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Dearest Reader,

We first started [horror-writers.com](http://horror-writers.com) in February of 2013 as a basic HTML website with no real plan and a pretty ugly layout. Over the years, you've stuck with us, had great conversations with us, and helped us grow into what we are now.

If you've been around from the beginning or just came along for the ride yesterday, I would like to offer you my most sincere thanks. This has been a roller coaster at times but you've all made it worthwhile.

This is only possible because of you.

-Shawn

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**



**THE APPLE AND THE TREE**  
*by Charity Langley*

**Job 24:14**

Red, angry, gleaming eyes in the darkness.

I have work to do this night. The Lord's work. Satan will not stop me!

I rebuke thee Satan, I rebuke thee.

The orbs blinked green. Heaving a breath of relief, I went on my way.

A steady snow had fallen over the past few days blanketing the whole city in a thick layer of white. Giant flakes stuck to my windshield as I drove. Steam rose from the asphalt. A grey haze had settled in when night fell. Even the steeple of the church was missing, swallowed by the dense fog.

Black ice. My tires spun. Street lights flickered. Orange, laughing burning demons watching the world of the living. My truck skidded into a small bank of snow.

I rebuke thee Satan, I rebuke thee!

A street light went out.

I maneuvered carefully back onto the road and drove the rest of the way very slowly, lest Satan send more of his demons to thwart my work.

With the Good Lord in my corner, Satan will never stop me.

I pulled into a familiar driveway and cut the engine. Gripping the steering wheel with gloved hands I uttered a short prayer.

May God protect, and deliver me home safely after this visit.

The front door burst open throwing a fiery ray of light across the shimmering snow. A dog barked from somewhere inside.

The old woman hobbled onto her wooden porch.

“Father Wycliffe,” she crooned, “I told him not to call you, but he’s ‘bout as stubborn as they come.”

“I go where I am needed Sister Gladys. And your son worries, and loves you a great deal.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” she said, wiggling the end of her cane at me. “That’s why he bought me this stupid mutt. It’s ‘for protection’ he says. Well, hurry inside you’re going to catch your death out here.”

Even though she wasn’t overly thrilled to see me, she gave me a great big hug.

Shooing the giant yellow lab from our path, she led me to her tiny living room.

“I put coffee on for you. I only got sugar, all outta milk, but it’s late, so I don’t want you to fall asleep when you drive home... which should be soon, especially now that you see I am perfectly fine.”

“Do you know why I’m here, Sister Gladys?”

She jutted her chin out at me. “Because my son’s stubborn as a bull.”

“He said you were refusing to take the new medicine that Dr Peterson prescribed.”

“I ain’t takin’ medicine that messes with my blood. I take so many pills, I’m tired of ‘em all, Father.”

“I know you are, but we all want you to be here for a very long time. How about I grab us some coffee, and I’ll stand right here while you take your pills?”

“But I don’t need ‘em, Father.” Gladys dropped into her recliner and crossed her arms like a sullen child. “I done just fine up ‘till now without ‘em.”

“Do it for me?” I asked.

The old woman grunted and took a deep breath. “Okay, Father, you win. I’ll take the damn pills.”

I smiled and headed for the kitchen. “So what have you been up to lately, Sister Gladys?” I asked, making small talk as I poured our coffees.

The recliner creaked as she kicked out the footrest. “Game show reruns,” she said. “Only thing on television that makes sense anymore.”

“Which show is your favorite?” I asked, taking her a coffee and a handful of pills.

“I don’t have a favorite.” She leaned over and scratched the lab’s giant head. “I watch ‘em all. Most of the time I sit here and wonder if we really wore clothes like that.”

I glanced up at the television and cringed. So much green, yellow and orange, my eyes burned.

“Take that guy for instance,” she said around the wad of pills in her mouth, “you think that’s a toupee?”

I squinted at the mop of black on top of the head of a contestant with gray sideburns. "I'm not sure."

"It could be that black color goop that men used to look younger back in the day. Like any woman could mistake the age of a man with gray sideburns. Who'd he think he was trickin'?"

Gladys settled back into her recliner. She mumbled a few slurred incoherent words before closing her eyes.

I leaned down and scratched behind the giant ears of the yellow dog. "Don't worry buddy. Soon you'll be outta here. There's three sweet little girls that need a dog just like you."

Once sister Gladys stopped moving, I pulled the old afghan from the back of the chair and tucked her in. I topped off the dog's food bowls, let myself out the front door, then headed home.

### **Deuteronomy 21:18-21**

"Get up, Joanna, you're going to sleep the day away."

No answer.

I knocked louder. "Joanna, your mother might let you sleep all day, but that isn't the way I run my house. Get up!"

Still no answer. Anger washed over me. This was my house and my daughter would do as I commanded.

I gritted my teeth and tried to turn the knob. She'd locked the door!

"This is my house Joanna. I forbid you from locking this door."

Still no sound from inside. I rattled the knob and banged on the door. “You will open this door,” I bellowed, “or I’m going to kick it in.”

Just as I raised my foot, the door was sucked open.

“Look dad,” Joanna said from under a frizzy mess of bangs, “I’m here because I have to be, not because I want to be.”

“You should be more grateful and humble. I pay to feed and clothe you, I put a roof over your head.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m your goddamned child. I don’t owe you anything. I didn’t ask to be born. I’m here because you fucked up and mom refused to get an abortion.”

I pursed my lips and clenched my fists. I wanted to snatch her by the hair, bend her over my knee and beat her ‘till she was bloody.

But somehow, I managed to keep my composure.

“You know what they say about sloth, don’t you sweetheart?” I whispered, taking her chin between my thumb and finger.

“The same thing it says about everything else, I’m sure.”

I brushed back her hair. “What did that harlot do to your hair?” I asked when my hands combed through a chunk of scarlet strands.

“I’m seventeen. I didn’t need mother’s approval on my hair color. It fits within my school dress code.”

“It’s too short. It makes you look like a boy.”

“But isn’t that what you wanted, a boy?”

I set my jaw. She was trying my patience on purpose. God is my shepherd and strength, I will not hit her, Lord.

“Go get dressed. No secular clothing. We leave for church at 6:30.”

“It’s Saturday. I am not going to church on Saturday.”

“You will, and you will be presentable. That also means I expect you to take that ridiculous metal out of your skin.”

“You mean my earrings?” She said, spinning one of the small round studs. “And I will wear whatever I want. You don’t get to dictate my clothing choices.”

“I guess you are just too old for me to discipline anymore. But dear, sweet Joanna, if you do not abide by my wishes I will come into your room and burn every secular item you own.”

Her eyes grew large.

“Just be glad we don’t treat rebellious youth the same way they did during biblical times.”

## **Proverbs 11:25**

“Sister Priscilla, you remember my daughter, Joanna?”

Sister Priscilla was a pinch-faced woman dressed in the traditional white turtleneck, jean skirt, and white canvas shoes. She scratched at her gray bun, looked me over head to toe, then greeted me with beady little eyes and blank smile.

They always had blank smiles.

“Oh, yes, Father Wycliffe,” she said, patting my shoulder. “I

certainly wouldn't forget little Joanna."

"Joanna will be here through the holidays, I'm sure she will be a great help, won't you sweetheart?"

I nodded, returning the same blank, toothy grin back to Sister Priscilla.

The woman's sharp little eyes narrowed. Her smile disappeared. "Well, Honeycutt's is threatening to dump all of our donated clothing into the trash bins if we don't come by and empty them. I bet Joanna," she said in a condescending tone, "is perfect for the job. Girls like you all have their driver's permits by this age don't they?"

By 'girl's like you' she meant 'secular, godless, heathens'.

I mirrored her contrived speech. "Yes, ma'am, we most certainly do."

"Then it's settled," my father said, passing me his keys. "My new truck is off limits, but take whichever church van you like."

I took the keys, curtsied dramatically for Sister Priscilla, turned on my heel and headed downstairs to the parking lot.

The Oakdale Church of God had eight, barely working vans, yet still managed to provide enough of a salary for dear old dad to buy a new truck every year.

Settling on the least rusted of the bunch, I hopped up in the front seat, and turned the heat up to high. Once the engine warmed, I put the van into gear and rolled out onto the empty street.

The place was a ghost town. All the childhood I'd spent here now sat empty and boarded over. Even the little ice cream shop that was open before Thanksgiving was now closed, the building gutted.

All that remained was a battered 'For Rent' sign in the window.

My first stop was Honeycutt's Food Mart. There were only three other vehicles in the parking lot. I slid out and clasped my jacket tighter against the bitter cold. Icy wind was dry and piercing as I walked across the lonely parking lot.

A plump, red-faced woman greeted me when I stepped inside. "Can I help you?" she asked. Her smile was the first genuine smile I'd seen in two days.

"Yes, I'm from Oakdale Church of God. I'm here to pick up the clothing donations you have."

The woman's face fell even though she tried to hide it. "There is so much! So many people are moving out to Knoxville for work. Whatever they don't need, they donate. My name is Esther by the way."

She'd hoped I was a paying customer, I felt guilty for disappointing her.

"I am so glad you're here," Esther said. "We have so many clothes and nowhere to put them. Murray, the owner of Honeycutt's, has been calling your church for days. I've had to talk him into not throwing all of this stuff out for weeks."

"I understand," I assured her nodding.

"I mean, I really wanted to bring it by myself, "but it's too far a walk for me."

"You walk to work?" I asked, looking out at the snow covered landscape behind her.

"It's not so bad," she said. "Only two miles. Johnny, the night

clerk walks four.”

“That’s still quite a trip in this kind of cold.”

“We do what we have to.” She shrugged and scooped up an armload of clothing. “Here, I’ll help you with these.”

Half an hour later the van was almost completely full of clothing.

“Is there anything in here you or Johnny might need, Esther?” I asked holding the door open wide. “Before I take it all to the church? Anything you see, this is certainly more than I expected.”

Esther chewed her lip. “No, I’m okay.”

“Are you sure Esther.”

“Yeah, we’re good. Takin’ it one day at a time. You be careful going back, those roads are slick you know.”

I nodded. “I’m in town for almost two weeks. If you need anything Esther, you call the Church of God and ask for Joanna. I’ll do whatever I can, okay?”

The woman’s eyes welled up with tears, she nodded and gave me a big hug.

Once Esther was back inside I started up the old van and pulled out onto the road. I’d only gone through one light when one of my tires blew.

Cursing under my breath, I navigated the creaking behemoth to the shoulder, cut the engine and sighed.

I went to the back of the van. Of course there was no spare. I

took out my cell phone and called the only person I knew in this town.

“Father Wycliffe,” he answered.

“It’s Joanna. The van has a flat-tire. Is there someone who can bring me a spare, the van doesn’t have one.”

“I have things to take care of, Joanna. You’re just going to have to figure something out for yourself.”

And he hung up on me.

Anyone else would probably be upset by this, but for me, it was exactly the conversation I’d expected. He hated me and probably hoped I’d freeze to death. After all, a dead daughter would bring more money and sympathy to the church than a living one.

I climbed out, locked the van and started walking. Stupid jean skirt and canvas shoes. My feet were wet and I couldn’t feel my toes anymore. I’d thought about calling my mother, but I didn’t want to the holiday for her or my little brothers. By my best guess, the grocery store was probably three miles back. Even if no one was going to help me, at least it was warm.

A beige sedan pulled up after I’d walked about a mile.

“Need a ride?” a middle aged man asked me from the driver’s seat.

“I really do,” I said, smiling, grateful that he had stopped.

“Where you headed?”

“I was going to the Church of God before my van broke down.”

“I’m a mechanic by trade, I can look at it for ya.”

“No need,” I said. “Flat tire and no spare.”

“Do you need to use my phone for someone to bring you one, or come and get you?”

I held up my phone. “No answer,” I lied.

“Name’s Gerald,” he said, pulling in front of the van. “Need to get anything out before I take you to the church?”

“We can take some of the clothing donations back if that’s okay with you?”

“Sure,” he said.

Together we stuffed his trunk and back seat full of clothes.

“Have you had dinner?” he asked.

“No,” I said, noticing the sun had nearly set.

He put the car in drive. “On me,” he said. “You look like you could use a hot meal.”

I looked down the empty streets. “Is there still somewhere around here to get a hot meal?”

“Baymont BBQ. Best Barbecue in all of Morgan County.”

### **Psalm 17:12**

I leaned back in my chair and steepled my fingers. “I am so sorry to hear of your loss, Brother Daniel.”

He rolled his bible over in his hands. “They said she went peacefully, Father Wycliffe. It’s how we all hope to go, I guess.”

“Did they say anything about the manner of her death?” I asked.

“She was eighty-six, Father. They believe it was simply old age.”

I nodded and leaned back in my chair. “If it is all right with you, I would like to say a few words about Sister Gladys during tomorrow’s service.”

“Of course, Father. I’m sure mother would be grateful.”

Daniel fidgeted with his tie. The silence between us awkward.

“Would you like to say a prayer for her, Daniel?”

“I would like that very much Father, but I don’t know if I should.”

“Everyone could use a prayer, Brother Daniel, even those in heaven.”

His shoulders slumped. “I should be upset she is gone, but I’m not. Father, I’m almost relieved. Does this make me a bad son?”

“Of course not, Brother Daniel! You know that your mother was a Godly woman who is now safe in the arms of the Lord.”

“But it feels wrong to be relieved, Father Wycliffe. I didn’t feel this way when Julia passed.”

“Your wife was taken young and in childbirth, Daniel. The loss of your eighty-six year old mother is a blessing. She is with the Lord

after a long full life. Her death is one we should rejoice in. Do not feel guilty for being at peace with her passing, my son.”

Daniel smiled in relief.

“How about we recite Psalm 46 together?”

Daniel nodded and found the passage in his bible. I already had the page bookmarked in mine.

We read together, our voices sounding odd in the large empty office. How long had it been since I’d done this... three years maybe?

Once we were finished we closed our bibles and I showed him to the front door of the church.

He stood on the front stairs and zipped his jacket. “I owe the babysitter extra for today, but I’m glad I came to see you.”

“Take care of those little girls, and your mother’s dog,” I said watching him navigate the old wooden stairs. “I’m sure those little girls love him already. And we’ll see you tomorrow, Brother Daniel.”

I waited until he had disappeared over the rise in the road before I turned back inside.

“So was that the three hour appointment you had?”

I nearly jumped out of my skin. In the light of the entrance, the red in her hair looked like fire.

“My business is not yours, Joanna,” I said, staring at her fast food cup. “Besides, it looks like you did just fine on your own.”

“Yeah, I did.” She pushed off the doorframe by her shoulder. “I’m a worldly girl who jumps in the first and only car she sees in

twelve degree weather.”

“I am your father and you will not talk to me that way.”

“Or what? You gonna punish me like you did mom? I’m sure having your daughter at Sunday service with a black eye would make you the talk of the town.”

“I never treated your mother in any unbiblical way,” I said through gritted teeth.

Joanna laughed. “Yeah, figured you’d say something like that.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

She ignored my question and fiddled with the key ring in her hands. “Here are the keys to your precious new truck. I’m taking another van to get the rest of the clothing.”

“Don’t worry about the rest of it,” I said. “Clothing donations only brings in freeloading riff-raff. Old man Honeycutt could’ve dumped it and saved us the trouble.”

Joanna’s mouth dropped open. “So basically, if they can’t put money in the collection plate, you don’t want to make sure they have warm clothing?”

I shook my head. “It’s not like that, sweetheart. Some of them just need to get off their asses and get a job. They need to contribute something, they shouldn’t be depending on someone else to clothe them. If I give a man a fish I feed him today, but if he is taught to fish, he will eat for a lifetime.”

