

BestsellerBound Short Story Anthology: Volume Two

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What Was Lost

by James Sophi
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The sound never came. I knew the gun had been fired. Somehow I knew. There was no pain, only a strange sensation, as if the ground beneath me had fallen away and I was being suspended in mid-air, frozen in a borderless void. A fogginess engulfed my mind and in the blackness the memory of these most recent events began to blur until they were just a vague collection of distorted images, as if someone else had lived them and I was merely remembering a tale told.

The camp. The sky. The barbed-wire walls. The guards, their faces bare and expressionless. The journey from my cell to the muddy yard in my brown uniform, whereon watched my brothers, fellow captives. The executioner stood behind me, and in that all-too-brief moment before the cloth was pulled over my eyes, I looked up and saw Isaac. The firm, brave expression on his young face emboldened me, and as the deep scarlet skies were blotted out with the darkness of my blindfold, I stopped shaking. My heartbeat slowed, and my mind went to the Almighty. My prayer was silent, but was shouted inside me. *Remember me, Father. Forgive me and strengthen me. Remember me.*

Then the darkness was complete. My legs gave way, my posture relaxed, the aches and bruises that covered me seemed to fade to nothing. I was falling forward for what seemed like an eternally long time. I was expecting the earth to come rushing up to meet me, to fill my mouth with the filthy mush of the camp floor. But I hit no ground. I was just there, present, prevailing. Some emptiness had taken me. Lazily, I became aware of my thoughts. I was thinking. *Thinking*. Did dead men think? I saw in reflection the shadow of what had happened, which now seemed such an insignificant thing. I was subsisting. For what, I was not sure.

Was I truly still alive? Was this what it was like to die slowly? There was nothing, for a time, to ground me as still human. No arms or legs or face or fingers. No emotion or concern or desire. Mind and body, I was at peace. I was rested, relaxed. Liberated. I was waking from a slumber that had lasted eons.

After a time, a very long while, there was coolness on where my face once was, as if a breeze was kissing me. The kiss reached my limbs. My skin prickled and I shivered. I inhaled weakly and could taste sweet air, the sweet breath of life, filling my lungs. I had feeling again. A pulsing rushed through to the tips of my fingers and toes. My lips curled into a smile as I drew another long breath, deeply and with determination, as if it had been a lifetime since I had air to breathe. I felt powerful, recharged, spirited. I felt the ground, not against my face where it should have been, but under me, behind me. I was lying on my back. I curled my fingers and dug them deep into the dirt, feeling the soil, the texture of it, the dampness. It wasn't mud.

A glow flourished against my closed eyes, reddening my lids. It grew brighter until I was forced to shield myself from the light. I casually, cautiously, opened my eyes and looked up. My vision was unfocused. A tree loomed over me, blocking out the force of the sun. The radiance twinkled through branches swaying slightly in the breeze.

My mind was flooded with imaginings. Somehow, amidst the enigma, I knew where I was. It was a promise He gave me. A reliable and trustworthy vow. I shivered at the thought. Was I the first? Was this my own body? How long had I been gone? *What happened to my brothers? To Isaac? How did it all end?*

"You must have a lot of questions," a male voice whispered from somewhere out of sight.

I startled and sat up. "Do you read minds in paradise?" I jested, my own voice hoarse and broken and barely audible.

"Now that would be handy," the man said, as he approached. My eyes were still hazy, and I hadn't seen him leaning against the tree. He draped a blanket over my shoulders from behind and I realized I must have been naked. "So you are aware," the man continued. "I knew you would be. Makes my job of educating you quite a bit easier." He was old, I could see as much. His hair was grey, but he stood tall and robust.

I wrapped the thick blanket around myself and attempted to stand. I found my legs strong and capable. I looked around, taking in the setting, and my heart leapt at the sight. The sky was blue again. It had been the colour of blood the last time I looked upon it. The blueness sent a wave of peace through me. In the distance on all sides were rolling hills and outcrops of trees hustled together. The field I was in was lush and green and grassed all over, except for the patch of earth where I had been. There it was soil, fine and deep brown, turned and soft. My vision was clearing. I rubbed my eyes awake and took a few steps to try out my new legs. At the base of the tree, there was a chair. It was simple and wooden, and on it sat a lute bag.

"Your garments," the man said, when he saw me looking at them.

"I don't suppose there's any food in it?" I asked.

He gestured me towards the bag, and I went for it eagerly. The man watched me intently as I took out a heel of crusty bread and tore it apart.

"My name is..."

"I know who you are, brother," the man said.

I looked at him then, really seeing him for the first time. His smile, that nose, those unmistakable eyes. I tried to swallow down the tears. "Isaac?"

About The Author:

James is a full-time student from Western Australia. He does too much daydreaming when he should be studying, and too much writing when he should be socialising (with real people). His genre of affection is fantasy, and mainly writes it, to the dismay of his mother. He writes for his friends and family, and sometimes for fame and glory. He also feels comfortable writing about himself in the third person.

Find out more information at <http://jsoph.blogspot.com/>

###

The Art of Breathing

by Jaime McDougall
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Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

All Tyler had to do was keep breathing. Breathing was essential. Even breathing would bring calm, stabilize his temperature, and keep him thinking clearly.

He struggled to remember what he had learned to fight off panic attacks.

One, look at your surroundings and name everything.

He looked around and began to name. Door. Window. Moon through the window. Dresser. Closet. Desk. Computer. Chair. Little table. Lamp. Bed.

Two, establish where you are in the room in accordance to the things you listed.

The door was behind him and the closet behind him to his left. The large window was on the wall directly to his left and the desk was under that. The dresser was along the wall directly to his right, about three steps away. The bed and the little desk right next to it on the right were right in front of him. With three long strides, he would be at the foot of the bed.

Three, repeat for as long as necessary that you are not in danger.

He almost smiled at that one. No, he was not in danger. He was not in danger. He repeated the phrase in his head once for every step he took until he was at the side of the bed by the little table with the lamp. He looked at the lamp, its shade decorated with a design of purple lilacs and frilly lace all around the base of it. Turning toward the table, he got as close to it as possible and stared down in through the hole at the top of the shade at the light bulb. He continued to stare until his eyes watered and pained him.

Maybe. Maybe if he just couldn't see, then everything would go away. As a child he'd loved putting his hands over his eyes. If he couldn't see it, it wasn't there. Yet, when he looked back to the bed, everything remained the same, despite the large grey spot in his line of sight.

The grey slowly faded and still everything remained the same.

Bed. Blankets. Pillows. Adrianna. Light purple pillow stuffed thick with batting.

Swallowing hard, he took the pillow and examined it, the same lilac and lace pattern on the lamp echoed along the edge of the pillow. He stared at the pillow until he could calm his breathing enough to look back at the bed. At Adrianna. At his sister. His perfect, perfect sister.

He swallowed hard again, trying to stiffen his muscles so he wouldn't tremble. How... How could something happen to his beautiful, perfect sister? No one hated her. She was practically angelic, but not in

a flaunty way that annoyed people. She was the embodiment of what a person should be. How could anything ever happen to her?

"How..." he whispered, staring down at her as his arms twitched with the effort of trying to stay still.

"How?" he asked of the room, loud enough to make Adrianna moan in her sleep. "Tyler did it."

Grinning, he relaxed his body and rested the pillow over her face, slowly adding more pressure...

About The Author:

Jaime McDougall is a citizen of the world, currently loving life in beautiful country Victoria in Australia. She loves eating sushi, kidnapping her husband and naming her pets in honour of science fiction authors. (So far, a cat named Asimov and a puppy named Brin.)

A love of fiction has always coursed through her veins and she told stories as a child even before she knew how to write them. Settling into one genre was never her style and she has plans for novels in women's fiction, urban fantasy and more – all with a touch of romance.

She has been published in *Chicken Soup for the Soul: High School: The Real Deal* and *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Campus Chronicles*. She has also enjoyed writing a column called 'The New Australian' in local newspapers as well as various articles online.

Her fiction work and poetry has been published both online and off in places including The Oddville Press (no longer running) and The Filth zine.

So You Want to Write a Guest Post is her first ebook and is available on Kindle and at Smashwords.

Learn more about Jaime at: <http://www.inkyblots.com>

###

Soul Windows

by Jaleta Clegg

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"The eyes are windows to the soul." Blake's lips twitched in an ironic smile.

"Our philosopher." Talbot lifted his tiny cup of Turkish coffee in the air.

"Just what do you mean by that?" Jim asked, ignoring Talbot as he leaned farther over the tiny table.

Blake shifted his gaze to Jim, an older man studying the folly of youth.

Jim challenged him with his stare, daring him to answer, demanding treatment as an equal.

"Merely something I heard in the bazaar today." Blake turned his bland blue stare to the sinuous dancer weaving magic in the sultry night.

"Blake hears every last odd rumor spoken by the natives," Talbot said flippantly. "His real problem is he believes what they say. Been here too long, old chap." He pointed at Blake, who ignored him.

Jim shot him an annoyed look. "What if you truly could see into someone's soul? Would you?" Jim's intense gaze drew Blake's eyes back to the table.

"Lighten up, Jimmy boy." Talbot nudged the younger man with his elbow. "Have a drink." He poured more of the syrupy coffee into Jim's cup. "Heathens. No alcohol," he muttered with a sigh.

Blake ignored Talbot as he searched Jim's boyish face. "Would you want to see the darkness lurking in your own soul, or have it bared for another?"

"Nothing in my heart I'd be ashamed of." Jim thumped his chest with his fist.

"You're certain of that?"

Jim nodded, although a trickle of unease crept across his neck. It was as if Blake could almost read his mind, see his soul in the hot, heavily scented darkness.

"Load of toff, if you ask me, which neither of you chaps are doing." Talbot finished off his coffee and surged to his feet, his knees popping as he stood. "Sitting on the floor drinking that rubbish is for the birds. I'm off to beddy-bye."

Blake and Jim took little notice of Talbot's departure. The music throbbed around them, weaving a seductive spell, making magic possible in the deep violet night. The cloying smell of tropical blooms hung over the café. The dancer wove between tables, delicate scarves fluttering around her like the moths that swarmed the guttering candles.

"Not everyone hides evil, Blake. There are innocents in this world."

"Are there?" The ironic smile was back, Blake's blue eyes bland and unreadable.

"What of children?" Jim pushed, defensive now for reasons he did not wish to explore. "Or her?" He pointed at the dancer. Her face appeared young through the thin veil, the eyes wide and innocent as a doe's. "She can't be much older than my sister. What dark secrets lurk in her soul? I say none." Jim sat back, chin out in stubborn challenge.

"You would be surprised, I think," Blake said. "If you could look into her soul, would you take that chance?"

"It's all hypothetical, anyway. There is no way to look into someone's soul. Eyes are windows. Hogwash."

Blake merely smiled. One hand dipped into a pocket and produced a strangely worked pendant. It glittered slightly in the candle flame. Blake laid it on the table between them. "A charm from one of the wizards of the bazaar. It supposedly opens the windows of the eyes so that you can see into the soul."

"Rubbish," Jim said, but weakly, a protest of habit. "The wizards are all fakes."

"Then it won't hurt for you to try."

Jim reached out then hesitated. The music pulsed through him, drums beating and voices wailing. Like a heart beating secretly in the darkness, he thought. Strange things had happened since he forsook the boring security of life at home for the intrigue of foreign adventures. Blake had been here much longer. Blake was a believer in the strange. They often ribbed him about it in the barracks. But now, here, under the spell of music and perfumed flowers, in the flickering candlelight, suddenly it seemed not so much rubbish. Magic was suddenly possible and not at all friendly. Jim's hand hovered over the charm.

"Are you afraid?" Blake was gently mocking. "Maybe innocence is much more elusive than you think."

Jim grabbed up the charm, his hand clutching tightly to squeeze away doubt. "There are more innocents than you believe, Blake."

"Maybe, maybe not." Blake shook his head as if it didn't matter. "A word of caution. Once you have used the charm, you can never go back to who you were before."

"Meaning what?"

Blake shrugged. "The wizard who sold me the charm was quite the philosopher."

Jim turned the charm over in his hand. It was cheap, made of tin and ornamented with badly polished river stones, nothing more than a tawdry pendant resembling an eye. Curls of writing writhed around the outer edge. The letters twitched in the flickering light.

"Have you used it?" Jim asked, suddenly nervous. He wanted to drop it on the table, forget the whole conversation, but the thought of being mocked as a coward, afraid of charlatan wizardry, made him hold it tighter.

"I've seen enough of souls already," Blake answered.

"It's trash, utter nonsense, of course," Jim said, trying to sound brave.

"Of course," Blake murmured.

Jim looked up from the charm and found the dancer in front of him, kneeling gracefully at their table. The music took up a faster beat, a new performer wailing in the night air.

"I'll prove it doesn't work." His hand shook ever so slightly as he held the charm to the candle on the table.

"If you don't believe it will work, why are you afraid?" Blake's voice came from deeper darkness that masked his face as he leaned into the shadows of the night. His words took on eerie significance as they mingled with the throbbing wails of music. The flower perfume grew heavier, smothering the hot night air.

"There are innocents, Blake," Jim answered stubbornly.

Blake gave no further answer.

Jim squeezed the charm, daring it silently to work, to open the eyes of the dancer, windows to her soul.

The girl glanced up. Rings of kohl emphasized her soulful dark eyes.

Jim squeezed the charm, staring into the girl's liquid gaze. He smiled ruefully.

"It doesn't work, Blake."

The throbbing music turned to a chant that swarmed into his ears like bees. The charm in his hand buzzed angrily against his skin. The dancer knelt motionless, wide eyes sucking him in, drinking his soul. And giving him her soul in return.

He slipped into her mind, into her memories.

She crouched in an alley, fear hammering in her chest and constricting her throat. She was young, barely beyond childhood. She clutched her shawl, remembering the men's eyes, possessive and hungry. She had only walked to the market to fetch bread for supper. Mama warned her not to go alone or after dark, but she had only gone for bread. The men waited in the bazaar, stripping her with their hard eyes. She felt unclean. Tears leaked down her cheeks. She had done nothing, but she would be blamed. She only hoped the men would not follow her home. She pulled her shawl over her head, remembering too late the code of modesty that dictated fashion. She scuttled down the darkened streets, the bread clutched to her breast as a shield.

She sat in stunned silence. Her father had chosen a husband for her. She wanted to protest she was too young, that she loved another, but it would be a lie. She had been a woman for two years now, she was fourteen and old enough to marry the ancient friend of her father's. He was fat, smelled of stale sweat, nothing like her visions of a handsome young husband. She bit her lip, knowing to protest would only lead to beatings and charges of disobedience. She bowed her head, accepting her father's will. She had no other choice.

She crouched in the corner, sobbing quietly. Her husband had gone to drink with his friends. She was safe for a few hours. She moved slowly, bones aching from the most recent beating. She had done nothing to deserve his rage. It did not matter. He beat her whenever the mood took him. He forced his way to her bed whenever he pleased. She was his property, to do with as he pleased. She flinched as fabric rubbed over raw welts. New tears of pain and misery tracked her cheeks.

