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SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, AND HORROR

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ISSUE
11



Alexander Monteagudo • Henry Szabranski • Ian Creasey • J.W. Alden • Josh Vogt
Jacob Michael King • Paul Magnan • Steve Simpson • Suzanne J. Willis

Fantasy Scroll Magazine
Speculative Fiction — Issue #11 — February 2016

**Featuring works by Alexander Monteagudo, Henry Szabranski,
Ian Creasey, J.W. Alden, Jacob Michael King, Josh Vogt,
Paul Magnan, Steve Simpson, Suzanne J. Willis**

This collection is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Editorial, February 2016

Frederick Doot

Welcome to Issue #11 of Fantasy Scroll Magazine.

Hello 2016, what are you doing to us?

As I sit here writing this intro up in north New Jersey, the weather is a balmy 6 degrees Fahrenheit with 50mph gusts whipping through the trees dropping windchills to near -30. A few weeks ago, as I recall, it was in the 60's. Talk about a strange winter.

On television, we enter another other-worldly land of fiction and a news cycle filled with even more fantasy and horror – the US primary elections. As of this writing, we're down to 8 candidates across the two parties. While Bernie Sanders wants to give away all our stories on the internet (our stories are free online), another fact is we must still pay our authors, and really wouldn't object to some donations by Wall Street or even some of the big boys like Soros or the Koch brothers. Yes, we will even appoint them Generals if they make the appropriate donation to our Starlight Patrol. Or heck, they could just look at our many subscription options or purchase individual issues or our Year One Anthology, *Dragons, Droids & Doom* at most online e-retailers.

For old-school readers, we also have hard copies of *Dragons, Droids & Doom*,

available online, at a few bookstores in north New Jersey and New York state, and coming to a convention near you in 2016. Iulian and I are marking up the calendar figuring out which parties to crash at conventions this year. Lunacon and Philcon are guarantees, and we have quite a few more listed as possibles and probables. Stay tuned to our website as we confirm.

Enough of my blabbering, how about some stories!?!?!?

We start 2016 with the heartfelt and enchanting “Sundark and Winterling” by Suzanne J. Willis featuring one of the most extraordinary homes you could imagine. The story hits all the right notes.

We then move on to Paul Magnan's “Red Cup”, a unique story that takes an inside look of trials and tribulations of a flower; no, it's not all roses for our hero Red Cup.

Next we are swept into a chaotic world with Stephen Walter Simpson's “The Water Moon” following the fascinating life, and secret to some, of the lead character, Ivan.

We welcome another contribution by J.W. Alden, this time a flash fiction gem, “Battle Lines” which hits us early and hard, as the best science fiction flash stories can do.

How can you settle the hostilities and egos and a decision between rival guildsman?

“Talking with Honored Guests” by Alexander Monteagudo may provide one fiery way how.

Fantasy Scroll Magazine was long overdue for a pet alien love story, and we found a beaut with Ian Creasey’s “How I Lost Eleven Stone And Found Love,” a much more endearing story than the title suggests.

We are happy that “The Great Excuse” by Jacob Michael King has found a home here at FSM; I won’t give much away, but I will say that Lovecraft would be proud.

“The Velna Valsis” by Henry Szabranski is short, but sometimes a short jab to the gut is all you need to make your point, and this one hits the reader hard.

The unintentional running theme of loss, fitting for the dead of winter, closes out Issue eleven with the haunting and disturbing tale “Have You Seen Me?” by Josh Vogt. This is a story you want to see, and a final scene you may not forget.

In addition, the fiction section includes another installment in Josh Brown’s graphic story, Shamrock—Episode 6, *Perseverance*.

Our non-fiction section includes entertaining and informative interviews with Karri Thompson, author of the *Van Winkle Project* series and A.L. Davroe, author of several YA novels. The section also includes a book review of Bruce Edward Golden’s *Tales of My Ancestors* and a movie review of the dystopian adventure *Turbo Kid*, which flew under the radar in theaters last summer.

So sit down, curl up under a blanket with a hot mug of whatever tickles your tongue and get ready to enjoy hours within fascinating new worlds of *Fantasy Scroll Magazine*’s latest issue.

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Sundark and Winterling

Suzanne J. Willis

Sundark awoke to rain drumming on the windowpane and dripping from the eaves. In the street below, the footsteps of early risers splashed along the cobbles. None paused outside her house; the house that was once the dragon, Winterling. It was almost as though most of the people had all but forgotten it was there; a splash of jewels and dragon-skin against the shadowy gothic spires and crooked mansions that spread through the old district. They were used to living alongside the fae, so many people thought the music that rilled from the roof and rained down from the eaves on moonlit nights was just a clever trick, when they bothered to notice it at all.

It was no trick. In the gray morning, Sundark listened for Winterling’s song, but there was nothing but the patter of raindrops and the faint shouts of the early market opening down by the pier. Then, snatches of conversation between two of her charges floated down from the rooftop:

“I don’t think she’ll ever come back.” Gutterblood’s tone was obstinate.

“Nonsense,” Bellibone replied. “How else will songs be written, poetry set to Winterling’s glorious notes, if she stays away forever?”

Sundark smiled and pulled her mind up toward them, hovering at their shoulders as they sat on the edge of the roof, their feet dangling over the edge. Gutterblood and Bellibone were two of the word-ghosts—the *erutisi*—who haunted the city. They were the fragile echoes of forgotten words who had found refuge with Sundark, the fae charged with guardianship of forgotten words, lost language. As small as children and nebulous as mist, *erutisi* faces flickered and changed constantly, shaped and reshaped by all the mouths that had ever spoken them. While the other *erutisi* awoke in their nooks and crannies within the house, Gutterblood and Bellibone’s chatter comforted Sundark in the face of what this day meant. Of what she had to do, now that a year and a day had passed since Winterling’s death.

Gutterblood sighed. “But we will have to learn to look after ourselves—”

Bellibone silenced him with a stern look. “The house is all we need for now. She has to avenge Winterling’s death, now that the mourning period is done. I was there, you know. When it happened.” They both began to swing their feet excitedly. Ghosts they may have been, but words are *always* enthralled by a good story. “After the fae-king Rakmore had slain all the other dragons in the country, he came for Winterling. Even though he was the lover of Rakmore’s sister, Sundark. Even though it was the day of the lovers’ wedding, on the winter solstice . . .”

The image carved through Sundark and she pulled her mind downward, back into the room. The downpour grew heavier. Winterling had loved to fly in storms, whipping through heavy clouds, the rain on his scales ringing like far-away bells. Against the gray sky, he was a flash of dark light, a flame in an ocean of ash. His music came from the elements hitting his body and his mood as he cut through the air. The thunder was his beat and bass, the crack of lightning the crash of cymbals. The music that sparked off Winterling on those fragile days was a fierce fight against the storm, which then faded to melancholia as the storm marched on.

