



MACABRE MONDAY ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 1

VEXED
TO NIGHTMARE

MACABRE MONDAY

Vexed to Nightmare

Macabre Monday Anthology: Volume 1



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I

BOOK ONE: LIMINAL SPACES

Rare Dawn

By: Jon Toews

The Job Interview

By: John Coon

The Hut

By: Jessica Maison

Gnaw

By: Jennifer Morrow

Rare Dawn

2 AM

Learn to keep one eye open. Keep watch as the long night presses down on you like the weight of water. Scan the murk, twitch and jerk. Ready your pole and reflector in vigilant poses and pre-imagined countermeasures. This, while you curl into the underlid, your sleeping eye wrapped with dream fuzz and the syrup of sweet abandon.

A rare dawn approaches. An inevitable transition ticking closer at the thousand-year turn. You anchor your stance as the slow dark roll of the Umbraworld crawls beneath you. This realm, a crypt of shadow, a dim dimension in terminal repose.

The morning will burn cold and pale, they say. The turn has come, all devils die, and the seraphic host will reign with wretched radiation for the next millennium. This is the cycle. You'll do battle if you can. And you'll lead the charge because there is virtue in the violence.

You imagine a slash of inquisitors ripping through the gloom, invoking grotesque transformations shrieking on heaps of rubble and despair. You squint at the dead horizon, waiting with your nails in your skin.

Your companion, June, is counting arrowheads in the bottom

of a concrete basin they once used to wash the blood rust from ancient animals. You can hear her energy flitting and scratching in nervous skirmishes as she tries to round the corners off the bone-white dread she knows is coming.

Eugene has cocooned himself inside the carcass of a derelict sofa. Ria and Bloom left months ago. You can still hear their mournful whistle as they wandered into the western sky.

You envy the thralls that bore this dismal place. Their apathy, a salve. The daybreak, a mere glitch in their revenant consciousness. Their lives barely beating, they will shuffle around like moaning lost children. This will change nothing for them.

You feel the vibrations around the block in your molars and rib cage. The denoised murmurs and mumbling of an existence on the precipice of disaster drown out your own heartbeat, jumping irregularly in your throat.

* * *

3 AM

Sweep the ashes. Beat the rug. Wipe the hard drive. Rub the thug. Pour the jelly. Lick the spit. Shuck the fiber. Mix the grit. Trick the lightning. Roll the ball. Loose the tightening. Burn the doll.

Haunted affirmations—you find some peace in the meditation—a drum beat of uncanny incantations. An anxious crowd has gathered, also finding some comfort in your mantra. They clog your threshold with damp and dreary bodies. You continue at a measured pace. Don't stir the pot too hard. Bubble gently like a simmering stew. They'll join you on the eminent front if you keep their focus. Skin the dragon. Pack the grease. Pull

the wagon. Stain the sheets. Rake the pages. Suck the smoke. Tap the gauges. Drain the yolk—you trail off, momentarily slumping out of your rhythm by the sheer gravity of the trance.

“It’s too little too late! This isn’t helping,” blurts Lolly, stabbing into the lull, “we might as well jump in the shredder right now. I don’t wanna see the dawn!”

You’re not surprised by the interruption. Lolly has always been melodramatic. A trait you find performative and obnoxious, especially for night creatures. You are a daemon with higher expectations and considered action. A bright shade in the purple void, June once said. But what did it matter now? You try and reassemble and quiet your mind, but thanks to Lolly, all you hear is the stochastic echos in the cloister repeating the refrain, “don’t wanna see the dawn, don’t wanna see the dawn,” as the group peels away in reckless spasms. Presumably to preempt the impending cataclysm. By shredder, shiv or shotgun.

* * *

4 AM

You’re alone again. Or at least it feels that way. Like a thin transparent veil, floating down helplessly into a well of ambivalence. The anxiety cramps through your muscles, squeezing out sweat like you’re ringing a towel. It smells like camphor and chlorine. Don’t gag. Don’t choke, there will be plenty of opportunity to do that in due time. Due time. It’s hurtling toward you. Some heraldic menace in white aprons and faerie boots pulled by crazed silver oxen, paranoid and pustulent, oozing with the slime of kindness, trampling your village with the wrath of heavenly service. You mash your internal reset button—hold

the night, fight the light, but more terrifying premonitions cut into your periphery. Headless winged astronauts descend on crystal wires. A vast curdled crust of milk and sour cellulose envelops the landscape. You're forgetting to breathe. Your panic is stacking. The madness is starting.

* * *

5 AM

"Here comes the sun doo do doo do," sings June, now joining you on the parapet. It feels creepier than it should. Her voice cracking, strained and crispy, she sounds like a seizing diesel. And you want to sing back, It's alright, but it's clearly not. The deep purple is fading. The nocturne blur is degassing. You've heard that disintegration is really the best way to go. Fast and fleeting. But you're not sure you should give up so easily. You hold June's hand and realize it might be for the last time. Then you reel through all the other last times that have already happened and sink into your feet. Your last feed, last bleed, last dastardly deed. The penumbric crescent taunts you. The squeal and grind of death machines drone low under rifle fire and the self-inflicted last-minute throws of surrender. But still, some horrors hang, pace and fidget in tentative troops on rooftops and towers. Prepared to claw, bite, and swing till the very end. You feel bolstered yet somehow, in this moment, benign. What's left in you? Is this all there is? Then—

What will become of us? you wonder aloud.

June thinks about it, blinking slowly, she notches a bolt and doesn't answer right away. A sickening glow reflects in the white of her eye. A seam of ivory fire cracks in the distance. The sound

rips into your ears, and tears through the sky. A saccharine symphony of horns burst through the ozone, evaporating the fog of anguish that obscures the land. You ready your mirror and tilt your spear, lower your battle helm and raise your voice— last hell cry, last stand. Then in some awful gesture of consent, June drops her bow, and so you turn to look at her. The blistered edges of her face pointilize, dissolve and disperse into the twilight forever, but not before she tells you, “Nothing Ida. Nothing is what becomes of us.”

***Jon Toews** is a Toronto-based creative director, short fiction writer, designer, and musician. His work, recognized in literary magazines and by international awards, blends these disciplines into compelling narratives. Jon’s innovative approach challenges traditional boundaries, establishing him as a unique and notable figure in the field.*

Subscribe to Jon’s author newsletter, [Ferns of Columbo](#), on Substack.

The Job Interview

This had to be the wrong place.

Chris double checked the address he typed into the map app on his smartphone. He glanced back up at the number above the door.

616.

No, he had the right number. 616 Market Street. Still, his destination did not match his expectations based on what he read and saw online.

A nondescript brown brick building. Windows flanked both sides of a heavy white wooden door. Drawn blinds shut out sunlight and concealed whatever lay inside from prying eyes. No sign hung above the door.

Maybe interviewing to be a content writer for Wild Grape Marketing wasn't such a hot idea after all. If this building truly housed their home office, it sent the wrong message about the company's approach to marketing.

"What kind of fishy fly-by-night company is this?" Chris wondered aloud.

He stuffed his phone back inside his jacket and shifted a navy-blue folder to his other hand. The folder held an up-to-date resume. Chris spent an entire evening ironing out the details after reading various articles that offered resume-writing tips.

He ran his hand through his light brown hair, stepped up to the door, and twisted the knob.

A hinge creaked as Chris pushed the door open. Darkness and emptiness swallowed everything in front of him. Outside sunlight flooded past his shoulders and soon revealed an empty waiting room. His eyes settled on a single couch covered in rough brown fabric. The couch faced a bland white round table decorated with three random magazines. Across from the office furniture stood a second door.

“Hello?”

Silence greeted his question. Chris stepped through the open doorway and surveyed the cramped room. Nothing beyond the minimal decor caught his eye. No signs of human activity.

“Hello?” he repeated. “Is anyone here?”

Chris approached the second door and knocked. An echo of his knuckles banging against wood bounced back to him. He scrunched up his eyes and nose and let loose a confused sigh.

“Is this a prank?” Chris glanced back at the open door behind him. “Am I being punked?”

Did someone post a fake job at Wild Grape Marketing on the job board? Wouldn't be unprecedented for some anonymous jerk to pull that trick. Too many trolls out there with too much time on their hands.

Chris tested the doorknob.

Unlocked.

He pushed the door open and poked his head through the doorway. It led into a darkened hall. Chris paused. Should he go inside? If someone lurked around in the hall, they were doing a good job of hiding from him.

“I'm here for the job interview,” Chris called out as he stepped through the doorway. “Is anyone here?”

Hinges creaked.

Two doors slammed.

Darkness deepened into a thick shadowy soup. Chris jumped and wheeled around. The folder holding his resume tumbled from his hand to a floor covered in rough tawny carpet. He tried the knob on the second door again.

Locked.

“Hey! What the hell’s going on?” Chris pounded his fist against the door. Vibrations from the repeated blows shook the hinges. “If this is intended to be a joke, I’m not laughing.”

His words returned a faint echo. Dim lights sprang to life above him. Fluorescent tubes flickering with a sick glow and emitting a sputtering hum.

“This isn’t funny!” Chris yanked on the doorknob harder. “Let me out of here!”

The knob refused to budge. He ripped away his hands a second later and uncorked an angry sigh. His eyes trailed from wall to wall and then floor to ceiling. Chris ran his fingers through his hair again and straightened his skinny tie. He studied his surroundings, searching for an alternate exit. An opening to a larger room stood on one end of the hall. Nothing lay in the opposite direction except a dead-end wall.

He scooped up the dropped folder again. That ragged persistent hum from the overhead lights dug into his ears as Chris walked down the hall. A scowl deepened on his lips. Man, he wished had a rock to chuck at those fixtures. Striking the lights would plunge the hall back into total darkness. Then again, at least that annoying hum would finally stop.