“You quote that a lot to your congregation, don’t you dad?”

“Well Jesus said--.”

“He said ‘I’ll make you fishers of men’. What you just quoted to me is nowhere in the bible. It’s actually an old Chinese proverb.”

“No it isn’t,” I protested. “It’s in--,”

“I’m going back,” she said, cutting me off and rolling her eyes. “I have no problems giving a hungry man a fish.”

“It’s after dark, and you will do no such thing.”

She laughed. “Why? Because something might happen to me? You should’ve thought about that three hours ago when you told me to ‘figure something out for myself’. Don’t wait up.”

She was out the door and down the stairs before I could stop her.

### **Matthew 7:15-20**

“Now before we depart,” I said from the pulpit. “I would like to say a few words for our dearly departed, Sister Gladys.”

I paused and waited for the shocked gasps to stop. “I know many of you were not aware of her passing, but I was told by Brother Daniel that it was peaceful.”

Daniel nodded and wiped a quick tear from his eye.

“Sister Gladys was the Godliest of women. She abided by all the Good Lord’s commandments and not only gave her blood, sweat, and tears for this church, but also every extra penny she had. She wouldn’t dare dream of robbing God of tithes as the wicked men did in Malachi. So today, in remembrance of Sister Gladys, take out your offerings, hold them above your head and say a silent prayer for her.”

I smiled to myself as every hand went up with a paper note. I let them have a few minutes of quiet reflection before I spoke again. “May everything you give be returned to you ten-fold.”

I took my usual place at the door with the collection plate. While I was chatting with my last few parishioners, two police officers started up the front stairs.

“Stephen Wycliffe?” one of the officers asked.

“That would be me,” I said as a shot of panic ran through my heart.

“May we come inside?”

“Of course my sons. Come right in and make yourselves at home.”

“I’m afraid this isn’t a social visit,” the taller one said. “I’m officer Murdock, this is officer Roberts. We’re from homicide.”

“Brother Daniel said that Sister Gladys passed in her sleep. Was that not true?”

“Gladys is not a name of any of the deceased.”

“Any?” I asked licking my lips. “More than one?”

The short one cleared his throat and spoke slowly. “Three to be exact, and the only connection they seemed to have is your church. You wouldn’t mind telling us where you were last night would you?”

Alarm bells went off in my head. “Am I a suspect?”

“Right now, we’re just trying to figure out who these people are and what their routines were. We found tracts from your church near

all the bodies.”

“Can... can I ask who they were?”

Officer Murdock opened his notepad and flipped a couple of pages.

“Brother Allen and Fillmore come two Sundays out of the month, and I make Saturday visits to see Sister Caldwell. She doesn’t get around much anymore.”

“Did you see her yesterday?”

“I didn’t, I’m sorry to say. My daughter Joanna is in town for the holidays, and Brother Daniel came by yesterday for grief counseling. His mother Gladys passed away Friday night.”

“Would you mind coming down to the station to talk to us?” Officer Murdock asked. “You and your church are our only link between these murders.”

“Am I being investigated?” I asked bluntly. “Do I need a lawyer.”

“If you think you need a lawyer Mr. Wycliffe, you are welcome to bring one with you.”

“Well, okay. I will be down soon, just let me make sure my daughter has safe transportation home and I will be there promptly.”

The two men nodded and went on their way. I headed to the office to get my coat with Joanna close on my heels.

“So did you do it?” she asked. “Kill them I mean.”

I spun to look at her horrified. “Of course I didn’t.”

“Seems awfully convenient,” she sang, clasping her hands behind her back and rocking on her heels. “Four affluent members of your congregation are dead. They probably left the church all their money. I mean, that is clearly all you think about isn’t it, Daddy?”

“Don’t be so stupid, Joanna.”

“Daniel told you he might go broke taking care of his mother, didn’t he?”

I didn’t dignify her question with a response.

“I heard him talking to Sister Susan. And like a gift from the Almighty Lord himself, poof,” she said, snapping her fingers, “she’s gone. Probably left you a boatload of money, and her son can still make his generous tithes every Sunday. This sure seems like a win-win for you.”

“I don’t have time for this Joanna. Take your conspiracy theories somewhere else. Make sure nobody is here, lock up and go home. Take one of the vans. I’m sure you still have the keys.”

I stormed out of the office and never looked back.

## **Proverbs 15:27**

It was full dark when I arrived home. I’d spent hours in an interrogation room going in circles with the officers. I’d hoped my lawyer could shorten the process but with no luck.

The only light on downstairs was the kitchen light. Joanna was probably sulking in her room.

Entering the kitchen, I tossed my keys on the table and noticed a note:

*Dad,*

*I made lasagna, it's still warm in the oven, I know it's your favorite. Sorry I've been so unruly lately, I'll try to do better.*

*Love,  
Joanna*

She made me dinner? Maybe having a daughter that knew I could murder was a good thing after all.

I opened the oven and took out the warm cheese covered dish. I carefully cut out a square and plopped it onto my plate. I poured myself a glass of milk and took a seat.

A sigh escaped my lips as I took the first bite, it was heavenly.

A sharp pinch at the base of my spine.

“Hi, Daddy,” Joanna said, taking the seat across from me. “Is it good?”

I nodded around a mouthful.

“Good, because it’s your last meal.”

She was smiling at me. Her face seemed so innocent, but her words. Did she really just say that.

“Oh, no, Daddy, don’t try to get up, I just severed your spine with a butcher knife,” she said. “It’s the only way I could think to talk

to you before I kill you.”

I couldn't feel my legs. I reached around to pull the knife out.

“Oh,” she pouted. “Pull it out and you'll bleed to death and die before we have a chance to talk. Wouldn't you like to know why I just severed your spine with a butcher knife, Daddy?”

I chewed and swallowed. The food felt like a sponge in my mouth.

“I know you killed Sister Gladys,” she said, plucking a wad of cheese from my plate and popping it into her mouth. “I saw all the paperwork. You even keep the church member's current W2s on file.”

I stared at the demon across from me and couldn't form any words.

She scooped another pile of cheese with her index finger. “But see, I know you didn't kill the other three, because I killed them.”

My mouth fell open.

Joanna giggled. “Your expression is so much better than I expected.”

“No!” I cried.

“Yep,” she said with a proud grin. “Little 'ole me.”

“They will trace this all back to you. And I hope they execute you for it!”

“No they won't,” she laughed. “They didn't catch you. And I highly doubt dear old Gladys was your first victim. Plus, their blood is on your shoes, like literally, all over your shoes.”

I couldn't move my legs to look at my shoes, but my feet burned as though they were on fire.

"I don't want you to fall over trying to look, so I'll save you the trouble and explain it." She plopped her elbows on the table. "You see, doing anything in this town in canvas shoes is pretty stupid. My feet kept getting cold and wet, so I came back home and borrowed a pair of yours before I went back to get the remaining donations. And that's when the idea came to me to wear your shoes. I even made sure you would have them on today." She glanced under the table at her handiwork before continuing. "Three of your wealthiest members. Three that have insurance policies and leave everything to the church. It was so convenient for you to have all of their financial information on file. And they weren't very nice people either."

"So it was all about the money?"

"Every time I needed you, you told me 'figure it out for yourself' or 'solve your own problems', so I finally took your advice, and did."

"You greedy little whore."

"I don't want a damn dime, but money is what this town needs. I plan on dismantling your little Den of Greed and selling it off brick by brick. Then I'm going to give handouts to all those freeloaders you keep telling me about."

I gripped the side of the table as the edges of my vision dimmed. "I don't believe you. Why did you do this if you didn't want any money?"

"I hate money," she said bluntly. "Almost as much as I hate you."

I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. What kind of hellspawn had I raised?

She moved to her feet and slid her chair under the table. "With you gone, I can finally go back home, and never have to see you, or your church ever again."

"You godless heathen!" I screeched as she pulled another knife out of the block.

"Evil slays the wicked, Daddy."



**IN ROUTE**  
*by Bo Chappell*

The inverted flames outside his car window gently woke Benny up like warm morning sunlight. But the coupled smell of breakfast had been replaced with gasoline, along with the overwhelming taste of copper. As he spat out the blood pooled in his mouth, he undid his seat belt, sending him to the interior roof of his overturned, luxury sedan.

Cutting himself on the broken glass, he crawled like a beaten dog out the driver's side window and onto the forest ground, muddy with fuel. Benny's blurred vision came into focus, making out the road he had been driving on just yards away.

But there were no passing headlights, and the path up the bank was near impossible with leg bones shattered like fine China on the kitchen floor. Benny was too stubborn to admit he was moments away from dying despite being tucked neatly inside the pocket of civilization where no one could see his despair. All he could do was drag himself from the wreckage and curse her name.

"Rebecca, you fucking bitch", he mumbled to himself. "Can't even stay dead."

Benny was one of those guys who always blamed someone else for his troubles. But maybe it was because whenever his mother would try to teach him to be responsible for his actions, his father's hand would find its way across her mouth. The belt soaked in sweat and booze shaped Benny into who he was, and the day he made his first million, Benny returned the favor by putting his dad into the nicest coffin available. Writing his mom checks instead of letters kept Benny's guilt on the dry erase board, leaving him without a conscious. How anyone could love Benny was a mystery, even to himself.

But Rebecca did.

She loved him like anyone wishes to be loved. Unquestionably. For someone who reminded him of his mother, Benny wasn't hesitant to respond like his father. She treated Benny like God, and he rewarded her mistakes with the finesse of the Old Testament. But no matter how many black eyes or comments about her increasing weight she received, Rebecca loved him, even up to the moment she broke her neck on the bottom stair.

The rum and Coke soaked shoulder of her blouse where Benny had shoved her away with drink in hand wasn't enough to convict him. No matter how much alcohol soaked his collar, it was still white, even if the neck behind it was red. But as he drove away from the courthouse and up the mountain pass back to his mansion, he had seen her there, naked in the middle of the road waiting for him to come around the bend and crash.

Still crawling from the wreckage, the path beneath Benny was exposed in crimson with each passing blink from the taillight.

The dry leaves of the forest crackled beneath distant footsteps. As Benny turned to look, he caught a glimpse of the same pale figure as she disappeared into the edge of blackness around the car's headlights against it. Following the methodical steps leading his way, the strobing taillight highlighted her body with repetitious veils of bloody luminosity.

She held her arms around her midsection, barely covering her breasts in favor of her stomach. As her beautiful details arranged in his disjointed brain, Benny realized that the face, though reminiscent of Rebecca, was not hers. It was more youthful and sharper. He was more than relieved to know Rebecca was still dead and help was there.

"Baby, I don't know what God sent me a fine ass angel like you to rescue me, but sign me up for his church."

Benny's words dragged as they spilled from his mouth like cheap wine, unaware of what God had in store.

With each titillating snapshot from the red lights, his eyes traced the sexy lines of her curvy body towards her exposed front. But his untimely sleaziness was interrupted by the sight of her umbilical cord falling from her arms as she dropped them to her sides.

The cold shock traveling down his spine was met with the warm flames that had traveled down the path Benny made from the start, igniting his body. The horror before him could no longer be hidden from his sight. She stared into his eyes, allowing him to see that they were his own, set like stones in the image of her mother.

"I could have loved you too, daddy", she said as the fire consumed her father.



## THE HAUNTED HOUSE

*by Dusty Evely*

Frederick stood 50 feet from the entrance of the haunted house while his teammates pleaded with him to go inside. He rattled off a bunch of statistics of mechanical failings in these kinds of pop-up carnivals while they rolled their eyes.

“Just 3 years ago in Iowa, the roof came loose and injured 5 people. A 12 year old girl lost her arm.”

They laughed.

“Freddy, if you’re scared, just say so. You don’t have to make up injury statistics.”

Frederick was scared, but he didn’t want to admit it. It was just last week that he had made the varsity football team as a sophomore; he would be the starting running back and safety on a team that had made the state championship the last two seasons. He couldn’t very well have his new teammates see him jump at the sight of a dirty bed sheet on a stick emerging from the darkness.

Eventually he realized he wouldn’t be able to talk his way out of it. He looked at Chet – the starting quarterback – in the eye and gave a slight nod.

“Alright! Freddy’s in. Quick, let’s go in before he remembers about the guy who was paralyzed by a prop gone wild in Arkansas.” They laughed.

Frederick took one last look around the carnival yard. It would be moving on the next day, so the yard was pretty empty. He thought maybe he would see someone in dire need of help somewhere and could heroically rush off to help them.

“Sorry guys. Can’t go in there; my fellow man needs me.”

But there were no damsels or lads in distress, so Frederick turned towards the haunted house and shuffled up the steps.

The opening featured a cartoonishly large mouth with vampire teeth, lips curled back in a grotesque laugh. The eyes above were red and wild. Frederick gave a short laugh at the ridiculousness of it all.

His laugh brought the attention of the door attendant. He was an old man, sitting on a stool so tall his legs didn’t quite reach the floor. His body was hunched over, as if his necklace weighed 500 pounds. His terrible comb-over was covered with a ratty top hat.

“You find this funny? Perhaps you won’t be laughing when you exit. If you exit.”

His laugh was harsh and uncomfortable. Frederick gave the man a quick, sidelong glance before hesitantly pushing his way through the black curtain that marked the entrance. The man’s laugh seemed to get louder as he stepped through, as if it were echoing off every wall.

The entrance was a dark, narrow hallway. The walls were tight; Frederick barely had enough room to pass through with his broad shoulders. On the few occasions where he made contact, they gently swayed, as if they were nothing more than cardboard. He attempted to look more closely at them, but he couldn’t make out much in the dark.

Frederick looked down and realized that he couldn’t see past his knees.

“Smoke machine must be working overtime,” he said nervously.

He looked for his teammates and saw they were already 20 feet ahead of him. He sped up his step to catch up with them. Once he was back in their presence, he began to calm down, and the laugh of the old man finally seemed to dissipate, swept away with the smoke.

The entrance hallway turned to the right and widened, revealing many alcoves lining the walls, filled with the most frightening costumes Wal-Mart had to offer for less than \$30. A rubber witch mask and flowing black bed sheet shot out, while a cackling laugh played over the speakers. Frederick startled, but not enough for anyone to notice.

“I can do this,” he thought.

The laughter of the others made it easier to deal with. He found it difficult to be scared while the rest of the guys were poking fun at every scare. Watching them laugh and pretend to punch the masked killers in bathrobes put Frederick at ease.

One subject in particular drew a lot of laughs: a two-foot doll with long dark hair covering her face and bright red paint splattering her white dress. A metal arm was attached to the back of her neck, cocking her head ever-so-slightly from side to side. But it was turning a bit too hard and the head had popped off. The hair had also uncovered her face, revealing the surprisingly non-creepy face of a mid-80s Cabbage Patch Doll. Frederick was starting to feel pretty good, so he stopped for a few moments to inspect the doll.

He dwelled on it for longer than he meant to, and when he looked up he found himself alone. Someone must have turned up the smoke machine, because it was now up to his chest.

“Hello?”

There wasn't even an echo.

“You guys there?”

He heard laughing up ahead but he was determined not to run. He was having a good time; the last thing he wanted was for panic and fear to come creeping back.

He walked to the end of the hallway and stopped, listening. He heard laughter, but it seemed further away. He was getting ready to jog up to the next turn, but something to his left caught his eye. It was the same doll he saw earlier, right down to the blood splatter pattern. Frederick laughed.

“Must have found a deal.”

He briefly laughed at himself for being scared to enter such a cheaply thrown together haunted house. He was about to turn when he saw movement from behind the doll. A figure dressed head-to-toe in black emerged from the wall holding a long, curved blade. Frederick was able to get out one strangled yelp before he felt the blade enter his throat. The figure dragged Frederick’s kicking body through a gap in the wall.