She cried out as pain rippled across her swollen belly. The new life within fought to free itself. She sobbed in fear as the cramps faded. She crawled through the straw of the stable, seeking comfort but finding none. The lone donkey blinked sleepily as it chewed its cud. She clawed her way up the half wall separating the donkey from the hay. Her fingers clutched wood as the pain came again, harder and stronger. She cried out, frightened and alone. She had no one to help, no one to soothe the pain tearing her in two. A flood of bloody fluid erupted from between her legs, staining her skirt. She sobbed in humiliation as the pain ebbed. She leaned on the railing, shoving sweat damp hair from her eyes. The pain struck again, stronger and deeper. She screamed as it tore her apart, again and again, until a limp infant lay on the straw between her feet. She crouched, tenderly wiping blood from the tiny face. The child, a male child, lay too still. No breath stirred his tiny lungs. She cradled his body and cried as blood pooled around her feet.

She danced in the night, weaving fantasies for men who used her and discarded her to wait, forgotten, until another night and another dance and another man. She held her pain inside, never letting it show. She showed her strength, sinuous and supple, in every moment of every dance, in every instance of

abuse and neglect. She danced for the future of daughters yet unborn, that perhaps they would not live in shame and fear, that her daughters would laugh in sunlight and know happiness.

The spell broke. Blake slipped the dancer a coin.

She pulled her veil over her eyes, melting into the night.

Jim sat with tears running across his face, dripping unnoticed from his chin. The charm fell from his limp hand. Candlelight glittered over the magical runes.

"One less innocent soul," Blake said quietly as he closed his hand over the charm.

About The Author:

Jaleta Clegg loves to build worlds with words. She writes science fiction, silly horror, and dabbles in other genres. Find more information at www.jaletac.com.

###

I Didn't Know His Name

By Darcia Helle

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The sky wept for the man about to be buried. Fat drops splattered and spread until the greedy earth sucked them in. The shower of tears added weight to the dirt, causing miniature mudslides in the growing hole.

I didn't cry for the man whose grave I was digging. I didn't know him. The man could have been a wealthy philanthropist, donating millions to help eradicate world hunger. Or he could have been a pedophile. As with most people, he probably spent his life in the middle of these two extremes. He'd be known by many, truly missed by only a few.

I stuck my shovel into the wet dirt. The metal clanged against something hard and I spent several minutes digging out a baseball-sized chunk of rock. The cool rain dripped down the back of my lightweight jacket, raising goose bumps on my flesh. Despite the chill, sweat sprang from my forehead and armpits. I'd been digging for twenty minutes and had barely made a dent in the ancient land.

Mud sucked at my sneakers. I stepped back from the hole and wiped the rain from my eyes. This would be the man's final resting place. He'd be watched over by the crowd of trees and the animals and insects that made this space their home. The earth would slowly reclaim him; the ultimate form of recycling.

I didn't know the man's name. Names were nothing more than labels attached to us at birth. We could just as easily be assigned serial numbers.

The rain eased to a slow sprinkle. I stuck my shovel back in the ground, came up with a pile of fresh earth. I set it beside the hole, went back in for more. Lift and dump. Lift and dump. A mindless activity, perhaps, though I found it profoundly stimulating. I had chosen this place, beneath these trees, and intended to treat this final resting place with the respect it deserved.

I didn't know his name, this man whose grave I was digging. I didn't know when he'd come into the world or how he'd lived his life. I would know the intimate details of his last moments. I would know where he'd been laid to rest.

How we lived wasn't as important as how we died.

My shirt clung to me, wet with both sweat and rain. I lifted another shovelful of dirt, added it to the pile. The clouds rolled and divided. A slice of blue sky brought a glimpse of the sun. It had come to say a final goodbye.

A tree root impeded my progress. I worked diligently, breaking it with the blade of my shovel, dissecting it to allow space for the body that would rest here.

I didn't know the man's name. Anthony or Andrew, Thomas or Timothy. The name didn't matter, though I would like the intimacy that one provided. I could give him a name, Christen him anew on this day, in this place where he'd come to the end of his journey.

I dwelled on this momentarily as I dug. *No*, I thought, as I uncovered another large rock. Names came with baggage. Identities bound us to who we'd been, the person others had come to know and expected us to be. Names created portraits, with colors and symbols, distinctions and associations. We grew to look like the name and the name grew to define us.

This man, whose final resting place I now dug, would remain anonymous to me. He would leave the world the way he came, a clean slate in which the portrait could be anything of his making. No boundaries to define his life or his death.

An hour into the digging and I was halfway there. New England dirt could be difficult, challenging, relentless in its struggle to remain intact. The earth here was never eager to give up its depths. That quality made it all the more perfect for its intended use.

Many would say that what I do holds no value. Digging a hole, moving earth from one place to another then back again. Many would scoff, call what I do menial labor. We have machines now to do most everything for us. We need not strain ourselves unnecessarily, whether that strain be physical or intellectual.

I vehemently disagree, as you might suspect. Digging a hole is not simply about creating an empty pocket within the earth. The process brings me to a place of solitude. The dirt beneath my fingernails, clinging to my skin. The rich, intoxicating odors of freshly bloomed flowers and long buried sediment.

Birth and death rarely meet.

The spot of final rest is never a random choice. I do not spin my shovel and dig where the blade points. I take my work seriously and cannot leave such things to chance.

While conception is often a random, thoughtless moment in time, death can never be. To start a complicated life or a simple story requires little. You see, no one would know the difference, whether you'd done it right or wrong or not at all. That thing, the life or the story, did not exist before you chose to bring it about.

Perhaps your child or your story was conceived by accident. The conception, that brief moment, is rarely remembered and matters not. The life lived, the story told, become the focus.

Death, however, destroys that which exists. The moment takes something away and gives nothing back. That end, whether it be a slow fizzle or a grand explosion, can overshadow all else. Death becomes the defining moment of the life lived.

I didn't know his name, this man whose final resting place I'd finished digging. The rain had ended and the sun now worked to dry the dampness left behind. Drops of water slipped from the leaves above. The sound became like a thousand tiny fairies performing a farewell tap dance.

The time had come for earth and man to meet. I looked over now, at the man I'd left tied to the tree. His frantic squirming over the past two hours had caused the ropes to dig into his flesh. Blood trickled from the raw wounds. The gag forced his tongue to remain still. I did not know this man's name and I didn't want him to say it aloud.

I untied the ropes, releasing the man from the tree. The binds on his ankles and wrists remained. I bent at the knees and hoisted him up. He wasn't overly heavy but I was tired from two hours of digging. The strain of lifting him made my legs tremble.

I walked him to the hole. His eyes locked on mine. I saw his story there, details of a life lived, as he pleaded with those eyes. But I didn't want to know those details.

Down on my knees, I lowered him into the hole. A puddle had formed there at the bottom and he shivered at the chill. I picked up my shovel and tossed the first pile of dirt over his legs. He squirmed and twisted. I stuck my shovel in the mound of dirt. Lift and dump. Lift and dump.

I saved his face for last. The weight of the soil kept him still now, though his head rolled back and forth. Fighting till the end. I looked into his eyes and absorbed those last moments. An entire life condensed into this brief exchange.

The dirt splashed over his face. He sputtered, spit at the dark loam. Then he was gone. I continued on, lifting and dumping the earth. His hands, bound together, pushed through the mound and clawed for freedom one last time.

I didn't know his name, this man whose final resting place I had chosen. In the end, his name hadn't mattered. They never did.

About The Author:

Darcia Helle writes because the characters trespassing through her mind leave her no alternative. She has published seven novels and has several short stories floating around cyberspace. You can learn more about Darcia and her writing on her website: <http://www.QuietFuryBooks.com>

###

Red Route

by James Everington

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Another of the signs went by outside, and Eliot tried to resist looking at the death count – but wasn't that number one higher than last time?

Annoyed with himself he looked back at the road ahead. Much safer - the signs themselves were a distraction, Eliot thought; more tax payer's money wasted. The road was designated a 'Red Route', deemed especially dangerous, and regularly spaced signs showed monthly death figures, for this year and last. This year's figure was higher, already.

On average one person a day – Eliot could see why the road was considered dangerous, for those who didn't know it as well as he: the route cut through the flat Lincolnshire countryside, but unlike the Roman-straight Fosse to the north, this road curled and snaked its way around the landscape – the signs lining its sides were written in a continuous language of zigzags, exclamation marks, and suicidal pedestrians, not to mention the ubiquitous casualty stats. And it was single carriageway all along, encouraging blind overtakings, and it ran east/west, so the sun was always in somebody's eyes.

Eliot was heading west, although through the bright fog of tiredness he was finding it hard to remember the route more than three junctions ahead. He didn't know why he felt so fatigued, he was used to the driving, but he felt curiously light-headed, not able to concentrate, not quite present. Outside, the flat countryside stretched for miles, and despite how far the eye could see the land seemed empty too, devoid of anything for the eye to catch hold of except the stubby hedges, the arrangements of the fields, squat churches. It was summer and so sunset was slow, and Eliot found himself looking forward to the darkness that would smother the oddly desolate views around him. Only the road seemed alive, insistent, twisting itself into curious bends and curves.

Eliot sighed for what felt like the thousandth time as he approached a car dawdling in front – tourists, no doubt, meandering back from the coast. Eliot didn't slow down but sped up – after here there wasn't another overtaking opportunity for miles. Best to go for it, to get it over quickly. He pulled out as he was thinking about whether to do it, and the white car he was overtaking seemed to speed up, as if chastened. Idiots, he thought as he passed, glancing left at them – two old dears, both looking half-dead, the old man gripping the wheel as if he daren't let go, the old woman's head slung back, asleep?

When Eliot looked back at the road there was a car coming straight at him, lights on even in the dusk-light, blazing. Eliot screamed as it filled his vision - he flung his hands up in front of his face, and futilely shut his eyes.

He opened them – nothing had happened to him, and the road ahead was clear. Shaken, he pulled back into his own lane, slowed to a speed less than that of the car he had overtaken. Was he so tired that he was hallucinating? He could picture the car coming towards him, how in that last second it has looked like it was made of light... Another of the Red Route signs went past and he felt angry – it was those ghoulis signs that had unnerved him! They didn't make him feel more cautious, but more fatalistic – one a day and it was dumb luck whether it would be you, years of experience and knowledge of these roads notwithstanding.

God, I can't wait to get home, Eliot thought, with only a slight mental pause before the last word. Get me home. The comforts of his destination seemed hard to visualise, for he had been on the road all day. His limbs ached and there was a tight belt of pain across his chest. I just want to lie down in the dark, he thought, as outside the cat's eyes lit up in his lights. It was that time of evening when the sun was so low that it seemed brighter than at midday. And there was nothing in the flat landscape to impede its glare – no wonder people have accidents here, Eliot thought, your eye is drawn outwards, looking for some elevation, some landmark to let you know that you're not somehow still where you were ten minutes ago.

The white car behind him had switched on its headlights too now, shining in his rear-view – the old man who was the driver was nudging forward impatiently. Eliot refused to speed up for them. His near accident, or hallucination, or whatever in hell it had been, had left him even more tense. He went past a junction with a minor road, going god knew where in this countryside, and mentally ticked it off his list – past that left turning, then past a right turning a few miles later, also leading to Nowhere, then the crossroads... He couldn't follow the route home any further than that without losing track. But he knew this road; he would remember when he got there.

Feeling more confident again, Eliot sped up so as to lose the bag of bones driving behind him; but the white car behind kept pace. Someone *has* got a bit of blood in them after all, he thought, and he looked in his mirrors expecting to see the weak eyes of the other driver peering over his steering wheel. But all he could see was that damn light, sunlight and headlights both, glinting and reflecting across the whole of the vehicle, and his car too. At least dip them you old fool, Eliot thought.

The sun was equally as blinding to the front, but he still saw the red numbers as he passed them – one a day, he thought, is it really so much as that, for a single stretch of road? Three hundred and sixty-five ghosts a year added to the tally; this road must be thick with them, if only you could see them. Maybe those lights, he thought, that you think are gnats and flies in the dusk, are really the pinpricks of all the souls that died here... – Eliot wasn't normally given to such brooding, but it made sense. Weren't ghosts supposed to be those who died suddenly, with deeds undone, their life's tasks incomplete? And which deaths were more untimely than those that happened at seventy miles an hour: one second routine, hand drumming along to the stereo maybe; the next your body slammed to a stop with all the bloody energy you had thought you were in control of?

What deeds have *I* left undone? Eliot thought. If it should be me today, then what... But there was a myriad of things, he thought, not the horror-tale hokum of a secret untold or a will unsigned, but the normal stuff of existence left undone at the tail-end of a tired day. But then *everyone*, he thought...

He was distracted when the car being driven by the old man made a move to overtake him. They were about half a mile from the next right turning. What in hell is he doing? Eliot thought – he knew there were two tight bends before the junction. He slowed down, but when the white car pulled level it too slowed down to match, so that the two cars moved in parallel. Although they were side by side Eliot still

felt dazzled by the lights of the white car; he still had to blink when he looked to his right to see what the hell...

He met the eyes of the old lady in the passenger seat, and they were dead. Open, certainly; malevolent, maybe, but obviously dead, as was the slack-jawed hang of her denture-less mouth, the crazy twist of her neck. She both blazed with light and was translucent – through her he could see the old man, arms stretched for the wheel, rictus grin tight on the bloody oval of his face.

Eliot slammed on the brake, and felt his body lunge forward sickeningly before the seat-belt bit. He didn't slow to a full stop, but almost stalled, his hand automatically reaching to the gearstick to prevent this as his eyes followed the path of the bright car in front of him, still in the wrong lane and heading towards the tight corner. The light of the car was white, in contrast to the bloody glow of the low sun, squashing itself flat against the land. There was a screeching sound, whether of brakes real or remembered Eliot couldn't be sure, and the car that he was watching jerked to a hideous and total stop, as if it crashed into something, although nothing could be seen. It crumpled as if the impact was real too, and as it did so the light that lit it from within faded, and with it the vision of the car itself.

He slammed his foot on the accelerator now, desperate to be away, to reach... home. He took the first bend at great speed but on the correct side of the road. At the point where the white car appeared to have hit something unseen, he could see nothing other than very faded skid marks. There, he thought, that's *where* they died and what I saw was... The sharp turn of the next bend took all his concentration to manoeuvre around, and all he could think of was the crossroads ahead. A car passed in the opposite direction, a reassuringly normal looking estate with no ghost light to it, and the driver didn't even seem to notice Eliot's mad speed as he passed.

Tiredness Kills! a sign hectored Eliot as he drove, and then the inevitable Red Route sign – despite his panic he still looked at the number of deaths as he passed. “Fuck,” he said quietly to himself, forcing himself to slow down to the speed limit. You're just tired, he thought, taking his cue from the other sign. It was all just a hallucination. He just had to get to his destination, straight on at the crossroads that were coming up – straight on, he could remember that now, if nothing else. Straight on, and there was no point in stopping for those pissing little roads to the left and right that lead nowhere, and from which no one ever emerged. He *knew* this road. God my chest *hurts*, he thought; but then it had done all day.

He passed the sign that announced the crossroads but he didn't slow down. Someone had scrawled something on the sign, even all the way out here, but he couldn't see what the graffiti said. The whole of the road now seemed lit up as if he was driving straight into the half-submerged sun; the red glow and the white of his own lights. He slowed very slightly as he approached the junction, but then accelerated again, for he could see in this flat and horrible countryside that nothing was approaching from either of the dead-end village turnoffs...