But that was in the days before dragon-music was outlawed; before they were slain and their bodies burned on pyres that hissed and sung funereal dirges as the scales burned; before Winterling's brother discarded his own skin, shifting into his man-shape forever and eloping with Rakmore's wife. Rakmore: Sundark's brother and her bane.

"Good morning, Winterling," Sundark said under the sound of the rain. The house sighed gently in return. She rose and began to get ready for the day, wanting to remain as long as possible in that room lined with the soft moss and basalt rocks from her tribe's land. Who knew when she would return?

The house sighed again, this time a little mournfully.

"You know that I have to leave—but you must also know that I'll be back, don't you?"

There was no answer. She looked out of the arched window, framed by the smaller of his ribs, watched as the cobblestones and buildings began to steam as the morning sun hit the soaked city. Smoke curled on the back of the early morning breeze; it reminded Sundark of a funeral pyre, and she pushed away thoughts of the great fire she had used to render Winterling's flesh from his bones. It had been worth it, though, hadn't it? The house was a glorious and sturdy construction. The triple spurs from each of his hind legs were used to anchor the foundations deep into the earth; the vertebrae of his snake-like spine for the wall struts, fibula and tibiae for the rafters; the larger of his ribs formed the curve of the roof and walls. The spires topping the house were his talons and claws.

"I know that it's been a poor substitute, but at least we've been together this last year."

The house that used to be Winterling didn't respond.



As she left the bedroom, a cape of raven feathers, each with its own gleam of violet and emerald light, waited for Sundark at the bottom of the staircase; a dark memory against the pearly whiteness of the balustrade made from Winterling's teeth.

“Gifts, my love? This was my wedding mantle, as you well know, and I put it on your pyre.” The last time she had worn it, Sundark had flown across the skies with Winterling, a dark raven and a flash of bright song-scales over snowy peaks and the vast city. Only a few hours later, those same scales shone crimson with Winterling’s blood.

The feathers shook irascibly, as though ridding themselves of water or ash. The other *erutisi* drifted through the entrance hall, whispering to one another and pointing at the cape. Gutterblood and Bellibone looked down from the landing above.

Market smells of new cut flowers, animal manure, and spices flooded through the window; morning birds called through the mist outside as she walked over to the cape. He had made it whole again, despite the tearing and ripping from being chased, held, made to watch as Rakmore brought down his sword. Despite her trying to burn away those memories.

“Objects of love should be happy memories,” Bellibone called down.

“Put it on,” the others whispered.

The feathers were fine and silken beneath her fingertips, the oil color speaking of soaring and open skies and song. The *erutisi* giggled as she shed her clothes then threw the cloak around her shoulders. Preening, fluffing, and smoothing like a dove grooming itself in the sun, it fitted itself to Sundark *just so*. She swung her hips, smiled at the way the feathers brushed her ankles, at how her bones felt light and hollow with the memory of flight winging through them.

“Thank you,” she said. In reply, the front door and those to Sundark’s bedroom, the parlour, and all the ground floor rooms disappeared, leaving behind smooth walls.

Sundark laughed. “Very well, upstairs it is then.”

She ascended the winding staircase, trailing her hand over the balustrade. On the second floor, the same; nothing but adobe walls, splashed here and there with the rough jewels gifted to Sundark and Winterling on their wedding day. Sundark leaned against one of the walls, felt it move beneath her. She rested her forehead against it, in the same way she would lean against him in the sunlight as he stretched out across pebbled beaches or in the desert ravines after his flight. His dragon-shape, his true shape, so different to her own, always fascinated her. Being close to him had never been close enough; so much so that she had often thought she would like to unpick his edges, as though de-seaming a garment, and crawl inside him. After his death, she had done just that.

Sundark continued to the uppermost story, the *erutisi* watching her with their strange, changeling faces. “Winterling will keep you safe while I’m gone.” She could almost smell her brother’s blood. He may have had revenge in his heart when he murdered Winterling and his brothers, but Sundark had taken her full mourning period to nurture the revenge and hatred

simmering inside her, to cool and ferment it into a poison more potent than nightshade. Only a fool kills in rage; only a coward punishes the innocent as well as the guilty.

Gutterblood beckoned to her from the top of the staircase. On the third floor were the map-room and the tiny staircase to the roof. Both doors were open. At the top of the stairs lay a second gift from the house; shoes of bone, moonbeam bright with heels like scythes. Sundark's breath caught in her throat as she turned one of the shoes delicately in her hands. Shards from a mermaid's tail supported the sole; the ridged fibulas of satyrs had been carved as the vamp; phoenix wing-bones, like thin flames, licked the shoe's quarter.

She stepped into the left, then the right. "These belong to the shapeshifters of the Bitter Sea. How did you . . . *where* did you get these from?"

Gutterblood sank into the wall, reappearing a moment later looking faintly harried. "He says they are to remind you that there is more in this world than revenge and loss. There are beautiful things unexplained—there is life! But if you must go after Rakmore, you are not going alone. You have allies."

As she walked to the map-room, the heels sparked on the floor, the power of earth, fire, and sea sheathing her feet.



The globe, covered in fine vellum and kept shut tight with an ornate brass lock, was small enough to fit into Sundark's palm. Cloaked in raven's feathers, shod in shoes of bone, she stood in the center of the map-room looking with a sinking heart at Winterling's third gift. She glanced up at the maps lining the walls, with their ever-changing boundaries and cruel seas. The two huge globes that stood to shoulder height and marked the worlds of humans and fae revolved slowly. Here she had the power to re-map all the worlds, remake new language from old with her fragile *erutisi*, but nothing could change the hollow space in her life that his death had left; the hollow space of an unlived life. And now this.

"You want me to use a memory box?" Anger shook her, for she knew what he intended her to do. "I store my memories of you in here and as soon as I leave this house—you!—it will be as though you never existed to me. I will forget Rakmore and I . . . I will never find *you* again!"

On the wall maps, on the shore of the Bitter Sea, two fae appeared with armies behind them; armies that cut each other down until the sea ran red.

"His hate makes him ruthless and he will keep killing, anyway—because of me or in spite of me."

The figures on the wall faded and the house fell silent.

“And what about all the forgotten words, whom I am charged with guarding? They are like my children . . .”

The walls dented and morphed into recesses and spaces that would fit the *erutisi*. The windows sealed over, making the room snug and dark.

“I know you will look after them.” She turned the memory box over in her hand, feeling its weight. “What do you think they would have been like? Our children, I mean.”

Bright flames began to blaze in the enormous fireplace. In their center, the shapes of three children, with long, wild hair like Sundark’s, danced and ran about. Great dragon wings unfurled from their backs and they flew upward, skimming the chimney then coming to rest in the grate. The orange and white flames crackled and sang in the voices of their unborn children. The children stopped and turned toward Sundark, their intensity stinging her eyes.