The hall fed directly into an expansive office. Empty cubicles dotted the room from wall to wall. No visible windows anywhere. Chairs and desks occupied random cubicles while

others remained empty. Passing each occupied cubicle left Chris with an increasingly eerie feeling. None of the cubicles offered signs of recent use. Usually, an office cubicle would house an assortment of pictures, a desktop computer, and a phone. Items showing an actual human used the place as a workspace. These cubicles were an exception.

Nothing except a deserted office greeted his eyes.

If Wild Grape Marketing ever existed, that fact was no longer true. Chris licked his lips as he wandered from cubicle to cubicle. Who set up the phony job posting? Who sent a response email to his application directing him to come to this empty office? The sender of the email identified himself as Cameron Prett, lead talent recruiter at Wild Grape Marketing. Now Cameron's existence had turned into a legitimate question.

Was this merely an alias for someone else?

Chris pulled out his smartphone. He swiped the screen and encountered a dreaded notification.

Out of service area.

Chris unleashed another angry sigh and shook his head with vigor. How come he had no cell service inside an empty office building? This wasn't an isolated wilderness cut off from civilization. He drove out to an east side San Cristobal neighborhood for Christ's sake. Getting a signal around here shouldn't be a problem.

Unless someone intentionally blocked the signal.

Whoever lured him in here wanted to prevent him from reconnecting with the outside world. Why? What did he do to deserve this? This whole episode seemed a little too personal to be a random prank.

Despair gripped Chris. He desperately needed this job for Lucy's sake. Money grew sparse after getting laid off from the

magazine copy desk in the spring. Being denied unemployment only tightened his budget further. Skipping random meals became a necessary step during the past month. He was willing to make whatever personal sacrifices he needed to make to keep his little dog from going hungry. Maya insisted Chris let her adopt Lucy while he got his act together. She got defensive when he told his nosy neighbor to mind her own business and zip her lips.

He pressed the emergency call button on the phone lock screen. Smartphones were supposed to connect to the nearest cell tower if you dialed an emergency number. Or so Chris had been told. Time to test that theory out. A dial pad appeared. He entered 911 and then pressed the phone against his ear.

One ring. Two rings.

“911. What’s your emergency?”

“I’m trapped in an abandoned office building! I showed up for a job interview and I got locked inside.”

Chris blurted out the words with frenetic energy, betraying his increasingly anxious state.

“We can help, sir.” The dispatcher answered him a soothing tone. “Try to stay calm. What is your address?”

“616 Market Street. Please hurry.”

“Did you say 616 Market Street?”

Chris didn’t like how the dispatcher repeated the street address back to him. Something about the way they said the number revealed hidden skepticism.

“That’s correct. Please hurry.”

“No building is listed at that address.”

His eyes widened and his mouth fell open. What an absurd thing to say! He didn’t make a mistake with the street number. The dispatcher was flat out wrong.

“Of course, there’s a building here!” Fresh irritation laced through his voice. “I’m trapped inside. Please send someone. Hurry!”

‘Sir, you need to stay calm or I —’

At once, the line went dead. Chris pulled the phone away from his ear and glanced at the screen. It had gone black. He pressed a button on the side with his thumb.

Still black.

“No! Not now. I charged it this morning.”

How did his battery drain so damn fast? Chris clenched his teeth and jammed the phone back inside his jacket pocket. God, he hoped the dispatcher sent someone out here to help him soon.

Chris started pacing along a row of cubicles near the south end of the room. Worried thoughts swarmed him, matching the speed of his outward nervous energy. He paused in his tense circuit when his eyes fell upon a single folded piece of printer paper. It lay on an otherwise barren desk inside the cubicle where he started and had his name written on front. How did he not notice it earlier? Chris approached the desk and set down his folder. He snatched up the paper and unfolded it.

A message filled one-third of the paper. Each word written in impeccable cursive using a calligraphy pen.

Don't waste your time waiting for help.
Deliverance will never arrive.
Don't bother searching for an exit.
You will never escape.
This is a new beginning.
And also a definitive end.
Your fate will be a shared one
with that cruel, selfish brood
who once poisoned paper with ink.

Locked in an empty prison,
existing beyond space and time.

His heart sank as Chris studied these words. Someone went to great lengths to lure him inside this place and trap him here. A dead phone and no visible exit complicated his efforts to fight back against their scheme.

He had to fight though. For Lucy. She couldn't be left alone in that apartment to fend for herself. For his mom and dad too. Chris was their only child. They would grow sick with grief if anything bad happened to him.

"I know I can find a way out," he said aloud. "If I retrace my steps, maybe I'll come across another door or window that will lead me outside."

The paper rustled in his hand as though a breeze brushed against it. Chris stared down at the unfolded sheet anew. New words were inscribed on the page, replacing the earlier message.

I won't let you escape; you fool.
Get used to this place.
You're not going anywhere.

His heart raced as this new message settled into his frantic mind. Chris trailed his eyes across the empty room searching for signs of his captor. Part of him prayed he wouldn't find anything. Learning who brought him here may be a mystery better left unsolved.

They were able to alter words written on a paper before his eyes while remaining unseen. Anyone that powerful also had enough power to do much more unspeakable things.

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Subscribe to John's author newsletter, [Strange New Worlds](#), on Substack.

The Hut

Sheryl discovered this particular trail on an urban hiker's app. It was a coyote run through an 18-acre walnut reserve in the center of a Los Angeles neighborhood. Not too difficult but steep enough in sections to make it challenging. The reserve was beautiful and pristine half the year, dried up and withered the other half, peaceful year-round. Not too many people knew they could enter it, so not too many did which made the hike incredibly tranquil. Sheryl preferred to hike the paths less travelled. She didn't like other people when she was out in nature, not since Beth stopped hiking with her.

The path dipped down a steep hill passing dozens of walnut trees, heavy with dark green leaves and round, light green nuts. Sheryl lost her footing several times on the many piles of loose dirt caused by gophers, barely avoiding complete wipe-outs. She mopped the sweat from her brow as she walked by several sunflower plants, just starting to bloom, at the bottom of the small valley. Ahead of her, the path entered a densely wooded area, much darker under the forest's canopy.

When she entered the darker area, the temperature dropped at least ten degrees almost instantly, drying the sweat on her arms. With each mossy step and discovery of a new wildflower, she became more enchanted with this place. She couldn't believe

such untouched beauty existed in the middle of the city which only made her all the angrier when she arrived at the largest oak tree in the reserve. A makeshift swing made from seatbelt rope and a skateboard deck hung from one of its larger branches and someone had spray painted the name Billy in bright blue on the trunk. Her cheeks flushed, and she placed her small hand on the tree, whispering an apology for how thoughtless people could be. She made other apologies about her own thoughtlessness, especially toward Beth. As the bark pressed into her flesh, the area behind the tree blurred, and she could see the once vital, love of her life, walking down a sloped path toward her, smiling, revealing her crooked teeth. Sheryl's breath caught in her throat, watched Beth stroll through the woods, knowing she was a figment of her imagination, but desperately wanting the illusion to remain. Slowly, Beth's teeth elongated and distorted her sweet face into something wounded, feral, angry. Sheryl ripped her hand off the tree and staggered away from it. Beth's image dissipated, only a monster her mind had summoned to torment her. The last words the two had spoken to each other had been in anger, and Sheryl could never take them back.

She had fallen into a pile of twigs and leaves just off the path. From the ground, she spotted a group of bushes that had grown snugly around a smaller nearby tree, creating a circular, hut-like structure. The branches and briar formed an oval entrance into this strange little structure.

Sheryl pulled herself up, brushing dirt and twigs off her jeans, squinting at the door, trying to glimpse what was inside. A small gust of chilly air blew past her cheek. She glanced quickly behind her shoulder. No one was there. Beth was still gone. Correction. Beth had never been there. Sheryl gazed up through the forest's canopy as the sun disappeared behind a large cloud. The woods

grew colder and darker.

Dried twigs crunched under her boots as she veered completely off the path making her way to the oval entranceway. She could hear Beth's voice telling her to stay on the path. She ignored it, like she had when Beth had told her to slow the car down. Humming from a nearby tree replaced Beth's voice as Sheryl arrived at the hut's threshold.

"Bees," Sheryl murmured, searching the area for signs of the insects, not overly concerned. Bees belonged here. They made their homes in hollowed-out tree trunks; a walnut reserve had plenty of those.

She stopped five feet in front of this captivating hut that nature had grown. The area inside was several shades darker than the area just outside of it. She could just make out a large root protruding out of its smooth dirt floor. Further in, there was an object she couldn't quite make out from where she was standing.

Sheryl hesitated, weighing the dangers of entering the hut. As far as animals, the worse she would confront would be a coyote, and she could handle herself around one of them. She glanced around the woods then back to the entrance, thinking about all the homeless in this city, wondering if someone might have made this hut their home. Yes, a person being inside was a far more dangerous possibility than any animal. The longer she stared at the entrance, the less she worried about animals or people, and the more she started fretting about other entities that made their homes in forests. She snorted, surprised she was entertaining ideas of spirits. She knew the only reason her mind was wandering in the supernatural direction was because of Beth. She wouldn't allow her mind to become weak like that, let her grieving, guilty heart become desperate. Still, entering the hut felt forbidden, like it was already occupied.

She placed her hand on a twisted branch making up the top of the door. It felt warmer and softer than the trunk of the defaced walnut had felt, more alive. It sent an unnatural jolt through her fingers, and she jerked her fingers off its bark.

At the hut's center, surrounded by a dirt floor that looked like someone swept it regularly, sat an old fashioned T.V. with its screen smashed out. In front of the T.V., a few feet from it, sat a worn rubber tire acting as a lounge chair. The inside of the hut seemed staged, every branch placed just so, the shards of glass from the T.V. scattered precisely, like a street artist had set-up a macabre exhibit. Maybe Billy from the tree.