Frederick’s teammates waited outside the haunted house.

“You think he’s still in there? Probably got scared by a rubber cockroach or something. YO FREDDY! YOU COMING? I’m going back in.”

Chet’s phone buzzed.

– *not feeling well. left thru front door. c u tmrw*

“Freddy,” Chet reported to the group, pointing at his phone. “Must have got spooked. Already took off.”

As they walked away, they heard the old man say, “Have a

pleasant evening.” His laugh echoed into the night.

## THE DEVIL'S HAND

*by Colin Harker*

The solemn bell of the grandfather clock in the downstairs hall tolled the hour, the eleven echoing reverberations reaching even into the closed upper chamber where three figures were seated about a round wooden table.

“It is your turn, Gilchrist,” one of the men, a florid-faced fellow, spoke, his lips curling as thinly and blackly as the moustache above them.

The man to whom he addressed this statement, a young man who held with trembling fingers a sheaf of playing cards, glanced up falteringly before speaking:

“The stakes are too high – I will play no more.”

A silence ensued, broken only by the sound of the third figure, a sallow stick of a man, scraping the edge of his own cards against the dry knuckles of his thin-fingered hand. The young Gilchrist rose unsteadily, dropping his cards upon the table.

“Sit down,” the gaunt-faced man suggested, his gaze steady upon Gilchrist.

Then, when he received no reply, he repeated the request in a tone no wise angered; but his hand all the while moved towards the dagger that hung at his side. The young man saw this movement and, pale-faced, seated himself once more. Taking up the three battered dice, he dropped them with a clatter upon the table, his eyes dull and incurious as his two companions leaned forward eagerly to examine them.

“Two ‘one’s’ and a ‘two,’” the florid-faced man declared.

“Your number is ‘four,’ sir.”

Wordlessly, Gilchrist resigned the remainder of his cards to the gaunt man. The latter accepted them with a hard smile as their more jocund companion remarked,

“A palpable loss, Gilchrist. Never fear – I am certain that you shall compensate your loss soon enough to play another round with us, eh, Alexander?”

Gilchrist, as though alive for the first time, rose with a start of horror and gazed at the two men with unutterable loathing.

“I was forced into gambling with the two of you. No court of law would – ”

He was cut off by the gaunt man named Alexander who, with an easy smile, returned,

“On the contrary, sir: no court of law would credit your testimony over that of mine and the Earl of Aberdeen here. I would advise you, then, to take yourself off and attempt to make the best of it in a hovel on the moors with that charming new bride of yours.”

At these last words, Gilchrist started forward as though meaning to strike the man; the florid-faced Earl of Aberdeen held him back forcibly and, after the youth had spent himself with oaths and threats, managed to coerce him out of the room before closing the chamber door securely behind him.

“A satisfying game,” he remarked, glancing down at the still-seated Alexander who toyed with the fallen dice and scattered cards with absent fingers.

“Yes, but we have no other player left,” Alexander reminded him. “We have ruined my nephew Gilchrist and with no other guests

within my castle, I fear that we are now left to our own devices for amusement.”

His words were casual enough, but the tone in which he uttered them discomfited the Earl of Aberdeen enough to where the good man felt obliged to say,

“Well, I fear that I haven’t enough spare funds to satisfy your love for high stakes. And,” he added gently but pointedly. “I am, unlike your nephew, no small landholder that you can force into a disastrous game.”

The muffled creak of the chamber door as it slowly opened brought the two men to their feet, both of them half-expecting to see the face of young Gilchrist, driven mad with murderous despair. Instead, Alexander’s manservant Joseph, lantern in hand, stood in the doorway. The elderly gentleman, who was swiftly approaching the venerable status of a nonagenarian, had served the lords of Glamis Castle throughout all the varied epochs of his life, beginning as a stable boy and gradually advancing at last to the coveted title of Steward of Glamis Castle.

It was difficult, however, for his present master Alexander to conceive of the old man as a stable boy. In his mind’s eye, the inveterate Joseph had appeared whole and entire upon the Earth with a grizzled white beard eternally upon his cheek; golden spectacles clamped perpetually upon his nose, magnifying his round, nearsighted eyes; and his beloved skullcap fixed firmly atop his balding head.

The aged servant was extremely attached to this latter belonging, as he superstitiously believed that his skullcap endowed him with psychic abilities. He had obtained it from a traveling pardoner thirty years ago and so eloquent was this pardoner that he had also managed to convince the loyal Joseph to forsake his masters at Glamis Castle and to accompany him as a mendicant friar. A fortnight later, the penitent Joseph returned to his masters at Glamis, void of all

his savings and cured of his desire for the priesthood.

However, though all of these doings had occurred long before Alexander's time, he still often had to endure the pious fervor that old Joseph had never quite been able to rid himself of since his escapade so many decades ago. Now the ancient steward was shaking his head severely at the sight of the many appurtenances of gambling that lay so conspicuously upon the table.

“Do ye not know what hour it is?” he demanded, a frightful gleam in his eyes. “It is the eleventh hour of a Saturday and 'tis an hour until midnight when the Sabbath begins. Shall ye be at your blasphemous abandonment even at that sacred hour, my lords?”

“Aye, and beyond it,” Alexander returned with a derisive smile. “I'd play on until Doomsday if I found a gambler who was no coward.”

He glanced at the Earl of Aberdeen as he uttered these last words.

“As it is, my friend and I will continue to play with stakes more suitable to his taste – all of which is no business of yours, Joseph.”

Joseph gazed with genuine horror upon his master.

“Ye speak as a heathen, my lord.”

The two gamblers laughed.

“Away with you, Joseph,” the Earl of Aberdeen suggested. “Before you slay us with one of your interminable sermons.”

Shaking his head, Joseph departed, leaving the two men as they shuffled and dealt the cards by the flickering light of the single candle upon their table.

“You do not object too greatly to lowering the stakes somewhat?” the Earl of Aberdeen inquired, glancing up at his reckless companion.

Alexander shrugged, his eyes upon the hand that he had been dealt:

“I am in a gamesome mood tonight, sir – and I would play with the Devil himself were he a guest in my house, so long as he had property enough to interest me!”

Joseph muttered many a forbidding augury to himself before he had completed his ascent up the steep, spiraling staircase of the castle to the chamber in which young Gilchrist and his bride reposed. He had endured many a cruel and arbitrary master, but the new Lord of Glamis’s callous impieties and atrocities against the commonfolk who dwelt upon his land never failed to aghast him more thoroughly than any of his former lords’ peccadilloes, causing the old man to regard Alexander as something of a Scottish Nero.

Knocking at the door, he was admitted by the wan-faced Gilchrist who gazed upon the old man as though he did not for a moment recognise him.

“Your dinner, sir,” Joseph said by way of explanation, holding out a silver platter upon which rested two plates of veal and two goblets of wine.

“Dinner? At this hour?” Gilchrist spoke in a voice of sudden, animated despair. “My uncle sends it merely to mock me. He has shown his hospitality already to me – in robbing me of all that I own and leaving Catherine and me utterly destitute. I wondered at his invitation before, but now at last I know the reason behind his sudden kindness.”

He seemed as though he wished to say more but, convulsed with anger, turned away and bowed his head to hide the tears of rage and humiliation that fell from his haggard eyes. For the first time, Joseph espied within the chamber the figure of a young woman, whom he took to be Catherine. Though her own face was full of a sweet anxiety, it seemed to be directed more towards her unfortunate husband than their lost fortune.

She put her arms about him and drew his head against her bosom, caressing his dark, tousled hair as though he were but a boy.

“I did warn you against accepting his invitation, darling,” she reminded him gently. “But now that it is all over, we shall make do with what we have.”

“We have nothing!” Gilchrist interjected.

“Then we must put our faith in God.”

Joseph seized upon this instantly.

“Aye, hearken unto the lassie, sir. He will save ye – if it be your destiny to be saved!”

Though only a fifteenth-century steward, Joseph was forward-thinking enough to already anticipate Calvinism.

At that moment, the clock struck twelve and as the low, solemn notes reached his ears, a maid-servant appeared in the doorway, her face a-fluster with surprise. Catching sight of Joseph, she spoke:

“Oh, sir, there’s someone at the door!”

“Well, did ye open the door, ye flaysome fool?” Joseph questioned, at once frightened and irritable.

He had overheard the last blasphemous remark of Alexander and, considering the impious manner in which he knew his master to be ushering in the Sabbath, he was full of a superstitious dread regarding any event at all unusual.

“Please, sir, I was so afraid that I did not.”

Unwillingly, Joseph accompanied the maid downstairs; the young couple followed as well, curious as to who should wish to call at such an hour. As they reached the great hall, the knock at the door was repeated, seeming to echo the tolling of the clock. Drawing the bolts of the door, Joseph opened it with much difficulty, struggling against the fierce wind that pressed in from the other side. When at last he had done so, he beheld upon the doorstep the tall figure of a man clothed in a dark cloak, the cowl of which entirely concealed his features.

Joseph, thoroughly unnerved, raised his lantern against the gale, for it had now died to a small, quivering blue flame – a sure sign to the superstitious of the presence of the unearthly.

“Who are ye and what do ye wish?” the ancient demanded.

“A refuge from this tempest,” the stranger replied. As Joseph hesitated, he added, “I beg you, sir, out of charity, do not force me to remain unsheltered upon such a night as this.”

“Yes, of course you may come in,” Gilchrist replied and without another word, the stranger entered.

Once Joseph had closed the door and bolted it securely, he cast his spectacled eyes once more upon the newcomer. The cowl had now fallen back to reveal a face that astonished the old man fully as much as if he had caught sight of goat’s hooves under the man’s cloak.

The quality of the stranger’s visage was neither old nor young

but strangely redolent of both. For while he possessed all of the fine features of youth untarnished by age, there was an weariness about his eyes and a discontent that was neither the sullenness of youth nor the bitterness of old age but something far more strongly felt and eternal, that darkened his brow. Thin and considering were those lips in that face of ivory and it seemed to the querulous old man as though they were fashioned into a smile such as might have played upon the mouths of satyrs in wanton Greece. In the trembling light of the cressets and torches within the great hall, the stranger's hair seemed like a coronet of dark flames that surrounded his face; his eyes, twin drops spilt from the same slow, emerald poison.

Joseph clapped a hand to his sacred skullcap and, deciding that prudence was the better part of politeness, crossed himself in the stranger's sight. Seeing the man avert his eyes from the holy sign, he took courage and said, "Who are ye, sir, and how did ye come to be abroad upon such a night as this?"

"From going to and fro in the land," the stranger replied. "I am a lord of great renown and I have known the earl of this stronghold for many years."

As he spoke, he inclined his head courteously towards Gilchrist and his wife, though with a faint expression of aversion as though even this small gesture of humble deference was galling.

"But you," he added to Gilchrist. "You are not the master of Glamis Castle."

Gilchrist met the stranger's dark, unwavering eyes with a sensation of mingled fear and fascinated repulsion that he could not entirely account for.

"No," he replied falteringly. "My uncle is the man whom you seek. He is in an upper chamber with the Earl of Aberdeen. Joseph, go tell my uncle that –"

The stranger raised his hand peremptorily, signaling for silence.

“Such a formality is unnecessary,” he said in a voice of calm assurance. “I am already expected – and I am not one to impose upon a host who is unwilling for my company.”

Gilchrist felt baffled confusion at these words but remained silent.

“I pray that you take me to his chamber,” the stranger continued to Joseph.

The aged man muttered mistrustfully to himself, but seeing that Gilchrist did not voice an objection, the unfortunate Joseph had no other choice but to lead the way up to Alexander’s chamber.

They found the two earls still at their cards and it was several moments before they were noticed.

“What’s this, Joseph?” Alexander demanded furiously, his eyes bleary from both drink and lack of sleep. “Who have you brought to us?”

“A lord – whose company ye have been expecting,” Joseph replied, trembling at the thought that he was standing betwixt a cruel master who might slay him in a drunken rage at this interruption and possibly Lucifer himself.

Considering which danger he thought to be most immediate at the present, he thought it safer to duck discreetly behind the Adversary of Souls.

The stranger did not speak but merely motioned for the deck of cards to be shuffled for the start of a new round. The Earl of Aberdeen obeyed with all the practised vigor of a well-oiled automaton whilst

Alexander, naturally suspicious by nature, eyed the stranger carefully.

“What stakes shall you set?” he barked.

The stranger withdrew a velvet pouch from out of the depths of his cloak and placed it carefully upon the table. Both earls leaned forward and caught the dark, crimson flash of rubies within. Alexander glanced up, a smile of avaricious, unwilling admiration upon his lips.

“At last, a man with a bit of courage,” said he. “Well, Crawford, can you match this?”

The Earl of Aberdeen’s ruddy complexion reddened still more and he returned gruffly, “I’ll wager my two Arabian stallions.”

“And I shall put forward a quarter of my family jewels,” Alexander said, leaning back and gesturing for the stranger to sit.

All the while, Joseph had been watching these proceedings with an expression of growing distaste. Seeing the stranger draw nearer and take a seat at the round table, he finally could not forebear muttering,

“Aye, lose your family jewels, your stallions, and your souls as well, ye Christ-less heathens!”

Neither of the earls took any notice of Joseph’s departure or overheard his unqualified remark. Rather, Alexander addressed the silent stranger, saying,

“That senile old buffoon mentioned that you were a lord. Is this indeed true? Do you possess any land here in Scotland?”

“Yes,” the stranger replied. “You may have heard of it, for it has an unjustifiably ill reputation amongst the superstitious folk of this realm. I dwell within a stronghold that stands upon several acres of

moors and heaths. There are few servants within, save those who are bound to the land: a poor, tongueless lady who tends the grounds; a bearded man who sees to the Blue Room; a servant girl who could find no other employer because of the strange rumours that attended her regarding her taste for human blood – baseless rumours, of course, that hardly disquieted me – ”

“Zounds, man!” Alexander laughed. “Why, it nearly sounds as though you are reciting a list of the ghosts that haunt us here in Glamis Castle!”

“Indeed?” the stranger said with an expression of polite interest.

“Yes, we’ve a tongueless lady as well as a score of other banshees to terrify the foolish locals. Who shall take up the dice first?”

The Earl of Aberdeen, always ready with his hands, volunteered. At the sight of the surprisingly fortunate outcome of his dice throw, he furnished a friendly smile for his two opponents and declared,

“Now we shall see what man may top my number!”

Gilchrist stood by the window of his chamber, his face tight and rigid with uneasy contemplation. He felt a dogging disquiet, a desire to act rather than to await any further action on the part of his uncle. Catherine, sensing this change in his manner, enquired as to the cause of it.

“That guest of my uncle’s,” Gilchrist replied. “For what purpose could he have come here? My uncle told me nothing of another guest’s arrival.”

His shoulders trembled slightly with the terrible shudder that a beast gives when it is under a heavy, clinging yoke that it cannot shrug

off.

“Whatever the reason, it cannot be for my good – that is certain.”

Catherine drew nearer and put a gentle hand upon his shoulder, but he brushed it away with a swift, brutal hand. Tears started in her eyes and she sought to turn away, but the next moment was arrested by the look in her husband’s gaze as he regarded her stricken face.

“Why do you look at me like that?” he asked, his voice soft.

She sought in vain for a sign of relenting compassion within those formerly kind, tender eyes; and felt, perhaps, the same sort of despair that a suicide might feel when, as he gazes upon the moving waters beneath him, he hopes to hear some voice of pity rise up from those unfeeling currents within whose depths he has still firmly resolved to plunge himself.