One last flare then the fire died, leaving behind gray ashes and the shadows of the three serpentine children branded on the fireplace wall. Sundark dropped to her knees and scooped up handfuls of the still-warm ash, rubbing it onto her face and hands. It streaked her skin the dull silver of loss.

A little copper key appeared on the floor beside her. Picking up the memory box, Sundark fitted the key to the brass lock. She opened it, held it to her mouth and began to whisper into it as the house opened its windows to the sunlight and morning breeze.



Sundark opened the door to the outside for the last time. She stepped out, being careful to move gently in her sharp shoes. The *erutisi* followed, chasing one another and scattering like leaves across the blue curves of the roof.

Of all the wonder and beauty of the house—its ever-changing rooms, sturdy structure of bone, its moods and magic—Sundark loved the roof most of all. It was Winterling’s hide, carefully removed and cleaned, and stretched over the frame of his bones. Shaped like waves or rolling dunes, it gleamed azure and indigo, undulating gently as the sun hit it or the house settled or tried to soothe his wife.

Just as music had rained from Winterling’s skin during his lifetime, the roof sang under moonlight and sunshine, storm and spring wind. Sundark would often stretch herself out up there on starry nights, shut her eyes and imagine that she was curled next to him as he sang her to sleep. On those nights, the roof would sing of the summer and winter solstices, the two days

and nights each year that Winterling and his brothers would take their human form. Even in his man-shape, his skin had had an otherness that drew her to him. Scale and flesh and skin, the exquisite pain of his music running across her. Both skin-hungry and ravenous after the long months of waiting; then the waiting again until he could next take his man-shape. The welts he left on her would remain weeks after the longest day and the longest night had each passed. When she touched one or her clothes pressed against them, the stinging pain spoke to her of his love.

That morning, she lay in a Sundark-shaped depression and pressed her ear to the shining cerulean scales. Each one lifted and settled at her touch, crooning a lover's tune of farewell.

Far below, over the market and city sounds, came drumbeats and the marching of many feet. Sundark sat up, alarmed at their unfamiliarity. The dragon-skin fell silent. The *erutisi* crowded together and looked to their guardian. She put her finger to her lips in a shushing motion and crawled over to the edge, peering into the cobbled streets below.

A king's guard of thirteen men marched toward the house and fanned out around it. Before them, Rakmore walked with his warrior's stride, smiling grimly. He stopped before the front door.

"One year and one day, Sundark. But I've saved you the trouble of coming for me. All you have to do is walk out your front door."



The *erutisi* gathered around Sundark, patting her gently on the back and stroking her hair. She had not expected this. She peered over the edge again; below, Rakmore appraised the house, the hatred on his face clear. Even now, the betrayal of his wife with Winterling's brother consumed him. He reached out and touched the front door. It hissed at him and he laughed drily. His men drew their axes and stood to attention.

"You have two minutes, sister. If you aren't before me in that time, we will come in after you."

Sundark drew back from the edge and beckoned the oldest thirteen of her charges to her. Their ancient faces flickered and changed, but their eyes never left her. They fanned out around her as she stood, arms outstretched, the feathers gleaming in the sun. Gutterblood, Bellibone, and all the others huddled by the door.

Mouth wide open in a silent scream, Sundark threw her head back as the thirteen *erutisi* spun around her, fast and faster still. They thinned like mist until they were no more than a curl of

smoke; Sundark drew them toward her with a deep breath, inhaling them until the air was clear again.

Forgotten language, muscular and elegant, rippled under her skin. The roof sang out, a war cry that stilled the city and made Rakmore and his men shiver. Standing on the eaves, Sundark's shape filled the sky. The toes of her shoes of bone hung over the edge; then a little further. With arms outspread, she fell through the air toward the street below, toward her brother.

Shoes of bone became razor talons. The feathered cape stretched, then shrank, shaping itself into its avian form so it was no longer the fae Sundark falling but the raven Sundark swooping and flying among the invaders. One after another they struck out with their silver broadswords, but she was too nimble for them. She flew upward, opened her beak. And the old language she had consumed found voice again. They were words no longer recognized by any fae or human mind or tongue. Ancient, keening cries, thirteen in all, fell from the raven's throat and flew toward Rakmore's guard of thirteen men. As the men cried out, the words made a home of their mouths. They buried themselves deeper; unfamiliar in their throats, the old words choked them.

Rakmore spun around, eyes wide as the men of his guard asphyxiated and dropped, lifeless, to the ground. Sundark dived toward him, her claws cutting deep into his upper arm as he ducked away from her. With a guttural, raging shout he drew his axe and swung it at the house. Dragon-fire spewed out from its doors and windows. Rakmore dropped the axe and fell backward as the air filled with the smell of burned hair and singed flesh.

As pain distracted him, Sundark dived again. She flapped her wings and shifted her weight as she attacked. He could not grab hold of her. Her talons gouged his cheeks and he screamed a terrible scream as she pecked and pecked at his face. She flew upward again, feet drenched in his blood and her beak gore-slicked. Rakmore held his hand to his ruined face, his now-empty eye-socket, and reached for his axe again.

More footsteps as his first battalion ran through the streets *toward* the house. The windows and doors continued to flame, forcing all the soldiers backward. Sundark flew once, twice around the eaves, darting to avoid the arrows aimed at her. The wind began to blow fierce from the west and it caught under her. She flew upward and to the east, toward the distant, frozen mountains, leaving the city so far behind, it was as though it had never existed.



Far below Sundark, the green of the lowlands had given way to rocky foothills, then the glaciers and snow drifts of the hinterlands and high mountains. The late sun glittered on the white landscape, turning it rose-gold—the color of Winterling’s fire, driving her brother back. He and his men would have left the city by now, for he couldn’t kill Winterling twice. Rakmore would follow her, but she wouldn’t give him the chance to find her first. Not again.

More ravens joined her, dipping and wheeling in the cold air. A storytelling of ravens could be just as good as an army, in the right hands. She would hunt him on stealthy wings.

A small shadow flitted across the glacier below then disappeared in the gloaming. Flying lower, it reappeared. An *erutisi*, hardly more than steam, was making her way up the mountain. Sundark landed and took her usual form again. The *erutisi* stared, then raised a hand to her own chest. “Mab,” she croaked.

Sundark smiled and held out her hand. Silently, they walked across the ice and settled into one of the high, dark caves above. There would be more *erutisi* willing to sacrifice themselves, more ravens as fierce and black as burning pitch. But the taste of Rakmore’s blood had not cured Sundark of her longing. With Mab by her side and mountain ravens cawing at the last of the sun, she pined for Winterling and her charges, to remake the world with language reformed.