But then something *was*, a blaze stronger than mere headlights coming for and engulfing him from the left, and all at once the answers to many things – why his chest had seemed to hurt all day even before the seatbelt had locked; why the last car he had passed had seemed not to see him; why he had been unable to remember anything beyond this junction – became clear to Eliot. But not the *why*, the unfinished deed, for in fact Eliot could remember very little about his life... He screamed as he remembered screaming, as the bright car hit him from the side and the world turned and toppled in the blood-red sunset. This is *where*, he had time to think; then that light too went out.

Another of the Red Route signs went by outside, and Eliot tried to resist looking again at the death count – but wasn't that number one higher than last time?

Annoyed with himself, he looked back at the road ahead.

About The Author:

James Everington was born in 1976 in Nottingham, England. After writing somewhat dark fiction for a number of years, he feels it is time to send some of them out into the light... His collection of dark and surreal horror fiction 'The Other Room' (from which Red Route is taken) is available on Kindle now.

Connect with James at: <http://www.jameseverington.blogspot.com/>

###

Make a Wish

by Susan Helene Gottfried

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Mitchell shifted from foot to foot and stared up at the ceiling. It didn't matter that he'd gotten used to hospitals, thanks to Amy. He still hated the places for anything more than a quick in and out to visit her and then free.

Today was nothing like that. Not even close. This was going to be one of the hardest things he'd ever done. And one of the most rewarding, too.

"He's really quite fond of you," the woman -- her name was Kristie, Mitchell thought -- said. She put a hand on his arm, cautiously, like she expected him to slap it away.

If this hadn't been a public appearance, Mitchell might have smiled at her to help her relax. No go, though. The world knew him as a grouch and he had no problem maintaining that impression, even now when a smile would make him a friend for life. But this *was* a public appearance, and he was being touched by someone he didn't particularly know. Reaching into the crowd for hand slaps during a show was one thing. Strangers putting their hands on him like they owned him was another.

He wrote it off as a job hazard. In the grand scheme of things, it wasn't such a big one.

They paused outside the hospital room. The photographer bent to mess with his camera. Mitchell took a deep breath. "Now remember..." Kristie said.

"He's sick. I get it. I've seen sick people before."

"No," Kristie said, putting her hand on his arm again. Her fingers dug in the slightest bit, making Mitchell start. "He's not just sick. He's *dying*. If I could have gotten you out here two months ago, before he took this downturn, you'd have been visiting a sick kid."

Mitchell pulled back, instantly angry. "No one said a damn thing about this to me until last week. You mean you tried and someone on my end thought this kid wasn't important?"

She paled, the lines of her makeup suddenly obvious. "No! It was us. We thought we had more time. We..." She licked her lips and glanced around, then slowly met Mitchell's eyes. "We thought we had more time."

Mitchell felt a pang of sympathy. "My sister's a doctor," he said. "I get it."

"Okay," Kristie said, snapping into her role as event director -- or whatever it was. Mitchell didn't pay much attention to titles. "His parents are in there with him, so if he's asleep, let them wake him. Then you can pose for pictures, I'll have the photographer leave, and you can spend a few more minutes with him. I'm afraid that's all he can handle right now," she added with a watery smile.

"We'll play it by ear," Mitchell said.

"We can't alter the plan," Kristie said.

Mitchell wished he could growl at her and tell her they damn well would *alter the plan* if that's what the kid needed them to do. The world worked well because of rules. Mitchell got that. What he didn't get was why people couldn't wise up and roll with things. This was about the kid, not about making sure it

got done *right* -- whatever that meant. As far as the kid was concerned, just seeing his hero beside his bed would make the whole thing perfect.

He shoved past Kristie and stuck his head through the door. Behind him, he could feel the photographer pressing against his back, wanting to capture the instant when the patient saw the rock star. Kristie didn't make a sound; Mitchell wondered if she'd expected him to take charge.

Like she had predicted, the boy was asleep. The parents' eyes widened; the dad got up.

The guy looked like he hadn't slept in a week. So did the mom. At least they'd showered recently and had clearly put on nice clothes for him. He wanted to tell the mom to take her jacket off; a mother keeping vigil by her son's bedside should be comfortable. *He* was the one who needed to impress, not her.

Mitchell stepped into the room and shook the dad's hand. He introduced himself and welcomed Mitchell.

"Mitch," the boy's mom said softly as Kristie and the photographer slipped into the room. They whispered, probably about how dark the room was and how that would mean they'd have to use flash. Mitchell wished the photographer wasn't there. There was something tranquil about the dark room and the quiet people in it.

The dad turned on the lights. The kid barely stirred. Mitchell blinked, hoping the photographer wasn't shooting yet. Nothing like being caught wincing at the light.

"Mitch," the mom tried again. She took her son's hand, her face a mixture of pain, grief, and disappointment. Mitchell wasn't sure, but maybe there was some failure mixed in.

"Let me," he said, stepping up behind the mom. He put a hand carefully on her shoulder. She edged her chair closer to the wall.

He made himself give her shoulder a friendly squeeze. "Hey, Mitch," he growled in his best stage voice. "Wake the fuck up and say hello. What sort of rude *pussy* do you think you're being?"

The mom drew in her breath. Mitchell heard the dad take a step closer.

But it worked. The kid opened his eyes, looking first at his mom. He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"Hey," Mitchell said, not bothering to try to hide a smile. "Over here. You've got a visitor." He could see how weak the kid was, that this visit was too late to do much good. He wouldn't be able to do much more than slip away with a dream fulfilled. If he even got to savor it, it'd be a miracle.

"Wow," the kid breathed. Mitchell had to lean in to hear him, getting too close to pretend he didn't see the sunken and darkened eyes, the too-prominent cheekbones. The kid smelled, too. Like medicine, like hospitals. Like death was near.

He'd read about that. Never thought it was real.

"Hi," Mitchell said, pulling away a fraction. "I heard you think I'm cool. Came to see for myself."

The kid glowed. Literally glowed. It started with those horribly sunken eyes; Mitchell saw hope come back into them. It spread from there until even his skin lit up with the unexpected surprise. "You came," the kid said. "I kept asking and no one answered."

"They were busy talking to me," Mitchell said, glancing up at the photographer, who was shooting away. "Trying to work out my schedule. I'm glad I did," he added as the kid pushed at his covers. He wore a ShapeShifter t-shirt. Mitchell told him it was a good one. "They're all good. Know why?"

The kid shook his head, his eyes lolling closed.

"I won't approve anything lame. Every single design for a shirt comes to *me*. If I don't like it, it doesn't go up for sale. I brought you a whole bunch of new ones, too. A couple aren't even for sale yet."

"I won't wear anything else," the kid said. "I told Mom and Dad..." he licked his lips. His eyes shifted, finding his parents. The mom sat forward with a cup. Mitchell took it from her and held it for the kid, steadying the straw with two fingers. He didn't need to hear the end of the sentence to understand it.

Kristie had been right. He was too late. The kid was ready.

Mitchell's hand shook as he handed the water to the mom. She took it from him, covering his hand with her free one. Their eyes met; Mitchell felt like an entire conversation took place in that one glance. The dashed hopes for her son, the pain of having to watch this happen, the uncertainty of how to go forward from here.

Mitchell had seen many wounded people in his years with ShapeShifter. But he'd never been right there with the pain as it was fresh and happening.

Mitch reached up. "Can I shake your hand?"

Mitchell took the hand. The papery skin, the feel of those bones, the knowledge that if he squeezed too hard, he'd make the kid's hand about as thick around as a guitar string. There was nothing left of it. The bones felt ready to turn to powder.

The flesh on Mitchell's back rippled. His throat, his golden throat, tightened up.

"I know," the boy sighed. "You look at me and you see what's coming. I won't look in the mirror anymore. Know how hard it is to brush your teeth without a mirror?"

That was enough to loosen Mitchell's throat. "Yep," he said with a grin. He pointed at the bed, wordlessly asking permission to sit.

The boy nodded and shifted. Mitchell had no doubt that if the kid had the strength, he'd have moved over.

Mitchell tried to be careful, but Mitch winced. The mom gasped as if her son's pain was her own. The dad closed his eyes briefly, as if praying for strength.

The photographer moved in closer. Mitchell turned to the boy. "Of course, when you have dorks like this following you around, you damn well better make friends with mirrors. Feel like posing for him? Maybe he'll go away?"

The kid winced again. "Not really."

Mitchell waved at the photographer. "Okay, then. We'll go with what he's gotten so far."

"But..." the photographer started to sputter. Mitchell cut him off with a glare.

"I don't care about the--" he cut himself off, reminding himself that he was there with a mom and a dying kid. "I don't care about the plan. We honor Mitch here, and if he's not up for more pictures, then you're done."

The boy smiled.

The photographer slowly moved his camera to his side. "You're right. I'm sure we've gotten enough."

"If not," Mitchell said, winking at the boy, "there's always photoshop."

Mitch giggled. The photographer apologized again and went to stand beside Kristie. Mitchell had forgotten she was there.

She made a motion to him to wrap it up. Mitchell looked down at his not-really namesake. The kid was fading.

"I gotta go," Mitchell said, getting ready to stand up.

"Stay until I fall asleep," the boy said, reaching for Mitchell's arm.

This hand on his arm, Mitchell decided, was okay. He looked over at the boy's parents for guidance.

They nodded, small, hopeful smiles dancing on their lips.

"Only until you fall asleep," Mitchell said. He took the boy's hand off his arm and held it, instead. He could feel his own warmth radiating through it.

Mitch sighed and let his eyes shut. Just when Mitchell thought the boy had slipped into a dream, he opened his eyes. "From now on, call me Mitchell," he said.

Mitchell Voss, lead singer and rhythm guitarist of ShapeShifter, a band who liked to tell the world to fuck off, pretended he didn't see the parents of a very sick little boy smile through their tears.

About The Author:

A tone-deaf rocker-at-heart, Susan Helene Gottfried worked in retail record stores, in radio stations, as stage crew, and as a promoter while earning two college degrees in creative writing. You can find Susan rocking and writing on her website: <http://www.WestofMars.com>

###

The Last Chance Motel and Mausoleum

by Joel Blaine Kirkpatrick
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It's just not possible to tell this story without profanity, so yes, there is profanity. When the story is about a place called Shit-Struck...you're just already there and have to deal with it. The thing about Shit-Struck was that everyone who was there, they wanted out. Andie Jo could tell it was getting worse, because she'd been counting the pass-ons. There were seven now in the last year. That's good business in a small town when you get one a month.

When everyone in town wants out of town, you've got a problem town. When people arrange their demise so they could finally leave, you must be talking about Shit-Struck. It didn't start out that way - whenever that was - when someone decided a town needed to be where *this* one was. No one could even remember why the town was there in the first place.

There were man-made hills of tailings about a half mile east from town. They kept the sunrise from being real, for thirty whole minutes later in town than for the folks on the other side of those hills. Andie Jo had a plan for stuff like that extra, unused dirt, but her best plan had just come to her as she was thinking of the first plan.

Shearstuck, California may have had something to do with the uranium mining back in the Fifties, but no one was really sure anymore. It only had ten good years behind itself, when something went wrong with the money and the place began to become what it became. Surrounded by dusty government land, most of which had abusive warning signs posted on every dirt trail, Shearstuck seemed to turn into dust itself. Lots of years later the tired locals were drinking late at the Bar one morning, and one of the smartest called the place Shit-Struck and...well, it stuck.

Situated stupidly, it was only a few miles off the interstate, but there had been no direct exit made to the town. You could see the lights at night, but if you happened to run out of gas, it was a painful walk through scrub and gullies to get to the only filling station in town. Interstate motorists always complained how far they had to drive, just to get gas, and why didn't someone put a truck stop out on the highway? Locals accepted the complaints, and the cash, and never had an answer for the question.

Andie Jo had a wicked story to tell, when someone would ask what a girl like her was doing there. But she didn't get anything of such questions from the regulars anymore; they happily purchased her beer, but they were all wary of her.

She loved dirt. She liked to do things with dirt. Shit-Struck had an abundance of it.

People said just talking to Andie Jo could mess them up a bit, and she liked that - but she didn't like they thought she was weird - when the subject was her interest in dirt. There were a lot of things one could do with dirt and her current thing was called the Reptilliarium. It amounted to nearly a dozen big stock tanks that she had pulled out of town from the bankrupt lumber yard. The road still had the gouges in the pavement; people teased her that she could have rolled them all out and spared some bumps for everyone else. She never even smiled with them at that.

But, she had the tanks all buried to their rims in the back of the Bar, all fenced in like they were precious. Each one held a handful of the biggest and nastiest snakes anyone could imagine, or look at for a dollar. Didn't rain enough to worry about the tanks filling up and the snakes getting out, but they were filled in a bit with dirt to give the snakes something natural to slide round on. Andie Jo fed them road kill mostly, and sometimes she hunted rats for them with a pistol, in back of the Bar, when the road kill was

scarce. But the Reptilliarium was only a good idea to her, and not her first. Her *best* idea was going to change her life, and it wouldn't even let her escape Shit-Struck.

She had a plan to stay there and be *just fine*.

It was pass-on number seven that started her thinking. She imagined the conversation with the dearly departed that she could have had,

"What the hell happened to you? Didn't you see that truck?"

"Yes."

"Did you try to move?"

"No. I was waiting for it."

He was definitely a candidate for her new dream situation, because he found his way out of town and it was poetic. There was only one road in, and it was the only way out. When he left town – dead - it was in that out direction, and so Andie Jo had a plan to put her first plan on the back burner.

Instead of opening the Bar the next morning, she pissed everyone off by walking down that road. They figured she just had enough of the place, so they looked around for a way to get the Bar door open. What she had wondered, was how quickly a dead guy could get out of town, and since the dead sort of floated along in all the movies, she just sort of floated out of town the way they did. Folks at the Bar were sure Andie Jo was history.

The door turned out to be an easy pry.

Floating didn't tire her out at all and she guessed she was a dozen miles away from Shit-Struck when she decided to sit down and rest underneath the only trees nearby. That was the spot where she would make her dreams come true. The ditch wasn't too deep to drive across, and she hadn't seen a fence for miles. All she needed was one of the abandoned trailers in town and a plywood sign.

That's a very cheap corporate startup for sure.

Dead people leaving town would get about that far, she guessed, before they decided to stop for a while, and so... she would give them a place for their first rest, on the way to their resting place. It just made too much sense to be left to someone else's creativity.

So, she would open the Last Chance Motel and Mausoleum. Her guests would be dead people, on their way to the Everlasting.

She would be popular in a place like Shit-Struck because the clientele was steadily increasing. The trailer was going to be tough though; she didn't know if any of them still had their tires, but that was just fine-print stuff to her.

One week, and a nearly ruined pickup truck later, Andie Jo was at the same spot; she had peed on it, and in a place like Shit-Struck, well, the spot was still sort of there when she got back with the trailer.

For dead people, there would be no need for electricity, TV, water, other stuff like that; those ran up costs when you only rented to people with liquid blood. She had spray painted the sign and leaned it up next to the door just in time for one of the locals to drive by, heading into town, and they drove in front of the trailer in circles, yelling at her to ask if the Bar was open. Their brakes were bad and they couldn't stop, so, the circles.

She told them she thought it was open, but they should go on in and see; it was only a dozen more miles.

