid. His great coup had failed!

In the weeks which followed the death and funeral of Professor Colson, Tim found every waking minute occupied. He had enlisted the services of the cleverest of scientists, and from the shattered apparatus one of the most brilliant of mechanical minds of the country was rebuilding the broken instruments. Sir Charles Layman, one of the foremost scientific minds in England, had been called into consultation by the lawyer, and to him Tim had related as much as he knew of Professor Colson’s secret.

“I knew Colson,” said Sir Charles; “he was undoubtedly a genius. But this story you tell me takes us into the realm of fantasy. It isn’t possible that life can exist on the sun; and really, young gentleman, I can’t help feeling that you have been deceived over these mysterious voices.”

“Then three people were deceived,” said Tim firmly. “My friend Chap West and his sister both heard the speaker. And Mr. Colson was not the kind of man who would descend to trickery.”

Sir Charles pursed his lips and shook his head.

“It does seem most extraordinary. And frankly, I cannot understand the functions of these instruments. It is quite possible, as Colson said, that there are sounds come to this earth so fine, and pitched in such a key, that the human ear cannot catch them. And I am pretty sure that what he called a ‘sound strainer’ was an amplifier on normal lines. But the mysterious world—where is it? Life in some form may exist on a planetoid, but it is almost certain that these small masses which whirl through space in the zone between Mars and Jupiter are barren globules of rock as dead as the moon and innocent of atmosphere. There are a thousand-and-one reasons why life could not exist on these planetoids; and of course the suggestion that there can be life on the sun is preposterous.”

He walked up and down the library, smoothing his bushy white beard, his brows corrugated in a grimace of baffled wonder.

“Most scientists,” he said at last, “work to the observations of some pet observer—did the Professor ever mention an astronomer whose calculations he was endeavouring to verify?”

Tim thought for a moment.

“Yes, sir, I remember he spoke once or twice of Professor Watson, an American. I remember once he was lecturing to our school on Kepler’s Law, and he mentioned the discoveries of Mr. Watson.”

“Watson?” said Sir Charles slowly. “Surely he was the fellow who thought he found Vulcan, a planet supposed by some people to revolve about the sun within the orbit of Mercury. As a matter of fact, what he saw, during an eclipse of the sun, was the two stars, Theta and Zeta Cankri, or, more likely, the star 20 Cankri, which must have been somewhere in the position that Watson described on the day he made his discovery.”

Then he asked, with sudden interest:

“Did Professor Colson believe in the existence of Vulcan?”

Tim shook his head. “No, sir, he derided the idea.”

“He was right,” nodded Sir Charles. “Vulcan is a myth. There may be intra-Mercurial bodies revolving about the sun, but it is extremely unlikely. You have found no data, no photographs?”

The word “photograph” reminded Tim. “Yes, there is a book full of big enlargements, but mostly of a solar eclipse,” he said. “They were taken on Friday Island last year.”

“Would you get them for me?” asked Sir Charles, interested.

Tim went out and returned with a portfolio, which he opened on the table. Sir Charles turned picture after picture without speaking a word, then he laid half a dozen apparently similar photographs side by side and pored over them with the aid of a magnifying-glass. They were the conventional type of astronomical photo: the black disc of the moon, the bubbling white edges of the corona; but evidently Sir Charles had seen something else, for presently he indicated a speck with a stylo.

“These photographs were taken by different cameras,” he said. “And yet they all have this.”

He pointed to the pin-point of white which had escaped Tim’s observation. It was so much part of the flame of the corona that it seemed as though it were a spark thrown out by one of those gigantic irruptions of ignited gas that flame up from the sun’s surface.

“Surely that is a speck of dust on the negative?” said Tim.

“But it is on all the negatives,” said Sir Charles emphatically. “No, I cannot be sure for the moment, but if that is not Zeta or Theta Cankris—it is too large for the star 20 Cankris—then we may be on the way to rediscovering Professor Colson’s world!”