As night closed in, she pulled her mind back to the house that was once Winterling, gently moving as a shifting breeze past Gutterblood, Bellibone, and the other *erutisi*. She was connected to those forgotten words as though by a fine silver thread, and they felt her with them, across the frozen distance between them.

“I think she wants us to go to the map-room,” Gutterblood said.

So the many *erutisi* crept inside, and whispered as one to the enormous globe in the center of the room. It opened with a leathery creak and Bellibone reached inside to pull out the little vellum sphere lying at the very bottom. She held it up and they all quietened. Like a far-away bell or the shushing of waves under an autumn moon, *something* inside it sang and recited poetry, muttered dirges and laughed with light happiness.

“I remember what that felt like,” said Gutterblood sadly. “To be alive and heard and remembered. How has she . . . ?”

Bellibone laughed, realizing what Sundark had done. “She is far cleverer than Rakmore or Winterling. A guardian of lost language knows the art of words right back to their beginnings. She knows how to restrain us or make us sing, even knows how to find us from far away. It’s not her memories in here.”

Bellibone held the memory box up to her ear and listened. Ephemeral Sundark hovered at her side, tugging and weaving the silver string of connection so that Bellibone would understand.

“Inside is Sundark’s *own* language, my dears. To be kept safe until she is ready to claim it again. To go out into the world mute is her sign of mourning and a promise that she will return. So that her words and his music can come together again and be more than what they are by themselves. Just as they would have been, had he lived.”

Even Gutterblood sighed happily. For Sundark there was still revenge, but there was also something waiting for her *after*, and she would find her way back to it with her shoes of bone carving rivers of words in her wake.

In the darkness, the *erutisi* fell asleep to the sounds of Sundark’s hidden language. And as they slept, they dreamed of a raven flying high over snowy peaks; of stories made not of words, but of pearls and lucent jewels strung on indigo silk; of Sundark lying on the dragon-skin roof as though cradled by a lover.

Far above, the roof sang softly under the slow path of the stars, its notes falling through the windows and slipping through the little globe’s brass lock to dance with the words inside, in the hope of Sundark’s return to Winterling, in the shape of songs yet to be sung.



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Suzanne J. Willis is a Melbourne writer and a graduate of Clarion South. Her short stories have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *Schlock Magazine*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, the *British Fantasy Society Journal*, *SQ Mag* and anthologies by *PS Publishing*, *Prime Books*, *Fablecroft Publishing* and the *Canberra Speculative Fiction Guild*. She works full-time and writes in the spaces around it, inspired by fairytales, ghost stories and all things strange.

Red Cup

Paul Magnan

The seed's shell cracked. A shoot pushed up through the soil, striving for the surface and sunlight. It broke into the brightness of a new life as its roots dove into the ground, absorbing life-giving nutrients and water.

The plant continued to grow through many cycles of sunlight, rain, and darkness. Its stem extended beyond the grass that surrounded it. A bud sprouted at the end. After a few days, with help from a warm, caressing sun, the bud opened. Orange and black petals blossomed from a deep red center.

The plant named itself Red Cup.

Red Cup thrived with the other plants that grew around it. They chatted back and forth, and soaked in cool water when it rained.

Then one day Red Cup found that it could pull its roots from the ground and move from place to place.

The other plants did not like that.



Red Cup bloomed with the coming of the morning sun. A slender stamen, quivering with pollen, protruded from the red center.

Red Cup pulled his roots from the soft earth. He cast about, looking for willing pistils, or at least a bee to deliver the pollen for him. Even a good gust of wind would do.

He pulled himself forward with his roots, drinking in surface dew as he went. Grass, proud and obstinate, tried to block his way. *What makes you so special?* Each blade turned and hissed at Red Cup. *You think you're better than us because you can move around?*

Red Cup did not answer the taunts as he crept forward. He never did.

He zigzagged around the thicker crabgrass. Crabgrass was meaner and much stronger than regular grass.

Something big slapped Red Cup in the petals and nearly knocked him over. He turned and with dismay noticed he had stumbled into a patch of dandelions. This was bad.

A big yellow flower got right into Red Cup's petals. *And where do you think you're going?* The dandelion's sharp petals pushed at his stamen. Pollen trickled uselessly to the ground. *You think you're going to find a home for that? Think again, freak.*

Red Cup was shoved from behind by the thick, serrated leaf of another dandelion. *We're going to knock that pollen right off of you. You're not contaminating anything, walker.*

Blows fell on Red Cup from every direction. He searched desperately for a way out, an escape. Dark green leaves blocked him. The ground about him was coated with red pollen dust. Red Cup tried to fold his petals together to protect the stamen, but the dandelions held them open.

A low susurrantion vibrated through the early morning air. The dandelions paused in their pummeling of Red Cup. The sound intensified, becoming a buzzing that engulfed their senses. The yellow heads of the dandelions swiveled up in anticipation.

A bumblebee, its huge body covered in black and yellow fur, hovered overhead.

The small yellow petals of the dandelions parted to reveal twin curlicue stamens. *Me! Me! My nectar is sweet! Take my pollen!* They all shouted up at the bee, who flew tantalizingly from one flower to the next without landing on any.

They had forgotten about Red Cup. He moved his roots carefully around the dandelion stems and pulled himself away from their grasp.

Red Cup wandered around a patch of clovers. Clovers were generally self-absorbed and did not bother with other plants, but Red Cup knew from experience that if he mingled with them, they would try to hold him in place. Red Cup was stronger than any individual clover, but it was tough to slog out from the middle of a patch.

Red Cup turned to the sky. The sun was more than halfway across. He looked around for bees or butterflies. A few buzzed or fluttered, but none came near him. It seemed even insects sensed he was different and avoided him.

Ahead was a large rock that bordered a vegetable garden. If Red Cup could pull himself upon it, maybe a good gust of wind would take his remaining pollen and blow it to a few exposed stigmas.

Something hit the ground.

Red Cup froze. He pushed a root into the earth and waited. A steady *thump-THUMP* came closer.

Oh, no . . .

Red Cup pushed his roots into the ground as far as they could go. He folded his petals over his stamen. He curled his stem and tried to hide his colors.

A rabbit looked about, twitching its nose. Black eyes in a brown-furred face found Red Cup. The rabbit hopped toward him.

Red Cup clutched the earth as hard as he could. The rabbit sniffed his petals. Red Cup heard the other plants laughing and urging the rabbit on.

The rabbit chewed on Red Cup's petals. Severed pieces fell to the earth. The rabbit nibbled away at the stamen and worked its way down. Red Cup was frozen in agony. He screamed as his stem was ripped from his roots by one of the rabbit's paws. The surrounding grass shrieked with delight.

Red Cup's consciousness bled away from his torn and mangled flower and collected back into his roots. The rabbit bit deep into his dark red center, hungry for nectar.