Andie Jo waited only three days before her first true guest came in the kitchen window. She would have been sad that the fellow died, but now he was a client, so the sadness didn't fit the situation. They just looked at one another, and she suddenly realized that talking to the dead might have been something she needed to look into beforehand. She wasn't sure how.

"Do you have a room?"

The first question in her head was answered.

"Yup," she replied.

"Is it nice?"

She looked at him sideways, "Does it matter?"

The answer took a couple of seconds thought.

"I'll take it. But, how do I pay for it?"

"Well I'm flexible about that. I figure you lived long enough to keep some brains when you died, so to speak, and that you could work that out on your own. So, it depends on you. What can you pay for the room?"

The guest thought a few minutes more and said, "I'll be right back."

A few minutes after he went out the window again, there was a crunch of gravel in the yard just off the road. A lady in a nice dress came in the front door and asked if she could have a glass of water. Andie Jo wondered who could look so pretty as they passed-on and *why* would they need the water? But she answered yes, and gave the lady a drink.

With a really neat, completely blank expression, the woman took off a huge ring and set it on the counter in front of Andie Jo. When the lady walked back out the door, the guest, surprisingly, more or less poured out of her and was back at the counter. Realizing that was a live one, Andie was very glad the lady had been dressed because that pouring-out business would have been too gross to watch. But there he was again, hardly crept out at what he'd done, and asked her if that sort of payment was the kind of thing she was expecting.

She picked up the ring and looked through it at his dried up complexion and smiled with satisfaction.

"That will do very well. Do you mind sharing the room?"

"Do you have other guests?"

"No, but I just didn't know what might be going on in town, someone might wander out later, just trying to be prepared." The guest looked off in the direction of town and was quiet for a moment.

"Not tonight, at least," he said.

"You get room number one," and Andie Jo pointed to the end of the trailer and tried on the ring the lady had left behind.

"Hey?" she yelled as he floated down to the end, "would you ever mind if someone played golf over your grave? I'm taking a survey."

"No, I don't guess that would ever bother me at all."

"Man, is that ever the answer I wanted to hear..." she muttered, wiggling her hand to make the ring flash in the sunlight from the kitchen window.

Another week later - and this time the pickup was toast - Andie Jo pulled the screeching second trailer right up behind the first. The right rear tires were completely gone, about two miles back, and she left more signature road marks for the locals to talk about.

She was open for business, and ready for a busy first season.

"What the hell is that girl doing out there?"

"I don't know, but she's getting some junk out of town. I bet those snakes are hungry. She's been gone two weeks now."

"I'm not feedin' em,"

"Who are we gonna get to run the Bar?"

"It can run itself, I guess. Sort of like a really big vending machine." And the few, really early locals laughed, and tossed a few more bills in the shoebox at the end of the Bar.

Twice that month Andie Jo had to run off some warm visitors. No, she didn't have a spare room - town was only a few miles down the road, and who would want to stay in a dump like hers anyway? AND...YES!...that really is the name of her business.

“Last Chance Motel and Mausoleum? For sure?”

Andie pointed out the open front door, to her considerably more professional looking sign on the two-lane right of way.

“Wouldn’t have painted that if it wasn’t.”

She got the feeling, *that* laughter would piss her off after only a few more nosey breathers.

“Do I have a roommate?”

“No, Roger. Can’t you tell on your own when one of you arrives? Sheesh!”

“Oh, I’m sorry...you’re right.”

“And, haven’t I told you, stay in your room when a stray comes in the door? It might be a kid, and I can’t be scaring kids out here. They’ll shut me down for sure!”

“Yeah, I remember...I’m sorry.”

“God, being departed doesn’t mean you’re suddenly smarter, does it?”

“No, I guess not. I don’t seem to understand things any more than I did when I was alive.”

“Well, I forgive you. Just this one last time though!”

Beginning to wonder if she had made a serious error calculating the remaining live population in Shit-Struck, Andie Jo was surprised and a little relieved when someone’s pickup coughed to a standstill just shy of her front door a few weeks later.

The door down the hall opened, and just as quickly closed again.

She was about to smart off again at her guest, when the front door opened. She just stood there, behind the dusty kitchen counter, with a mason jar of apple juice in her hand when a stray walked boldly in. She was afraid to turn her gaze down the hallway.

“You’re out of Molson at the Bar, Andie.”

She continued to just stand there, not sure if she was all that happy to have a real voice to talk to, but she had to admit, it had been lonely. Praying that there was nothing *otherworldly* floating up the hallway, she only smiled.

“Aren’t you comin’ back, ever? None of us know where you buy your stock. We’d hate to have you close the place up, even though...you don’t seem to be runnin it much anyhow.”

Andie Jo moved her eyes around a bit, not to look at anything really, but when her brain gears got moving, so did her eyes.

“Roger! Can you watch things out here for a few hours?”

She did look into the hallway then, and seemed to listen, but the local saw there was nothing to look at. Whatever the local wondered didn’t matter. She smiled at him and took one last sip of her juice.

“Chet, I guess I’m free for a bit. Let’s go restock that cooler in town.”

Never having thought to ask how long he intended to stay, Andie Jo suddenly had a motel manager. Her *best* idea was becoming almost too easy to be true. She wouldn’t even bother hurrying back.

She did hurry back anyway. Only thirty-one dollars and twelve cents in the damned shoebox, there had also been two hundred dollars worth of stock pissed away. She spent a good hour blasting all the hangdog drunks, threatening to make them all drink Bud if they ever did that to her again. She called for a half delivery, and glared at Chet until he offered to take her back out to the Motel.

“No, Chet. You’re gonna do better than that. The delivery will be here tomorrow, you are going to load it into the cooler. I’m taking your truck for a few days.”

She fingered the obscenely large-set ring in her pocket as she made Chet wince under her stare. A short time, and very short conversation later, Andie Jo was pulling away from the Motel in Chet’s rattling old beater, on her way to find out just how rich that pretty thirsty lady had been when she started shedding jewelry in the dusty kitchen. Roger was pretty sure things were going to be quiet for a few more days. He had always wanted to go to Vegas, and hoped she had a nice time there.

She did.

Did she ever!

When a town is as parched and poor as Shit-Struck, it wouldn't be surprising that it could smell wealth coming. Parades have been organized in smaller places, just because a pizza place was opening up. However, Roger was correct, things stayed quiet in town, even a few weeks after Andie Jo returned Chet's pickup with a few less rattles. She was hardly in the Bar any more often, and only back a few days from whatever adventure she had gone to find, and she was seen driving something marginally better than Chet's newly spruced guzzler. Nothing fancy, mind you, but the Barkeep was no longer walking as the result of her old pickup still being chained to that second trailer – she had shown up at the Bar one afternoon in something that was now the newest vehicle in town. Locals wondered the wrong way, hoping there might be some new brands of beer to try in the near future. Shit-Struck was truly stuck in its ways.

Not a goat-choking windfall, that ring had matched a few years earnings at the Bar at least. Andie Jo stood in her new Motel office – a cell phone on the dusty kitchen counter and a generator powered water cooler where the fridge used to sit – and she wrote out a few figures and made a few calls. Her best idea was about to breathe some life into her first idea. Roger was watching over her shoulder.

A small sigh caught their attention.

“Oh, neat!”

If Roger had been pleased, his face could no longer show it. If the new guest had been relieved, that couldn't be discerned from her face either. They were similarly expressionless.

“Do you have a vacancy?” she asked quietly.

Andie Jo looked into the far-away eyes of someone she had never seen before; not even a glance. This was no dearly departed local. Andie wondered absently if there were some incorporeal referral service she didn't know about, and hoped it didn't come begging any fees.

“I don't mind sharing,” the new guest continued.

Andie shot a glance at Roger.

No. The departed didn't seem to think of such things anymore.

“Damn, that sucks,” Andie thought to herself.

“Yes, Sugar. I have plenty of rooms. Roger will help you pick one out, and whatever you two do after dark, I couldn't care in the least,” she smiled. “We do charge a modest rate though.”

The slightly built spirit only stared, not the least hint of awareness in her eyes.

“But you don't have to worry about that right this minute,” Andie suddenly gushed. “You can work that out anytime you like. Can't she Roger?” and she made a swipe with her elbow, and regretted it because Roger seemed to crunch a bit at the touch, and he floated errantly to the end of the kitchen counter. “Sorry about that, Dude,” she winced.

“What kind of fee?” the gentle voice asked.

“Roger will fill you in on all that, Hon.”

“Alright.”

Andie Jo watched as her business doubled, and so did the pace of ideas in her mind.

“Roger? When were you thinking of leaving?” she asked a few minutes later, when he returned showing hardly any concern there was now an unattached female in his room.

“I'd not been thinking of that at all.”

“That's wonderful! Now, what I really would like to know – and you are paid up in full, you got that?...good! – what I'd like to know, Roger, Dear, is if you can move around where you like right now. Can *she* move around wherever she likes?”

“But, she only just arrived?”

“Can *she* get payment from wherever I send her? Sheeeeeeeesh!”

“Sure.”

She made no reply to that answer at all. But, she put to work the many muscles in her face which Roger could likely not move had they been on fire. Andie Jo smiled the biggest smile she'd made since learning in Vegas what that monstrous ring had been worth.

"Go find out your girlfriend's name, Rog. I can't be calling her 'Hey you!' okay?"

And she went back to her notepad, scratching out half a page of scribbled numbers.

The locals drank the Bar dry again twice more, neither time finding the correct and helpful sum in the shoebox as they had been warned to do. Two other guests had arrived at the Last Chance Motel, and shortly thereafter seemed to permanently depart.

Roger and his girlfriend, Daphne (Andie choked at hearing that), they were both still there, and just as settled as that oxidizing old pickup, which was seeming to try and coax the second trailer into some naughty activity. Daphne had been out a few times, to locate the payment that Andie Jo requested, but as yet had not put any cash, or cashable items, on the counter.

Andie suppressed a wicked urge to call her a dead-beat to her face.

It was after another fruitless journey through the kitchen window, because Roger always used it, that Daphne floated back to their room, and Andie glared at her behind her back.

She was about to yell something that *would* have been wicked, when Roger spoke up.

"Someone is coming."

"A new guest?"

"Too far away to tell, and not from town."

"Has Daph ever told you how *she* heard about us?"

"No."

"Well, if we aren't getting locals, where the Hell are they coming from – and, I sincerely hope you aren't going there..."

Roger seemed unaware of her slipup.

"From the desert. He's not alone."

"You can help me, Roger – can't you? If there is trouble, I mean."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Well, I didn't actually ask anyone's permission to set this place up, you know? There might be some damned... *darned*...regulation against giving your kind a place to stop, you know? I might be breaking a lot of rules, you know?" She looked out the window, though it was entirely the wrong direction of the approaching guests. "Maybe I broke one really big rule, *you know*?"

"No, you've done nothing wrong. I'm sure of that."

"I *sincerely* hope you are right, Dude."

"These two are not happy though, I can tell that from here. Would you like me to go ask them anything?"

Andie was weeping inside with joy, that she had promoted the stiff to manager.

"Go get em, Roger." And she followed him out – by using the front door – to go hide in her pickup truck behind the trailers.

"What does a ghost fight look like, really?" she wondered; he was taking a very long time to come back, with anyone.

Far too pleased with her own success to even consider any *employee* problems, Andie was suddenly overcome with dread; those two distant figures might have been coming for Roger, or Daphne. What color card would a ghost need, to work outside of the hereafter? "Oh, God," she moaned, "I've got his weightless ass in trouble with some Outer Limits INS!"

Finally overcome with curiosity, she crept around to the front yard again, and stared into the distance all around, hoping to see anything out there, to either be relieved about, or afraid of all over again. There weren't any ethereal lights in the sky in any direction; no unholy winds or sounds. It was just Shit-Struck silent as usual.

“Daphne? Hon?” she called out as she reached for the front door, “We need to get to know one another a little better, K babe?”

Roger was hovering near the cooler, and the two new guests were just on the other side of the counter from him. All three of them, staring off different directions, into some void....

“And you can come back with the payment whenever you wish,” Roger intoned.

“Christ on a cracker!”

Andie Jo never learned the names of those two guests. She couldn't stand to be in the same room with them. If ever there were an all-encompassing void after life, it could be seen in their eyes. Not that one could even call those eyes anymore. Those two guys were the most *lifeless* lifeless that she could dream in her worst nightmare. Having them floating around was going to get every one of them in deep trouble, and she knew it. She would rip up every note of her first idea, just to get rid of those two. It's just that Roger kept telling her to wait. He knew something, and she never wanted to hang around to hear from them what that was.

“They have the payment, they just can't bring it themselves,” he would say.

Two weeks later, she was numb from her lips to her toes, as she watched two dusty kids ride away into the desert on their dirt bikes. Neither of them awake yet to the five thousand dollars in hundred dollar bills she had stuffed under their helmets. The two desert demons had vanished, after explaining to Roger and Daphne where the payment could be found – out in the desert.

Andie Jo stared at a satchel of money, which Roger had explained was a drug deal gone very badly, at least for the two desert demons. They had shot one another, point blank, and guessed that the Last Chance was as good a place to come clean as they were ever going to get. It took them a while to find anyone wandering around in that remote location, and it was good those kids were on dirt bikes. Neither one of them could have driven the cars that were still out there in the canyons of that waste.

Andie Jo hoped those kids found those cars. They were probably as sweet-tricked and untraceable as the hefty bag of bills that she was eager to put her face into.

“I'm not even going to count this,” she told herself. “I'm not, I'm not, I'm not...I'm not.”

Shit-Struck rumbled, as it hadn't since the mines closed, one morning a few months later. Andie Jo had not been seen that whole time, and a really savvy young woman took up residence behind the bar in the Bar, and yes, she was employed, full time, by Ms. Andie Joe. That rumbling morning an entire parade of earth moving equipment pulled into town, not just a dusty road crew looking for staging space, but an honest to goodness dealership of power equipment, it seemed – every yellow behemoth on a glimmering new trailer truck. These were brand new, *monstrous* diggers and pushers and trenchers of every sort imaginable.

Andie Jo was in the lead truck, wearing a white hard hat.

She parked the whole mess right in front of the Bar, and in half an hour that place was singing like an Irish pub in Chicago. The Dirt Works Fun Park had come to town, and those flatbeds were aimed right at the tailings piles just east of town. The very last trailer in the line wore an ice blue and sea green mobile office on its back, and if the locals had bothered to have a look at it, all the hourly fees for renting the massive toys was printed right outside the ticket window.

An amusement park for real men.

One that would have them coming from Hong Kong, and Sidney, and Houston, and Toronto, and she hoped, Paris and London. Shit-Struck might eat more dust on windy days, but it would live again.

Shit-Struck had struck it rich. And it only cost Andie her goat-choking yearly tax fees, and a couple thousand dollars a year lease on that horrendous pile of uranium-less tailings. Shit-Struck had foundered, because the uranium was never out there. It was in Utah, or some other dirt filled place.

No one ever asked her how she did it. Not a soul alive even cared. There were sixty flavors of beer in those two new coolers now.

After five years Andie Jo had to close the Motel trailers. No, it wasn't because she ever got tired of that place. It was the quietest part of town now. Even though Daphne never would shut up anymore. One day she just started blabbing. Even Roger would go wait in that sagging pickup for a while.