Thus, her heart thrilling with both devotion and fear, she caught his hand and implored him to be at peace. Again he repulsed her, his eyes blazing flame-like as they flashed mercilessly upon her, and without a word he moved past her towards the door.

Frightened at his distracted manner and at his visage which had strangely resembled for a moment the features and expression of Alexander’s unexpected guest, she caught his wrist with a stifled cry and flung her arms about him in an attempt to stay his progress. He was about to callously force her away when the door abruptly opened: it was old Joseph, eager to tell of his portentous opinions regarding Alexander’s new game of cards.

However, his tongue was arrested at the sight of a dagger within Gilchrist’s hand. The young man, as though robbed of his rage and suddenly fully aware of what his former intentions had been, flung the weapon from him, his face paling with horror. Turning his eyes

from the old servant to his wife, he flung himself upon his knees and cried,

“Ah, God, what creature am I that I should seek to murder the brother of my own father for mere wealth?”

And with a despairing countenance, he turned away, ashamed of the looks of pity upon the faces around him. Yet as Catherine timidly took his hand, he did not repulse it but pressed it tightly against his livid cheek.

“You have lost all of your hands to me, Alexander,” the Earl of Aberdeen remarked, the scratching of his quill pen against the parchment of his pocket book sounding as audible within that silent room as the teeth of foraging vermin within a well-stocked cupboard.

Alexander watched expressionlessly as Crawford finished noting down the full extent of his winnings.

“Shall we play another hand?” the Earl of Aberdeen suggested.

“Yes,” Alexander replied. And then, in a whisper that was barely audible to his comrade: “I shall wager Glamis Castle.”

The conquering victor started. “My dear friend, you have lost your stables, your wealth, and the rest of your estates to me. Why do you wish to risk the one belonging you have left?”

Alexander laughed.

“And why are you of a sudden so scrupulous with my property? Hypocrite, you are afraid to stake your own estate even for mine. Why should you? As you said, you own all of my manses now. Will whatever you wager be such a loss for the chance to possess Glamis? Or have you turned from a great conqueror into a great coward?”

The Earl of Aberdeen appeared doubtful; glancing at the stranger, he said,

“And you – you have declined to enter the last several games. Shall you pass this one as well or will you stake your own land against ours?”

“My lord,” the stranger replied. “In my estate, there are many mansions and I should be an uncharitable miser were I to begrudge you and your comrade the opportunity of occupying one yourselves.”

“Nay,” Alexander interrupted. “Let this game be solely betwixt my comrade and I.”

“As you will,” the stranger said.

But he drew his chair closer to that of Alexander and as the Earl of Aberdeen shuffled and sorted, he glanced at the cards that Alexander had been dealt with a speculative eye.

“What think you?” Alexander murmured in a low voice. “This hand is not so unlucky as those I have played earlier. Have I a chance?”

“If the dice chooses to favor you, my lord,” the stranger replied. “I myself have never had a love for these games of chance. A clever man chooses his games as wisely as he chooses his companions – that is, with an eye towards those that he is certain to win.”

At these ambiguous words, Alexander’s resolution faltered and his former recklessness, fanned to such a feverish pitch, abated somewhat. It was as though he had for the first time realized how truly close he stood to destitution, like a sleepwalker who awakens at the edge of a pit only to start back in horror from the brink. He parted his lips to call off the game.

Instantly, the stranger's fingers sought his own, pressing his hand as though in silent encouragement. The man's grasp was amazingly strong and as warm as though it were the clutch of a fevered man and Alexander returned the comforting clasp with the convulsive motion of a man warming his hands against a furnace upon a winter's eve. He met the stranger's burning eyes and, as though impatient of his own foolish fear in contrast to the man's silent calm, he took up the pieces of dice and flung them upon the table.

Several minutes passed; he was half-conscious of exchanging cards, listening to the clatter of dice, and murmuring blasphemies under his breath in the distracted manner of a priest reciting a prayer that repetition has made meaningless. At last, the voice of the Earl of Aberdeen reached him as though from an impossible distance, and he heard the words, distinct and clear.

“My friend – you have lost Glamis Castle.”

Alexander stood, sober and silent, and felt for something that hung at his side. The Earl of Aberdeen rose from his seat as well and seemed about to speak but then stopped and lowered his eyes to the blade that now ran through his heart, about which trickled a steady stream of blood. He fell in a heap upon the floor and Alexander watched as the eyes of his friend darkened and then became as glassy as those of a fish. A pang of terrible horror at what he had done nearly felled him as well and he knelt to feel the Earl of Aberdeen's pulse: there was none.

The man was thoroughly dead.

Alexander's eyes sped with guilty haste towards the stranger: the man continued to watch him impassively, though the stricken lord thought that a trace of cold merriment twinkled in his gaze. Trembling, he crossed the room towards the door, but the stranger spoke before his hand touched the doorknob:

“After inviting me to your home, shall you then depart before having played a hand alone with me?”

“I never set eyes upon you in my life until I played with you this evening,” Alexander swore, but even as he spoke, he added with a fateful recollection, “I would play with the Devil himself...” and found himself growing colder as he gazed upon the stranger.

Then, with an oath that would have horrified old Joseph but merely brought another smile to the stranger’s lips, he took up the dice that lay upon the table and with his other hand he seized the cards that the stranger had dealt him, saying,

“Even if you are the Arch-Fiend himself, you must still bow to chance.” Then, hesitating, he asked:

“But what shall be the stakes?”

The tempest that had descended upon the highlands had not abated with time but rather seemed to have gained more violence as the night continued; and the keening of the wind without the servant’s quarters was of so piercing a nature that poor Joseph had a difficult time in managing to fall asleep.

When at last he had fallen into a fitful doze, he was awakened almost immediately by the sound of shouting and swearing from a higher floor of the castle. Recognizing the sound of his master’s voice, he rose, lantern in hand, and proceeded up the stairs to the chamber in which he had left Alexander at his card game several hours earlier. He was amazed to find as he reached the door that voices still issued from behind it. Straining his ears, he managed to catch a portion of what was said:

“The game is finished. You have taken all that I possess.”

“I have taken nothing that mere Death could not rob you of.”

“What more can you possibly desire?”

“The one possession that you value least of all – your soul.”

“And this will satisfy?”

“Satisfy? Along with the souls of all within this castle, within this isle, within this world – yes, that shall satisfy.”

“Then cease this terrible game and take me! I am maddened by your toying delay and that murdered thing in the corner.”

“You shame me, my lord, in believing that I would win a companion so unfairly. I shall depart once our game has at last ended – upon the day that you fixed earlier this evening for my departure – the day that men, seraphs, and daemons all must await: the day of wrath.” A pause. “But why do you recoil at such a prospect? Your state before this evening was no different. I have always remained with you.”

Joseph’s face grew very pale as he listened to all of this and he was forced to set his lantern down upon the cold floor for fear that his trembling fingers would lose their grip. Terror and also a certain wisdom told him that it would be best to depart at once. Yet he felt as well a strange curiosity to behold his master in the terrible state that his impiety had led him to and, in spite of his fears, he bent his eye to the keyhole of the room.

Gilchrist hastened out of his chamber towards his uncle’s chamber, the sound of a terrible scream having reached his ears even above the din of the storm outside. His fingers smarted at the sting of dripping wax from the candle that he held but at last he found the hallway where he knew his uncle’s chamber was situated. A soft, pitiful sound like a kitten’s mewing caused him to look down and there, crouched beside a dying lantern, he beheld Joseph. The old man was fumbling about as though searching for something that he had lost

upon the floor and Gilchrist, bewildered, took him by the arm and helped him to stand.

It was then that he beheld Joseph's face for the first time and when he did, it was only pity that enabled him to stifle a cry of horror. For where the old man's eyes had once been, there now remained but blackened hollows like burnt, ashen craters where lightning has fallen, ravaged, and died.

Stricken, Gilchrist watched as the old man turned his face away and murmured in a low, sobbing whisper,

“O Lucifer, son of the morning, how art thou fallen from Heaven?”

And then, as though maddened by his own words, he repeated them again and again, all the while frantically running his hands along the wall as though desperate to discover something thereon.

At last, he crumpled to the ground, utterly spent, his blind head bowed between his knees and his words slurring together as he lapsed at last into the utter delirium of madness.

A fresh clap of thunder rocked the castle's foundations and above its trembling reverberations, Gilchrist heard other, fainter sounds – the clatter of dice, a loud oath, and the murmur of voices. Their callous incongruity filled him with an anguished horror, but as suddenly as they had arisen they died away and all that reached his ears was the ceaseless keening of the wind. Helping poor Joseph once again to feet, Gilchrist led him down the hallway, in search of his uncle so that a physician might be sent for at once.

As though sensing Gilchrist's purpose, Joseph managed to pull away from him and, collapsing to his knees, pointed with a shaking finger as though guided by memory rather than sight.

“There – there – ” he whispered. “There is his chamber.”

And Gilchrist’s gaze followed the direction in which the servant pointed and he saw that where his uncle’s chamber had once stood, there was now nothing but a grey, unbroken wall of solid, impenetrable stone.

## **MERRY CHRISTMAS, ELIZABETH SORENSEN**

*by Shawn Lachance*

It is a cold night and Elizabeth Sorensen lay fast asleep in bed. Curled into an almost perfect ball, her left hand underneath the pillow, she is at complete rest.

It is winter and the moonlight refracting off of the fresh snow invades the bedroom with ghostly pale light. The dark blue wall glistens, further increasing the odd colors exploding all around the room.

Elizabeth begins to shudder, slipping deeper into dreams. Sleep has not come easily in quite some time, but tonight, after several glasses of wine, as soon as her head touched the pillow she was dead to the world.

Shudders turn to twitches and twitches soon turn to full on spasms. Elizabeth is dreaming again. In her dream she is in a forest, it is bright and warm. She is chasing a small impish boy through a thicket of brush. She calls out to him, receiving no response but playful laughter.

The thicket soon becomes impassable and claustrophobia sets in. Elizabeth sucks desperately at the air but the tightness in her chest prevents her from pulling anything in.

Shooting awake, Elizabeth feels vines recede from around her chest, feels the heat of the jungle quickly flee the room. The smell of leaves, flowers and humid air still surround her.

Desperately pulling in oxygen Elizabeth begins to weep and forces herself back into a ball. Sleep overtakes her once more and she spends the remainder of the night free of dreams.

\* \* \*

Another week of mostly sleepless nights goes by. The exhaustion is crippling and Elizabeth rationalizes once again that alcohol is the only way to join the world of sleep.

Sitting quietly in the small bedroom, she finishes a bottle of red on her own. Exhaustion and intoxication slowly coalesce into an energy draining, fuzzy darkness that overtake her and carry her off to the land of sleep.

After a short while the dream comes again. Thematically every nightmare is the same; forever chasing a small boy who manages to stay just out of arm's reach. The setting is always different though, and this time the trend continues on.

About 10 paces in front of Elizabeth, a boy that looks no older than 8 continues running. Instead of the thick, jungle like forest from her last dream, Elizabeth finds herself in a desert. The moon sits high in the cloudless sky, stars forming uncanny valley shapes and patterns. Faces caught in different stages of grief and horror, captured for all eternity in a purple sky.

The child continues to laugh playfully while Elizabeth runs as fast as she can on tired legs, outstretched arms capturing nothing but cool dry air.

Stopping to catch her breath, she sees him run up and over a dune. Taking slow breaths, hand over her heart, she presses on.

Reaching the top, the child is nowhere to be found and she panics. Hand still clutched over her heart, the beating takes on a chaotic, unnatural rhythm. Elizabeth falls to her knees, clutching her chest tighter, nails cutting through her shirt and drawing blood. Her free hand massages the sand underneath her, the softness reminding her of cotton.

With no warning Elizabeth sinks deeper into the sand, it piles up on her calves and slowly pulls her under. Formerly free hand now trapped, she can't wiggle free and allows herself to go deeper into the dune. The sinking stops at chest level and Elizabeth once again gasps for air, the intense pressure on her chest robbing her of the ability to even cry out.

The little boy appears again and stands a few paces away from her. He smiles and she fights back against the sand, pushing desperately with all of her strength to get her hands free. She closes her eyes, gathering up what little reserves of energy she has left and when she opens them again she is back in the bedroom.

Out of the corner of her eyes a small sand dune shrinks and fades into the floor. Catching her breath, she pulls her arm away from her chest and finds her hand caked in blood.

Elizabeth slowly slides off the bed and heads towards the bathroom, the cool humid air of the bedroom slowly dissipating before returning back to normal.

\* \* \*

Elizabeth stares at her half eaten plate of food. The Flashing Christmas lights from behind her reflecting brightly in the porcelain.

“Merry Christmas, Liz.”

The voice is from a stranger she no longer recognizes. Where warmth would once wash over her, the sound of the voice now elicits only revulsion and sorrow.

She keeps her eyes on the plate and makes no response.

“Liz, I know it's been –“

Eyes the color and coldness of ice dart up from the plate, and the look on her face is enough to silence the voice. It sighs in defeat.

The man sitting opposite her picks up his own plate and cautiously reaches for hers before turning around and setting them down on a counter.

Another sigh from the man and he gains a small amount of confidence.

“You aren’t the only person who lost something that day Liz. Fuck. The way you’re acting, I feel like I’ve lost two people. We can get through this together; you just have to let me help you.”

Without a word, Elizabeth walks to the kitchen and grabs a bottle of wine from underneath the sink. She doesn’t look back at the man who used to be known to her as Emanuel, who used to be her husband and the father of her son.

She makes no sound at all, walks slowly to the stairs at the end of the hallway and takes them to her room. The room of her deceased son Leonard.

\* \* \*

The wine burns as it goes down. The dryness feels as though it will shred her throat entirely, but the warmth it brings comforts her.

Elizabeth puts her head in her hands and sobs. For the first time since it happened, she thinks back to the day of the accident.

It had been the first major snowfall of the year. It came earlier than normal and Emanuel hadn’t put the winter tires on the car. The school board had canceled buses that morning, but Leonard insisted on going in. He had to attend the Thanksgiving mass and rehearse for his

school play.

He was a child that loved learning and laughing, his heart still full of the naiveté that tells us the world and the people in it are good. He smiled often, the type of infectious smile that was capable of forcing even the darkest of shadows to the back of the mind.

On this morning, Elizabeth had agreed to drive Leonard to school, figuring that as long as they were careful the lack of winter tires wouldn't matter that much.

At the halfway point of the journey, the vehicle hit a patch of black ice and spun out of control before going into a ditch and flipping over.

The paramedics said that Leonard died instantly, his seat belt had malfunctioned and when the car flipped over, he broke his neck.

Elizabeth lay unconscious for hours, fresh snow piling in through the broken window, her chest being crushed by the steering wheel.

Pushing the memory once more to the back of her mind, Elizabeth puts the bottle to her mouth and takes a long swig, finishing off the remainder of it.

She gets into the comfortable ball position and closes her eyes, allowing the heavy inebriation to take her once again.

A familiar cold sets in and Elizabeth finds herself in a forest, the child that she's been chasing stands by a large tree, finally waiting for her.

A heavy snow starts to fall. Large, puffy flakes come down sideways, sticking to Elizabeth's clothing. The snow sits on her neck and the blowing wind sends deep shivers down her body.

She dusts off her arms and uses her hands to comb the snow out of her hair, warm tears building up and blurring her vision.

She slowly walks up to the boy and throws her arms around him, picking him up in a large embrace.

The child laughs, his arms finding their way around her neck with enough pressure to make breathing difficult but still light enough that it's possible.

Elizabeth picks up the boy, carries him to a tree stump and sits down, cradling him and singing an old lullaby.