The rabbit squealed and backed away, spitting out what it had bitten off. Red Cup did not understand. Was the rabbit rejecting him, like the plants and bees did?

The rabbit hopped away as Red Cup's thoughts faded into nothingness.



His world was pain and struggle. All was dark as Red Cup's roots strove to heal. He willed himself to grow again. He couldn't lose his focus on that one task. To do so would be death.

Red Cup pushed against the earth above him. It did not yield. He wanted to give up. *No. No, I can't.* He sucked in more nutrients from the soil and pushed harder.

The ground gave way. Early morning sunlight bathed Red Cup's new shoot as it pushed upward, his chlorophyll soaking in the light and using its energy to grow ever further.

Several days passed as Red Cup grew stronger. His stem elongated and sprouted a bud. The grass whispered invectives at him, but he did not listen. He needed to concentrate on blossoming.

As he matured, Red Cup thought about his existence. How had he come into being? Who was responsible for fertilizing his seed, allowing him to germinate and live? There were no other plants like him around. How was it he was able to move around, while other plants couldn't?

No answers came. Red Cup resigned himself to the fact that they probably never would.

The humidity in the air was thick when Red Cup's petals finally opened to the sun. Black and orange colors spread wide to reveal a long red pistil, sprouting from an ovule-rich ovary. At its tip, a stigma, round and sticky, tested the air.

Immediately the grass passed the word to the other plants. *Watch where your pollen goes! Make sure it's nowhere near the freak!*

Red Cup pulled her roots from the ground. She looked for the rock she had seen before and started toward it. If she could climb it and elevate herself above the other pistils, there was a good chance a bee would land on her and give her pollen.

The grass was taller and thicker than she remembered. Red Cup still pushed through it, but it was more of a struggle. The sheer number of green blades tripped her up more than once. Red Cup did her best to ignore the snarling hatred all around her.

A low hum moved through the air. The grass blades stilled; waves of dread ran through them. Red Cup knew what the sound was, and she hurried around stalks which now ignored her.

The hum turned into a roar that reverberated through the ground. Grass, dandelions, clovers, foxtails, sorrels, all screamed. Red Cup willed her roots to move faster.

The rock lay just ahead. The roar turned into an all-encompassing blast that quickly bore down on her.

Red Cup was not going to make it.

She saw the horror approaching. Red Cup folded her petals around her pistil and bent her stem as low as she could. Her roots sought quick purchase in the ground. She hoped it would be enough.

Darkness engulfed Red Cup, and a terrible wind buffeted her. Just above her, a thick, slicing maelstrom tore into the grass. Juice and dismembered bits of green bounced off her.

Just as quickly as the darkness had come, it was gone.

The grass cried and moaned. Their tops had been sliced off. Juice and plant bits lay everywhere. Red Cup glanced up at the uncaring, towering human who pushed the cruel machine as it continued to rip through the greenery. Red Cup stayed low. She knew that if the human saw her standing upright, he would come back with the machine until she shared the same fate as those around her.

Next to Red Cup was the severed head of a dandelion. The ragged stem bled green. Red Cup wondered if it was one of her tormentors, and then decided it didn't matter. A flower's life was in the roots, not the head. The dandelion whose head this was would grow another. And probably still be a bully.

The awful roaring of the machine sputtered and stopped. The human wheeled it away. The grass was in shock and pain, and Red Cup pushed through with no resistance.

The rock lay a few feet away.

The grass blades stirred as Red Cup made her careful way between them. One that the machine had missed took a swipe at her, but was not strong enough to delay her progress.

The rock was right in front of her.

A number of small purple flowers peeked up from where they had been hiding at the base of the rock. They looked around to make sure the human was gone.

Henbits. If they saw Red Cup, they would never let her climb on the rock. They had broad, strong leaves that would stop her cold.

But they were distracted. Red Cup might have a chance.

She crept forward as fast as she could. She extended a root over the purple head of one of the henbits and touched the rock. She anchored the root in a small crevice.

The purple flower spun around as Red Cup reached out with two more roots. Wide, crenellated leaves lifted up to stop them. *What do you think you're doing, walker? This rock is off limits to you.* The henbit called out to the others. *Help me rip this freak's roots off and kill it before it has a chance to germinate any seeds!*

Red Cup pushed against the henbit's leaves. Her second root found purchase on the rough surface of the rock. The third grasped a tiny outcrop but was torn away by the henbit.

The other henbits within reach pushed at Red Cup's stem. One tried to dislodge the two roots she had secured to the rock. Red Cup stretched again with the third root. It slid across the hard surface without finding purchase. It was knocked away.

The henbit resistance was now coordinated. Leaves with serrated edges scraped across Red Cup's stem. Fluid leaked from small gashes.

Red Cup weakened. One of her two roots was plucked free from the rock. She struggled to reattach it.

The last root was pulled away. Red Cup was thrown to the ground.

The henbits continued to attack, tearing at Red Cup until she managed to drag herself out of their reach.

Next time you try that, we'll kill you, walker! We'll tear your roots apart! Do us all a favor and go off and die! There's no place for you here!

Red Cup made her way to a mercifully bare patch of soil. The surrounding grass was still stunned from the human's machine and did not try to hinder her. She looked up and noticed she was in the shade of a young poplar. The tree ignored her. Most trees couldn't be bothered with smaller plants, conversing only with fellow hardwoods. Even a plant that could walk with its roots was below their notice. Red Cup had never been more thankful. She sank her roots into the ground to absorb what she needed to heal.

Hey.

Red Cup raised her flower. A plant she had never seen before, thick with oval-shaped leaves, grew at the base of the tree.

Red Cup lay back down. Whatever the plant was, it couldn't reach her. Let it spew its hatred at her. She would not answer.

I know what you are. I've seen your kind before.

Despite herself Red Cup turned to the plant. *Who are you?*

I am a chipilin, the plant said. I am not native to this area. I come from a place far to the south. As do you. You are a bane orchid. There aren't many of you.

Red Cup stood and approached the chipilin. *If we are not native to this place, then why are we here?*

We were brought over unwittingly by the humans. I was a young plant that somehow got mixed with a crate of mangoes. Once I got here the crate was broken up and discarded, along with me. I would have died had not a rainstorm washed me down several roads and into this yard. That was many, many seasons ago. The winters here are not to my liking, but they are not cold enough to kill me. I hope I can say the same for you.

I don't remember coming here.

The chipilin rustled its leaves. *You probably came over as a seed, possibly mixed up with a crate of fruit as well. Either way, here we are.*

Red Cup heard a strange buzzing noise in the distance. *The other plants hate me. They tear out my roots when they can and stop me from pollinating. You are the only one who hasn't tried to kill me.*

That's because you are able to move around. Plus, you are able to change genders with each new flowering. Some plants have both genders, but very few can change as quickly as you. Those are huge advantages for a plant, and they are jealous of it.