No, Andie closed the trailers, because they attracted too much attention. The place was even making papers outside the country. It sat on the roadside, the first part of Shit-Struck that anyone would ever encounter, and it was just a natural draw. She considered putting the Reptilliarium out there, because she wanted to expand the Bar, and add a restaurant. (She hated the food at the new Sheraton Hotel.) But, after an emotionless talk with Roger, she just decided to push the trailers into a great hole she had dug behind them.

"Yeah, go ahead and close," was all he said about it.

She wondered where he would put Daphne, when the Last Chance was gone for good.

He probably wouldn't miss her at all if they shoved her in that hole.

No, better than that, Andie Jo found a place for those two. Her best idea had made it all happen, and her first idea was rumbling out east of town as sweating, giggling men ripped the earth open in great gaping maws, and pushed it all back again the next morning.

No, Andie Jo never stopped having ideas. One more idea had been born behind that dusty kitchen counter, in a long-buried trailer house a dozen miles outside of town.

As she teed up her first ball on that main fairway, of the Last Chance Memorial Golf Course on opening day, she looked over the tops of two beautiful stone monuments – just sixty yards down the course. Roger on the right, in marble; Daphne on the left in granite. They told her the last names were not important anymore. Beyond those, were a few dozen other headstones; insane-to-the-very-core breathers, who had rushed to be buried on her tournament worthy links. Andie figured she could house at least a thousand noteworthy dead under her immaculate lawns. She knew, by her booked-solid two year schedule, people would come from all over the world to play on the only golf course with headstone handicaps.

"It really is a nice place."

"Thank you, Roger."

"Much better than the Motel."

"Well, that was only a startup."

"I like it. I really do."

"You know, I think I can tell, too!" she smiled at him, not expecting in the least that he would do the same. She wished she could see him smile, just once. "You don't really need them, do you," she stated, rather than ask. "None of you really need such a thing at all, do you?"

"No. We really didn't need the Motel either. But, it was the only thing like it. We liked that a lot. It showed you cared."

"Yeah, well...those poor fools under those are going to pretty pissed when they realized how useless this place is, too," she chuckled.

"Oh, not really. Everyone loves golf," Roger sighed.

About The Author:

Collector of Crayons; Student of Limericks; Father of Monsters; Guardian of pets; Devotee of Nonsense (in three languages), Joel Blaine Kirkpatrick – whose middle name rhymes with those of this three brothers {Wayne, Lane, Kane} – writes in his spare time, reads as if it is a full time occupation, AND...and still stirs up occasional trouble on message boards where he's not been banned. He can be found all over the internet, and answers emails on Thursdays. At 2:00.

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Isolation

by Maria Savva

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'I don't know what we're paying that psychiatrist for.' Amy's mother's voice was laced with anger.

'I want to stay at home with Becca today,' said Amy.

Her mother frowned. 'You spend too much time on your own, it's not good for you. Your father has taken time off work today. We told you we'd be going out to dinner for your birthday.'

Amy averted her eyes from her mother's steely gaze. Sometimes she felt like a caged bird; spending more and more time in isolation in her bedroom. Whenever her parents came to see her it was to ask if she was "all right", or to suggest a family day out. Dr. Grube, the silver-haired psychiatrist, had recommended that they spend more time together as a family unit because many of Amy's issues sprung from her being an only child and not spending enough quality time with her parents.

For the past six months, Amy had been having weekly counselling sessions. She knew she didn't have any "issues" and that her parents were wasting money on this doctor who could do with a bit of analysing herself, judging by the multicoloured psychedelic dresses she wore.

Amy's one sanctuary from the overprotection was her best friend, Becca. If it wasn't for Becca's visits, she felt sure she'd have been driven insane by her parents and their overanxious ways that stemmed from their own guilt.

After her mother left the room, Amy looked at Becca apologetically. 'Sorry about that. My mum can be rude at times. My parents are so concerned about my well-being that they often forget how to treat me or my friends well.' She laughed dryly.

Becca twirled a lock of brown hair around her fingers. 'Let's go to the park. It's a nice day; the weatherman said it would hit 30 degrees.'

'Okay,' said Amy, feeling odd, realising that this would be the first time she and Becca had gone outside together. Becca usually visited her at home and they stayed in her room to chat and play. Amy's mother constantly told her that it was dangerous for young girls to play outside; she warned of monsters lurking around corners, or in the back of cars and vans, waiting to devour passing children. Perhaps the visits to Dr. Grube were paying off, because when Becca suggested going outside, Amy had not broken out in a cold sweat.

Taking a deep breath, Amy walked towards her bedroom door, feeling a sense of freedom; as though she were breaking out of a cocoon of fear. The furthest she had ventured outdoors lately, was to her parents' car for her trips to see Dr. Grube.

Amy was home-schooled. Her parents didn't want to send her to the local school. They said she would meet the wrong people and pick up bad habits. When she complained that she wouldn't make any friends if she stayed at home, her parents bought her a dog. Jinx was a cute and energetic puppy. Amy was happy to have him, and for a while her feelings of loneliness were forgotten. Her parents would only let her play with the puppy in the back garden. One morning, when he was just two years old, Amy had found Jinx shivering in his kennel. He appeared unwell. Her father took him to the vet and returned empty handed. Jinx was suffering from pneumonia and the vet wanted to keep him in the surgery under observation. A phone call the next day confirmed that the puppy had died. Amy was inconsolable. She blamed her parents for not letting Jinx sleep indoors. The snow had been covering Jinx's kennel for over a week before he fell ill.

She locked herself in her bedroom and then the pattern began, where she would spend most of her time alone. Around that time, Becca came into her life. Becca didn't think she was crazy, in fact, she'd once told her she thought her parents were the crazy ones. She was thankful for Becca; a lifeline to her sanity.

Amy went into the kitchen, where her mother sat at the table reading a novel.

'Mum, I'm going out.'

A gasp from her mother relayed her shock and surprise at the news.

Amy turned away towards the front door and began walking briskly.

'Wait! Amy!'

Amy stopped walking, but continued to stare at the front door as if it were an escape route, longing to reach it before the invisible but powerful reigns could stop her. 'Me and Becca are going out,' she said, resolutely, to the door.

'But, you're not well, honey.' Her mother was beside her now, holding her shoulder. Her voice sounded patronising to Amy who longed to break free from this strangulating hold her mother had on her.

Amy looked at Becca who smiled back at her. This gave her the courage to reply: 'I'm going out. It's my birthday and I'm going to spend it with my friend.'

'But your father and I—'

'I want to be with Becca today.' Her eyes were now brimming with tears.

Her mother rubbed her back and said, 'Becca can come with us. There'll be chocolate cake.'

'I'm not a child!' came Amy's sharp response.

'You're only 12 years old, Amy, of course you're a child,' said her mother, gently, one hand remaining on her back.

Amy shrugged free from her mother and looked at her friend who stood twiddling her hair. Why wasn't Becca standing up for her? It had been Becca's idea that they go to the park. 'Why aren't you saying anything?' Amy stared accusingly at her friend.

Becca turned away.

'What do you want me to say, honey?' asked her mother.

'I wasn't talking to you!' said Amy, a tear escaping from her eye.

'Calm down. Your father will be back from work soon and we'll go to dinner.'

Amy looked daggers at her mother, and when she turned back she saw that Becca had already left. Regret coursed through her veins; she wished she hadn't snapped at her. It wasn't Becca's fault. Her heart hollow, she worried that Becca might not want to be her friend anymore.

Amy began to cry, and soon felt surprised to find that she was not swimming in an ocean of her own tears. Where did all the tears go when they fell? They were gone; seemingly dissolved on the way from her eyes to her cheeks. Some had slipped into her mouth. She knew because of the salty taste they had left behind. Her mother was cradling her; rocking her. When Amy lifted herself up, she saw that her mother's shirt was wet where her face had been pressed against it; stained with tears. A reminder of the pain.

She stood up, unable to look into her mother's eyes.

'Darling, stay here with me for a while. Let's talk,' her mother said, seeming reluctant to let go of her arm.

'I'm going upstairs,' she replied. As she said it, a blackness enshrouded her. She didn't want to go back up there, to that room where she was always alone. She wanted to run free, to get away. So, she did. Darting out of the front door, as if a starter pistol had sounded, she ran and ran, and she kept on running. A feeling of liberation took over and brought peace to her troubled mind. She heard her mother's screams behind her, fading. Soon, they were too distant to be heard.

Amy woke up in hospital. She had collapsed after running for quite some time, and was almost run over by a car. There had been much whispering between the doctors and her parents before they let her go home. Frustration overwhelmed her: *Why won't anyone tell me anything? I'm not a child!*

Her mother looked at her as if she had run out of words. Neither of her parents spoke to her in the car. The silence was absolute.

When they arrived home, her father said, 'Amy, we don't know what to do for the best. Dr. Grube will be coming to see you this week. She'll know what to do.' Doubt flickered in his eyes.

A few days later, Amy was in her bedroom when there was a knock at the door. She hoped it was Becca. She hadn't seen her since the evening of the accident.

Dr. Grube opened the door and entered the bedroom as if she had been there a hundred times before, when in reality she had never visited Amy at home. Amy didn't like the way Dr. Grube was looking around the room, as if she were searching for signs that a mentally disturbed individual inhabited this place. Before she even sat down, Dr. Grube took out her pen and jotted something down in her notebook, which seemed to be glued to her hand as Amy had never seen her without it.

The doctor smiled briefly at her and then sat on the pink armchair in the corner of the room. 'Hello, Amy. How do you feel today?'

'Fine,' she replied. The good old word that could be used in place of all and any other true feelings. She found herself wishing hard that Becca would turn up, so that she wouldn't have to be here alone.

'I understand it was your birthday last week,' said Dr. Grube. Leaning over, she reached into her briefcase pulling out a red parcel tied with a bright pink bow. She stood up, walked towards the bed, and handed it to Amy along with an envelope. 'Happy birthday!' she said, brightly.

Amy took the gift and card, unsure how to react. She had not expected to receive anything from the doctor. Their relationship had always been very distant, stifled, and uncomfortable. Dr. Grube had hardly shown any real human emotions in all the time she'd known her, and Amy always resented the way she tried to delve into the deepest reaches of her mind. 'Thank you,' she managed to say eventually, almost under her breath.

Dr. Grube returned to the pink armchair and sat down. 'Now, Amy,' she began, 'tell me how you are feeling.'

Amy looked at the birthday present. She wanted to know what was inside, but it appeared that the doctor had now reverted to formal mode. Her face was full of concern, reminding Amy that this was not a social visit.

Amy cleared her throat. 'Um... I'm fine.'

'Let's talk about the day of your birthday. Why did you run away? Are you able to tell me?'

Amy recalled the claustrophobia that had enveloped her and the way she had sensed a freedom as she escaped the confines of the house. She had met up with Becca at the end of the road, and they had played a game. They ran along the street, trying to stay on the narrow kerb, running in a straight line. The road was busy, and as it became darker they used the lights of the passing cars as a guide. She remembered Becca running ahead of her, laughing at her because she could not keep up.

'Amy? Are you okay?'

Dr. Grube's voice roused her from her memories; it was as if she had been lost back in time.

'I'm fine,' said Amy again.

'Tell me about when you ran away. Where did you go?'

'I was with Becca.'

'Oh.' Dr. Grube frowned and made another note in her little book. 'When was the last time you saw Becca?' she asked.

'That was the last time I saw her.' Amy recalled the last words she had heard from her friend's mouth, before she fell into the road in front of the car: 'I don't want to be friends with someone who can't even run properly!' Amy pursed her lips as she wondered whether Becca had meant it when she said that. She realised, as if for the first time, that Becca had not visited her in the hospital, or even tried to find out if she was okay. What sort of a friend was she to abandon her when she was almost killed?

'Good.' Dr. Grube's voice invaded her tangled thoughts. 'Well, we seem to be making some progress, Amy.'

Here we go again, thought Amy. Dr. Grube was always trying to get her to stop seeing Becca.

‘This is a very positive step,’ continued the psychiatrist. ‘It shows that you are letting go and moving forward on your own. It could be that the trauma of the near-miss car accident has given you the wake up call you needed.’

The pink and orange swirly pattern on Dr. Grube’s dress was causing Amy’s eyes to cross, so she turned away.

‘I think you are letting go of Becca, finally.’

‘Letting go of Becca?’ *You don’t even know Becca!* She wanted to scream at Dr. Grube. The doctor was for ever telling her that her friendship with Becca was unhealthy and that Becca didn’t really care about her well-being. Perhaps Dr. Grube thought the more she repeated it the more chance she had of making her believe it, but Amy always thought Dr. Grube was trying to brainwash her. She had always rebelled against the doctor’s words, believing that her parents had somehow conspired with her to try to get rid of the one and only friend she had, so they could keep her locked up here like some prized possession.

Amy shifted uncomfortably on her bed. She stared curiously at the unopened birthday present. As she did so, some part of her mind woke up as if the red gift wrap was a beacon guiding her. Momentarily, her feelings of anger towards the doctor—and even her parents—lifted. She thought again about the last time she’d seen Becca. *Where has she been for the past few days? Why hasn’t she come to see me?* Could the doctor have been right about her all along?

‘I think it’s about time I told you the truth about Becca,’ said Dr. Grube.

Amy wrinkled her brow. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You know how you’re always reminding me that you are not a child anymore?’ The doctor laughed.

Amy blushed slightly and looked at her hands.

‘Well, guess what?’ continued Dr. Grube. ‘I think that’s true. The truth about Becca... I think you’re grown up enough to hear it. You see, you needed her when you felt isolated, because of your circumstances. It’s a good sign that she’s disappeared now. She only existed in your mind... In your imagination.’

‘What are you saying? She’s not real? But...’

‘You are growing up, Amy. You are letting go of your childhood imaginary friend. You are breaking free.’

Amy could only gape in disbelief.

‘Aren’t you going to open your present?’ asked Dr. Grube, snapping Amy out of her trancelike state.

The red package looked blurry in Amy’s vision, her eyes now full of unshed tears. In her heart, she felt a sense of loss. Becca’s whole identity had been proclaimed null and void, all the times they had spent together were unreal. It was too much to take in. She lifted up the gift-wrapped package.

‘Read the card first,’ said Dr. Grube, appearing as excited as a small child on Christmas morning.

Amy carefully placed the package on her bed and lifted up the yellow envelope. She opened it and saw a pretty pink card with the number 12 on it. Fancy calligraphy wished her a “Happy Birthday”. Amy’s brow furrowed. She felt anything but happy at the moment. Sighing, she opened the card and read Dr. Grube’s message. “Today is the start of a new beginning, the marking of a new year in your life. Time to leave behind anything that is no longer of value.” *Becca*, thought Amy, a tear fell from her eye and made the ink on the card run.

Dr. Grube picked up the birthday gift and handed it to her.

Amy fumbled with the pink ribbon, feeling awkward. All she wanted was for Dr. Grube to go away, so she could cry in peace. As she tore away the gift wrap, she saw a book, titled: “Saying Good-bye to Karen” by Philippa Grube.

‘I used to have an imaginary friend,’ said the doctor. ‘Her name was Karen. When I was slightly older than you, I wrote a book about her. She’ll always be in my memory, and Becca will always be in yours.’