Opening her eyes to the real world, Elizabeth sees shrubbery moving up her leg, twisting branches wrap themselves around her arms. The boy is sitting at the edge of the bed and now it's her turn to smile.

Allowing the growing wilderness to slowly consume her, she mouths a final I love you to the child at the foot of her bed, embracing the oncoming darkness like a long lost friend.

**THE DRAIN**  
*by Baylea Hart*

You do not notice the drain at first. Why should you? Your new home, just a simple bungalow, had been renovated before you bought it. There had been no mention of any indoor drains, especially one located in a corner of the living room. Drains do not belong in living rooms.

You are beside the fireplace, painting the cream walls a dark, dusty pink, when Clive calls out to you.

Hey look, he says. What do you think this is?

He is pointing at the ground, just beyond the large pile of carpet he had torn from the floor. You smile over your shoulder, but do not move.

What is it? You ask him.

Beats me, he says. Do we have a basement?

You do not have a basement. Clive knows this, you know he does. You would never have bought a house with a basement. There are all sorts of lurking horrors skulking around in basements.

You balance your paintbrush on a small, metal stepladder, and watch a droplet gather at the end of the bristles. Then, you wipe your hands against your jeans and waltz over to Clive.

The drain is large, much wider than yourself. Long, black bars stretch across it; metal and clean. Too clean. You crouch closer and wrinkle your nose at the scent that rises up to greet you. It is wet and musty. It smells of dark things left untouched for many years.

Where do you suppose it goes? Asks Clive. He is bending down too. He looks like he will fall.

You step away.

Down, you say.

Shall we look? Asks Clive.

You do not want to look.

Let's finish what we're doing, you say. Then we can call the estate agent. God, I could kill them.

Clive does not look away from the drain, and you turn your back on him.

\* \* \*

The estate agent knows nothing, but promises to come take a look as soon as the weekend is over. You and Clive eat a quiet dinner, perched on the end of your upturned sofa, and then head to bed.

You keep the lights on for as long as you can get away with. The drain has unnerved you and, more than the drain, the thought of things below. Rats scurrying beneath your feet. You shiver into your duvet as Clive grumbles at you to turn off the lights.

With a click, there is only you and darkness and time. So much time. You cannot see the clock from where you lay, and so you are forced to guess as the hours pass to the rhythm of Clive's gentle snores and of the low murmur of the wind outside.

You shiver again.

Your bed is pressed up against the bedroom wall, and behind

that wall is the living room, and within the living room is the drain. The darkness. You can feel it there, like you can feel a strangers gaze upon your skin in a crowded room.

You wonder what would happen if you fell into the drain. Would you land, painfully, onto ground so covered in dust it felt like snow beneath your fingertips? Or would you fall, and fall, never escaping the darkness, falling ever faster as the wind lashes your face and stings your eyes while all the while large yellow eyes come closer and closer until you are so close you can see yourself within and...

You sleep then.

You do not remember your dreams when you wake.

You are thankful for that.

\* \* \*

You do not find Clive in the kitchen, where he is normally to be found first thing in the morning. Instead, he is in the living room, cross legged in front of the drain. His face is pale, his eyes wide.

Here you are, you say. I was looking for you.

Clive does not say anything.

Would you like some breakfast? You say, a little louder this time.

Not hungry, says Clive.

His eyes do not move to look at you. You take a step closer towards him.

Are you feeling okay? You ask. You look pale. Are you sick?

Clive shakes his head.

No, he says. No, just tired. I woke up in the night and couldn't fall back to sleep.

Why not? You ask.

This time Clive turns to you, and slowly, he says: You didn't hear them?

Hear who?

The people in the drain, he says.

You start to laugh, but Clive does not smile and the sound comes out more like a bark. You frown instead.

Don't joke around with me, Clive, you say. You know how I feel about basements.

I'm not joking, he replies. I heard them all night, chattering through the walls, getting louder and louder and louder and -

Clive clutches his head in his hands. Scrunches his face as though he is in pain. You move towards him, wrap your arms around his shoulders. The two of you stay like that for a little while, until Clive starts to speak again.

I need to see what's down there, he says. I need to see what's going on. Prove that this is all in my head.

Don't, you say. It's just a creepy old drain. It's nothing.

I need to see, he says.

You say nothing. You want to tell him no, want to shout at him for being so stupid, but that is only your fear talking. If Clive stays away from the drain, you'll be able to pretend that it isn't there. That there is nothing below you.

But you say none of this. Instead you step away, moving further and further until your back is pressed against a wall and Clive is alone in the centre of the room.

He reaches over to the metal grate, placing his hands either side. He pulls and the grate comes away easily, without a sound. The rotting smell seems stronger now.

You watch as Clive places the grate to one side, and then dangles his legs in the hole. He looks over to you. His face is still white.

Be careful, you say.

He nods.

Drops down into the darkness.

You wait in the living room, staring at the gaping hole in your floor.

Clive does not come back.

\* \* \*

It takes you a whole shame filled hour to work up the courage to peer into the drain, and when you begin shining a torch into the dark it almost slips from your sweaty hands.

The drain appears to lead to a shallow pit, barely wider than the hole itself. There are no pathways, no murky sewers. Just a hole.

Clive is not there.

You call the police, aware of how hysterical you sound as the words tumble from your lips. The woman on the phone is sympathetic, and promises to send someone over to you immediately.

Nobody comes.

When you try the phone again, there is only static. No matter who you call.

You cannot stop yourself from staring at the drain. It is a black speck in your vision, seeming to follow no matter where you look. You want to leave the room, the house, but what if Clive comes back? What if he needs your help?

You can't leave.

Not yet.

\* \* \*

The sunlight seeps away and the light in the room fades.

As you stare into the drain you feel your head grow heavy. Your eyes begin to close. Slowly you feel the weight of sleep push down upon you.

Your mind wanders.

From the pit, from the drain, comes a voice.

It is garbled and distorted, as if thick with water. Or blood.

It says your name.

Your head shoots up.

The sunlight is entirely gone now. You are surrounded by night.

You listen for the voice, but hear nothing.

Did you imagine it?

It had seemed so real to you.

Fearing hallucinations brought on by lack of food, you stumble to your feet and make your way to the kitchen. As you reach the door, there is a gust of foul smelling wind.

You hear your name again.

You turn, back against the wall.

You hear it again.

And again.

The voice multiplies. Stretches. Distorts.

It is coming from everywhere.

One voice, ten voices, a thousand.

Your name.

Over and over and over.

The voices are mocking. Pleading. Screaming. Crying.

There are so many.

You press your palms against your ears but the noise is already resonating in your head. It thrums like a guitar string.

Your name.

And something else.

You remove your hands and listen to the chorus.

The voices seem to die away until only one remains.

A voice that is saying more than your name.

Help me, it says. Oh God, please. Help me.

You know that voice, through the terror that transforms it. It is a voice you love dearly.

You run towards the drain, leaning over and desperately searching it's depths.

The pit seems larger now.

Clive, you call. Your voice echoes. Clive, are you there.

That voice again.

Help me. Help me.

You take a shuddering breath, swing your legs over the drain, and slip inside.

You drop into the darkness, and land with a splash into something cold and wet. You gasp, and stumble backwards, colliding into a wall dripping with a cold, slimy liquid. You pull away in disgust.

Above you is the hole leading to the living room, just beyond the reach of your fingers.

In front of you is a passage, and a cool, white light.

Help me, says the voice. The voice in the passage. Oh please, please help me.

There is nowhere else to go.

You begin to walk.

\* \* \*

You walk for what must have been an hour, but what feels like a day. The light in front of you gets larger, but the rest of the passage remains unchanged. Always oozing. Always wet. You feel what you hope is water splash against your hard ankles as you move.

You jump as droplets fall from the ceiling and trail down your neck.

Clive's voice continues to call to you, pulling you onward.

You want to ignore him and turn back, but behind you is only darkness.

Though there is only one path, you are afraid you will never find your way home if you turn back.

You turn a corner, and the light grows brighter still, so bright it burns your eyes. You wince, squint, and step out of the passage.

It takes a moment for your eyes to adjust.

It takes the rest of you much, much longer.

You are standing in a stone hall, larger than your mind is able to comprehend. It stretches out endlessly, and staring up into the sky you see nothing but endless void. You want to scream, and tear at your eyes.

You look away from the abyss before you can do so.

You search for the source of the light, and finding a shining pool of silver water just a little way before you. You run to it, wanting to be closer to the light, wanting to escape the thick, oppressive blackness.

As you get closer to the pool, you see a figure stood in its centre.

You know that figure.

His back is to you, but you know him.

Your heart swells.

You feel tears in your eyes.

Clive, you shout. Clive, I'm here. I'm here.

You reach the edge of the water

The figure does not move.

You blink.

The pool seems larger than it had before.

Not a pool.

A lake.

An endless, still lake.

You stare at the figure at the centre.

Seemingly so close.

But it wasn't close.

Can't have been close.

The figure turns and you scream.

The voices, all the voices, rip into you. Tear your mind apart.

Not Clive.

Not human.

It looks at you.

Through you.

The eyes, so many eyes, you see them in your mind and they crush you with their weight and you can't breathe and the voices claw into your throat and chest and then there is nothing, nothing but eyes and voices and abyss.

You hadn't noticed the drain at first.

But it had noticed you.



**180 GRAMS**  
*by Renfield Rasputin*

The needle found its place and injected the rush of euphoria that he sought after. There were only a few that could understand the feelings that it gave. It was a connection. The way the vinyl popped and cracked with the needle inside of the grooves.

It wasn't difficult to understand unless you were the parents of an angst ridden teenage male. Fitting in required liking sports that he hated, having a haircut that was in style for that season (despite it being popular with a shitty pop band), and wearing clothes that screamed "Kick my ass - it'll be easy". Because of his nature it awaked a primitive instinct hardwired into his adolescent peers; guys saw him as not manly enough, and girls saw him as unfit to pair with.

Screw the same old song and dance. He saw himself outside (and above) the routine. If he was going down, he was taking everyone in his path with him. Inject resistance. Release stability.

He was lost in a world of blast beats and muted power chords when a knock at the door interrupted his refuge. He opened it just enough for his mother to poke her head through.

"Hey, turn it down!"

He closed the door without a word of resistance but the door was met by Rachel's hand, halting the movement.

"Don't you roll your eyes at me," she said.

He wondered how she even saw his eyes. At 17, he was a whole head taller than her.

"Your dad asked if you got a haircut today and I lied to him and

told him that I didn't have time to take you. So, if anything you should be grateful to me."

"He's not my dad" he muttered with enough clout to prove his point, but not come across as a rebellious teenage jackass without a cause as he tossed a lock of hair to the side that dangled before his eyes.

"He's the closest thing you've got. And right now, as much as you don't like it, we live under his roof."

Ethan looked down at his worn shoes while the thought of his father flashed in his mind. He thought of him frequently. Not of the cancer that ate him away in those last months, but rather, his encouragement to learn an instrument and the times that he drove him to guitar lessons, and even that Christmas when the black B.C. Rich showed up under the tree. Money was tight that year, but his father was sure to make that gift happen.

"This isn't easy for me either. I'm torn between my son and my husband."

"Is that supposed to be a hard decision?" he asked.

"That's not fair." She corrected with the accusatory finger pointed his way.

"No, what's not fair is not asking me how I felt when you married him and then throwing me into the situation to deal with it regardless."

He had her at checkmate; she knew he was right. She hated how he brought it up every time they argued and he knew just how deep it cut her when she hung her head with guilt.

"I shouldn't even tell you about this, but this came in the mail

today.”

From behind her back she produced a copy of Nefarium’s new album, “The Young and the Reckless”. It was avoidance, and he knew it. But his excitement swelled at the sight of the cover the three band members stared back at him.

Dressed in tight leather attire and adorned with grommets and pyramid studs they looked more like they were about to storm a castle than play a rock concert. Corpse paint purposely ran down their faces. The lead singer was positioned between the other two and held his hands out, cupping a white dove like an offering. He flipped the vinyl over to see the tracks listed on both sides of the back picture – a white feather settled in a pool of blood.

Nefarium’s lead singer, “Johnny Inferno” had earned his nickname, “Cutter” because of the onstage antics where he would cut his wrists but never secede to death. It was his shtick. It was shock rock through and through; everything that parents hated and made kids crave it even more. Unfortunately, Cutter lacerated his wrist a little too deeply during a show six weeks prior to the release of his latest album and died in the club’s dressing room.

“You remember what I said,” she warned, shaking her finger upward at his face. “Keep it low – I mean it!”

Ripping through the clear wrap he tilted the cover, shaking the record out into his hands and releasing a plumb of new record smell. The only light that hung from the ceiling was dim, but the record still shined like black tar in the summer’s sun.

It was only a few seconds into the first track when Ethan felt his heartbeat skip as the music grabbed him by the throat and took him to another place; somewhere else. Somewhere far from authority and away from judgment. It was lost in his music that he felt secure and could be bigger than he was made to feel in his own home.

He nodded his head to the sporadic blast beats, the bass throbbed in his pulse. But the intensity behind Cutter's opening scream made him tremble and break into an air guitar riff.

Loaded with angst, the songs protested authority at every level. The church that told him he was evil, the school that told him he wouldn't amount to anything, and the parent that told him he was an embarrassment. Cutter understood him. He had written the soundtrack to Ethan's hurricane years.

Inject awareness. Release rebellion.

"It's a phase" Rachel uttered over her second glass of wine.

"Well, I don't like it," Marc shot back adding a glare for good measure. "I didn't listen to that shit when I was his age. I had a job, a car, and was out picking up girls. He locks himself in that room and listens to long haired men with make up play music. If that isn't the sign of a sissy then I don't know what is."

Another date night, another fight. It wasn't supposed to go this way, it was supposed to be a night out; dinner, drinks. Starting another argument that involved her husband belittling her son and ending with her feeling hurt was not in her plans.

"Didn't Wes teach him anything being a man?" Marc added.

His ice clinked in his drink as he returned the whiskey sour to the table.

She was torn. He made Ethan sound like he was a failure – no trophies from winning games, no girlfriend to sneak around with, no car to fix in the driveway. In Marc's mind that equated to someone who would end up a ditch digger. But in Rachel's mind it was a child, her child, which was content in his own skin.

He took a final swallow from his glass and pushed it to the side.

“He’s gonna have to learn.”

\* \* \*

Marc sat reading the paper when Ethan thumped down the stairs for breakfast. Marc’s eyes traced the teen as he darted across the kitchen and open the fridge, ignoring Marc’s presence at the table. He took a swallow from his cup and held it out like trucker in a diner.

“Get me some more coffee, will ya?” Marc asked, half request, half demand.

Several replies came to mind but rather than start a fight he couldn’t end, CCCC bit his tongue placed the carafe of coffee on the table.

“I’m not holding this damn thing in the air for my health. Coffee goes in the fuckin’ cup.”

The idea of pouring hot coffee in Marc’s lap came to mind. Scorching his dick and burning his abdomen sounded like a feasible revenge. Maybe for added bonus he could smash the glass carafe in Marc’s face and slicing through that rugged good looking face that his mom complimented Marc about having. How would Marc enjoy shaving around a face full of stitches?

Instead he picked up the carafe and poured a cup.

“Thank you, son.”

The words made Ethan cringe.

“I said, ‘Thank you, son’ ...” as he emphasized the label, “...And what do you say?”

Ethan managed to mutter a welcome through the distaste in his mouth.

“That’s better. Now, son, why don’t you get your father some sugar?”

Inject contempt. Release retribution.

“I would but unfortunately he’s dead” Ethan countered.