I can't help that! It's just who I am.

It doesn't matter. You are different, and you have abilities they yearn for and will never get. They will never stop hating you.

Red Cup shook her petals. *So I am doomed. The other plants will find a way to tear me from the ground and prevent me from rooting. I will die, and they will be happy.*

The buzzing sound grew in intensity.

The chipilin did its best to flatten out its leaves on the ground. *Get down. Now.*

Red Cup did not need more persuasion. A shock of fear ran through her as she realized what the buzzing was.

The same human as before stepped into view, this time holding something that looked like a huge, inverted flower. The roots, which were held up, appeared to be bundled into a knot at one end of a long, thick stem, while the head, with one large petal and two thin stamens, swooped low to the ground. The human pressed a leaf on the stem. The new machine that looked like a flower roared. The stamens spun with shocking violence, churning up stray plants that the first machine had missed.

The human approached the rock that Red Cup had tried to climb. The henbits that guarded it screamed as the spinning stamens tore through them. Purple petals and minced bits of leaf scattered everywhere. Red Cup shivered as pieces fell near her.

The terrible noise subsided and the human moved on.

Red Cup did not move until the chipilin told her it was safe to do so.

She turned toward the rock. Green juice dripped from its surface. At its base, the severed stems of the henbits were stilled.

If Red Cup had actually succeeded in climbing the rock . . .

The henbits, though they hadn't meant to, had saved Red Cup's life. Her roots, on the rock and not anchored in the ground, would have withered and died after her stem had been severed by one of the spinning stamens.

Red Cup felt she should be horrified by what happened to the henbits. She wasn't. The henbits and all the other plants would have been happy to see the same happen to her.

Only one thing concerned Red Cup now. She turned to the chipilin. *How far south must I go to find my own kind?*

I'm not sure, the chipilin said. *But, judging by the angle of the sun during the seasons, I sense the distance is great.*

Red Cup considered this. *I cannot remain here. I must go.*

I understand. The journey will be long and hazardous, but at least you have a weapon at your disposal to deal with hostile plants and herbivores.

What weapon?

Are you not aware that you are an allelopathic plant?

Red Cup stood still. Something about that word sent a shiver through her. *What does that mean?*

The chipilin chuckled. *Of course. Foolish of me not to realize you wouldn't know. You would have found out about it through your kin. But you have no kin here.*

Her leaves fluttering with impatience, Red Cup asked again. *Please, tell me. What does allelopathic mean?*

It means you have a store of chemicals, deep in the heart of your flower, that can be used to drive away herbivorous animals.

Red Cup remembered the rabbit, and its reaction when it had bitten into her flower's center.

The chipilin continued. *And can also be used to kill other plants.*

This caught Red Cup's attention. *How do I use these chemicals?*

The chipilin paused, as if carefully considering its answer. *Focus on the depths of your flower. There should be a little knot there, made up of small petals. Do you feel it?*

Red Cup sensed the knot. Now that she was focused on it, she realized there was something within the petals, something hot and eager for release.

The petals may take some effort to open at first, since you have never done it before. You should practise, before you face real threats out there.

Red Cup looked around. She saw a blade of grass that had been missed by the human's machines, and made her way to it.

The blade turned to her. *What do you want, freak?*

Red Cup opened her outer petals as wide as they would go. She concentrated on the smaller ones at the red center of her flower. There were five of them. One quivered and opened. Once that happened, the others quickly followed.

Leaning forward, Red Cup belched the heat onto the grass stem. The fluid was thin and pink, with dark red motes floating within. It oozed into the earth.

What did you do to me, freak? What is . . .

The grass blade could not stop the osmosis. The roots absorbed the fluid, which collected in the xylem, and quickly shot it through the plant's vascular system.

The grass blade lost its voice and shuddered. Its edges and tip turned brown.

Red Cup watched the blade die. A pleasurable shiver ran through her. She looked across the lawn, at all the other plants still reeling from the human's machines, and wished she had enough chemicals to kill them all.

It became clear what Red Cup had to do.

She turned to the chipilin. *You have been kind to me, and taught me about myself. When the time comes, you will be spared.*

The chipilin was quiet a moment. *What are your intentions?*

I am going home, Red Cup said. It was after noon, so she positioned the sun at her right side and pulled herself forward. *It may take many seasons, but I will make it. I will find my own kind. We will multiply.*

Red Cup turned and faced the lawn. *Then I will return. With as many of my kindred as will come with me. Except for you, we will kill all that grows here.*

The humans will not allow that, the chipilin said. *They will kill you on sight.*

The humans will not know we are here. We will spread our chemicals at night, and move off to a hiding spot during the day. The grass, the dandelions, the henbits . . . all will die. None will call me a freak again.

Red Cup was now distant from the chipilin, almost out of communication range. *Then we will find a patch of fertile ground, away from human eyes, where we can grow and pollinate. We will expand, and any native plants that try to stop us will be destroyed. By the time the humans realize what we are, we'll be everywhere.*

The chipilin's words were faint. *Good luck.*

Red Cup continued her southward crawl.



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Paul Magnan has been writing stories that veer from the straight and narrow for many years. He lives in Rhode Island with his family. Paul's stories have been published in *The Literary Hatchet*, *Allegory Magazine*, and several other venues.

The Water Moon

Steve Simpson

"*Mamãe*, can I take Alfredo?" Ivan Karlo Batista, in his pajamas, was holding Alfredo up by his floppy green arm.

"Of course, darling. We're leaving Selenia and we're going to travel to Brazil in a big ship. Isn't that exciting?"

"What about *Papãe*?"

"*Papãe* . . . is going to come later, but we have to leave tonight."

"*Mamãe*, you've hurt yourself."

Maria looked down at the blood stain that had seeped through the bandage, through her t-shirt with the stencilled fist. The coarse stitching hadn't held the wound closed.

"It's nothing, darling, just a graze."

Maria and her child reached Brazil safely. They settled in Rio de Janeiro, but Ivan's father never came. Ivan grew up there, and when he started Middle School and his mother judged that he was old enough, she told him his father was a Selenian *desaparecido*, that he'd been taken by the military, tortured and murdered.

On the island they'd left behind, the Selenian elite learned how to play the game—they set up a cardboard democracy led by a papier-mâché president who was always re-elected, and rebranded the revolutionaries as terrorists.

Twenty years later Ivan returned to his homeland.



Able Seaman Ivan Batista stretched out on his bunk, closed his eyes, and let the gentle sway of the *Atlantic Maru* relax him. He imagined he was looking through the porthole in his cabin. He pictured the screws in the frame with the paint peeling off, and through the scratched glass, the dock at Assunção, with the red-and-white gantry cranes that looked like they were made of oversized Lego.