‘Y... You wrote this?’ Amy stuttered.

‘Yes. I know why we create imaginary friends. It’s partly because we think we are all alone and we need someone to listen to us.’

Amy flicked through the brightly coloured pages.

‘I hope my book will teach you that you are never alone, Amy.’

Amy stared in wonder at the psychiatrist, and even began to think that maybe her dress was quite pretty after all. *Now I really am going crazy*, she thought to herself, as a smile curled on her lips.

About The Author:

Maria Savva is a lawyer and author from London. She travels on the London Underground by day and then, by night, writes stories about the people she sees on there... Of course, her imagination likes to add a little extra. You can read excerpts and find links to purchase her stories, by visiting her website:

<http://www.mariasavva.com>.

###

Beyond the Green Hills

by Tom Gahan

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He walked slowly at first. Then blending his steps with an awkward jog, he traveled the muddied path alone. Curls of mist rose from the peat. The morning fog that had kissed everything with wetness, now lifted with the brilliant sunrise. Seamus McDonough was on the first leg of a journey that would last the rest of his life. Times at home had not been good. Not good at all.

His grandfather had survived the famine and stayed. Nothing much came of that. He was nothing more than a slave to the landholder of his small sharecropping farm. Wrongfully accused of poisoning the landlord's horse, he died in prison a defeated man. Seamus' father worked Grandfather's farm hard enough to feed seven children. Other than being blessed with them, he didn't have much to show for his troubles. His wife died at the birth of his last.

A hay wagon sat at the side of the lane headed in Shamus' direction. “Going my way, are you?” he calls out to the driver.

“Where are you headed, lad?”

“America, I am.”

“I’m not going that far. I’ll be tuning round at Kilcoole. I was restin’ me horse here for a bit. She’s gettin’ on. I suppose I am, too. Hop on. I’ll take ya that far at least.” The driver motioned to the place beside him. “Martin Herlihy is the name.”

“Thank you, Mr. Herlihy. Much obliged.”

“I’m glad for the company,” Herlihy said.

“I’m even more glad for the occasion to rest my legs,” Seamus replied as he tossed his bag in with the hay. Herlihy’s gnarled hands flick the reins and the dappled mare pulled against the harness.

“Ah, boyo, I recall yer face and voice. Y’re in the pubs givin’ them fiery speeches. You live out beyond the green hills.”

“Well, now, yes t’is me.” Seamus shifted uncomfortably on the wagon seat.

“Made good sense to me. What you were sayin’ and all. Even with a belly full o’ potcheen.”

“I don’t touch it,” Seamus countered.

"It was me self I was referin' to. Why don't you drink?" Herlihy questioned.

"I'd rather be spending my hard earned bit of money on tools and books. And...this new adventure."

"I see. Ah, yes! You're the horse-shoer from Wicklow."

"Yes, a farrier I am. I remember you and your horse. Shoed her up a couple of times."

"What's sending you to America?"

"A steamship out of Liverpool. I'll catch a boat over from Dublin to connect."

"Right, then. What I'm askin' is—what's chasing you? Have ya thought aboot stayin' and fightin'?"

Seamus measured his words carefully. "Sure I've thought about it. We all have. But what's the point?"

"Right, then. Don't be forgettin' your homeland, lad. It's made you who you are."

Seamus thought about it for a while. "Sure it's true. The dirt under my nails and on the scruff of my neck is from the turf," he said.

"The revolution is what will put this good land back in the hands of its people," the driver said.

Seamus was usually a quiet young man with the ability to read and write very well. His mother had taught him to read by candlelight. When she died, the village priest educated him on the finer points. McDonough always wanted more and something better. It drove him.

"The revolution is the answer for all that troubles us," Herlihy said and wiped his stubble with the back of his hand.

"Those in the fight will wind up on the losing end of a long rope, courtesy of the crown," Seamus argued.

"You've already been involved. Givin' those strong words in the pubs. Never know when a constable's man or a double-agent is listening."

"I'm careful about that. I always know who's in the room."

Herlihy turned and looked his passenger square in the eye and said in a low voice, "You can never tell who might be a turncoat. In these hard times, a little money, a pig, or the promise of an easier life for a workin' man's family can turn the weak. A man bribed with whiskey could loosen his lips just the same."

"Right, then. Just as well I'm leaving. Wouldn't you think?"

"Probably so." Herlihy spat over the side of the cart into the dirt. "Boyo, I'm hoping you set foot in America long before the Black and Tans even know you're gone."

Seamus knew Herlihy was right. Although he was a skilled tradesman and could likely eke out a little better living than most if he stayed; it would only be a matter of time before they caught up with him. His cousin Kate had gone ahead of him two years ago. She had sent him some money to help with his trip. There was the promise of a job for him at the house where she worked as a domestic, the estate of Patrick Sullivan. Kate arranged for Seamus to work in the stables. Sullivan, a wealthy merchant, was a second generation American. A plan was in place, but McDonough feared the unknown. Word had gotten to him that his compatriots were being treated very poorly in America. They couldn't apply for most good jobs and were paid lower wages when they did find work.

The two traveled on in silence. Herlihy spoke first, "You'll be shoeing horses in America, then?"

"Hopefully so," Seamus replied.

"I hear tell that motorcars are becoming all the rage in America. They don't need shoes."

"Well, there might be an odd one here or there. My cousin has arranged stable work for me." Seamus leaned back in the seat with a smirk. "Of course I'm sure those motorcars will need fixin' soon enough. I'm fine with that."

A lone horseman approached. Sitting tall in the saddle, he wore the dark green uniform of the Royal Irish Constabulary.

"Say, old Herlihy. What's in the wagon?" the constable asked. He spoke in a clipped, staccato rhythm.

"Hay, of course. Can't you see? It's as plain as day." *What a fool*, Herlihy thought to himself.

"Mind if I have a look?"

"Suit yourself," Herlihy said and pulled on the wagon's brake.

“Who's your passenger?”

“He's my smithy. Came along to look after old Nell's hooves, he did.” Herlihy grinned.

“A might well dressed for a smith, don't you think?” said the constable.”

“Aye, maybe so, but it doesn't seem to bother the horse.”

“Don't be a smart-arse. Hold your tongue, Herlihy. Your face alone is ugly enough to get you arrested,” the constable said as he dismounted his horse.

“Did you want to inspect my wagon?” Herlihy jerked his thumb toward the hay pile.

“We've got word the rebels are running guns through here. What do you know about that?” The constable leaned his face to within inches of Herlihy.

“Nothing,” Herlihy replied and turned his head away from the constable's acrid breath.

“And how about you, mate?” The constable now glared at Seamus. He unsnapped his holster's cover and drew his Webley revolver.

“Easy now. There's no call for that,” Seamus said. Ashen faced, Seamus held up his hands.

“I'll be the judge of that. Get down off there and help Herlihy unload that hay.” He pointed to the load with the gun.

“Right here?” Seamus asked.

The constable waved the pistol. “You seem like a sturdy enough young man. Right here. Right now,” he said.

Seamus and Herlihy fiercely tossed hay over the sides of the wagon. Seamus prayed that Herlihy wasn't in the business of running guns along with his fodder. The constable took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He began to question Seamus. “The R.I.C.'s barracks up the road were burned the night before last. I'm told they started the fire with tallow and common straw. You've got enough here to start quite a blaze. Wouldn't you say? Carrying baggage and dressed as you are... might you be running away from that job?” He pressed the Webley 450's cold muzzle under Seamus' chin to emphasize his point. Beads of perspiration began to glisten on Seamus' forehead. “You seem a might nervous, mate. You have all the makings of I.R.A. scum.”

“Sure enough. I'm hoping all the saints in heaven make sure that gun of yours doesn't go off by accident,” Seamus said.

“Don't be so cheeky. I'll just wait for the next patrol of lovely Black and Tans to take over the questioning. I'm sure they'd like a word with you.” Seamus cringed at the thought of the ruthless Black and Tans interrogating him. He knew they had murdered a local priest in cold blood a week ago.

“If you're about shoeing horses; where are your trade tools?”

Seamus changed the subject. “I'm off to America to see my cousin Kate McDonough of Wicklow. Perhaps you know of her?”

“Indeed I do,” the constable answered. “Fine lass. Too bad she went packing for America. Is she coming back? Her uncle could have used her help at home. What with seven children and all...”

“Aye, I'm the oldest of them.” Seamus sensed the tension drop and he backed away from the gun.

“Nothing to be proud of. You come from a long line of criminals. Your grandfather died in jail. And rightfully so, for killing a man's horse,” the constable said. Seamus felt the anger rise in his veins and decided to bite his lip.

“As you say, sir.” Seamus looked to Herlihy, then the wagon's empty bed and finally to his interrogator. He held his hands out to the side, his palms turned up. “Will there be anything else, sir?”

“Looks as though you're not carrying any contraband. I guess most everybody's got a pile of straw somewhere that could be used to set fire. That'll be all. Load up and be on your way.” The constable climbed back on his horse. “Give my regards to your cousin Kate. I remember her fondly. Let her know her good name and the memory of her fair face got you off the hook.”

Herlihy dropped off his passenger on the outskirts of Kilcoole village. He snapped the reins and pulled away with a half-dozen American made .30-06 Springfield rifles still safely hidden beneath the floorboards of his wagon.

Seamus finished the remaining twenty-five miles of his journey to Dublin on foot. He had only been there once before as a boy. He had forgotten about the aromas drifting from the bakeries and pubs. Streets

bustling with activity greeted Seamus as he made his way to the pier. A boat crowded with people waited for the trip across the Irish Sea to Liverpool.

In Liverpool Seamus threaded his way through the streets. Sooty smoke spewed from factory chimneys and the stacks of ships loitering in the harbor. His ship to New York wasn't set to sail until the next day. He wandered from the park to a pub and back again to kill time. He read three newspapers. Night was falling and Seamus thought about getting a room for the night. His meager pocket money would have to last until his first paycheck. He reconsidered. The weather was almost mild enough; sleeping in the park seemed to make sense. He then considered the risk of being roused by the police, harassed by pickpockets, or worse. Seamus chatted up the pub's proprietor who agreed to let him sit at the bar until closing. Being amiable, and crafty, Seamus negotiated a deal with him to sweep up the place, wash the dishes and stock the bar in return for a meal and being allowed to stay the night inside.

"I'll come round first thing in the morning to unlock the door," the barkeep said and poured himself one last draft. Seamus sighed in relief. He was in a country that didn't take kindly to his lot. Although the owner had a brother-in-law from Limerick, that was about as far as the diplomatic relations extended. In the morning Seamus was up and ready to leave before he heard the key turn in the door.

Seamus bounded up the gangway and produced his papers and ticket for boarding the ship. He had heard horror stories about the coffin ships in days gone by. This ship seemed far better than the ones in the tales. It was booked to capacity and steerage was his only choice for passage. He was okay with that. Making his way below, he found a bunk and stashed his bag.

In crossing the North Atlantic Seamus gained an appreciation for the vastness of the world. Sky merged with the water on the horizon and blended into an indiscernible boundary. Half way into the trip clouds began to thicken and the winds increased. Gradually at first, stiffening the flags, and then whipping into a full gale. What had been a tolerable bobbing of the ship in the sea now changed to an undulating ride. Green water broke over the bow and coursed over the top deck. Seamus watched with a mixture of fear and amazement. *Best to go below*, he thought, *this is no place for horseman*. A sudden slash of cold rain chased him down the steps. His knuckles whitened as he gripped the rail. He made his way to his bunk and stumbled in. Women huddled with their children as the ship pitched. Many heaved with seasickness. Even more prayed for their lives.

The storm kept on for two more days. During most of that time, Seamus, and most everyone else aboard, figured they were goners. On the third day the winds dropped, the skies cleared and the crew announce that New York Harbor was only a half-day away. The passengers didn't have enough energy left to express any joy. Lack of bathing and the effluents of seasickness made the odor below decks unbearable. Seamus longed for the earthy smell of the farm. *Even the dung heap smelled better*, he thought.

They arrived in New York as the sun set behind the Statue of Liberty. All those in steerage were transferred by ferry to Ellis Island for immigration evaluation. Given the hour, they would have to wait until the following day to be processed. Passengers on the upper decks were granted the luxury of on-board inspection and immigration procedures and the courtesy of being let off in lower Manhattan.

"Where are you from?" a man wearing dark clothes and a thick black moustache asked Seamus. They sat on the long wooden benches under the vaulted ceiling in the Great Hall of Ellis Island waiting for their number to be called. Seamus didn't recognize the man's accent. Scores of others sat in the rows. Their accents and languages echoing off the tiled walls were unknown to Seamus.

"I'm from beyond the green hills," Seamus said.

"Which green hills?" He looked puzzled.

"The ones back home," Seamus replied and arched his back in defiance of the hard bench.

"That is good. Welcome to America, I think, yes? And maybe yes, this will be our new home?"

"Maybe, yes," Seamus said.

"Do you have someone here for you?" The man squirmed and tugged on the number card hung around his neck. 57612 it said.

"Yeah, me cousin. Me cousin, Kate. She wrote. Told me to meet her outside Castle Garden in a place called the Battery when I get off of here. I didn't know they had castles in America. Battery must be some

sort of village, I suppose.” A uniformed man came and tapped 57612 and he was gone. Seamus slumped in his seat for endless hours thinking about the past and wondering what America would be all about. Then he was tapped.

Seamus passed his physical exam and was processed for entry. He was tired, dirty and hungry.

She was easy to pick out of the crowd. Stunning and easily the tallest woman within sight, Kate’s brilliant red hair was bunched behind her head. Her curls tumbled over her shoulders. Seamus ran to her. They hugged.

“Ah, sweet Jesus. You look a mess,” she said and began to laugh.

“Aye. It’s been a rough ride,” Seamus said.

“Surely you’ve had better days. We need to get you cleaned up.”

“A bite would be most welcome.”

“Mr. Sullivan gave me money to see to you.”

“I tip my cap to Mr. Sullivan. Bless him.” Seamus lifted his tweed cap with one hand and let it fall back on his head.

“There’s a hotel up the street. We’ll get you a bath and your clothes cleaned and pressed. I’ll see to it that you are brought something to eat.”

“Okay, after that. What’s the plan?”

Kate didn’t answer the question. “Let’s get you taken care of first,” she said.

They arrived at the small hotel and Kate paid for the room in cash. She turned to Seamus, handed him the key and said, “Go up and take care of yourself. I’ll meet you in the lobby in two hours. I have errands.” She gave the desk clerk a stern look and instructed him to pick up Seamus’ clothes and send them to the laundry. “Do whatever it is you have to do to have them back in ninety minutes. We have a schedule to keep.” She pressed a large tip into the man’s hand. “See to it that he is brought a decent meal. Am I clear?” The clerk nodded vigorously.

In well under two hours Seamus bounded down the steps into the lobby bathed, shaved, pressed and fed. Kate greeted him and handed him a brown paper package. “Feeling better, are you?” she said. “T’is for you. A compliment of Mr. Patrick Sullivan. He wants you to make a good impression this evening,” Kate said. Seamus opened the package. It contained a new silk tie.

“Right, then,” Seamus said and wrapped the tie around his neck. “Help me with the knot, will you, Kate?”

“Aye, for sure. Still dressing the McDonough boys, I am.”

“Where are we off to? Seamus inquired.