Marc sprang from his chair and bowed up against the teen in a second, shoving his alpha male ranking down Ethan’s throat deep enough for him to remember. His chest touching Ethan’s.

“You’re gonna learn some manners in my house” he spat. “And if you don’t like it, you can find your way out to the street. Your mother will be just fine here with me. Unlike a dead man, I’ll show her how a real man keeps a woman warm at night.”

“Oh, you don’t like that? Do you not like me talking about what your mom and I do at night? How she begs for me to give it to her like your father couldn’t.” He leaned in close enough that Ethan could smell the coffee on his breath.

“So hard, and deep.”

Ethan’s hands curled into a fist as his lower lip quivered. He kept his eyes low; not seeing Marc’s arrogant face was the only thing that restrained him from unleashing his resentment from the last two years of constant badmouthing.

“Do it you little prick. Just fucking try and I will put your fairy ass in the ground.”

Ethan's fury grew as he turned to retreat back to his room where he could achieve asylum.

Before he could exit, Marc uttered one last insult.

“Fuck you.”

Slamming the door to his room he dashed to the stereo and powered up the unit. The orange glow behind the buttons matched the fire behind his eyes and he knew the exist piece of music that fit his mood. The needle found its place. The vinyl sputtered as his pulse anticipated the first song's opening notes.

His fists repeatedly met the mattress with fury. He imagined it as his stepfather's rib cage and each punch shattered a bone until it resulted in a mass of quivering pulp, struggling to fill its lungs with air.

The rhythm of the double bass drum fueled his rage. He felt the sting of his knuckles chaffing raw against the sheets but he ignored the feeling, discarding the sensation as a minor discomfort compared to the damage that he imagined he was inflicting.

Rachel's fists pounded upon his door, demanding that he open it.

“Ethan, what in the hell just happened? Open the door and talk to me!” she insisted, but he ignored her demands.

The batter upon the wall triggered the player to skip under the needle in the middle of the chorus. The line “Turn it around, listen with your fist” from the song, “Brutality”, echoed through his room.

He stood at attention, drawn in to the stereo as it skipped, repeating the bridge over and over.

He reached out and placed his fingertips on the vinyl, halting

its rotation on the turntable. Then with a steady hand he rotated the record backward, the needle going against the grain and releasing a sound reserved for the score of a horror movie.

The haunting melody of the guitars sounded more like an out of tuned organ with a skipping sound littered between measures. The vocals took more concentration to comprehend. Lyrics that seemed so familiar were now crooned with an incomprehensible drawl. Then the message came through with a voice as clear as glass.

“How sad that was. How sad that was,” repeated over and over through the stereo speakers as he spun the record backwards.

When the words reached him he took a step back, shocked by the result of his experiment. The record returned to spinning clockwise as the song resumed its blast beat and wall of distortion. Cutter once again screeched his way through a chorus about inner belief and outward rebellion.

His pulsed throbbed through his ears. Frightened by his new discovery, his curiosity was peaked. As much as he wanted to place his fingers on the record and hear it again, he feared what he may hear.

Rock bands were accused of hiding subliminal messages in their songs since rock’s conception. Accusations of devil worship and bands encouraging suicide were denied from interviews to court trials. Even Lennon supposedly “buried Paul” in “Strawberry Fields Forever”.

Nefarium on the other hand were different, they never backed down from their accusations. They through caution to the wind while gloating in interviews that their listeners often misinterpreted their lyrics and took their live shows to heart. Cutter couldn’t care less if the result was detrimental, he encouraged his fans by saying, “It’s your life, destroy it however you want.”

Ethan gathered the nerve to try playing the record in reverse once again. With a twitching hand he placed his fingers on the record, bringing it to a halt. Then, with a steady pull, he slid the record backwards as the needle scratched through the groove.

The initial scratching of vinyl was heard followed by the haunting melody of guitars. Cutter's voice sliced through the audio with an unfamiliar chant until he adjusted his speed of which he turned the album.

“Draw his blood. Draw his blood.”

He heard the message with certainty and clarity.

A car door slammed and an engine started up as Ethan pulled his attention away from the stereo just in time to watch Rachel accelerate in reverse out of the driveway with Marc pursuing the car on foot, his arms stretched wide.

Marc was alone with him.

The hammer felt natural in Ethan's hand. He patted it in his palm a couple of times, the metal face impacting though his palm and resonating into the bones of his hand. It had an instinctive balance from the metal head through the handle, making it perfect for an ideal swing.

Thirteen stairs— that was how many steps in Marc's stairway separated him from Ethan. Such a short distance, but yet miles away when retribution was calling.

His fingers adjusted his hold on the handle as each step found a stair and a memory of Ethan's contempt for Marc. Each step was another mental scar that he was reminded of to carry with him. But this would come to an end tonight.

The slurs, the threats of physical violence, they were all going to end with Ethan as the victor. Marc would finally see him for who he really was – a strength behind his scars, impervious to pain, an indomitable spirit inside of a storm.

Halfway down the stairs reality struck him, this was final – no repent. Remorse was a feeling for the guilty.

He reached the bottom landing and heard Marc rustling around inside his bedroom. Ethan put one foot in front of the other as he trekked toward the sound. Within two minutes Marc's oppression would come to an end.

Nefarium's music was nearly out of earshot save the thumping of Raven's bass.

Marc did not hear Ethan enter the room. Marc's was focused on finding something within his nightstand and oblivious to any distraction from outside his quest. He cursed to himself, disappointed at his lack of accomplishment, as he shuffled objects from one side to the other of the drawer.

Ethan inched toward Marc; the hammer raised above his head, the forks hungered for Marc's skull. Within a minute his urge to make Marc submit would be satiated.

He drew a breath – the vision of Marc lying in a pool of his own blood flooded his mind.

The hammer fell as Marc rotated and dodged the blow. The forks lodged in the flat surface of the nightstand. Marc studied the weapon then turned to see Ethan standing before, now weaponless and without a backup plan.

Marc lunged at Ethan, tackling him and bringing the two down to the floor beside the bed. Ethan's head hit the floor with a sickening

thud, confusion scrambling his synapse momentarily until Marc beat a focused transmission into his head. Repeated blows to his youthful face released a crimson river of blood from his eyebrow, nose and upper lip.

Blood droplets splattered on the carpet and the wall. The sound of hard knuckles colliding with flesh echoed through the room until Ethan lay motionless on the floor. Every punch was received without resistance. His body limp, pummeled into a state of unconsciousness.

With Marc's anger still elevated a thought entered his mind; how was he going to explain this to the authorities? Of course he was attacked, Ethan's prints were on the hammer. He had no choice but to beat the kid into submission – he feared for his life. But was that excuse good enough for Rachel?

Inside Ethan's room the turntable rotated through the grooved pattern of Nefarium's third song, "The Burning of Mercy". Evol's guitars squealed with pitch dives against Natas' percussive assault. Then, scratching to a halt, the record spun counterclockwise, like as if it were directed to do so by an invisible hand. Rotating backwards through the song, another message was projected through the room.

"Oh, what a pretty fire! Oh, what a pretty fire!"

Smoke rose from the album just before a flame ignited on at the end of the needle and spread up the bedroom wall. The blaze rolled over the ceiling and melted through the sheetrock – spreading from room to room as if pushed by a gulf wind until the home was encased inside a fireball.

The sound of the fire alarms broke Marc's reflection and sent him running out of the room to inspect the sound. Black smoke lurked through the hallway accompanied by the popping sound of furniture that ignited in the path of the inferno. He knew that there would be reconciling the problem and the only solution was to escape.

With his eyes burning and smoke invading his lungs, Marc stumbled to find an exit. He had walked the halls of his house countless times, he knew the turns and straight paths by muscle memory if nothing else. But in his panic he could not concentrate on what room he was in nor the route to the closest egress. With clarity far from his mind and trepidation setting in, he leaned against the wall and succumb to the blackness that filled his lungs.

The nurse held the syringe in the air and pushed the air out with a small amount of the drug that arced as it followed. She pinched off the line and inserted the needle into hub, injecting Ethan's medication.

Rachel watched from a chair in the corner where she slept for the past two nights, hoping for her son to wake. The meds that dripped every few seconds in the IV chamber kept him in a profound sleep. Unconscious and unaware of the frequent visitors that came and went from his room, stocking supplies and pushing medication through his lines, his mind was in another place, distant from Marc, his mother, and even the music that he idolized from the front row of his turntable.

The whisper of the oxygen that piped through his nasal cannula and the regular beep from the cardiac monitor were the only signs that his mortality remained with her.

She buried her face in his chest as the tears came. She tried to convince herself to refrain from going to pieces, that he could hear her sob, but that did nothing to help her reaction as she saw the suspended life of her child. The melancholy filled her, stinging like a winter's chill every time she reminded herself to keep it together.

Looking to the ceiling she blotted her eyes, assured that her three day old eyeliner was running. She held her breath as she slid an embroidered Nefarium patch between his fingers.

## **LIKE SO MANY NICKELS AND DIMES**

*by Anya Stanley*

I was 13 years old when my world and my pride came to a halt.

I sat in the hallway by Mr. Odden's office and twiddled away on my new tablet, working on a Worldcraft project. Building a digital world pacified the riot ensuing in my cheekbone. Turns out, pretty boy Gunther could land a punch every once in a while. I leaned over and spat blood into the small mesh wastebasket beside me. Say what you will about Hamlane High School, they kept a tidy campus.

A notification ring from my tablet gave me a start, and the riot on my face resumed. I winced, and opened up the chat app. It was Sebastian, offering his usual helpful contributions.

**LOL DUDE ARE YOU IN THE PRINCIPALS OFFICE?  
DEAD MAN WALKING...**

I chuckled and adjusted my ripped shirt, while my right shoulder screamed in protest. A tap at the window to my left caught my ear, and I turned to see Sebastian pressed against the glass, making cutthroat gestures at me. As soon as he leaned back, his battered maroon Texas A&M cap fell off his head and out of sight. It dripped with puddle water as he picked it up, cursing.

I ignored the aching in my right side and laughed while I flipped him the bird. He returned the gesture before he disappeared from view. I turned the sound down so the uptight receptionist wouldn't hear me messaging. I couldn't see her over the framed "GIT EM BUCKS" print displayed on the wide, gray desk in front of me.

Nah, I'm not too worried about Mom's reaction. Unless she turns off the WiFi. Wouldn't be fair, she knows the work I'm putting

into this contest submission.

I paused, letting my scraped fingers hover over the touchscreen. If she did that, I'd lose progress on my Worldcraft castle. I lose progress, I don't finish by Youth Day, and lose out on the chance for the \$50 prize.

**FAIRNESS DOESNT MATTER, WINNING DOES. YOU DIDNT SEEM TO CARE ABOUT ETHICS WHEN YOU WERE SLAMMING GUNTHERS HEAD INTO A LOCKER LOL**

I squinted at the screen through my swelling eye. I had \$254 saved in an old spaghetti jar in my room, \$50 would get me to my goal. This was my ticket to a brand new gaming desktop, and I would do anything to win. Gunther learned that the hard way when tried to "confiscate" my tablet.

I didn't get a chance to type a reply, as the door to Principal Odden's office opened and Gunther hobbled out, holding a limp icepack to his head. Gray scuffs and the occasional blood drop adorned the shoulders and elbows of his emerald green Bucks jacket. His eyes met mine and we regarded each other with equal loathing as he passed. Odden's glistening bald head leaned out of the doorway like a stick puppet.

"Hugo. In here. NOW."

His office smelled of old books and printer ink. A framed picture of him posing with the football team (GIT 'EM BUCKS!!!) sat on the wall behind his mahogany desk. He looked silly in the photo, as most of the players towered over him and he wore an ear-to-ear grin. I'd grin, too, if the school team won four championships in a row on my watch. He gestured towards the shabby green chair in front of me.

"Have a seat, son."

I flopped onto the seat while he leaned against his desk and glared at me.

“What’s going on with you, Hugo? This isn’t the first time you’ve been in my office this month.”

I crossed my arms.

“It was self-defense. That bunghole—”

Mr. Odden held up a hand.

“I’ll thank you not to use that sort of language in my office, son. Young Mr. Werner informed me that you had been engaged in a mobile game...thing...on school grounds.”

I couldn’t roll my eyes any harder.

“They’re called apps.”

“They are a waste of time, and turn you and your entire generation into drooling zombies,” he said with a shake of his head.

My scowl could have burned a hole in his shiny little scalp. He gazed over at the team photo on the wall and the trophies surrounding it, and let out a cleansing sigh before changing gears. He moved beside me and clapped a hand on my shoulder.

“You see, son...technology can be a wonderful thing. Tweets can raise morale among our team and fans. That interest leads to higher ticket and concession sales, and more people willing to pay for football camps and other services that our modest little town can offer.”

He strolled back behind his desk and adjusted his navy blazer before seating himself in his ergonomic chair. The leather groaned at

him as he sank in.

“You, however, choose to play online games on school time, and lash out at the first person to call you out. It would behoove you to take note of Gunther’s behavior and adjust accordingly.”

I let out a bray of laughter and asked if he got a bigger bonus in his paycheck for sucking up to the Mayor’s son like that.

I was suspended for 3 days. But hey, more time for Worldcraft.

\* \* \*

Mom picked me up. The scent of Burberry perfume announced her plans — she had a PTA meeting to attend later. Between that and her job on the town council, she had eyes and ears everywhere. It was hard for a guy to get away with anything. If I so much as sneezed, she’d know by lunchtime.

I loaded my bike into the back of her silver Chevy Sonic, on top of a pile of Youth Day fliers (CELEBRATE WITH US AS WE CELEBRATE OUR YOUTH!) and pretended not to see her glaring at me through the rear view mirror.

It was September, but the Texas humidity hadn’t quite left yet, and the heat cast a thick shimmer over the Mom-and-Pop storefronts that stretched down 1st Street, our main street. I nearly broke my neck staring at the gaming computer setup in the window of Harlan’s Electronics as we passed, and spent the rest of the 5-minute ride home silently daydreaming about Worldcrafting in style.

Mom pulled into the driveway of our single-story home, and turned toward me, holding out her slender, manicured hand. I stared back, incredulous.

“You just earned this,” she admonished, brushing a stray

brunette hair away with her free hand, “and now I have to be the bad guy and punish you by taking away the thing you care about most. You won’t learn otherwise.”

I clenched my jaw and fished the tablet out from my backpack and handed it over, shaking my head. She looked me up and down, sighed, and ruffled my hair.

“I love ya, kid. Go clean yourself up and finish any homework you have. Go on.”

I hung my head and plodded into the house to my room, dragging my backpack along the hardwood floor. She followed, giving a courtesy wave to our busybody neighbor, Mr. Suggs. He made up a good portion of Mom’s eyes and ears, to my frustration. Her burlap wreath with a little Texas silhouette on it thumped against the door as she shut it behind her and diverted to the living room, where she turned on the TV and rehearsed her speech for the upcoming festival.

“Youth Day is the day that we show our appreciation for the boys and girls of Hamlane. They are our greatest asset, our greatest treasure...”

I shut out the noise with a slam of my door and immediately regretted it, as my shoulder painfully reminded me that I went toe-to-toe with a linebacker only hours before. I took a deep breath, regarding my room. Thrift store furniture peppered the area, only pulled together by their uniform state of wear and tear. Gaming posters covered every inch of wall space except that of the closet, in which secondhand clothes and my Daisy BB gun held the prime real estate.

I wished Sebastian lived closer, he would always have something inappropriate to say to make me laugh. I had just started to undress when Mom shouted my name. I trotted back out to the kitchen to see her sitting at the table, glaring down at my tablet. She shoved it toward me.