Sheryl forced herself to breath. Every muscle, nerve, and impulse directed her to turn around and leave this hut un-entered. Her mind screamed at her over and over again. *It's a trap. It's a trap. It's a trap.*

There was only one tiny, curious part that wanted to step inside and sit on that rubber tire and stare into that broken television set. Her other parts waged a battle against that out of tune piece but because it wasn't in sync, it rose to the top. Sheryl's boot finally crossed the threshold and disturbed the perfectly swept dirt floor. Inside, the swarm's buzzing could not be heard. There were no birds chirping or distant sounds of kid's playing or cars honking. There was a silence inside this place that Sheryl had never experienced. The hut suddenly felt overwhelmingly sacred and welcoming. Sheryl wiped away a few tears, shocked by the intense feelings that washed over her.

Again, her gaze was drawn to the T.V. The whole set-up was so strange. Who would have dragged this stuff out here? Maybe, the same teenagers who hung the swing, but Sheryl didn't really think so. This hut seemed different, more thoughtful, like whoever had done it was trying to communicate to an audience.

Sheryl took the few steps to the rubber tire without even realizing she was moving. She was sitting on it without remembering deciding to do so. From her position on the tire, it seemed the branches of the trees and the bushes tightened and twisted together, shutting out the few rays of sunlight that had been touching the floor of the hut. Her hands pushed up against the tire, her body wanting to leave, but the small impulse driving Sheryl held her there, needing to watch this television set. She shifted her hazel eyes to focus on the spot where the screen should be. This was the kind of television that had a place for a tube and a bulb, both shattered. From the far back of the shell, a darkness swirled into a whirlpool and pushed toward the place where the screen should be. Slowly, white flecks broke up the black, and the glow from the static illuminated Sheryl's face. A translucent film grew over her eyes as she continued to stare, and a grainy image appeared out of the static.

It was Beth. Not as she was right now, unresponsive in a hospital bed kept alive by tubes and machines, but as she had been when they went on their first hike together so many years ago. Vibrant. The image reached out and touched Sheryl's face, and the world went bright white, and then pitch black.

Coyote yips and howls started Sheryl awake. She kicked forward and hit the old T.V. with her boot, knocking it back. She wiped the drool from her chin and frantically took in her surroundings, unsure of where she was and why she was there.

"Shit," she whispered when her eyes finally adjusted, and she accepted she was actually still in this hut, not just having a nightmare. She had fallen asleep and now the coyotes were hunting which meant the park was closed, and she was alone out here for real.

She was careful not to look at the T.V. again as she pushed

herself out of the tire's center. Its screen had already shown her too much, rewired her circuits. She crept toward the oval exit, focusing on the trees outside as an owl hooted, and the wings of crickets made their music. The coyotes' increasingly frenzied yipping quickly swallowed the other sounds. They had made a kill.

Sheryl stepped out of the hut, keeping a steady internal monologue going about how to get back to the path, out of the reserve, and safely to her car. She was going to be fine. She just needs to move quickly and be smart. She was good at those things.

"Don't go," Beth's voice pleaded from behind her right as her boot hit the trail. She froze. She knew her mind was just making that voice up. She had created a Beth in her head that kept her company since the real Beth had slipped away. Sheryl had been too much of a coward to release her, and now that T.V. had shown her the awful cost of not letting her go. Without turning back, Sheryl gasped, "I'm so sorry."

Humming returned to the woods but this time it was different than the bees. This time, it was a T.V. set on a channel that wouldn't quite come in. She caught the frenetic light of the screen from the corner of her eye. She wasn't going to turn around. She couldn't look at that screen again. She would never be able to explain that T.V. It had taken her somewhere not of this world. At first, it took her to Beth but then, it warped and shifted, and the places she travelled were not warm and loving, they were violent and dark, desperate for others to join and stay. Yet, they were also still somehow Beth. Sheryl had no idea how long she'd been lost in that darkness, hopefully just the afternoon and evening. She never wanted to return to it. Even if Beth was trapped in it. Even if Beth being trapped was her fault.

She did not look back. She rushed along the path, shadows jumping out at her from every tree, bush, or rock. She usually loved a night hike but there was not even a sliver of the moon out tonight, and this forest was hungry and dangerous.

She gasped and froze. She shook her head at the impossibility before her. About five yards ahead stood the hut and its oval entrance. She had been running away from it for over ten minutes. The hut should be way behind her, deep in the woods. A light flickered from within, and she screamed, quickly turning and veering off the path, stumbling up the hill. The loose dirt caused her to slip and slide, face planting several times on her way up. Every time she fell, she dragged herself up and searched frantically behind her, but the hut remained down in the valley, and nothing was chasing her.

She clambered up to the top of the hill, dirty and bloodied, but relieved as she stepped on the familiar path leading out of the reserve. She started jogging, desperate to put more distance between her and that hut.

As she turned a corner toward the park's exit, a silhouette of another tree stood in the center of the path. She slowed her jog to a more cautious pace. The closer she got, the more the tree rounded until it revealed that oval entrance once again, a ravenous mouth. Sheryl felt her hot skin cool as her heart raced. A small light flickered on from within the hut.

She released a choked sob and staggered back from the hut only to ram into a sharp branch behind her. She slowly turned and once again faced the hut's oval entrance, the flickering light of the T.V. glowing on her face. Its branches whipped out and wrapped around her wrists and dragged her over the threshold toward her spot on the tire in front of the broken television. Sheryl struggled and screamed as the branches tied her to the

tire while others grew and weaved across the entrance of the hut, sealing her in.

After several minutes, her screams turned to moans and then whimpers.

The hut disappeared.

The forest was peaceful again, even the coyotes calmed, all its hungry beasts satiated for now.

***Jessica Maison** is a sci-fi, fantasy, and horror author, screenwriter, comics creator, film director, and publisher. **Plastic Girl** is her coming of age novel trilogy set in a climate apocalypse, and **Mary Shelley's School for Monsters** is her horror graphic novel series. Her short sci-fi short stories have been published by Terraform. More about her and her company can be found at wickedtreepress.com.*

Subscribe to Jessica's author newsletter, [Monster of the Week](#), on Substack.

Gnaw

Dan should have been back hours ago. I think I'm going crazy but I can't let her see that I'm afraid. Please let him be hiding somewhere they can't find him, waiting them out until he can run back to us.

It started with a few. The first ghoul I ever saw was on my way to work, driving down Oakwood, a two-lane road through the woods that that took me to the main streets of town. It was a Wednesday morning and I saw a pile of something in the lane up ahead, then realized the pile was moving. I slowed and looked at it as I passed, seeing it for what it was, a young man covered in browning blood, hunched over and holding the remains of a dead animal. He was tearing it open with his teeth as he ate. I believe it was a cat, but it might have been a possum. I saw the scene clearly for maybe one second before stomping on the gas. On Randall Street, I pulled into a parking spot and called the police to report it, my voice shaking so hard I could barely control it. He'd been *covered* in blood, more than a cat or whatever it was would produce.

When I got the story out, the 911 operator said, "Another?" No, I told her, I'd never reported a man ripping an animal apart

before, and she replied, “I mean this isn’t the only sighting like this. We’ve gotten a few calls this morning about people eating roadkill and stuff. Must be the druggies got something exotic to get high on and here’s our new problem. We’ll send a car.”

It turned out she was half right, this was the beginning of our new problem. I went to work and texted Dan about what I’d seen, but the day was so eventful that I had texted him at least five times the first hour. Two coworkers, on-again-off-again best friends, had been sent home for biting each other. They both had red eyes, so everyone knew they had spent the night drinking together and brought their argument to work with them. But their faces ... both of them looked so incredibly dry, like their skin had shrunk and was stretched across their skulls. Then, one of the security guards ran off into the woods chasing a rabbit. At two o’ clock I went to my manager’s office to get an okay but his door was shut, an unusual thing. I knocked. I could hear panting inside and panicked about what I might be interrupting, but the panting turned to coughing, then Roger saying, “Don’t come in. I’m not well.”

“It’s Beth,” I called, “do you need help?” He didn’t answer so I slipped the paper I needed him to initial under his door. I texted Dan *I can’t wait for this day to end.*

When I was leaving for the day I watched as three of my coworkers chased each other around the cars at the far end of the parking lot. Some people never grow up. I followed the same route home, and on my way down Oakwood I saw the mess on the road where the druggie had been that morning. Both he and the animal were gone, just tufts of fur waving in the slick of dark slop that still remained.

* * *

That night, after putting Stephanie to bed, Dan and I compared our days. He's unable to take calls at work because he's on the move in a noisy factory, but he'd read my texts with growing concern. Dan had watched a maintenance guy throw a wrench at the floor supervisor, then chase the man through the line in an attempt to tackle him. Most of the employees on the line had been laughing, the sup was hated, but when the maintenance guy actually caught him and bit into the sup's face, everyone had jumped in. Except for Graciela, one of the oldest line employees, a grandmother who stood just over five feet tall. Dan said that she'd been yelling *no, no* like everyone else as they pulled the two men apart, but when the sup's face was revealed, with the big flap of meaty skin hanging down from the bite, suddenly Graciela had wrapped her arms around the sup's head and tried to pull his face down to her gnashing teeth. Dan had grabbed Graciela's hands and yanked her off. Every supervisor and lead had flooded the area and between them all, the three had been dragged away and Dan got the production going again. "All the capillaries in their eyes had burst," he said, "and their skin was almost blue, and so withered. It was beyond dehydration. It looked like they hadn't had water in a year."

Between my coworkers and his, and the roadkill eater, the dispatcher, it was too much to not be related. I turned to the news and Dan checked his phone. There were reports from across the country of people attacking, chasing strangers through the streets. Children were missing. A man in Cincinnati had been at the zoo with his family when he jumped into a hippopotamus enclosure and charged, growling and snapping his jaws. The animals had stomped him. There was video from San Diego of a furious man breaking down a side door of a wood framed house and entering. There were screams from inside

that suddenly stopped and the man came back out the broken door, face smeared in blood and dragging the body of an elderly man behind him like a coat. Before each of the phone videos were played, the newscaster warned that the footage we were about to see was graphic, and though they stopped each right before the worst violence, I could see the shriveled faces of the people running after their prey. It was a brief interview with a middle-aged man in a Seattle street that made it fall into place. The man was dressed in running gear and sweating so profusely down his face that he looked like he'd stopped during a marathon. Actually, he'd been chased. The reporter asked him what he thought was going on. "Drugs," the man panted. "All the street people are freaking out. I've been chased by a couple of them just now. I've seen them trying to grab birds out of the air. They're like ghouls trying to eat anything they can catch. It's scary." The reporter asked if the man would continue to run his usual route. "Nah, I need to switch my route if this is what's happening downtown."