“I don’t want to talk here. There’s a small pub a few blocks up. We know the owners.”

They walked the streets of lower Manhattan and Seamus was overwhelmed with its enormity. *Much grander than Dublin*, Seamus thought. He craned his neck and gawked at the buildings and the endless stream of Model T Fords rumbling by. Kate grabbed his hand and yanked him into a doorway. His eyes took a moment to adjust to the mid afternoon dimness of the empty pub. “Back here,” she said and pulled Seamus toward a corner booth. An aproned bartender rounded the bar and approached. Kate waved him off. “Give us a moment, will you?” Without a word the bartender nodded and shuffled back to his post.

“Seamus there are many of us who believe we will one day make a difference and win the respect of this country. In a short time we’ve already gained control of the police and fire departments. Some other areas, too. We’re not done yet. It’s a big block of votes as the bosses say.” She looked at Seamus to make sure he understood. “We believe that before long one of our people will be in Washington’s Whitehouse. In the meantime, there’s other work to be done.” Seamus leaned forward as Kate lowered her voice. “It’s all about independence and becoming an Irish Free State. As you know, Mr. Sullivan has sponsored you here as part of a much grander plan than the stable.” Seamus bobbed his head in agreement.

“He’d like to get you naturalized and run you for Congress some day,” she said. Seamus’ eyes widened. “You’re smart and hard working. He’ll pay to further your education.”

“For God’s sake, Kate. If I am going to represent the people it should be back home,” he countered.

“Yes, it’s true. But it’s not safe now. And maybe one day you will,” Kate said. “At the moment, we need you here.”

Seamus was growing frustrated. "Let's get on with the plan at hand," he said. "My original proposed role here."

Kate continued, "Okay, then. You and your gifted tongue are to speak this evening at a social club. It's out in Woodside Queens. We'll take a train there. Sullivan will be on hand. He wants you to lecture us about the goings on at home. He wants you to tell it all. The brutal atrocities by Britain's thugs, the Royal Constabulary, the Black and Tans and..."

"Aye....tonight...are they friends of the revolution?"

"Now, Seamus...Mr. Sullivan and his family have long been supporters of the Fenian Brotherhood here." Kate reached out and patted Seamus' hand in reassurance.

"Right."

"Sullivan knows you're a firebrand, loyal to the sod and can deliver an inspiring speech. You move people's hearts."

"Right."

"But are they friends? How do you know there won't be a detective in the house?"

"Oh surely there will be detectives. But they're with us." Kate paused. The quiet darkness of the room enveloped them. She continued, "Yes, Seamus, all friends. Brotherhood members, they are. Tonight it's a fundraising benefit for the new Irish Revolutionary Army."

"Right. That's what I'm here for," Seamus said. "Let's be on our way."

About The Author:

As a writer, Tom Gahan has run the gamut from newspaper columnist to feature writer to speechwriter. His freelance writing has helped build the image of various corporate clients. His well-received novel, *Harmony Bay: An adventurous slice of waterfront life where mystery surrounds history*, earned him a place on an international list of authors at GoodReads.com, "Writers You Should Get to Know."

Additionally, many know him as the creator of NY State's largest outdoor music festival. This accomplishment earned Gahan accolades and numerous awards including the prestigious Gold Key Award from his hometown Chamber of Commerce and two citations from the U.S. Congress. He was also named Times-Review Newspaper's 2009 Civic Leader of the Year for his humanitarian work.

Gahan is happily married and lives on Long Island's East End in New York. He is a member of: Long Island Authors' Group, Long Island Writers' Guild, and Eastern Long Island Executive's Roundtable. He serves as the Director of Marketing at First Edition Design eBook Publishing www.firsteditiondesignbooks.com. Gahan lectures regularly on topics including the oddities of the American language, the craft of writing and events during the American Revolution on Long Island. You can visit him at www.tomgahan.com.

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From Joy We Come, Unto Joy We Return

An award winning story from the Best Fiction of UCF, Cypress Dome of 2007. Additionally, a semi-final of the Laurel Hemingway contest 1997.

by Ami Blackwelder
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The sky is a dark and heavy rock about to drop. Her light blue shade bleeds violently with grays and dark blues. I am kneeling before my open window.

'You are wisdom. You are law. You are our heart, soul, and breath.' Fattened clouds roll eastward, but she is quiet. Fields of rice, reaching across acres, wave in paddies drenched in last night's rain. These fields flow under my own and distant houses standing up on wooden stilts. Crowded trains roll across tracks placed away from the villages and move chchch chchch. I pray long and hard. I pray to Mother Lakshmi. She is a mother to all of India. She will bring prosperity to this family.

My whisper softens at the sound of rain and thunder in the sky, the sounds of a whip striking an ox's worn back. The giant rain is awakening. Silence fills the air for a minute. The sky is silent again. I know Mother is listening. My tense cheeks and forehead lighten. I almost smile despite the pain. The sky deepens in color. Rain fights its way to the earth. It fights its way through the clouds like water fighting a dam that is just about to break.

'The love divine that conquers death, Mother Sweet, I bow to you, Mother great and free.' My shirt is a long cotton fabric, colored like the morning sky and decorated with dark blue floral designs. The sleeves are wide, reaching my wrists. The shirt hangs freely over identically patterned pants. The pants dangle just past my ankles. My feet are bare, but usually covered with deeply stained wooden sandals. A thin strap would wrap around my foot and another would wrap itself around my big toe. Snap. My palms grab the bottom of the tiny window frame and I hold myself still against the falling rain and the storm breaking outside. I close my eyes.

The rain pours heavily onto the fields before me. Mango trees shake outside the window's wooden frame. Branches scratch up and down against the window screen. The wind blows hard and its rain brushes against the screen and my face. Like a tear from my own eye, a raindrop falls from my eyelashes, slides down my cheek, and to an empty space alone on the wood floor inside my room.

To me the raindrop is a tear from Mother Lakshmi and outside my window is her cry, her pain. I can feel her. She listens to me when I pray and calls to me in the rain. It is cleansing. It is freedom. My mind is clear. Nothing do I see. Nothing do I hear. I can almost feel no pain.

'Sobha, Sobha.' I open my eyes. It is my husband. When he calls my name, it is always twice. Once slowly like one wooing his lover and then quickly a second time. It is always louder and always angry. It is loud to ensure that I hear him; it is angry to remind me of the anger disobedience brings. I do not mind if I upset him. He upsets at the simplest things. I do not even mind the beatings.

My body is not me, I tell myself when he raises his hands against me. But I will not upset the gods. I will not give them a reason to be upset with me. Therefore, I obey my husband and always listen when he speaks. The Bhagavad-Gita warns that when family laws are destroyed, men will certainly dwell in evil times.

Mother Kali reminds us of this warning with punishment. She is violent passion. Her anger beats like my husband's hand, but breaks more than skin and bone. I will not disgrace my family with disobedience, nor give a reason for Mother Kali to raise her hand against me and my family. I know a wife should be devoted to her husband with all her being, finding pleasure in obedience to him even unto death. Pavan sometimes makes this unbearable to do. But I am a good wife and I will raise my daughter right and obey all the laws of my gods.

I remember when I lived with my Ama and Babu a year before I was arranged to marry Pavan. I was thirteen. Ama was in the kitchen. She was little, but strong. Babu was helping her cook. Pavan and his parents were sitting on the couch in the other room. I sat across from them, looking at Pavan. He would stare at me, smile, and look away. I played games with my eyes upon his. A smile spreads across my face and then tears swell my eyes. Ama and Babu are dead now. The shutters on the window move back and forth, blowing squeak, squeak. I get up to close them.

'Sobha, Sobha.' Pavan calls me. I walk to the door. 'Sobha.' I open the door to let him in. He enters the room. The sounds of his feet hitting the floor echo thump thump beneath the hollow wood. It echoes like the wood pounding on an old tabla. I tighten the bun wrap in my hair. The color is a dark silky brown

and when I put it up, Pavan says it glows like a crown of jewels. His body becomes the black bear as it slowly moves beside me.

'Dinner is supposed to be ready. Where is it?' My face is soft and glows like the morning sun. His eyes are a dark storm that keeps ships away from their harbor. Scars rip deep, deep around his left eye, in his coal colored skin. His thick blue-black hair rests unkempt, like an abandoned bird's nest. His hands are covered in dirt from working outside all day.

'Why don't you brush this mess?' I lift my hand and comb his hair back. His hair slides between my fingers. He becomes a small bird feeding from the palm of my hand. 'I don't like this mess of you. Why don't you clean yourself up and I'll have dinner ready when you're done?' Pavan turns around, heading to the bathroom. I set the table and prepare dinner. The open window in the kitchen cools the hard wood kitchen floor. My bare feet tingle. I take out the pots, chicken, onion, garlic, coriander, roots, cloves, and curry. I cook for an hour in the kitchen.

Pavan waits in the bedroom after his shower. The thunder outside cracks crush. I set dinner on the table and have a seat. I call to Pavan and he walks out of the bedroom and sits beside me. But he is not with me. Pavan eats with his head down. He doesn't look at me and doesn't speak. Although Pavan says nothing, I can sense much noise inside him. His chest rises and a wrinkle breaks between his eyes like a river in a valley, twisting up into his forehead. I know he is angry, because he doesn't have a son. I know of his desire for one. He lifts his head.

'I am NOT a man without a son.' I am almost sympathetic to his disappointments.

'I know, Pavan. I promise you will have a son.' But too often inside him a frustrated fire for a son and for prosperity becomes my beating and my sympathy becomes despised. I have born him a few children. The first child was a boy who died a few months after birth. The second child we named Rajani. The third child was a boy and was still born. I know each time his sons died he felt the sad rains fall on him too, but now he does not feel anything but anger for me.

'What am I without a son?' His chest rises. His voice is loud. He raises his arms. 'Who will be there to continue my work, our livelihood? Who will help me bring prosperity to this family?' Every word is like a beating fist, beating and beating my back. Every word he uses to remind me of my failure of not giving him a son.

Today I am lucky he doesn't raise his hands against me. I know of the value of a woman when she gives her husband no sons. I know what can happen to her then. Uma was my neighbor. We would meet in the market and giggle loudly. Every day after the sun would fall, I knew we should be getting home. It is not proper for a woman to stay out late. Pavan would yell at me for it. I would look out the window across the fields and see Uma's house and smile while he shouted at me. I knew I would be seeing her again tomorrow and knew we would have fun.

She was a good wife to her husband. Her skin was soft like lamb's wool. Her skin was lighter than mine. She was graceful when she moved, like ships sailing smoothly on the sea. Everyone would tell her husband how beautiful she was. She had a gentle voice and was always obedient to her husband and her gods. She knew that was pleasing. She would rise early, seeking wisdom from her gods. She would always pray to Sita, the beautiful wife of Rama. She was the model wife. People say, 'May your wife be like Sita.' Uma was.

But her womb did not know children and I remember the day her home shook with the loudest words. Her husband took in another woman. Uma would sit in her room and stare out her window, only rising to serve her husband and her gods. Uma walked like she carried a sack of heavy rocks. The other woman gave her husband three sons. Every son born was like another hit from a hammer slowly hardening Uma's face of softness into hard, chipped clay. The window became her silent world. We did not laugh again in the market.

The earth cries and goes to sleep. I can't sleep. Moonlight dances behind the drawn curtain and wind wrestles with it. The crème colored curtains blow in the breeze from the open window. A dull light pierces the curtain and falls onto the wood floor. It crawls up the bed slowly, spreading like a blanket over Pavan and I. Under this light, a hollow pain pounds thump thump under my chest. I think of Uma. I think

of myself. Pavan lies on his back so still. He rests hard .Ghhh, ahhh. Ghhh, ahhh. His sounds of sleep are like the sounds of war. I rise to my knees and press my palms onto the sheets over his body.

I hang over him silently. His face is dark in this light. Four day old stubble sits like hard mud. His eyes are closed, but I know their color. Behind those lids fire burns, bitter fire; the kind that doesn't die in minutes, but burns and burns until everything is dead. Behind those eyes, I know my worth. For a moment, I slide my arms around his throat. Maybe I could be strong enough to do it. Maybe no one would know. Maybe no one would care. The light from outside crawls over his face and I see him clearer. I see the strength of the fire behind his eyes, the strength of his arms and I know I cannot do it. I fall back onto my side of the bed.

The morning sings to the earth like a mother to her baby. I am nestled under the sheets. Pavan is sleeping. I get up and walk to the mirror to comb my hair. It drops below my waist. I put it into a bun, because Pavan says he doesn't like other men looking at me. I pull it back tightly. Two gold earrings and three necklaces sit on a side stool. I adorn my face with this jewelry and mark my forehead with a dot of red paint as a sign of a married woman. I draw the curtain up. Thousands of birds, doves, silver beaks, wild pigeons, and hawks float across the sky.

'Mother sweet, rich with hurrying streams, bright with orchid gleams. I pray to thee.' My whisper is soft. Long and short bare trees grow between the neighboring wood homes. 'I kiss your feet, Mother. I bow to you. I beg you for a son. I beg you to appease Pavan's anger.' The door squeaks.

'Ama.'

'Rajani.' I turn my head and see my daughter stand behind me like a small statue. On my knees, she can almost see over my head. Her frame is rectangular and arms dangle to her side. Her shirt's colors of orange, blue and green bleed together.

'Will you come help me make breakfast?' Her lips puff up and she squints her eyes. They are big brown eyes when she doesn't squint. She likes to play games behind her eyes. Behind her eyes is laughter, behind her eyes she tells a thousand stories. I giggle with her. 'Awe, come here.' I wrap my arms around her, pulling her to me.

'You are so precious. You are Ama's jewel.' We walk to the kitchen. Sita and Mother Lakshmi stare at me from off the shelf near the stove. I know they demand my reverence. Dried flower petals rest at the bottom of their stone bodies. I brush the petals into my hands and toss them outside. Fresh flowers grow in a little rectangle beside the house. Their colors blossom beautifully. Their petals are huge. I pluck them and their scent rises into the air.

I remember my neighbor, Karuna. She squats within the rectangle of soil empty of any plant life. She is tall and lean. Strands of her hair fall over her face from a bun that is too often loosely tied. Light blue sleeves hang over her hands as she digs into the soil, dropping flower seedlings. Although she is much older than I am, we are very close friends. She helped me make a home of my house when Pavan and I were first married.

'Hand me the seeds.' I stand beside her, handing her the seedlings in my hands. She pours the seedlings over the soil. 'Look at what I do and remember. You will have to do this someday on your own. This how you make them blossom strong, the kind the gods like.' She was always wise and eager to help.

The sun was warm and the air was cool, brushing against my body. I watched her carefully as she planted. Our friendship grew with the seedlings, likewise growing stronger each year. I smell the flowers in my hands now and smile. The gods will be pleased. I look for a fresh fruit offering, but there is none in the house. I hope that will not upset Mother Lakshmi. I know I need to go to the market to pick up some fruit.

'Pavan, I'm going to the market.'

'Ama, can I come too?'

'We'll see.' I smile at Rajani and walk into the bedroom. 'Pavan, I'm going to the market. I need to pick up some things as well as fresh fruit for this morning's offering.' Rajani stands behind me. Pavan sits on the bed, drinking. A few bottles of liquor lay on the floor next to him.