“What did you do to this thing? There’s some crazy lock screen on it and I can’t even disable the WiFi.”

I leaned in to squint at the screen. It wasn’t locked, not by any effort of mine. It displayed a white screen with the image of a huge dusky rat on it. I looked back at my Mom and shrugged, shaking my head.

“Wasn’t me.”

She pursed her glossy rose lips.

“Can’t swipe out of it, and resetting did noth— did you turn off the TV?”

We walked in to the living room together to find that the same image of the rat was now adorning Mom’s 52-inch flat screen. And her laptop. And her phone. We stared at each other for a brief moment, asking silent questions neither could answer.

A knock at the door brought us out of our confused stupor, and I yanked it open. Mr. Suggs stood on our porch with the same look of confusion on his face. He had an affinity for tacky Hawaiian shirts, and the puke green one he wore today flapped in the humid breeze. In his tan, calloused hand he held his phone.

“Hey, ah, this might sound loony, but...”

He looked past us toward the living room, and dropped his shoulders when he saw the TV screen.

“...oh. You’ve got it, too.”

Vermin had come to the town of Hamlane.

\* \* \*

On the first day, most folks were just bewildered at the images. Neighbors came out to their yards, hands on hips, to stare at their satellite dishes and hold their phones up for a better signal. On the second day, the confusion turned to frustration as cable and internet providers gave no answers. On the third day, the town was in a panic as businesses started to suffer.

Folks don't carry paper maps anymore, and an online map was our lifeline to the rest of the state, out-of-town customers, and their bottomless pockets. A town meeting was set up to answer everyone's questions that night.

The sideswiping rain pelted my face and seeped under the collar of my raincoat as I trotted with Mom into the school gymnasium. School colors of green and gold adorned the building, inside and out. Championship banners flanked the wall behind the basketball hoop on one end of the court, and that's where the Hamlane town council set up shop to hear out a full house of concerned constituents. I seated myself on the lowest row of bleachers in the corner while Mom met up with the other council members. The crowd grumbled amongst themselves until the Mayor banged his gavel.

“Alright now, settle down. Let's get some order in here.”

A couple more bangs beat the crowd into submission. His chair groaned as he rose.

“Now this isn't an official town hall meeting, so I'll go ahead and dispense with meeting protocol and formalities. We've gotta get this virus thing sorted out. Do we know what it is yet? Dale?”

A wiry man in jeans and a wrinkled blazer jacket stood up.

“Uh, yeah,” he croaked, clearing his throat, “so I got on the

landline and spoke with the city utilities commission, the power company, and every phone carrier that services this town.”

He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“No one knows what in God’s good name is going on. Some kinda malware that affects most electronics. TVs, computers, mobile devices...that rodent’s face is everywhere.”

Mayor Werner stemmed the rising tide of murmurs from the crowd with the wave of a hand.

“Now, I want you all to know that we are doing everything we can to get on top of this. The landline phones still work if you’ve got ‘em, so we can still call the fire department and our boys in blue. Lights work just fine, as well as water and gas. You’re gonna have to bear with us as we tackle this. Got an ETA on that, Dale?”

Dale hesitated, then shook his head.

“Anywhere from one to two weeks, sir,” he said with a shrug.

Several voices lodged their complaints at once. Fingers pointed, the gavel rapped, and everyone and no one was heard. The bickering swelled to a monstrous roar, which died abruptly when all of the adults jumped in surprise at a quick, collective buzzing. Eyebrows raised, people reached into their pockets and purses and pulled out their phones, their tablets, their little lifelines. They peered down, and the rats peered back.

No notifications, no changes. Glances to other adults seemed to only deepen the confusion among them. A static silence settled over the gym. I shifted in my seat, waiting for the world to start turning again. Instead, the world bellowed as the double doors to the building opened, giving the thunder outside a chance to echo the intrusion. It was only slightly pacified by soft, steady footfall that followed.

A man walked in.

The doors crashed shut, punctuating his entrance. Unconcerned, he strolled straight towards the council. There were many things of his that commanded everyone's attention: the faint scent of pine and metal that suddenly permeated the gym, the short, slicked-back ebony hair, the espresso leather weekender he swung back and forth. What caught my eye was the hint of a grin he could barely contain on his waxy face.

He walked with leisure through the crowd, one hand in the pocket of his dark gray slacks. The jingle of coins in his pocket was audible, such was the hush in the room as he disappeared from my view. I could only hear the loose change, and the muted clacking of his spotless oxford shoes parting the waters, and wonder who the man was along with everyone else.

I dissolved out of the crowd and stumbled up a couple of rows of bleachers for a better view. As I tripped over my own feet I expected to catch another death stare from Mom, but no such response was given. Her eyes, and all eyes, were on our mysterious newcomer.

He stood in front of the council's table with the confidence of someone who had been around the block a time or two. Dark, brooding eyes shimmered from his smooth face. He gently set his bag down beside him and removed his ebony peacoat, revealing a checkered gray button-up and a black tie adorning his barrel chest.

"I am Mr. Piper, and you, Mr. Mayor, have a problem," said the man, neatly folding his peacoat over the crook of his arm.

He pivoted to face the crowd, enunciating every word.

"You all do. Malware like this is no walk in the park to exterminate. Not something you can Ctrl-Alt-Delete your way out of, either. A bug like this...can paralyze a community. Keep you on its

leash and let you fade away, while the world — and the paying customers therein — passes you by. We need to get your businesses and schools plugged right back in with civilization, and soon. There are ads to be run. Tidbits to tweet. Snaps to chat, and so forth. Without the use of your smarter devices, this town is lost when the time comes to balance that ever-increasing budget sheet.”

He pulled his hand from his pocket and placed it over his heart.

“This is what I do, and what I have done for years. I eliminate the vermin that infect your society. In the past I have worked cybersecurity with Interpol and the FBI, and done consultation with the NSA. I know technology, and how to communicate with it to our mutual benefit. I can identify and locate the source of your infection for a reasonable fee. However, if it’s a thorough, prompt cleaning you desire, my fee will be far less modest.”

He paused to let his words hover along with the sharp musk of metal in the air.

“A thorough cleaning will cost your town ten thousand dollars, and this price is quite firm, I can assure you.”

A flock of gasps soared through the crowd and landed at the feet of our town leaders, who sat aghast. The man in gray continued.

“Your options are simple,” he said, pulling change out of his pocket and shifting it in his palm, “you can part ways with your pennies for the greater good of Hamlane, or you can sit on your wallets, and hope that your business patrons and potential customers are patient while your top IT minds do their best.”

He glanced at Dale, who rapidly flushed red. Mayor Werner cast a flustered glance around the room.

“Well, thank you for your offer, Mister, uh...Piper. Do we have

a way to conta—”

“Here is my card, Mr. Mayor,” he said, gently placing a crisp white card on the Council’s table, “I can be reached at the cabin by your Mueller Bridge, I’m sure you know the one.”

Everyone did.

Mr. Piper donned his coat and adjusted the collar. The click-clack of his shoes echoed throughout the building as he strode to the doors. He turned back and tapped a finger to an imaginary cap.

“Good evening to you all.”

He opened the doors to the applause of the storm and went back into the evening gloom.

\* \* \*

Mom dropped me off at home and went in to work to talk with the finance clerks to figure out where they’d get the fee money from. The Council, and the town, voted unanimously to hire Mr. Piper.

In my room, I sketched Worldcraft ideas on a notepad and watched the evening quickly roll in. It occurred to me that if I could meet with Mr. Piper, he might be able to fix my device first, giving me a jump on the competition. A 10-minute ride along the river would take me to his cabin; I could be back before Mom returned from work. I pulled my bike out of the garage and set off.

The cabin Mr. Piper stayed in was actually two log cabins, connected by a breezeway. A common roof covered the entire thing. It sat in a small clearing in the woods, just off the well-worn trail that ran along Devil’s River, eventually leading to Mueller Bridge, then over the hills into the great nowhere. I rode up to the cabin and propped my bike against a nearby tree. The wooden steps murmured at my

trespass as I looked for signs that he was home. There were none.

“Uh, Mr. Piper? ‘Lo?”

After hearing no answer, I continued into the front room of the cabin on the right. It was a kitchen, with a range stove and an off-white fridge. A dust-covered table sat by the window. There were no chairs. I made it two steps in when an overwhelming stench of rotting meat hit me. I turned, gagging, and scrambled out to the breezeway between the cabins. I breathed through my nose, savoring the cool post-sunset air.

I looked at my bike in the dirt, and out toward the woods just beyond the clearing. A heavy layer of thick trees meant that sundown brought swift and total darkness everywhere but the clearing. I swung my gear bag around my side and pulled out my tablet, the scuffed metal familiar in my hand. I held the device in front of me to light my way as I tiptoed into the front room of the opposite cabin.

The light switch was easy to find. A single, bare bulb cast a harsh light on a narrow table against the far wall, the only furniture in the room. Paper littered the table in a milky spill, stopped only by Mr. Piper’s smooth leather bag. I shuffled through the crisp sheets with a hesitant hand, hoping to find an IT protocol or anything that would let me fix my tablet and get out of there. Technical terms leapt out at me:

Tone therapy...

...sustained acoustic frequency...

...brain wave training...

...synchronized neural stimulation in multiple subjects...

I furrowed my brows and wondered what tones emitted from a device would do to get rid of the rat images infesting our hamlet, when an intense change in humidity entrenched itself over me in a thick

sheet. I twitched at the tingle in my armpits and began to sweat. The acrid odor of pine and metal gave rise to my dread, threatening to close off my throat in that unmistakable bio-cue to get the hell out of Dodge. Deep, honeyed words met me as I turned to flee.

“It’s a simple process, you know.”

Mr. Piper lounged against the doorway, an uncanny grin inching across his face. I swallowed a lump of unease, unable to take my gaze off of the glinting half dollar Mr. Piper pulled out of his slate pants pocket. He twiddled the coin from thumb to little finger and back again, never breaking eye contact. The bizarre coppery odor suffocated me in a damp blanket of warmth. My eyes welled up and I turned away from him.

“I can converse with your gadgets, you see. I speak their language and play music through the current. The electronic components are my instruments. With a little fine-tuning, they can make things happen, make people happy,” he purred.

His choice of words made me pause. I shivered and glanced over at the title of one of the papers again. Isochronal Tones and Their Effects On —

“I can see that you aren’t convinced,” he conceded.

My back was to him, but I felt his eyes on me, processing. He sauntered up behind me. My gut lurched skyward and my blood thundered in my veins, quickening with every second spent trying to stay calm. The heat of his words caressed my neck.

“No worries, boy. You’ll see tomorrow.”

His voice was barely above a whisper, but I jerked back as if he had screamed at the top of his lungs. A flurry of sheets flew off the table as I stumbled around him, towards the open door. His thin,

upturned lips widened as he gingerly stepped heel-to-toe after me, hands clasped behind his back.

Mr. Piper silently stopped at the doorway as I tripped and tumbled out onto a bed of dirt and pine needles. With my backpack swinging from my shoulder, I crawled onto my bike and rapidly waddled out to the trail. The wind bit at my face and resisted my attempt to flee. It wasn't until I started pedaling that I had the gumption to look back.

In the dim glow of the porch lights I beheld his flawless smile, burning a pearly scar onto his silhouette.

\* \* \*

At home, my breathless story went unacknowledged. Mom had just come out of her bedroom in her lavender bathrobe as I frantically burst into the house, begging her to call the cops.

“They can't arrest someone for ‘being weird’, Hugo,” she said.

She unwrapped a faded white towel from her head and scrunched her damp hair into waves.

“You know, I've had a long day playing catch-up with paperwork,” she lamented, tossing the towel into a hamper.

I followed her through the narrow hallway.

“Turns out, our council kept most of their records digitally, plus we're preparing for the festival.”

She slumped onto the mauve living room couch, while I persisted with my claims. She looked upon me pleadingly with dull eyes.

“I’m not in the mood for this. You’ve done enough this week.” I opened my mouth to protest, but she silenced me with a raised hand.

“Just...go to bed. Go on.”

I stomped to my room, threw my door shut and buried my face in my grimy hands, wondering if I would survive the night. The wind rattled at my window and mocked my efforts to shut the world out with discount curtains. I grabbed my BB gun from the closet and sat in a corner, waiting for the smiling man.

Sleep didn’t come until the morning light did.

\* \* \*

“...you spend the night like that?”

My eyelids fluttered open to the sight of Mom staring at me from the doorway. She sharply sighed through her nose and ambled over to my curtains, flung them open and showered me in soft daylight. There were still some clouds leftover from the storm, hanging back like lingering doubts. I forced myself to my feet in time to catch the jeans she volleyed at my chest.

“Change your clothes and come out to breakfast. I’ve got a surprise for you.” she crooned as she left.

After dressing, I made my way to the kitchen. My feet scuffed along the smooth floor, carrying me half-asleep to the repainted dining table. Mom turned away from bacon sizzling on the stove to gawk at me in anticipation, waving a pair of salad tongs in the air.

“Did you notice the TV?” she asked.

I straightened in my seat. The sounds of Top 10 country music softly twanged through the living room. Never had I been so delighted

to hear lovelorn rednecks sing about breakups. I turned back to catch Mom placing my tablet before me.

“Oh, sweet!” I shouted, grabbing the thin device. “When did everything come back up?”

“About an hour ago,” she began, moving cooked bacon onto a lined plate. “I woke up to hear my phone making odd sounds on my nightstand. A series of digital notes, like Morse code. Meep-meep-meep-boooooop...meep-meep-meep-boooooop.”

Her tongs danced above her head to the tune.

“To be honest, after a second or two, I found the meeps and boops kind of relaxing. The rat picture glitched a few times, then the phone restarted itself, good as new!”

She walked over with our plates and we ate in peace as we thumbed through our devices. I thought back to what I saw at Mr. Piper’s cabin, the journals on isochronal tones, the tune Mom described. The scent of copper lingered in my mind, and my mouth watered as a result. After a minute of browsing, I found that my apps were missing. The tablet had been reset entirely, which meant that Worldcraft, and my castle project, was gone. My stomach dropped. All of my progress, lost.

“Whoa, what the heck? Where are my pictures?” Mom exclaimed.

Her eyes ping-ponged and her index finger thumped over her phone screen.

I frowned.

“Looks like whatever Mr. Piper used to clear out the virus also did a hard reset on our devices. Our DVR’d movies and shows are

probably erased off the TV, too. And music and photos from the computer. Anything locally saved.”

“Unbelievable.” Her lower jaw jutted out as she spoke. “If I had known he was gonna ruin our electronics I would’ve never agreed to that ridiculous fee.”

“He did what he said he would do,” I shrugged, “and you guys did agree to that fee. Kinda have to pay him.”

Her expression hardened.

“We’ll see what the council has to say about that.”

\* \* \*

The gymnasium was packed with angry Hamlanians. Dance moms and football dads jostled for the cushioned fold-out chairs on the gym floor, while masses of teens and adolescents lined the upper bleachers in their various cliques, arms crossed and waiting impatiently to be plugged back into the grid. Pretty Boy Gunther was among them, and he gave me a nod, which I returned. Sebastian’s dark red cap was easy to find in the sea of faces, and I sat beside him on the lowest bleacher.

I started to tell him about the nightmare at the cabin when the Mayor’s gavel came down, and we both looked up in time to watch Mr. Piper make his way through. The scent of pine and metal followed him again, and I felt nauseous. He stopped in front of the Mayor who remained standing behind the table, did an about-face, and took in the sea of livid faces with a smirk.

“I see you’re all back in business,” he said, gesturing towards us all with a wave of his hand, “you’re welcome.”