We shoved the couch in front of the front door and the breakfast table in front of the back door. I laid next to Stephanie while she slept. Dan sat in the easy chair with his Colt next to him, watching the news all night.

* * *

In the morning he came into our bathroom. I was brushing my teeth but stopped when I saw his face.

"We don't need to call in," he said. "I don't think anyone is expecting us. We're going to the cabin." I spit, wiped my mouth and hurried to get my phone. I heard Dan telling Stephanie to pack her sleepover bag with her favorite jeans and shirts. "We're

going to the cabin!” he told her, like it was a treat. “Now?” she asked.

* * *

I called my parents over and over, getting the automated recording. They lived on the second floor of a condo in a retirement community. It was the floor for the more active residents. *Please stay inside for once*, I thought.

* * *

Getting to the cabin was terrifying. Red eyed people ran back and forth across Crandall Road, chasing and feeding. I told Stephanie to lay down in the back seat. We passed an open Jeep in the road that was swarmed by ghouls, bloody and chewing, so many that, thankfully, I couldn't see what they were eating. Dan swerved the wheel back and forth, dodging abandoned cars and ghouls roaming the road with their hands reaching for our SUV. Once we were out of the town proper the road was mostly clear, though we did pass cars pulled to the side of the road with people watching us go by. One family had the hood up and tried to wave us down. Normally we would have stopped, but one of them was bloody so Dan hit the gas.

* * *

Our cabin is isolated. My great-grandfather built it in the center of twenty-three acres of land. It's the family cabin now, one that my parents, siblings, and cousins take turns with, so I expected to find someone else here first. I hoped for my parents.

* * *

We've been here three weeks. My parents haven't come, nor anyone else. One minute I'm mourning what I know to be true, the next I'm filled with gratitude for having Dan and Stephanie.

We had enough food to last a few weeks before even thinking of rationing. It's low now, and we didn't have enough of anything else to begin with. Medicine, soap, toothpaste. Dan and I told each other that everything would be normal soon.

We dare not use the fireplace, so the cabin is cold, but we have a small, quiet generator that let's us run space heaters and the stove, and enough blankets and coats that have been left here over the years. Dan and I have gone outside one at a time to pick apples and blackberries, the other waiting in the doorway and watching. Stephanie understands what's happening as much as she's capable. She knows we're staying away from people and being quiet.

* * *

Dan is driving to the Kirwin's cabin this morning to see if they're there. If they are, they might want to share resources. We have coats and fruit. We have a gun. They might want to crowd together for protection, and they could bring all their food and aspirin. If they aren't there, he'll break in and take their stuff. He has the gun in case a ghoul appears. I'm watching the time. He should be back within the hour. Stephanie wants to play outside so I put her coat on her, and put two kitchen knives in the pockets of my own coat. I peeked out through the tear in the blanket we'd nailed over the window and listen. When I haven't seen anything, we quietly go outside. Stephanie plays in the

grass with the little plastic cars her cousin Cody left behind. She knows to whisper. I watch everything.

* * *

Dan hasn't returned. I've given Stephanie her lunch but didn't eat myself. He's been gone two and a half hours.

* * *

He hasn't returned. It's been five hours. I've called his cell sixty-two times. I tell Stephanie that Daddy said he was going to check on lots of neighbors today. That isn't what he said, but now that I've told her the lie I'm hoping it's true.

* * *

It's been eight hours. I know something has happened. I give Stephanie spoonfuls of peanut butter and a candy bar for dinner. I shouldn't even think it but I'm considering sneaking out after Stephanie goes to sleep. I have to look for him.

* * *

It's 7:30. I put Stephanie to bed half an hour ago and have spent that time putting my boots on and taking them off. My coat too. I can't stand waiting but I can't leave her alone. I had pulled my boots off for the third time when I heard something brush against the side of the house. We've always left the lights off, using camp lanterns on low at night, so the cabin looks empty from outside. I heard it again, something on the front porch. I

crawled up to the window and slowly pulled a tiny bit of blanket back. There, on the dark porch, was Dan. His back was facing me, but I heard his key fumbling into the lock, saw him bent down a little to squint in the blackness. I heard him breathe *open up* against the door. I jumped, throwing the deadbolt back and flung the door open. Dan came out of the black night and crossed the threshold, entered the sparing glow of the cabin, and I saw his torn face and red eyes, the bloody drool that hung from his shriveled mouth and the stench of decay that came off him. He lunged, grabbing my face, opening wide and attaching his mouth over mine like a kiss, my scream muffled by his face pressing down and into my flesh, his teeth gripping my tongue and biting through and through until I heard his own teeth click as they met. He pulled away. The excruciating pain. The horror of feeling the final release from my body. My mouth filled with blood that I coughed out as I watched Dan chew.

When he let go, my hand scabbled across the counter for a kitchen knife, the one Mom used on the turkeys, and found it. He stood there, chewing and watching as I brought the knife up. I stabbed Dan in the chest. I had to do it for our daughter. A little blood dribbled down the handle but he pulled it out and dropped it on the floor without any indication of pain. My own pain was both sharp as the stump dragged against my teeth, and an exhausting ache that made me sure I would pass out soon. I couldn't let that happen.

I backed around the kitchen island, scanning for more weapons. I pulled open the freezer and grabbed the mallet we kept there, but as soon as I had it in my hand Dan lunged again. He yanked it from me and dropped it, then pulled my arm into his mouth, biting down with all his might and tearing out a chunk. He chewed as blood spurted into his face. A sound

that would have been a scream came from my throat and my body began to spasm. I fell to the floor but Dan was still holding and chewing my arm. Through the blood that dripped into my eyes, I watched my husband eating my arm, but the pain began to ease, and soon I didn't feel it at all.

Then Dan lost his balance, slipping in the enormous pool of blood. He let go of me and caught himself by grabbing the stovetop, knocking a big cast iron skillet to the floor with a thump that made the cabinets shake.

“Mommy!”

Dan looked down at me. He took my hand again, but this time he pulled me to my feet. Together we went to the bedroom door and I turned the knob. A small and squirming bit of food was looking at us silhouetted in the doorway.

“Daddy!” she squealed. “You’re back!”

We moved closer and I reached out my arms.

*Jennifer Morrow lives in Phoenix with her husband and a worried Boxer named Coral. She's the author of **The Morgue Is Murder**, available on Amazon, and the short story, “**Sitting Up with Granny**”, which can be heard on the Full Body Chills podcast. She enjoys book collecting, tiki mugs, and punk rock.*

Subscribe to Jennifer's author newsletter, [Autumn Lives Here](#), on Substack.

II

BOOK TWO: PROPRIOCEPTION

Julie

by Lauren Salas

The Beast of Fort Meade

By Hamish Kavanagh

Spiral Cavity

by Bridget Riley

The Ugly Cardigan

by Kathrine Elaine

Julie

Julie. Julie Julie Julie.

I don't remember writing it, or even picking up a pen, but there it is, scrawled all over scattered pieces of paper, on the table, on the walls even. Just one name, over and over and over again.

Julie. Julie. Julie. Julie.

I sit there, watching my hand start writing again. Crazy that I don't even feel it moving. It's like it belongs to someone else, a lovesick kid who won't stop scribbling the name of their crush on everything and anything. My fingers creep out and slide the next sheet of paper over once both sides are completely covered.

She told me I'd never be able to get away from her no matter how far I ran. That one way or another I'd regret leaving her.

It started with constant text messages, phone calls in the middle of the night, social media stalking. Later that became physical stalking, lurking around outside my job or my house, following my car with hers. She'd leave what I assumed were 'presents' on my doorstep. Half-burnt candles, bundles of twigs and plants and hair tied together with string, a still-bloody bird's wing.

That last one had me wondering if I was dating a really fucked-up cat this whole time, but it did what she wanted. It got my

attention. I'd been ignoring her constant calls and texts since we broke up, but after finding that wing laying there, *I called her.*

"Alright Julie, what the hell? What's next, a horse's head in my bed? A pentagram in goat's blood? A pig's heart stuck all over with pins?"

She laughed, a giggle I used to think was cute. "Don't be stupid, Jason. The curse doesn't need any of that."

"The curse?"

"Right, the curse I put on you. You're going to be sorry you left me."

I hung up after that. Curses and spells didn't scare me, so if she thought that she'd get me that way, she was dead wrong. I shrugged it off, figuring my nutcase ex was getting desperate for attention, since nothing else had worked.

The first time it happened I didn't think anything of it. I was talking about her anyway, about how nuts she was and how I had no real recourse but to move in order to feel safe from her. Idly writing Julie's name was a little weird, but she was on my mind already. Not like any of her flaky 'spells' had done anything to me.

Sitting here with a novel's worth of pages repeating only her name, I've started to set a little more stock in curses.

I don't sleep much; hard to when your own fingers will claw her name into your skin. They want to write, and if there's nothing else to write with, they'll resort to blood. Never in my life did I think I'd have to wrestle my own hand to get it to stop scratching me, but here we are. I don't eat much either, because my fork or knife will become less of an eating implement and more another way to inscribe Julie's name into everything.

It ruined my last date too. There's really no way to explain to

someone why you've gone into her bag and started writing the name of your ex-girlfriend all over the table in wine-red lipstick. 'My crazy ex cursed me and now my hand won't stop scrawling her name everywhere' isn't about to go over big with anyone. In fact, she blocked me just about everywhere she could, and I wouldn't be surprised if she told all her friends what a weirdo I am.