'Why don't you have fruit for the gods? You are a stupid woman. Are you trying to make this family fail?'

'No, Pavan.'

'Now, the gods will be angry at me, because my wife doesn't know how to be respectful. They'll curse me!' Pavan rises like a bear from the bed and hovers over me. He snaps my arm, pulling me to him. He slaps me across the face.

'Ama.' Rajani runs over to me like a mighty soldier at war, trying to pull me from him. 'Leave Ama alone.' He pushes me back, knocking me over Rajani and we fall to the floor. She is like a tiny bead on a necklace about to rip apart.

'You don't teach Rajani respect for her Babu either.' Pavan's face grows angry like the darkness Kali brings to the skies. Rajani's big brown eyes hide under her hands. Pavan swings his arms around. Rajani crawls back. He is like a strong wind. His hands knock me like a hard bat against my body. 'Get out of my sight.' He pulls me toward the bedroom door. My knees scrap against the wood floor. Rajani's cheeks burn red. Tears soak her skin and drop from her eyes, down her cheeks and onto the floor. 'And get Rajani out of my sight.' He looks at her. 'You are a disrespectful little girl.' I stand up and pull Rajani up into my arms.

'Don't talk about Rajani like she is no good. You are the one who is no good.' I walk us to the door. 'You are a no good husband.' Pavan's face becomes beet red and he lifts his hands to strike me. He moves forward, but falls backward onto the bed and passes out from last night's drinks. I quickly carry Rajani out of the room and kiss her on her cheek. It is puffy and soft. The sun rises behind Rajani's eyes and a big smile squeezes her cheeks up into her eyelids. She is sometimes the only strength I have left. She is the gift I do not deserve. I know that if she would ever die, there would remain no life in me. I walk out of the house with Rajani in my arms.

'Let's go to the market.' I carry Rajani under the sky. The walk is long, but I can breathe outside. Rice paddies spread across acres and acres of land. Shades of light gray and dark blue soak like water color in the sky. Clouds rest low on the bank. I walk across the fields and water squishes under my feet. I put Rajani down and she walks beside me. I walk squish squish. My feet sink into the mud. Long gray and green grasses surround the paddies. A breeze blows through them. Karuna pulls rice up from the fields. She has been born into years of this life. Day after day, her life has been dedicated to it. A life that I also know, the only life either of us knows.

It is a life ingrained in us for so long that we almost see no other way of living. Karuna lives next to Krutika in my village. Karuna has a big family, two boys and two girls. She gets a lot of respect. Women listen to her when she talks. She is a good wife. She rises early and prays long to her gods. She bends over, kneeling. The water almost touches her face. Her body sways side to side. She hums la la la la la la la while she works. Her shirt is long and blue sleeves hang over her hands like they did when she taught me about planting flowers.

'Sobha.' I hear my name, it is Krutika. 'Sobha.' I turn around and see her small figure running toward me. She is thin like a child. Her hair is cut short to her shoulders. Her arms flap up and down. Her legs carry her quickly to me. She pants huh, huh. Behind her eyes is much fear.

'What is it?' She pants again.

'Karuna.' Her eyes sadden. 'Dharker died last night. This morning he will be cremated with Karuna.' I look over at Karuna working in the fields. Her body is bending over, her back is towards me.

'Dharker died last night?' I almost couldn't believe it. He was not that old.

'Karuna will be taken this morning.' Her face holds the pain of those words. My eyes swell with tears and I look up to the sky. I look for answers there, but I only see gray and dark blue. 'Karuna was a good wife, a good friend.'

I speak hard. I speak as if she were already dead. I knew that a woman dies with her husband. I've seen it many times growing up, but I've never had a friend that had to leave me because of it. I knew how Karuna would die. I knew I couldn't take her away from it. Krutika's words reminded me of that. A woman is of no value without her husband. All a woman is in him and a woman should serve and be obedient to her husband even unto death. She should show her devotion to him through her death with him. But I needed to know why I should not be angry. I needed to know why Mother Lakshmi would take

her away from me at a time when I need her here so much. I run to Karuna. Memories of her flood my mind. She is still bent over, pulling plants out of the wet fields.

'Karuna?'

'Sobha?' She smiles at me. My face is sad.

'You will be taken today?' I say it as if it would not be true unless she said it was so. She looks down at the plants underneath her. My arms want to pull her away from the water, shake her and have her tell me that it is not true.'

'Yes.' She says simply. She says quickly. 'I will be taken this morning. They will come by and take me to Dharker's body.' I want to pull her away from her pain, from her life. But my arms are not stronger than the devotion she has for her husband and her gods. If she were given the choice, she would choose to die with her husband. I cannot pull her away from her soul, a soul shaped by many years. This is the only life she knows, the only life I know. If I pulled her from it, my soul would burn at the thought of it. This life is bonded to us like a mother is bonded to her child. I know I should not pull her from it. I say nothing. She looks at me with a contented smile and sees the sadness on my face.

'I have lived my life. I follow our ways and now my life, our way, has brought me here to this moment. I must submit to what this moment brings me.' She smiles. 'I am content.' Wood is piled in a rectangle. Each log is thick and cracks with burnt age. Dharker's body is wrapped in white cloth and lies on top of the piled wood. His head is turned toward the sky. I can only see his black-blue hair hanging around his head. Rajani stands by me.

His Babu, Ama, brother and sisters surround the body. Karuna stands over the body, held up by family. She is drugged to help relieve the pain and cannot stand on her own. She stands in their arms like she has no will. Her eyes sometimes fall shut. The elders pull her to the wood and lay her next to her husband. A thin mist straggles below our feet, across the dirt and rises over the wood like a ghost. The morning is quiet.

Men begin a fire on the wood and a drone instrument sounds eee-ng, eee-ng. A beggar and a young boy fade out all other sounds. They sing a story of heroism. It is for the wife's devotion. But the music cries and cries. The fire crackles kksh kksh. She moans at the fire against her body, but the sound is muffled by the song. A hollow pain pounds under my chest as I stare at the smoke rising above the wood and hanging like a cloud over us. Eee-ng, eee-ng. The fire grows quiet...eee-ng. . . And slowly dies. I grab Rajani's hand and turn to walk to the market. The earth is heavy. The air is heavy. The walk to the market is heavy. I fall to my knees and cry.

'Ama, Ama.' I squeeze Rajani's hand and stand up.

We walk into the market. Children laugh ha ha behind a banana cart. Lychee, mango, jack fruit, and oranges are arranged in cane baskets. Baskets follow baskets. I smell them as I pass by. Light hangs over the land. The sun beats the ground hard. The sun beats upon my back hard. People run up and down the market place. Some walk slowly and some fast. I can see many wearing rainbows of colors. Buffaloes and cows push through the crowds.

'Get out of my way.' A man sits in his bullock cart and whips them. The cart shacks ccrick ccrick ccrick back and forth as it moves. I pull Rajani out of the way. Men talk in a corner. Each smokes his own pipe.

'No, no. See it is this way that a man finds Nirvana.' Another man laughs.

'No, you are mistaken. It is only when he desires nothing. He must neither delight in it nor loathe it, and then a man finds true Nirvana.' I walk around the corner. Bread is piled on carts next to cane baskets. The fresh fruit smells sweet. I remember Sita and Mother Lakshmi and buy two mangos to place at their stone feet. I fill my basket half way, leaving room for breads and spices. My eyes follow a small child running across a dirt road and behind a temple. Granite is carved into columns and many arches. Sculptures of men and women intertwined decorate the temple walls. A Guru sits on the front steps, whistling wu we wa wa wu, we wa wa wu. Many large beads on a necklace wrap around his neck. Saffron cloth wraps his body. Torn sandals sit beside his bare feet.

'Stay here, Rajani. I'm going to walk over to the temple.' The Guru looks up and smiles at me still whistling, we wa wa wu, we wa wa wu. His skin is like light speckled sand and his forehead is marked

with two red dots and two white lines. Years of dark hair tangle behind his ears and drop below his shoulders. A beard hides most of his missing teeth.

'I know why you have come to me.' His voice is low and scratchy like sand paper. He looks down and whistles again. I walk closer and sit down next to him. 'You're searching. That is what brings you here. You are searching for answers to your pain.' I cover my face and tears swell my eyes. Tears fall forth like a heavy rainfall. I toss my head up to the sky.

'I want to please the gods. I want to obey my husband like the Bhagavad-Gita warns us to do. But my husband is a monster. He is a hungry monster devouring everything in his way.'

'You don't tell kharma what you get. You must live with what it brings you.' He turns his head to the market and waves his wrinkled finger at it and at all the people there. 'See, it is like this. A man sees this and that and he desires it. So, the man follows this desire. All his life, he follows this desire and that desire and never has rest.' He breathes heavily, staring into me. 'One day he realizes that the only good desire he has is the desire in the soul.' He pounds his chest twice. 'The soul is what is eternal and it is this eternal that is Brahman, and it is this Brahman that is rest.'

He breathes heavily again. 'A good soul desires for nothing more than what it has.' He speaks angrily. 'Even if the husband has no good virtues, it is the wife's duty to always be obedient to him.' He says this sternly. 'This is what a good wife makes. This is what Brahman wants. This will take your kharma to a better next life.' He stands up, walking forward using a walking stick. 'Know this and then the day will not rest upon your face as a painful burden.' His face is a canvas of caves that dig deep, deep into his skin. His eyes weigh heavily. 'For you realize that this is kharma, and you must let kharma be kharma. Slowly this and that do not matter. Your heart will desire for nothing more than what your kharma brings you. Then you attain liberation, you no longer suffer pain.'

'For from joy all the beings come, by joy they all live, and by joy they will all return.'

I dry my eyes and throw a few coins into his begging bowl and walk out of the temple. I grab Rajani's hand and walk home. I think of the Guru's words and how simple he made things seem. My teaching is that of which the guru spoke, and although I knew I was building my kharma for my next life, I longed to taste the joy now. I lift my basket up over my head and a mango falls out, rolling onto the dirt. I lift it into my hands. I think of my gods, I think of Pavan. My fingernails press into its skin, my hands squeeze and press and squeeze and press. Juice squirts up. I drop it to the ground. The light from the sky is slowly covered with gray clouds. The blue sky bleeds violently with grays, blacks and dark blues. Fattened clouds roll eastward. I walk fast.

As I approach my village, I see my home. I see Pavan standing at the front door with a woman in a long red sari in his arms. She tosses her head up, laughing. Pavan smiles. I haven't seen him smile in sometime. He presses her hand against his as he walks her inside and closes the door behind him. At the sound of a whip striking an ox's worn back, the sky cracks snap. The sky color deepens quickly and rain pours to the earth like water rushing through a broken dam. The rain falls hard to the ground. I throw the basket down. I grab Rajani's hand and run. My feet hit splash splash in the fresh water. Mud spills onto my clothing. My left sandal flies off my foot and my hair bun unravels as I run through the wet land. Snap. The thunder cracks. Rajani and I run up to the house door. I open the door and see Pavan and the strange woman inside.

'No, no.' I run up to the front steps and open the door. 'No.' I cry.

'Pavan, What have you done?' The woman stands beside him, smiling. Her hair is long and dark and fluffy like clouds. She smells like flowers. Smoke rises from a cigarette in her left hand. Mud stains my clothes and the fabric clings to my chest. Beads of water drop one by one, forming a small puddle below me. I breathe heavily and hard. The sky cracks ccush. A fire burns inside me that has never burned so angry before. The sky sounds snap and my body trembles. Rajani pulls my dress. She doesn't want me to yell. She wants to protect me from Pavan, from myself.

'I am waiting no longer for a son. She can give what you cannot.'

'What about Rajani and me? What about us?' I should not speak back, but a fire burns inside that I cannot control. My eyes swell red and my chest rises.

'Ama. Ama.' Rajani wraps her arms around my waist. 'Ama.' Pavan pulls Rajani from me. She holds on tight, but his arms are stronger than hers.

'Ama.' Pavan pulls Rajani to him. She pulls back and falls to the floor. I push him back and he grabs my wrists. His grip is tighter than it has ever been before. I swing my other arm up and grab for his snake arms. I push him back again. He pushes me forward. My feet scrap against the hard wood and then I fall back onto the wet dirt.

'Don't do this,' I beg. I look at him with eyes that plead like the prey to her predator.

'Stay outside until you stop acting like a wild animal.' He slams the door shut. The rain falls hard. Tears soak my cheeks pink and slide down my skin with the rain. I hear Rajani cry inside and can hear him pull her to her room. My body lays soaked on the dirt ground. My hand squeezes the dirt in my palms. The sky sounds snap and my body shakes as I crawl. I crawl into a corner between the steps and the house and out of the storm. I curl up like a baby's fist to die. My head rests between my knees and I sway back and forth, back and forth and can only hum wu we wa wu wu, wu we wa wu wu. The sky is a dark blanket and the rain drops like rocks.

After the rain has quieted its anger and sadness, I knock on the door. I speak through the door gently, softly like a baby.

'Please, let me come inside. Let me see my Rajani.' I hear Pavan's feet pace near the door. 'Let me make you dinner like you like it. You must be hungry.' I hear him grumble on the other side and he slowly opens the door.

'Get inside. Clean yourself up.' I walk to Rajani's room. She lies on her bed with her face in her pillows. Tears soak her face there. The strange woman is in my room, adorning herself with my jewelry. She looks at herself in the mirror. I walk to the kitchen and prepare dinner just the way Pavan likes it. I mix many spices with a chicken in a boiling pot. I walk to the garden for fresh flowers to place on the table. The flowers outside are shriveled and dead. I look through my cabinet above the stove for Pavan's favorite spice, curry. There is none in the cabinet.

I bend below to the cabinet under the sink and look for some frantically. I knock over jars of plums and peaches and hit over a box of something. I pick it up and read the label, rat poison. Moments become hours in my mind. I see Rajani's eyes inside my mind that tell a thousand stories and I want her to have all those stories. I silently stare at the box.

'Sobha! Sobha.' He calls me from the bedroom. I drop the box to the floor and stand up straight.

'Yes, Pavan?'

'Where is dinner?' The strange woman tickles Pavan and they laugh on the bed.

'Just about ready.'

I pull the box up off the floor and lay it on the countertop. My mind becomes numb; my body moves in motion, but I feel as if I am not moving at all. I move over the stove like a sea about to swallow her ships. I pour the poison into the pot and it dissolves quickly into the heated water. The boiling water breaks the little pellets up and melts them well into the chicken. I pour more spices into the pot and mix the stew. I put the rat poison back under the kitchen sink. I place dinner onto a nice white dish on the table and call for Pavan to come.

I stare out the window of the kitchen and see the long and short trees and fields of rice that reach for miles. I can see myself walking out there, away from here. Pavan takes his big plate into the bedroom and shuts the door. I walk to Rajani's room and pull her out of bed. I do not want to be here in the morning. I carry Rajani on my shoulders. She falls asleep quickly again in my arms. I walk away like a storm that has resided and become still. Inside me, my own anger and sadness is quieting like the rain outside.

The rain is quiet. The night is quiet. The sky is clear. I walk into the distance, knowing Pavan will be dead by morning and that the strange woman will be the only one there to blame. I walk away from the house and from years of pain: for a morning that does not belong to Pavan, for a morning that does not belong to kharma, but for a morning that I can give to my Rajani and is my own.

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