He opened his eyes and there he was—standing in front of the porthole looking out at the scene exactly as he'd pictured it. Behind him, the other Ivan, the original to his copy, was lying on the bunk in a deep sleep.

Ivan had studied bilocation at the São Bento College in Rio, where he was taught by Brother Matias. *You're very fast, Ivan*, he'd said, *I've never seen a student as fast as you*. Brother Matias had applied his cane rod liberally about Ivan's head whenever he thought Ivan wasn't concentrating. The rod was the reason he was fast, and why sometimes he felt a ghost stinging in his ears when he bilocated.



The Selenian immigration official at the disembarkation point gave his passport a cursory glance, scanned the image, and tapped a couple of keys on his terminal. "Stand in front of the detector, please."

Ivan moved in front of an opaque silicon lens mounted in a screen. The officer shook his head. "Copies are not permitted, *senhor*. By presidential decree, it is illegal to copy and paste anywhere in Selenia. It's a crime prevention measure."

Ivan smiled. "I'm sorry, *senhor*, I didn't know."

"You Brazilians are all the same, you never read the regulations before you come. Go back on board and come out as the original . . ." He read from the passport, "Ivan Karlo Batista, unless you want to spend your shore leave in your cabin."

"Yes, *senhor*." He ignored the laughter of his crewmates in the line and returned to the ship.

Ivan had known perfectly well that copies weren't permitted in Selenia. What he hadn't known was that they'd installed neutrino detectors at the docks. It was only a precaution, anyway. He felt safer as a copy, knowing that whatever happened in Assunção, the original Ivan was secure on board the *Atlantic Maru*.

Copies had been banned in Selenia for over two hundred years, ever since the lunar priests had declared it a mortal sin to make replicas. Calling the prohibition a crime prevention measure was just the secular government's newest excuse.

At Selenian schools, there were no bilocation classes, the children weren't taught how to access their doppelgängers. Instead, they learned that Selenia had come to Earth from the moon's Grimaldi crater, they studied the lunar shards and their meaning, and found out who they really were.



The Tupi people had inhabited Selenia long before the Portuguese explorers arrived, and their talismans, statues, and stone tablets told the lunar creation story. At the beginning of Tupi history, when the world was covered by water, the moon mother, Ja Cy, gave up a part of herself, a great lunar mountain that she sent to splash into the ocean and form the island of Selenia.

Later, other land masses rose from the great Terran sea, and with help from the sun mother, Guara Cy, life flourished on Earth. Plants and animals, birds and fish, microorganisms and people, all came from the ancient moon, by way of Selenia.

The other Selenian relics, the shards, were clearly not the work of the Tupi. Beyond that there was some controversy, but if you asked any Selenian, they would assure you that the shards were not audacious fakes, nor were they left on the island long ago by sea voyagers. They'd come to Earth with the mountain that Ja Cy sent from the moon, and they were not made by human hands.



After the original Ivan disembarked, he spent the day strolling through the streets of Assunção's old town, admiring the whitewashed weatherboard homesteads with gardens of hibiscus bushes in flower, and sightseeing in the parks with neatly mowed lawns and manicured palm trees. He visited the Cisne Negro Presídio, the ancient prison built from weathered basalt chopped out of the cliffs by slaves from Mozambique, and in the evening he drifted back to the blue light district near the docks, where the women lined up along the streets.

Iracema was part Tupi, with rosebud lips and widely spaced eyes, and he handed her a few brightly colored ten luare notes.

He'd tried to convince himself it would be something special, because prostitutes were copies in other countries, but he'd failed. In his heart, he knew it would be another empty commercial transaction like all the others, a reflection of himself—the emptiness that looked back from the mirror when he shaved in the morning.

In Rio, Ivan had watched his mother slowly fade away, give up all hope. She'd longed to return to her homeland, to Selenia, but she'd been exiled and never given amnesty, and she pined for his father, who was surely buried in an unmarked grave.

The wound that had come with her from Selenia never properly healed, an antibiotic-resistant infection spread through her body, and when she finally died, Ivan's heart turned to ice.

Calor humano—the fire of the heart—couldn't burn in the vacuum that was Able Seaman Batista. All that was left was his job, and making sure that no one could get close enough to see there was nothing left inside him that mattered.



"What do you think of our new neighbor?"

"The redhead who always wears low cut tops? . . . Haven't noticed her."

Alícia reached down and stroked Heitor's testicles, then pinched a clump of pubic hair and pulled hard.

"*Merda!*"

"What was that again?"

"*Amor*, how could I possibly look at another woman with you beside me?"

"Liar. The other day in the elevator your eyes were on stalks, like a *caracol*." She waggled a finger at each side of her head.

"I suppose I might have glanced at her."

Alícia pushed Heitor over and sat on top of him. She doodled circles on his chest with her index finger. "I have to work today, *meu bem*."

"Really? Saturday again?"

"The ministry wants me to survey the tourists at the Lunar Museum. Numbers have fallen off because of the Urso Branco attacks—the car bombs had a lot of international publicity. They want to know what to do about it."

She saw the look on her husband's face. "I'm sorry, darling. I'll make it up to you, I promise."



Ivan had one more day in Assunção before his ship sailed to the Brazilian port of São Sebastião, and out of vague curiosity, he decided to visit the Lunar Museum. The red granite building on Assunção's central square was busy, with foreign tourists reading multilingual guide books and groups of schoolchildren on excursions, walking in single file like ducklings led by their teachers.

He walked down aisles of stone statues, peered at Tupi jade amulets carved in the shapes of strange creatures, and wondered about unremarkable chalky stones labelled as moon rocks in display cases. The lunar shards in the central hall were the main attraction, and the centerpiece

was a large vase that had been three quarters reconstructed from its scattered puzzle pieces. It showed hairless humanoids with pale skin and brown stripes, dressed in simple tunics. There were a dozen painted scenes that might have been important occasions in the life of a family, and Ivan circled the vase, studying each one.

In several scenes, the unknown artist had painted radial white lines around the figures, a stylized radiance. The plaque said that bioluminescence was one possible explanation, but Selenian lunar scholars were not in agreement.

Whether the academics agreed or not, Ivan knew that the common name for the humanoids was the *luminosos*, and his mother had never doubted that her people weren't just the descendants of the *luminosos*, but their incarnations on Earth. *When we Selenians die, my son, there is nothing to fear. We go back to our beautiful life on the moon.*

Marx might have been disappointed in his mother's spiritual opiate, but she'd been a communist for the good of Selenia, and a Selenian first. Ivan Karlo would have pleased his namesake in one way at least. He believed in nothing.

A foreign couple close by him were loudly browsing the displays.

"There's never been any carbon dating, and anyway, there never was a lunar biosphere that could support life."

The *gringo's* wife defended the Selenians. "They're a primitive people, darling. They don't know as much about science as you do."