The times where my hand doesn't act up and allows me a bit of normalcy are enough to make me cry. They're becoming further and further between, and I'm sure eventually there won't be any.

Everywhere in the house I see her goddamn name. It's scribbled, splashed, scratched, etched, scrawled, burned, and clawed into every surface possible. I can't have anyone over like this. Not my friends, not my family, not anyone.

There's no escaping her. I can hear that giggle, see her crazy eyes peering at me through every window. I can smell that stupid, overly-sweet perfume of hers. She's nowhere near me, but she's everywhere.

I try to force my hand to write my own name. I got as far as J-A-S before the 'O' turns into a 'U', followed by 'LIE'. Julie. Julie. Julie. Julie.

She'll never leave me be. She'll always be haunting me, always be ruining my life. Everywhere I go, everywhere I look, all there is is her goddamn *name*.

There's only one way to stop it. Only one way to end this madness for good, and the answer's outside in the tool shed. I hardly pay any attention to the late-night chill, flinging the door open. The key to my salvation hangs on the back wall.

Like I said earlier, the hand hardly feels like it's mine anymore. It doesn't listen to me. It only does what it wants, or rather what

Julie wants it to. I'm no expert on curses, but I damn well know that a hand can't write if it's not attached to a wrist.

Maybe I won't feel it. It's not like it's mine anymore, it's hers. Maybe it will hurt her.

God, I hope it hurts her. I hope she'll be screaming and writhing on the ground, feeling like there's nothing left but a bloody stump.

I hope it never works again. That'll teach her.

Grinning at the thought of Julie getting her just desserts, I bring the hatchet down on my wrist.

***Lauren Salas** turned a childhood love of Halloween into a lifelong love of monsters and supernatural happenings. She's got a particular soft spot for vampires and other undead creatures. She started out writing fantasy as a teenager, and still dabbles in the genre, but is more likely to write a story about a ghost or a cursed skull these days. Beyond all things dark and morbid, she's also fond of cats, video games, monster movies, and tea.*

Subscribe to Lauren's author newsletter, [Cobwebs and Candles](#), on [Substack](#).

The Beast of Fort Meade

Knock. Knock, knock, Slap.

A palm plants itself on my front door, two strokes before dinner. Five smudged fingerprints squeak their way down the frosted glass. A man's palm.

"They're after my wallet!"

I wince. I thought my slide into the hallway's side alcove had been subtle.

"Who?" I mutter.

"The Muggers! Three of them!" his voice breaks. "Been following me since Winchester Corner."

I release a long breath and pull aside the curtain with my pointer finger. This stranger is a well built kid. Enlisting age. Frantic eyes. Pacing up and down my wooden porch. Glancing down my all-but-black front pathway. Clasp and unclasp his fists.

Would *you* let him in?

Think about the long shot he's taking here if this is legit. Well and truly cornered himself if I don't pull through. I'd love to think some Samaritan would do the same for me if roles were reversed. He picked the right house. The rest of my street is all army wives and pensioners. I'm his *only* shot tonight.

* * *

Theory One: Mitch Hedgerow

Most folks around here have big opinions. They'll tell you they know all about The Beast of Fort Meade.

They don't.

They clink glasses over each new body that turns up and chat about his past as if it's some urban legend. As if it's some fun TV drama to swap theories over. That business makes me ill, but their worst sin is the advice they throw around to people who are only just hearing about The Beast. Like he's something you can understand.

Nine bodies in the space of three months can testify, that ain't possible.

I'm not gonna do that to you. The beast can't be understood any better than a woman's mind. The best we can do is make comparisons.

My trade is teaching boxing up at the Barracks, so fist-fighting's the only tool I've got to make any kinda sense of things.

The Beast of Fort Meade goes about his work like a good prize fighter.

He'll twitch his shoulder—a dead ringer for the start of a stiff jab.

Naturally you'll duck or counter.

He'll crouch down real low, and wind up to the left.

A body shot coming for sure! But then it never comes.

Is *any* of this making sense?

I guess what I'm tryna say is, The Beast creates a dilemma for you.

Do you swing on that jab, when you know it might not be real?

Cause if you take that approach all night, you'll be exhausted by the end of round three!

But if you don't respect *any* of his punches. The ones that *are* real will leave your nose crunchier than a punnet of eggs that got packed in your shopping bag underneath your week's-worth of meat!

This is all just analogy though. I doubt The Beast ever had the guts to set foot in a boxing ring. Like I said, The Beast of Fort Meade can't be understood.

* * *

I let him in.

Yea it's dumb, but I like to go about my day calling myself a good person. Keeping that door locked wouldn't have let me do that. Shoot me.

He does a good job of making me feel like I made the right call. Turns back to the door the moment he's inside, latches the deadbolt and even the security chain. Is that what you call those things?

He doesn't stop there either. I'm about to take back my charity when he heads right into my lounge, but he comes back seconds later and makes a similar dive into the front bedroom. This time I follow him and see he's simply pulling the curtains shut.

Finally, he turns to me and runs a palm over his black hair. "You're a Godsend." He buckles onto his knees and bows his crown. "Not many would be brave enough to take this gamble."

"Not many would associate the word bravery with my name..." I mutter.

Suddenly he seems to look at me properly for the first time. I take a proper survey of him as well. He's in the Barracks Khaki.

His buzzcut has grown out by about six weeks. A pang of jealousy pricks me. Mine never made it past that duck down sheen.

“Bravery ain’t just reserved for jarheads with a hardon for gun fire, y’know?” He says this with a knowing twinkle in his eye, and that’s as far we get on the topic. I never do catch his full name. But by the end of this short exchange, I understand this man on a deeper level than my own little brother.

Suddenly he picks up his nose, points it to the ceiling and sniffs in three hungry drags of air, “We sharing a chicken roast dinner tonight?”

A burst of laughter escapes me, he throws me a wink, but by the time he lets the faux entitlement drop from his expression, my attention is consumed by the front door again. My limbs fill with concrete.

Two, then three sticky palms are pressed against the glass. Something steel taps, tink, tink, tink, and before I know it sharp frosted shards are exploding across my hallway rug.

My new friend is in the lounge before the uniformed arm that follows the glass has patted its way up to the deadbolt.

“No get in here!” I yell. “To the panic room!”

* * *

Theory Two: Beth Birch

Now this is all coming second hand from my ex-husband’s stepson, so take everythin’ I say with half a gram of salt, but I hear The Beast used to live on the Barracks.

I hear they marked him as a real psycho from day one.

And not even the type of psycho you *want* in the infantry! He wasn’t your standard chest beating Rambo type. They say he was a small guy. Used to clean his gun way too much. Would never

join in with the rest of the boys when the bottles got uncorked. Sometimes they'd come in and catch him whispering out loud to himself in his cot.

They say one of the more clued-up Lieutenants found a way to discharge him before the crazy bugger took someone out *Full Metal Jacket* style.

They say, he never got over that slight. They say every one of his murders was a way of getting back at the US Army.

Now, I know what you're probably gonna say. Here in Fort Meade, what citizen ain't attached to the US Army in some way? Throw a dart at a crowd and you'll be able to draw *that* link.

Idunno though. It makes sense to *me*. With all the kids who go through that Barracks, it's only a matter of time before one of the eggs they crack turns out to be rotten.

I just wish they'd ship them out to some other town when they find one!

* * *

My front door slams open, and I never hear them close it. I think they must have split up based on all the bumping and banging I hear.

Taunting voices fill my hallways, up the stairs and into each bedroom. "Mikey, Mikey, Mikey, you can't hide from us forever!"

I draw in a long breath and look across the dim, cupboard sized saferoom with gritted teeth. There's six inches of steel between me and the kitchen tiles where I know my home invaders will end up standing in a few minutes, but I'm suddenly occupied by a more immediate threat.

"Mikey?" I ask. "These 'muggers' know your friggin' name?"

Pounding steps thud down the stairwell behind the saferoom. I shudder as they advance across the hallway and echoing boots cross the tiled kitchen floor.

“Hey boys, get in here.”

A palm slaps the outer face of the faux- cupboard we’re bailed up behind.

My new friend—Mikey I guess?—slumps against the wall and slides all the way to the ground. He shakes his head. “Don’t worry. As long as they can’t get through the door, we’ll be safe.”

“Safe? Yea, they’ll clean out my entire house. But at least you’ll be nice and safe!” I let him feel what I think of him with a crunched nose. “How do you know these spooks? Are they buddies of yours?”

The self-pitying pout on his lips makes me want to use violence, but I restrain myself long enough to hear him out.

“They ain’t here to steal. They’re here for me—”

On cue, a hand taps on the door and in sing-song cadence pleads, “C’mon Mikey, we wanna give you the benefit of the doubt that you ain’t *really* deserting us right now. But this...this ain’t helping your case.” He caps off his line with whichever sharp steel object he used to break through my front door. He taps tick, tick, tick then proceeds to scrape it down the metal door with chalkboard slowness.

A second deeper voice chimes in. The realization that these kids are all sub-twenty years old somehow adds to the illness in my belly. “It’s perfectly fine if you couldn’t cut it at Fort Meade Mikey!” he says. “But you don’t just get to just leave us like this! We didn’t sign up, to protect a public like you. You’ve gotta give us the chance trim off the fat!”

Mikey rolls his eyes and raises two palms towards me. “Trust me, this is all going to be ok. It’s a Sunday night. They’ve gotta

be back for morning drills!”

I release the most humourless scoff of my lifetime. “That bloke is talking about trimming your fat right now buddy! You really think we’re dealing with a sane crowd here?”

“You don’t get it,” he says with a sigh. “If there’s *one* thing these goons value ... it’s their protocol.”

Despite my growing desire to feed this stranger to his pursuers. This information *does* bring me a modicum of relief. Relief that lasts right up until a burning scent creeps beneath the door. The chicken roast.