My Mom stood up, her mouth set in a hard line.

“You, Sir, have deceived us. We would have never agreed to your outrageous fee if we had known you’d wipe our hard drives in the process.”

He regarded her. The brief silence was uncomfortable, but he wasn’t.

“You had a problem, and I solved it.”

“That’s another thing, Mr. Piper,” Mayor Werner interjected, “it’s awfully convenient for you to show up with the perfect voodoo trick to fix this bug of ours.”

A baby’s cry from among the seated masses accompanied his complaints. Mr. Piper snickered.

“A mild electric pulse accompanied by some tones is hardly voodoo to the technically savvy,” he said.

Mayor Werner’s neck reddened.

“Nonetheless, your secrecy surrounding your methods has given us doubts as to your motives.” He straightened, thumbing the discolored leather of his belt. “You’re no better than a loan shark and were it up to me, I’d have you arrested on the spot.”

Mr. Piper promptly turned toward the mayor and thrust his hands in front of him, palms up. His broad shoulders eclipsed any reaction from my view.

“I’m willing to cooperate fully with law enforcement, as I am confident that I’ve done nothing illegal.”

I glanced up to the bleachers. Most of the under-30 crowd were focused on their social media accounts, tweeting and liking things of

more importance to them. Some were filming the argument with their phones. There was either anger or apathy in our town; nothing in between.

The mayor hitched up his waistband.

“Unfortunately, we have no grounds to take legal action. However, I think I speak for the council and our fine citizens of Hamlane,” he said as he gestured toward the crowd, “when I tell you that we find your fee unreasonable, given the poor services rendered.”

Mr. Piper lowered his hands without breaking eye contact with the mayor. Several voices shouted obscenities and demanded that he go back where he came from. Sebastian crossed his arms and nodded in agreement.

“Am I to understand, Mr. Mayor...that you won’t be honoring our deal?” he said calmly.

“You got that right,” retorted the mayor. Several councilmen harrumphed their support.

Mr. Piper took a heavy breath through his broad nose. With his jaw clenched, he reached into his black coat pocket and pulled out a red comb. He calmly pulled the comb back through his glossy raven hair.

“If you will not end your greed, I will end it for you. I will remove your most valuable commodity, and I will grin all the while.”

His smile turned the air electric.

“That a threat of some sort?” Mayor Werner puffed his chest and pointed a finger. “We don’t do well with threats around here.”

Mr. Piper didn’t miss a beat.

“Good, I don’t make them. As I said when I first arrived here, I rid your society of vermin. Once the job is completed, I move on.”

Mr. Piper turned on a heel toward the door.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Mayor. Come tomorrow, I’ll be gone for good.”

Smug murmurs followed him as he slowly walked out of the building. While the people of Hamlane congratulated themselves, Sebastian and I went outside to get some air. I paced back and forth as he leaned against a painted wall (GIT EM BUCKS!!!) of the building.

“Dude, I’m telling you, there’s something off about this guy.”

My eyes flitted left and right as I walked. Sebastian’s nose was inches from his phone, eyebrows furrowed.

“Mmmm.”

I halted, and slapped the phone from his hands.

“Hey bunghole, I’m serious!”

“What the crap, Hugo?”

I watched him in disgust as he scrambled on the pavement after the phone. He arose and shoved me into the wall, his nostrils flared.

“You know, this guy played our town. The Mayor knows it, the council knows it, our parents know it. While you’re shaking in your boots over some crap you think you saw, the rest of us told him where to stick his modest fee.”

He pinched the brim of his faded Aggies hat and settled it on

his head, then spoke through gritted teeth.

“See, we get ours, no matter wh—”

Sebastian stopped, as recognition dawned on his face.

“That’s it,” he said, staring at me, “that’s it! We go out to his cabin while he’s gone, we clean him out and teach him not to take advantage of our town. We’ll be heroes, man. Like Robin Hood.”

I admonished him in a furious whisper.

“Did you hear anything he said in there? He did nothing illegal. The cops have nothing on him. But trespassing and theft...that’s illegal.”

My stomach flipped and I shook my head.

“I don’t know about this, Bass.”

A notification tone signaled the end of our bout. Sebastian whipped out his phone and checked the message, and giggled.

“Fine, dude. Let’s at least go check his place out tonight, see if he’s the android you think he is.”

Men, women, and children spilled out of the double doors of the gym, angrily tapping on their gadgets. Sebastian walked backwards toward his brother and a bunch of upperclassmen in green and gold letterman jackets. He pointed at me.

“Meet at the bridge in an hour?”

A Youth Day flier fluttered to the ground from above me, slowly soaking up the edge of a nearby puddle. I sighed, and nodded. I would need to stop at my house first, though. There’s no way I would

go there empty-handed.

\* \* \*

Mueller Bridge sat 5 miles east of town, a half mile ahead of Mr. Piper's cabin. It towered over Devil's River, an unforgiving snake that eventually emptied into the Rio Grande. When I rode up to meet Sebastian, ashen clouds had crept in like hovering parents. Bass was already there, adjusting his wine-colored cap nervously.

"Dude, I thought you were gonna wuss out," he said, flexing his jaw. "I scouted it out, the guy's gone."

My eyes searched the trees.

"Where? Did you see him leave? Did you smell anything?"

"I smell you pissing your pants over this," he mocked, "let's just check it out and see if we can find anything."

He paused, and touched my shoulder.

"Dude...you gonna be alright?"

I took a cleansing breath.

"Yeah. This needs to be done."

We dumped our bikes by the bridge and made the ten minute trek to the cabin. At the edge of the clearing, I grasped the straps of my pack to hide the tremble of my hands, while my best friend swung his deflated black backpack around to his belly.

The cabin was unlit, as before. Our sneakers pulled creaks from the porch steps. Sebastian made a beeline for the kitchen, despite my warnings. I went in to the opposite room, keeping my back against the

wall. Moments later Bass caught up with me, suppressing his retching and wiping spittle from his mouth.

Told him not to go, I thought.

I pulled out my tablet while Sebastian flipped the light switch, eliciting a deafening pop and plunging us back into blackness. I jumped back from the noise and nearly fell into him. He whipped out a flashlight and shone it on every inch of the room in a single frantic second, coming to a rest on Mr. Piper's dark brown weekender perched atop the only table in the room. Sebastian galloped to the table, leaving me adrift in the dark.

"Dude." he whispered, aiming the flashlight at the bag.

In the dim glow I watched him tug the fraying brim of his cap down over his eyes.

"Jackpot."

He set the light on the table and tilted the open bag toward me, displaying bundled stacks of cash intermingled with every kind of mobile device I've ever seen. Smart phones, beepers, flip phones, and palm pilots peppered the loot.

My jaw dropped, and I thought of the display in Harlan's Electronics. I thought of Worldcraft. I thought of what I had come here to do. While I thought, Bass scooped out the money by the fistful and shoved it into the gaping maw of his backpack, swelling its belly. Without slowing down his frenzied cash grab, Sebastian nodded at me.

"C'mon! You want that desktop or what?" he asked, trying in vain to zip up his backpack.

I stepped back, shaking my head slowly.

“Naw, Bass. This guy did what he said he would do. We all should have done the same.”

I unzipped my bag with ease.

“See this?” I said, pulling out a wad of crumpled dollar bills. “This is gonna make things right. He’ll leave us alone and —”

“He’s gonna leave anyway, man. We kicked him out while you were wetting your pants about the big scary man.”

The heat from my cheeks could have set the room aflame. I lowered my money-filled fist, ignoring the sweat dripping down my temple.

“Take it back, bung-hole. You weren’t here last time. You didn’t see him, or smell him, or feel like he was gonna eat you alive.”

My voice quivered as I spoke through clenched teeth.

“Take. It. Back.”

Sebastian sighed and dropped his shoulders.

“Okay. I take it—”

We both froze as the smell hit us. Metal. Pine. My breathing quickened to a sprinter’s pace, but I was rooted to the spot. I couldn’t turn around, couldn’t scream. Sebastian stared, wide-eyed, over my shoulder. I shut my eyes, but it did nothing to pacify the uncontrollable quake in my body.

“Good evening, boys.”

Mr. Piper entered the room, his fancy shoes clicking on the hardwood floor. My heart thundered against my ribs. The smiling man

had come.

“I heard your little quarrel and I must say, I admire your moral fortitude, Hugo.”

He came to a stop between me and Bass, the flashlight’s beam illuminating his face. I wish to God it hadn’t.

I opened my eyes and immediately regretted it.

Mr. Piper’s smile had deteriorated. His thin lips were stretched so wide that they had begun to crack and bleed into little crimson tributaries from ear to ear. His teeth were still human, but unnatural, numerous. His eyes had glazed over to a pearly white that glimmered in the darkness.

He continued his uncanny grin and lowered his gaze to my hand, my money. Resolved, I knelt before him and emptied my shivering hand, dropping the sweat-soaked earnings before his feet. Sebastian whimpered while I turned my secondhand backpack upside down, dumping the rest of my savings onto the pithy pile. I stayed kneeling, and watched a drop of sweat drip from the tip of my nose to the floor before looking up.

Mr. Piper tilted his head slightly, his grin fading into a bloody wrinkle. He didn’t react when a flurry of movement exploded to my left. He didn’t react when Sebastian grabbed my arm and dragged me toward the open doorway. He didn’t react when I resisted, and cried for him to accept my pathetic offering. My best friend and I fled into the night, and Mr. Piper had watched us go.

Fat, gluttonous raindrops pattered onto my tear-streaked cheeks, a merciful camouflage. After what seemed like a marathon sprint, our bikes waited for us on the well-trodden path by the industrial bridge. Sebastian ran hunched over, struggling to carry the bulging burden of his greed on his back. I mounted my bicycle, and began to pedal

furiously. A glance back showed Sebastian pushing off, half-pedaling, half-waddling.

“Bass! C’mon, man!” I cried.

The wind howled and jeopardized my balance. I pedaled faster.

He waved me on from behind. The glassy screen of his phone gleamed as he held it against the handlebar.

“Just go! I’m calling 911, I’m right behind——”

The world exploded in a brilliant supernova and I was pummeled from all sides, coming to a rest near the low-hanging branch that clotheslined me.

My bike lay a few feet ahead, neatly canted at the base of a tree. Had I fallen to the left instead of the right of the path, I would have been swept up in Devil’s River. A few feet further from my bike was the back of my best friend, riding, ever receding into the pitch-dark ahead.

My head swam, threatening to drown me as I tried, and failed, to stand. I crawled to my bike and dragged it a few feet further into the woods, where the thick tree line provided the cover of darkness while I watched the path with eyes wide. My soaked shirt clung to my heaving chest.

In the fierce downpour, I could see the ever-swelling edges of my broken nose in my blurred vision, and beyond, on the trail, a towering figure entered. The storm failed to censor the figure’s wrinkled skin, its stark paleness, like that of a skinless rat. Its feet came to fine, dark points that tiptoed up the path. It twisted its pallid upper body backwards, and a flash of lightning exposed its unholy face. It wore the smiling man’s deteriorated grin, now peeled back to reveal slate gray gums rife with miniature, pointed teeth. Its glazed-white

eyes reflected like a cat's in the indistinct night.

Slumped against the tree, I could only manage a low moan of revulsion with every heavy exhale. I watched the beast unhinge its cavernous jaw and let forth a high-pitched cry that I can only describe as the death of hope. Twice more I had to endure the sound as it competed with the resounding thunder, but it changed with each wail. The screeching processed itself, adjusted, became more... analog.

The thing in front of me was mimicking digital tones. I wanted so much to cover my ears and eyes and shut out the world, but my body had had enough, and vetoed all efforts to lift so much as a finger. I looked on from under leaden eyelids, as the creature continued ambling down the path and disappeared from view.

Then the children came.

A cavalcade of pajama-clad youth silently shuffled up the path, toward the bridge, at a snail's pace. I began to hyperventilate, watching every kid I knew, and so many that I would never know, in a slow procession out of Hamlane. Little bare feet sloshed through puddles, not reacting to the tempest they were being led through. Their blank faces were aglow from the light of the devices they held in front of their noses, smart phones and tablets that all emitted the same eerie binary notes that the creature had howled only moments before. Some had debris in their hair from branches and bushes they paid no mind to in their trance.

I sniveled as I watched a young girl dragging a mud-covered teddy bear along with her, looking neither ahead nor behind. They all stared only at their gadgets, unwavering in their parade. I willed my muscles, I urged my gut, but all I could muster was a croaked plea:

“Don't...”.

It would have never made a difference, anyway. They were

spellbound, and I was useless to save them. The universe blurred, my sight dimmed, and they all marched on into the dark of night.

\* \* \*

I woke up with a painful inhale of crisp air. My eyelids fluttered open and were rewarded with emerald leaves flirting with bits of a turquoise sky. The rain had gone. No more orchestra of thunder and fury. There was only the lullaby of Devil's River, flowing mere feet away from where I slept.

I sat up with a groan and clutched my head. Doubt began to creep in about the events of the past 48 hours. Tree line-filtered daylight slowly sobered me up from last night's fever dream. It was a dream. Had to be. The things I witnessed had no place in reality. Cautiously feeling my tender nose and the caked blood on my upper lip, I stumbled over to the banks in a daze. I saw the rushing water. I saw the spot where it splashed up against a jutting embankment of reeds. I saw a hat.

A faded maroon Texas A&M hat, resting half-submerged on it's unhurried journey down the river.

Last night's events flooded my head. My mouth filled with cotton and my lungs stiffened in my chest for an eternity and a half. When a whimper finally escaped, it was foreign, removed. The rain had gone, and so had the children. I fell to my knees and sobbed, never taking my eyes off Sebastian's favorite hat. The river flowed steadily, but time stood immobile in those woods, on that morning.

They were all gone, and I was left behind.

With a quivering sigh, I hoisted my bike over my scratched and scabbed shoulders, and shuffled the two miles down to 1st Street. It looked like an abandoned movie set, storm debris was everywhere. A weather-beaten Youth Day banner lay halfway out of a gutter; it now

read “YOUTH”. I walked around it as if it were cursed.

I don’t know why; I knew in my heart that the creature that called itself Mr. Piper had strolled out of town as easily as it had strolled in, and that it wouldn’t return. Neither would my friends, my schoolmates, their siblings. I limped past Harlan’s Electronics without looking at it.

A left turn at the end of the street and my Mom’s house sat waiting for me. I collapsed on the front porch to calm down for the briefest of moments. The street sat silent and still. As the town awoke and found empty beds and left-behind slippers, there arose a collective wail that rivaled our air raid siren in volume and urgency. I took a deep breath and braced for impact. Parents bled into the streets, still in their bedclothes. Names and question marks filled the air while more tears filled my eyes.

Ava Marie. Gunther. Tyrell. Olivia. Yasmin. Christian. Sebastian.

Sebastian.

Sebastian.

Parents and guardians wrung their hands and filed their police reports, but when all was said and done, 272 boys and girls walked over Mueller Bridge, and never came back. No bodies were ever found. Babies and toddlers were spared, anyone that couldn’t hold a device and march to Mr. Piper’s tune on their own, I figured.

Of the adolescent and teenage children, I was the only survivor. No one believed my story. The grownups launched questions and accusations at me with equal force, but I was never charged with any crime. Despite my lack of guilt, my Mom was let go from her position on the town council. Budget cuts, they said. Whispers and stares followed us everywhere.

Eventually, we had to move out of state and start fresh. I never mentioned Mr. Piper again, though I do think of him from time to time. Whenever I hear the jingle of change, I remember the money our town saved, and the youth we lost as the smiling man whisked them away, like so many nickels and dimes.

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