At his request, Tim left him, whilst, with the aid of charts and almanacs, he plunged into intricate calculations.

When Tim closed the door and came into the corridor he saw the old butler waiting.

“Mr. Hildreth is here, sir,” said the man in a low voice, as though he also suspected the sinister character of the financier. “I’ve put him in the blue drawing-room: will you see him, sir?”

Tim nodded and followed the servant.

Hildreth was standing by a window, looking out upon the lawn, his hands behind him, and he turned, with a quick, bird-like motion as he heard the sound of the turning handle.

“Mr. Lensman,” he said, “I want a few words with you alone.”

The young man dismissed the butler with a gesture.

“Well, sir?” he asked quietly.

“I understand that you have engaged in a little speculation. You are rather young to dabble in high finance,” drawled Hildreth.

“Do you mean Black Sea Oils?” asked Tim bluntly.

“I had that stock in mind. What made you buy, Mr. Lensman—or rather, what made your trustee buy, for I suppose that, as you’re under age, you would hardly carry out the transaction yourself.”

“I bought because I am satisfied that Black Sea Oils will rise.”

A slow smile dawned on Hildreth’s hawklike face.

“If you had come to me,” he said coolly, “I could have saved you a great deal of money. Black Sea Oils to-day stand at fifty shillings: they are worth less than fivepence! You are little more than a boy,” he went on suavely, “and I can well understand how the temptation to gamble may have overcome you. But I was a friend of Colson’s, and I do not like the thought of your money being wasted. I will take all the stock off your hands, paying you at the price you paid for it.”

“That is very generous of you,” said Tim drily, “but I am not selling. And as for Mr. Colson being a friend of yours—”

“A very good friend,” interrupted the other quickly, “and if you tell people that he and I were enemies it may cost you more than you bargain for!”

There was no mistaking the threat in his tone, but Tim was not to be brow-beaten.

“Mr. Hildreth,” he said quietly, “nobody knows better than you that you were bad friends with Mr. Colson. He was constantly spoiling your market—you said as much. You believed that he was possessed of information which enabled him to operate to your detriment, and you knew this information came by wireless, because you had listened-in, without, however, understanding the language in which the messages came. You guessed there was a code, and I believe that you made one or two efforts to secure that code. Your last effort ended in the death of my friend!”

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## POLARIS OF THE SNOWS by Charles B Stilson

### 2. The First Woman

Probably in all the world there was not the equal of the team of dogs which Polaris had selected for his journey. Their ancestors in the long ago had been the fierce, grey timber wolves of the north. Carefully cross-bred, the strains in their blood were of the wolf, the Great Dane, and the mastiff; but the wolf strain held dominant. They had the loyalty of the mastiff, the strength of the Great Dane, and the tireless sinews of the wolf. From the environment of their rearing they were well furred and inured to the cold and hardships of the Antarctic. They would travel far.

Polaris did not ride on the sledge. He ran with the dogs, as swift and tireless as they. A wonderful example of the adaptability to conditions of the human race, his upbringing had given him the strength and endurance of an animal. He had never seen the dog that he could not run down.

He, too, would travel fast and far.

In the nature of the land through which they journeyed on their first dash to the northward, there were few obstacles to quick progress. It was a prairie of snow, wind-swept, and stretching like a desert as far as eye could discern. Occasionally were upcroppings of coal cliffs similar to the one where had been Polaris's home. On the first drive they made a good fifty miles.

Need of sleep, more than fatigue, warned both man and beasts of camping-time. Polaris, who seemed to have a definite point in view, urged on the dogs for an hour longer than was usual on an ordinary trip, and they came to the border of the immense snow-plain.

To the northeast lay a ridge of what appeared to be snow-covered hills. Beyond the edge of the white prairie was a forest of ice. Millions of jagged monoliths stood and lay, jammed closely together, in every conceivable shape and angle.