Another sage assurance waits on the edge of Mikey’s lips. “Hey relax guy. As long as they’re *out there* chanting. We’ve got more than enough air to breath in here.”

“Oh so I just let my house burn down in the meantime?”

He shrugs. “A house is a house. If you’re filleted by sun up. Your precious property ain’t gonna mean much to you is it? Just stick it out till their curfew.” I’m knocked breathless by how genuinely annoyed my protests seem to be making him.

There are thick rolls of blackened smoke wafting under the door now. The chants from outside continue to sing as if encouraging the burning onward. “Shit I’m...” I splutter. “I’m feeling a little faint. How are they standing out there in that? How are they still...” cough, cough. “Chanting!”

“Who them?” Mikey, starts to laugh. “You think *they* need to breath oxygen?”

* * *

Theory Three: Dr Fraser Alec Albanese

Contrary to local reports from tabloids and anecdotes, there is a wealth of emerging literature on Duplicus Albasis, colloquially

know as The Beast of Fort Meade.

The beast does not have the signature black beard, dripping with saliva that has oft been associated with him. The eyes from hell, the canines of a sloth bear. All of that nonsense is fear mongering. Though as I'll explain, perhaps not entirely grounded in imagination.

Duplicus Albasis in fact, has no physical form that is visible to the naked eye.

The BOFM has been identified as an airborne virus, who procreates through a novel evolutionary adaptation this researcher is, frankly, fascinated by!

Its spawning mechanism requires decomposing hosts to repopulate. However, unlike its spike protein cousins, Duplicus Albasis has no biological mechanism to kill its infected host.

In a similar vein to the Cordyceps Fungus or Toxoplasmosis which infect the neurology of caterpillars and felines alike, delivering them to a secondary death at the hands of a natural predator, Duplicus Albasis attacks the natural survival mechanisms of a mammal.

As many readers may know. Human brains are adapted to survive in a hunter-gatherer environment. We are tuned in to see eyes in dark surfaces, sense danger at the first sign of sound at night.

Often these cues can be deceptive, mistaking a hanging coat for the shape of an intruder, however, the cost of being wrong in such cases is much lower than the survival benefits of overreacting, therefore we carry these reactions into the twenty-first century.

Duplicus Albasis capitalizes on these mechanisms, hijacking them often to the point of full-scale hallucinations. The virus fabricates a threat in its host's immediate environment. Provid-

ing the target's mind with false proprioceptive leads, causing them to believe there is an immediate threat in their midst, meanwhile desensitizing or diminishing the genuine threat of everyday dangers this host would otherwise be savvy to.

If undetected this commandeering of the senses can stay with a victim for up to twelve months until the host eventually terminates by their own hand. Walking in front of a bus while fleeing a non-existent Jaguar, forcing themselves to vomit to the point of no return under the delusion that they've swallowed some poison that carries some taboo too extreme to admit consumption. The list of these tragic instances goes on too long to include here.

This sad phenomenon is known among researchers as "Surviving your way into the grave."

While Duplicus Albasis found popular awareness through the publicity of The Beast of Fort Meade—a miscategorized campaign of a hunting serial killer—cases have been found in over two dozen northern hemisphere locales. No recorded cases have been confirmed in East Asia or Baltic regions to date however.

* * *

One palm, then three, back to one again, then two more. The last were Mikey's. Slapping against my front door. Slapping against my safe room. Trying to reach me. Trying to bargain with me.

Now my eyes are open, I can see it was just the one palm with me all this time. A mature palm tree outside my bedroom window. Funny the way the brain twists things around. I got one detail right, the word palm, but the rest so wrong.

I'm up here on the second story where I can see the ocean from my bed, and the upper leaves of a tropical canopy. Nothing can reach me here. Not even *The Beast*.

There must have been a storm last night based on the amount of water droplets accumulated on that glass and the broken frond being held up against it by the wind. I must have heard the palm banging against the glass all night, trying to get in.

Glad I managed to stay in bed this time.

These episodes seem to be getting less severe with each week that passes. I hope they let me stay on until I'm all the way better. I hope they don't palm me off to some other clinic. I hope they don't ship me home to the Fort Meade infirmary.

I'm not so naive to let them do that to me though. I know they think they've got me fooled. Coincidence that a Fort Meade Medic just *happened* to see flames through my window? Just happened to break in on time to save me at the last moment?

No. I'm not so dim-witted. Crazy, but not a fool. I've been waiting for them to cash in on that trust since my first day here. Shipping me out here to a special beachside rehab unit? Pfff. Funded by the US Army no less. Give me a break.

They'll never let my time back in the Barracks go. They'll never accept that I didn't want to be one of them. Rejected that Uniform.

Of course the can't chase their retribution publicly though.

That would let the public see that truth. Which would force *them* to see the truth. They'll never let that happen.

But don't worry about me.

I see *them*.

Hamish Kavanagh is a twenty nine year old writer from New Zealand who grew up on a sheep and beef farm. He recently moved to

London and took a year long sabbatical from his job in the property industry to write a novel which he is currently pitching to agents.

Subscribe to Hamish's author newsletter, [The Sudden Walk](#), on Substack.

Spiral Cavity

“**W**hat you need to understand, Mr. Baker, is that your cochlea is an incredibly sensitive, delicate structure. Be patient with it.” Audrey traced a two-and-three-quarters spiral in the air with her fingertip, bespeaking the perfect, minuscule mechanism of the inner ear. “Those tiny hairs that line your cochlea convert physical vibrations into nerve impulses for the brain to interpret, and the semicircular canals inform your body where you are in space and help you keep your balance, all based on the flow of fluid and vibrations in your ear. It’s mind-boggling that nature created something so small, so beautifully complex.”

Mr. Baker wrinkled his eyebrows at the spot in the air where Audrey had drawn the invisible cochlea. “Still can’t hear a darned thing.”

Audrey stifled a sigh and stole a glance at the rose-gold clock on the wall. “What about noisy restaurants? How are your hearing aids doing in situations like that?”

“I told you, I can’t hardly tell if they work or not. I’ve had this hissing, clicking noise rattling around in my ears since yesterday.” A white fleck of dandruff fell from Mr. Baker’s shoulder. Audrey had noticed other white specks in the crevices

of his ear when she'd re-fitted his hearing aid. Someone needed to get this poor old man some dandruff shampoo. "I looked it up," Mr. Baker said. "Could be a brain tumor pushing on a nerve."

"Tinnitus is extremely common," Audrey said. "It can be caused by loads of different things, the vast majority of which are not cancer."

"But you can't know 'til you run some actual, real-life tests." Mr. Baker's lined face drooped. "I can't find one doctor willing to take me seriously, not one."

Audrey made a quick check to ensure the absence of dandruff, then laid her hand on Mr. Baker's. "You have the right to ask for any test you want," she said, keeping her tone light. "I'm just not that kind of a doctor, I'm afraid. Doctor of audiology — not a medical doctor. You don't want me poking around in your brain looking for tumors."

"What?" Mr. Baker held his hand up to his ear.

"I said, I'm not that kind of doctor."

Mr. Baker nodded, but his frown deepened. "Still can't hear a gol-darned thing."

"Take your hearing aids home overnight and see how they feel. Sometimes your hearing aids and your cochlea just need a little while to get used to each other." Audrey turned to her computer. "Go ahead and make an appointment with the front desk for the day after tomorrow, and we'll see how you're doing then. If you're still having trouble, we'll make some more adjustments."

Audrey scanned the list of her remaining appointments for the day. From the corner of her eye, she watched Mr. Baker haul himself to his feet with determined slowness.

Then suddenly he crumpled.

His elbow caught the corner of her clipboard, which clattered

to the ground beside him as he landed with a thump on the vinyl floor.

“Mr. Baker!” Audrey leapt from her chair. *Don’t sue me, don’t sue me, please.*

She took Mr. Baker’s arm, looking him up and down for any visible injury. Could he stand? Was he having a stroke, and they’d have to call an ambulance?

There were no obvious bumps or bruises, no one-sided facial drooping. Only a bemused look on his wrinkled face.

“Darndest thing,” he said, shaking his head.

“Can you stand?” Without waiting for his answer, Audrey picked up the office phone. “Sheila, can you come to my office? Mr. Baker just fell. No, he seems fine, but if you could help me get him up —”

“No need,” Mr. Baker grumbled, grasping a chair. “Just a little dizzy spell, that’s all.”

“Mr. Baker, let me help you.”

She expected him to protest, but the dizziness seemed to strike again as he attempted to stand. He grabbed her arm, sucking in deep, heavy breaths.

“Mr. Baker, I think maybe we should call an ambulance.”

“No.”

“Then your daughter,” Audrey said. “We’ll ask your daughter to pick you up. You’re in no condition to drive right now.”

“Don’t bother my daughter with this. I can drive just fine.”

Sheila strode into the room, and Audrey thought she detected — or was she projecting? — a hint of disdain as her receptionist surveyed the scene. “He’s up,” Sheila said flatly.

Call his daughter, Audrey mouthed. *Don’t let him drive.*

Sheila raised an eyebrow and took Mr. Baker’s elbow to guide him out to the lobby.

Audrey hesitated a minute, then dialed the front office again. “Sheila, I was saying *Don’t let him drive*. He was wanting to —”

“Yes, I gathered that,” came Sheila’s clipped voice over the phone. “I’ve called his daughter.”

“Oh, great. Thank you.” But Sheila had already hung up.

Audrey slumped in her chair and glanced at her calendar. Her next patient would be here any moment.

As she reached for her water bottle, Audrey noticed a fleck of white on her sleeve.

Mr. Baker’s dandruff had flaked off onto her arm. Gross.

She swiped at it and found a few other stubborn pieces clinging to her.

She was still wiping at the white flecks when her office phone buzzed and Sheila’s voice patched through to announce her next appointment.

* * *

That night, when Audrey leaned over her sink to spit out a mouthful of toothpaste, a plump drop of blood fell and burst against the white porcelain.

She reached her hand up to her nose, her lips, her gums. No blood.

Audrey gently touched the soft flesh of her ear with her finger, and it came away wet and red.

That’s odd.

Audrey held a tissue to her ear until the flow stopped, then continued getting ready for bed.

* * *

Audrey's office phone buzzed, and Sheila's voice announced, "Mr. Baker's here to see you."

Audrey moved to the sink to wash her hands, and the gentle splash of the water sounded strange and distant, as though her ears were stuffed with cotton. She must be getting a cold. She was a bit disoriented, the way she sometimes was when battling a sinus infection, though her nose hadn't yet become stuffy. There was an unpleasant fullness in her ears, and an intermittent tinnitus that kept distracting her. Not a subtle ringing in her ears — this hissing, crackling noise was something she'd never experienced before.

Her office door opened. Audrey turned, then gasped and fell back a step.

A woman with frizzled, steel gray hair pushed a wheelchair through the door. In the wheelchair was a man who resembled Mr. Baker.

His white hair wasn't combed. His usual meticulous clothing had been replaced by a too-large flannel shirt. Rather than sitting straight, he was slumped in the wheelchair, his head lolling back against the headrest.

"What happened?" Audrey whispered. "Mr. Baker was doing great on Wednesday, until he fell."

"Dunno," Mr. Baker's daughter grunted. "He collapsed again Wednesday night. Doctors did some tests yesterday, didn't find anything, and discharged him. I thought it might've been a stroke, but the doctors say no." She shrugged and shoved her father's wheelchair beside the table.

Audrey's eyes met Mr. Baker's, and a shock of cold flooded from her head to her fingertips.

The harmless grumpiness in his gaze was gone. His eyes were wide, disoriented, darting from place to place as though

searching for firm ground, a deep-seated horror in their depths.

He opened his mouth as though to speak, but the only sound that issued from him was a low-throated moan.

“If his symptoms have worsened, you should take him back to the hospital.” Audrey put a hand on his shoulder, and he jerked away, his arm flailing erratically.

His daughter grabbed his arm and pushed it back down to his side, holding it firm until he stopped struggling. “Sorry, he’s been doing that since yesterday. Him going downhill like this, it’s the last thing I need, let me tell you. And, as if this isn’t bad enough, I can feel a cold coming on.”

“Let’s reschedule,” Audrey said. She stood, and a wave of dizziness caught her by surprise. She must have stood up too fast.

As the dizziness subsided, she unlocked the brakes on Mr. Baker’s wheelchair. “He’s in no condition to be talking about hearing aids today.”

His daughter groaned. “I have a life, you know. I dragged him into the car for this, and I don’t want to have to do it again.”

A hot surge of anger welled up in Audrey, but she swallowed it. “We’ll keep in touch, and you can tell us what day and time will work best for —”

A sudden, agonizing shriek split the air of the sanitized office. Mr. Baker’s back arched, and he writhed in his wheelchair, screaming louder.

“What in —” His daughter covered her ears, her eyes wide.

“I’m going to call an ambulance!” Audrey scrambled toward her office phone.

Mr. Baker flailed his arms. One of them connected with the side of his head, and he held it there, pressing his forearm up against his ear.

9-1-1. *Police, fire or medical?*

“Medical.” Audrey raised her voice over Mr. Baker’s screams. *What’s the address?*

As he thrashed, Mr. Baker tipped to the side and tumbled from his wheelchair, landing with a sickening thump on the vinyl floor.

“Do something!” Audrey shrieked at the daughter, who stood pressed up against the wall.

The door opened, and Sheila’s face appeared. Her eyes landed on Mr. Baker, and she paled. “Call an ambulance!”

“I’m *calling* an ambulance, Sheila!” Audrey snapped, then gasped the address of the audiology office into the phone.

An ambulance is on its way. Please explain what’s happening.

Audrey opened her mouth, but at a sudden change in Mr. Baker’s screams the words died in her throat.

The scream became a wail, a plea, high and keening. He writhed on the floor, his arms pressed over his ears, his legs kicking purposelessly.

Then he stopped, panting.

Audrey crept closer and knelt down beside him.

His eyes went glassy. Like water flowing from a sieve, the horror slowly drained from them.

His breathing eased, then slowed. Then, so gradually that she could not identify the moment until it had passed, he went still.

Hello? The voice on the phone was tinny, distant. *Can you hear me? Please describe what’s going on.*

“I think —” Audrey’s voice sounded odd and distorted to her own ears. “Please hurry. I think he might be dead.”

Mr. Baker’s daughter stood against the wall, hands over her mouth. “Dad?”

Dizziness swarmed Audrey’s head, and she sat down. The

emergency operator's voice faded to the background of her consciousness, drowned by the hissing, clicking roar in her ears.

* * *

After the paramedics carted off the sheet-covered body that once belonged to Mr. Baker, Audrey closed the office for the rest of the day.

Sheila left immediately, but Audrey stayed until the late-autumn sunlight faded, overtaken by the early twilight.

Audrey sat in her office, staring first at her computer screen, then at the wall showcasing hearing aids of various price levels, then at the ear molds she took a strange, soothing joy in making for each of her patients.

Dizziness came in waves as afternoon wound into evening, and the strange, hissing tinnitus in her ears worsened.

Thoughts came in fits and starts, mingled with the memory of Mr. Baker's face, agonized and then still.

Audrey could feel the chill that settled in the air outside, though the walls of the building were packed with insulation to protect against the elements. She didn't know how she could sense the cold without feeling it on her skin. She just could.

Audrey shivered and turned toward the door, and her eyes came to rest on a glimmer of green on the floor, one of Sheila's earrings. It must have fallen off in the commotion.

And there was Mr. Baker's wheelchair, abandoned in the corner.

Audrey stared at it. She'd have to find a way to get it back to his daughter.

She started to turn away, then paused.

She leaned closer, squinting.

There was something white on the black cushion of the armchair. Something tiny. And it was *moving*.

Audrey knelt down beside the wheelchair.

Was it a maggot? Some kind of worm?

A minuscule white body, segmented and bulging and bizarrely flexible, inched slowly across the black leather cushion. So tiny she could hardly see it, but there it was — something alive.

A host of other barely visible white flecks littered the cushion. Mr. Baker's dandruff.

But no —

An unsettling fear crept into Audrey's mind, and the hair on her arms rose. She needed a plastic bag and tweezers. She stood, and suddenly the floor smacked hard against her face.

Gasping in quick, hard breaths, Audrey rolled to her back, and the fluorescent lights glared down at her.

How had she wound up on the floor?

Slowly, Audrey hauled herself to her knees. Her body was at once heavy and weightless, as though the floor had turned to jelly. Pressing her hands flat against the side of her desk, she scooted across the floor toward the microscope that she kept on her shelf — a decoration, until today.

Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

* * *

Audrey crawled into a chair, sucking in deep breaths to keep the dizziness at bay. She squirted immersion oil at the glass slide under the microscope, but the oil sprayed all over the table as her hand swung in wide, clumsy movements.

She needed to see this thing, this strange white fleck. So tiny she had almost missed it.

After several attempts, she pinned the squirming white maggot-thing beneath another plate of glass. She leaned down to peer through the microscope but slammed her face into it instead.

Blood trickled down the bridge of her nose and plopped onto the table with a bright red splatter.

Panic rose within her like water filling her lungs, but she pushed it down.

She needed to see it, whatever *it* was.

Audrey pressed her face to the side of the microscope and guided herself up to its lens. She had to lean her face against the eye piece to keep it steady.

The slide was blurry.

She tried to turn the dial, but she couldn't seem to find her arm.

If she lifted her eyes from the microscope, she might not be able to get them onto it again. She could feel her arm bump and scrape against a hard surface – the table or her chair, perhaps. Her arm seemed a separate entity from her, though she could feel its pain.

Her arm smacked against the microscope, jamming the lens against the cut on the bridge of her nose.

The image cleared. Audrey gasped.

She could see it now, the creature under the glass.

A slender white body, an eyeless head with a single gaping mouth. Tiny, delicate ridges along its back, mimicking microscopic hairs. Arching its back, the creature curled into a spiral – two and three quarter turns.

Then, in a burst, a flurry of microscopic white, squirming creatures issued from it, wriggling, trapped in the immersion oil.

Audrey jerked her head backward in shock, and with a breath-shattering crash she hit the floor. She rolled to her side to stand, but the movement was too much for her confused and disoriented brain.

Like a carsick child, her body heaved, and she vomited on the vinyl floor.

Her gaze landed on her hand, scattered with a flock of white flecks, almost too small to detect. How long had they been there?

From her own ears, a brigade of hungry infant parasites?

There was her phone, resting beside the keyboard on her desk. If she could just reach it...

* * *

Night had been swallowed by morning, a hungry red sun rising in the sky.

In Audrey's office, fluorescent lights illuminated her tidy desk, the rose-gold metallic accents so carefully placed around the office, the mess of immersion oil on the table, her vomit on the floor, and Audrey herself, exhausted and flailing as she threw her uncooperative arm once more toward her phone. It slid from her grasp and skittered across the floor.

Audrey vomited again, the taste grainy and bitter in her mouth.

Trying to drag herself, she slipped. Her head collided with the floor, and blood streaked the grey vinyl flooring.

Her hand scrabbled for the phone.

There — she had it. Finally.

She pressed her fingers against the phone screen, trying to give them an anchor, something to show her body where it was in space.

9-

2-

No, that's wrong. Go back.

9-1

The clicking and hissing in Audrey's ears rose to a deafening roar.

Then, in the corner of her vision, the door opened.

The movement made her stomach churn.

A pair of rain boots appeared, followed by a dark blue sleeve, and a hand that grasped the glittering green earring on the floor.

Faintly, as though from across a chasm, Audrey heard a scream.

* * *

Audrey lay still when the paramedics burst into her office. The hissing and clicking within her ears filled her head, clamoring, devouring her from the inside out.