At some time a giant ice-flow had crashed down upon the land. It had fretted and torn at the shore, had heaved itself up, with its myriad gleaming tusks bared for destruction. Then nature had laid upon it a calm, white hand, and had frozen it quiet and still and changeless.

Away to the east a path was open, which skirted the field of broken ice and led in toward the base of the hills.

Polaris did not take that path. He turned west, following the line of the ice-belt. Presently he found what he sought. A narrow lane led into the heart of the iceberg.

At the end of it, caught in the jaws of two giant bergs, hung fast, as it had hung for years, the sorry wreck of a stout ship. Scarred and rent by the grinding of its prison-ice, and weather-beaten by the rasping of wind-driven snow in a land where the snow never melts, still on the square stern of the vessel could be read the dimming letters which spelled "Yedda."

Polaris unharnessed the pack, and man and dogs crept on board the hulk. It was but a timber shell. Much of the decking had been cut away, and everything movable had been taken from it for the building of the cabin and the shed, now in black ruins fifty miles to the south.

In an angle of the ice-wall, a few yards from the ship, Polaris pitched his camp and built a fire with timbers from the wreck. He struck his flame with a rudely fashioned tinder-box, catching the spark in fine scrapings of wood and nursing it with his breath. He fed the dogs and toasted meat for his own meal at the fire. With a large robe from the sledge he bedded the team snugly beside the fire.

With his own parka of furs he clambered aboard the ship, found a bunk in the forecastle, and curled up for the night.

Several hours later hideous clamour broke his dreamless slumber. He started from the bunk and leaped from the ship's side into the ice-lane. Every dog of the pack was bristling and snarling with rage. Mixed with their uproar was a deeper, hoarser note of anger that came from the throat of no dog—a note which the man knew well.

The team was bunched a few feet ahead of the fire as Polaris came over the rail of the ship. Almost shoulder to shoulder the seven crouched, every head pointed up the path. They were quivering from head to tail with anger, and seemed to be about to charge.

Whipping the dogs back, the son of the snows ran forward to meet the danger alone. He could afford to lose no dogs. He had forgotten the guns, but he bore weapons with which he was better acquainted.

With a long-hafted spear in his hand and the knife loosened in his belt he bounded up the pathway and stood, wary but unafraid, fronting an immense white bear.

He was not a moment too soon. The huge animal had set himself for the charge, and in another instant would have hurled its enormous weight down on the dogs. The beast hesitated, confronted by this new enemy, and sat back on its haunches to consider.

Knowing his foe aforesaid, Polaris took that opportunity to deliver his own charge. He bounded forward and drove his tough spear with all his strength into the white chest below the throat. Balanced as it was on its haunches, the shock of the man's onset upset the bear, and it rolled backward, a jet of blood spurting over its shaggy coat and, dyeing the snow.

Like a flash the man followed his advantage. Before the brute could turn or recover Polaris reached its back and drove his long-bladed knife under the left shoulder. Twice he struck deep, and sprang aside. The battle was finished.

The beast made a last mighty effort to rear erect, tearing at the spear-shaft, and went down under an avalanche of snarling, ferocious dogs. For the team could refrain from conflict no longer, and charged like a flying wedge to worry the dying foe.

Replenishing his store of meat with strips from the newly slain bear, Polaris allowed the pack to make a famous meal on the carcass. When they were ready to take the trail again, he fired the ship with a blazing brand, and they trotted forth along the snow-path to the east with the skeleton of the stout old Yedda roaring and flaming behind them.

For days Polaris pressed northward. To his right extended the range of the white hills. To the left was the seemingly endless ice-field that looked like the angry billows of a storm-tossed sea which had been arrested at the height of tempest, its white-capped, upthrown waves paralyzed cold and dead.

Down the shore-line, where his path lay, a fierce wind blew continuously and with increasing rigor. He was puzzled to find that instead of becoming warmer as he progressed to the north and away from the pole, the air was more frigid than it had been in his homeland. Hardy as he was, there were times when the furious blasts chilled him to the bone and when his magnificent dogs flinched and whimpered.

Still he pushed on. The sledge grew lighter as the provisions were consumed, and there were few marches that did not cover forty miles. Polaris slept with the dogs, huddled in robes. The very food they ate they must warm with the heat of their bodies before it could be devoured. There was no vestige of anything to make fuel for a camp-fire.

He had covered some hundreds of miles when he found the contour of the country was changing. The chain of the hills swung sharply away to the east, and the path broadened, fanwise, east and west. An undulating plain of snow and ice-caps, rent by many fissures, lay ahead.

This was the most difficult traveling of all.

In the middle of their second march across the plain, the man noticed that his grey snow-courers were uneasy. They threw their snouts up to the wind and growled angrily, scenting some unseen danger. Although he had seen nothing larger than a fox since he entered the plain, bear signs had been frequent, and Polaris welcomed a hunt to replenish his larder.

He halted the team and outspanned the dogs so they would be unhampered by the sledge in case of attack. Bidding them remain behind, he went to reconnoitre.

He clambered to the summit of a snow-covered ice-crest and gazed ahead. A great joy welled into his heart, a thanksgiving so keen that it brought a mist to the eyes.

He had found man!

Not a quarter of a mile ahead of him, standing in the lee of a low ridge, were two figures unmistakably human. At the instant he saw them the wind brought to his nostrils, sensitive as those of an animal, a strange scent that set his pulses bounding. He smelled man and man's fire! A thin spiral of smoke was curling over the back of the ridge. He hurried forward.

Hidden by the undulations of slopes and drifts he approached within a few feet of them without being discovered. On the point of crying aloud to them he stopped, paralyzed, and crouched behind a drift. For these men to whom his heart called madly—the first of his own kind but one whom he had ever seen—were tearing at each other's throats like maddened beasts in an effort to take life!

Like a man in a dream, Polaris heard their voices raised in curses. They struggled fiercely but weakly. They were on the brink of one of the deep fissures, or crevasses, which seamed this strange, forgotten land. Each was striving to push the other into the chasm.

Then one who seemed the stronger wrenched himself free and struck the other in the face. The stricken man staggered, threw his arms above his head, toppled, and crashed down the precipice.

Polaris's first introduction to the civilization which he sought was murder! For those were civilized white men who had fought. They wore garments of cloth. Revolvers hung from their belts. Their speech, of which he had heard little but cursing, was civilized English.

Pale to the lips, the son of the wilderness leaped over the snow-drift and strode toward the survivor. In the teachings of his father, murder was the greatest of all crimes; its punishment was swift death. This man who stood on the brink of the chasm which had swallowed his companion had been the aggressor in the fight. He had struck first. He had killed. In the heart of Polaris arose a terrible sense of outraged justice. This waif of the eternal snows became the law.

The stranger turned and saw him. He started violently, paled, and then an angry flush mounted to his temples and an angry glint came into his eyes. His crime had been witnessed, and by a strange white man.

His hand flew to his hip, and he swung a heavy revolver up and fired, speeding the bullet with a curse. He missed and would have fired again, but his hour had struck. With the precision of an automaton Polaris snatched one of his own pistols from the holster. He raised it above the level of his shoulder, and fired on the drop.

Not for nothing had he spent long hours practicing with his father's guns, sighting and pulling the trigger countless times, although they were empty. The man in front of him staggered, dropped his pistol, and reeled dizzily. A stream of blood gushed from his lips. He choked, clawed at the air, and pitched backward.

The chasm which had received his victim, received the murderer also.

Polaris heard a shrill scream to his right, and turned swiftly on his heel, automatically swinging up his revolver to meet a new peril.

Another being stood on the brow of the ridge—stood with clasped hands and horror-stricken eyes. Clad almost the same as the others, there was yet a subtle difference which garments could not disguise.

Polaris leaned forward with his whole soul in his eyes. His hand fell to his side. He had made his second discovery. He had discovered woman!

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