The crescendo was coming, she knew. Whatever had made Mr. Baker scream, then wail, then go silent.

It was nearly her time.

Please see. Her clumsy arms would not point. *The microscope, the tiny, disgusting creatures, whatever they are. Tell someone. Please.*

Hands pulled at her, maneuvering her onto a stretcher.

A sudden, burning pain stabbed in her ear as the hissing became a keening screech. Audrey's eyes flew open, and she knew she was screaming, though she couldn't hear it.

The shrieking sound drilled —

And stabbed —

Her wild, disoriented gaze fell for a moment on a dark blue

sleeve beside her, littered with a constellation of tiny white flecks.

Bridget Riley is a speech-language pathologist, writer, and mom of three living in Oklahoma. She homeschools her children, is a sourdough baker, and is also a self-described potato chip enthusiast.

Subscribe to Bridget's author newsletter, [Naptime Novelist](#), on Substack.

The Ugly Cardigan

“**W**hat the hell, Debbie?!” Jeff’s yelling resounded through the whole house.

“What is it, Honey?” His wife hurried to the basement on her tip-toes; better not upset her mister any more, he seemed annoyed already.

“What did you do?!”

The forty-year-old man had a desperately-childish expression of horror all over his face. He clutched a fuzzy clump of yarn in his hands; once it may have been a grown man’s cardigan, but now it could only fit a skinny teenager. Jeff shook it in Debbie’s face. Then held it to his chest — oh the heartache!

“It’s... it was my lucky cardigan! My writing cardigan and you knew it!” Tears gathered in Jeff’s eyes. “You knew it! How could you do this, Deb?”

“Well, I didn’t... I don’t remember putting it there with the rest of... oh, Honey!”

Debb attempted to embrace him, but Jeff pushed her away.

“It’s the same every time, Deb! I know what you think - *you ain’t getting anywhere with the writing, Honey! Now why don’t you do something useful, like fix the kitchen sink?!*”

Jeff mimicked his wife.

“No, Honey, please! I don’t even sound like that! But the

kitchen sink could use..."

"Don't!" Jeff screamed, and stormed out of the basement, out the house and into his car. He drove off with the tires howling.

It was always the same — ever since he decided to pursue his dream, and what a dream it was! It couldn't go wrong! Jeff just knew it. He was made for writing. Each and every step he took throughout his life had led him to the sudden realization — he was born to write.

No! Not just write!

To become a best-selling author.

He had everything to succeed — the talent, the time, all the right ideas, both the typewriter and the laptop, but most important — his lucky cardigan. The old wool thing had belonged to Jeff's Grandpa — a best-selling author. His books graced the shelves of every library of the state and Jeff shall bathe in this glory! No, he will surpass the old man, for sure. It took a while for Jeff to comprehend, but the gut feeling, *the gut feeling* was telling him - you are destined for great artistic depths.

Grandpa wore the cardigan every single time he wrote. It had never EVER been washed, but this woman dared to commit the heresy and she destroyed the sacred cardigan. Of course, it was on purpose, she knew - today was the day. The Big day. Jeff's Grandpa's good friend, the publisher, agreed to take a look at the finished manuscript. Two years of methodical writing, one — editing, this would culminate in the perfect moment. Jeff would sit by his desk, steaming-hot coffee on his left, laptop on his right, glasses on the tip of his nose and the crown jewel, the lucky cardigan hugging him reassuringly. He would take a deep breath and press "send."

Perfection!

Not anymore.

Ruined. Desecrated.

The wool misery laid on Jeff's lap, while he drove... where? Jeff's eyes searched the shop windows for salvation, until he turned into a tiny dead-end street. This was his life now - a dark place with no way out. Maybe Debbie was right? Writing could get him nowhere. Once, he had a good job, a normal life.

Away with the vile thoughts!

His gut feeling was louder than all of Debbie's well-meant advice. He had sacrificed far too much for the cause, and Jeff was willing to do whatever it takes.

He will succeed at any cost!

Jeff stopped the car. His gray eyes widened staring at a dusty window of a second-hand and antiques shop. It had no name. The place looked abandoned. What caught Jeff's attention was a glorious cardigan — moss-green, knitted wool angel, it shone in the morning sun, hung on a manikin. It was a sign! The gut feeling could not be misunderstood — it whispered “your work will be a timeless classic, but you need the cardigan!” Jeff ran to the shop, the door opened, a tiny bell rang, clouds of dust glittered in the sunlight, risen by Jeff's quick stride. He paid no attention to the junk in the room.

There!

There it was!

The last ingredient to his success.

“How can I help you?”

Alow, idle voice followed him. Jeff glanced back. A man appeared from the darkness of the shop. Jeff grinned to himself. The guy himself was a piece of antique furniture. He very much could be mistaken for a plastic skeleton, like the one on their left. A mess of wrinkled skin pulled over bones, his eyes sunk in

the dark holes of the bold skull.

“I’m buying this, I don’t care how much it costs.”

Jeff’s eyes were glued to the cardigan.

“You don’t care?”

Jeff rolled his eyes.

“Yes, yes, I’ll pay cash or card or whatever you want, just give it.”

“What’s the hurry?”

The man paced to the manikin, his stringy fingers unbuttoned the cardigan.

How slow can you go?! Jeff cursed internally.

“It’s not cheap.” The man didn’t hurry not one bit. He carried the moss-green-saving-grace to the counter.

“How much?”

The man’s pale lips curled up in a vicious grin.

“How much are you willing to give for success?”

Jeff furrowed his brows. What kind of a question was that? The gut feeling said — you want the cardigan? Then answer!

“Well, anything. I’ve given it too much time, thought and energy to fail. That’s why I need the cardigan. I cannot fail!”

“Anything?” the man stroked the green wool lovingly.

“Yes, yes, just give it!”

“Would you give your soul?”

“What? My - what?!” Jeff exclaimed.

Lunatic! He should’ve guessed places like these were full of weirdos and cultists.

“But if you don’t want it... I was about to burn the damn moth-infested thing,” The man shrugged casually.

“No, no, no, no! I’ll... I’ll take it.”

“And the price?”

“Take my soul, whatever, I don’t believe in that stuff anyway!”

Jeff exclaimed.

The annoying old cultist!

“Sold! That will be one soul and 11.99\$, sir.”

The cash register dinged.

Jeff gave a quick laugh — what a joker! He took the cardigan from the man’s ice-cold hands and held it more gingerly than he had ever held his new-born children.

* * *

“You sold your soul for an ugly sweater?!”

Jeff’s friend Rod laughed out loud. All the people in the bar stared at Rod, his laughter was the sound of a wild horse neighing. Jeff had to celebrate his new-found lucky cardigan. All the stars had aligned for him to find it and buy it.

“A cardigan. Yeah, that’s what the cultist said. I ain’t buying any of that stuff,” both guys finished their beers (Jeff — a non-alcohol one. No need to take unnecessary risks).

“How’s Debb?” Rod asked.

Jeff shrugged.

“She’s the one who almost destroyed my success. She’s not supportive. I don’t even know why are we still together. A force of habit, I suppose.”

“You need to treat her better, man. No other would put up with you.”

Rod laughed again and tapped Jeff on the shoulder. Both parted, Jeff drove home through the safest streets. He carried the cardigan into the house, his steps reverent; it was a sacred procession from the door to his office. There was no sign of Debb in the house, the place was unusually quiet without Debb’s ongoing “oldies-goldies” blasting all day long. Another way of

hers to sabotage Jeff's grand mission; he had to use ear plugs to write. No kids were yelling at each other just to annoy him, although they were supposed to be back home from school by now. Teenagers, go figure! Jeff approached his desk. Somebody had left a coffee mug for him. Oh, nice try, Debb! Jeff will not forgive her for the destruction of his lucky cardigan that easily. Jeff unfolded the moss-green wonder and put it on with a sanctimonious determination — the time had come! The moment of greatness! He sat down, opened his laptop and put his black-framed glasses on the tip of his nose. Glorious. He typed the e-mail, checked the file of the manuscript for the hundredth time. Attached it. One more step to perfection. The scent of coffee tickled his nose gently. The cardigan embraced him like a moss-coloured armour. His luck was well protected. With a stern finger Jeff pressed “send”. The happy “swoosh!” of the e-mail made his heart skip a beat. All was fulfilled.

He reclined in the chair — time for a victory drink. Jeff sipped the lukewarm coffee. He noticed a note glaring from underneath the mug. Jeff grinned — nice try again, Debb! He picked it up — however can that woman explain herself?!

“Dear Jeffrey! You are willing to give anything to succeed, but I am not. I took the kids, we'll be at Rod's. He offered to help until we find a better place.

I hope your dream is worth it. Debbie.”

A sudden pain stung Jeff's chest. The moss-green blessing had turned into a curse - it pierced his heart, the soft threads becoming knitting needles. A skeleton-like old man carved the soul out of Jeff's chest with a blunt blade.

“Success is not cheap, it always comes with a high price. Pay up, friend,” he said and gave a low chuckle.

* * *

“Do you have any special requests? Maybe the deceased had something peculiar you would like him to be buried with?”

“Yes... yes..” Debb stuttered sobbing. “His lucky cardigan. It’s an ugly old thing, but he would have loved to be buried wearing it.”

“The cardigan,” the man at the funeral services wrote down in his notes.

* * *

The funeral guests could swear Jeff’s face had an expression of unnamed horror on it, as the lid of the coffin was closed over his green-cardigan wearing torso.

Green moss grew on the grave. Debb arranged for a large tomb stone to be placed on it. It presented no trouble at all since she had the money from her late husband’s book sales. It was an absolute success! A bestseller of unseen splendour, praised by both critics and readers alike. “Here lies the New York Times best-selling author, a husband and a father...”

Kathrine Elaine is a professional visual artist and an educator who describes writing as her guilty little pleasure and a medium that lets her paint with words dark stories that mix fantasy and horror.

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