"But their beliefs are so childish, it's like, 'The Man in the Moon.'" He made derisory air quotation marks.

Apparently the *gringos* were arrogant enough to imagine that any 'primitive people' who happened to overhear them wouldn't understand English, or their condescension and insults.



She had short dark hair, small teeth with prominent incisors, and a warm smile. Because of a momentary schoolboy infatuation, when he meant to say, *Sorry, senhora, I don't have time*, it came out, *Yes, I can help with the survey*.

She read her clipboard and he read her nametag—"Sra. Alícia Nascimento, Ministry of Foreign Relations."

"What is your nationality, *senhor*?"

"I'm Brazilian," he replied with his soft *carioca* accent.

"Why did you decide to visit the Lunar Museum?"

Ivan suddenly felt uncomfortable next to Alicia, and the feeling was much stronger than his usual urge to hide himself from any real human contact. He reacted in the only way he knew, by pushing her away.

"The same reason that every foreigner comes--it's amusing. Selenian beliefs are so childish." He mimicked the obnoxious *gringo*. "It's like, *São Jorge slaying the dragon in the moon*."

She made some notes, continued in clipped tones. "Did the unrest in Assunção affect your travel plans?"

"Not at all. A few skirmishes, a few dead Selenians, but the Urso Branco aren't interested in foreigners, are they?"

Her cellphone rang. She'd only filled in part way down the survey page, but she seemed keen to finish. "That's all the questions. Thank you for your assistance, *senhor*."

She answered her phone and Ivan went back to examining the ceramics. He overheard her conversation.

"..."

"Really? *Tristão and Isolda*. I'd love to go."

"..."

"I'll meet you here at six, then. *Caio, amor*."



After he'd finished at the museum, Ivan decided to visit the artisanal market in the central square, to find a souvenir for the wall of his cabin. He strolled past stalls with dangling pendants and shining ornaments inset with semi-precious stones, designed to catch the eyes of magpie tourists, and came to an aisle with artwork that replicated the scenes on the lunar shards in brighter colors. He stopped at a booth with paintings depicting the *luminosos* out of their traditional settings.

"How much is that one, *senhor*?" Ivan indicated a hairless, striped version of *La Danse* that would have surprised Matisse.

The vendor, who, from the rainbow of paint on his torn t-shirt and the colored spots splashed through his straggling gray hair, was also the artist, put down his cigarette. "That one is on special. Fifteen reais, *senhor*."

"It's a bit expensive. Is that your best price?"

The old man stared at Ivan for a moment. "Sorry, *amigo*, I thought you were a tourist. It's twenty-two luars." The old man had switched to the local currency, and Ivan was astonished.

"You know I'm Selenian?"

The old man grinned. "When you've been around the square as long as I have, you learn to recognize a fellow countryman."

There were introductions, Ivan bought the painting, then found himself telling Paulo he'd left Selenia many years before, and was curious about the *luminosos*.

"It's your lucky day, *compadre*, I'm a *luminoso* expert. Why don't we talk over at the Lua Cheia? It's time for me to close up anyway."

Ivan suspected Paulo was exaggerating his expertise. Although his bald Mona Lisa suggested they could smile mysteriously, his paintings didn't betray any real knowledge of the *luminosos*. But the Lua Cheia Bar was just across the street, and Ivan accepted.



A row of empty shot glasses was lined up on the bar in front of Ivan, and the warmth of the alcohol had melted away some of his remoteness. "And why is copying prohibited for Selenians?"

Paulo was lighting yet another cigarette, and Rosinha, the bartender, answered for him. "Selenians are already a kind of copy, but not the simple bimorphisms that anyone can create when they know how to bilocate. We are incarnations from birth to death—"

Paulo interjected with her qualifications. "Rosinha has an honors degree in Translocation Studies."

"And when I graduated I had a choice between working at a fast food outlet or a bar." She grinned. "Our spirits belong on the ancient moon, as *luminosos*, and that's where we return when we die. A replica here would be like . . . a copy of a copy. If you made a replica and it died for some reason, your spirit wouldn't be able to return to your lunar body, and it couldn't return to your body here on Earth either, because that's already just a copy."

"So what would happen to it?"

Paulo downed the rest of his *cachaça*. "No one knows, *senhor*. If you're Selenian, the best idea is not to die as a copy."

There was a commotion at the other end of the bar, where Lua Cheia patrons were pointing at a flat screen on the wall. Someone found the remote and turned the sound up.

There was a reporter with a microphone, and behind her, a row of police cars with flashing green lights, and behind them, the lunar museum. She said that an unknown number of Urso Branco freedom fighters had barricaded themselves inside, and they were threatening to kill their hostages and destroy the museum if their demands weren't met. The reporter read from a list—

their comrades-in-arms to be released from the Cisne Negro prison, the president to resign, free elections to be held, and so on. Images captured by the gunmen with mobile phones flashed on the screen—hostages, school children being comforted by adults, and smashed lunar artifacts.



"You know something, Ivan? You're special. You're not like Rosinha and me. You were taught how to bilocate, weren't you?" Paulo had temporarily stopped smoking.

Ivan had sketched his life's story for them, told them about his mother's exile and growing up in Rio. He nodded, but he wasn't sure what Paulo was getting at. "Yes, I can bilocate. But that doesn't make me special. What do you mean?"

"I think you might be able to help the hostages in the museum."

"I . . . No, why would I do that?"

Rosinha answered. "The military won't take any risks. They'll do nothing. The Ursos Brancos are going to slaughter the hostages, the school children, one by one. Don't forget who you are, Ivan. You're a Selenian, and you can do something other Selenians can't. You can make a replica."

Her words brought a painful memory back to Ivan. He saw himself sitting by his mother's bedside in the Misericórdia Hospital. She'd wasted away, and her olive skin, stretched tightly across her cheekbones, had become pale and translucent. The suppurating wound on her ribs was mercifully hidden by the bed sheets.

It's for the best, my love. You can go home now. Never forget that you are Selenian.

She'd died later that night.

"This violence without end, it doesn't matter which side you choose, it's just more killing, more suffering. It isn't right. I want no part of it."

Even as he said it, Ivan knew he didn't mean it. Something had changed inside him. Perhaps it was the alcohol, or perhaps it was because of Rosinha and Paulo, who should have been strangers but weren't, or perhaps it was because of one particular Selenian held hostage in the museum. Ivan didn't know, but he did know he wasn't going to be a bystander.

"No, it isn't right." Rosinha looked straight into his eyes. "But doing nothing when you can save innocent people isn't right either."

Ivan hesitated, waiting for second thoughts that didn't come. "I'll need a weapon."

The petite Rosinha reached under the bar and pulled out a semi-automatic assault rifle. "Will this do?" She saw the look on Ivan's face and shrugged. "Sometimes there are little *problemas* with customers. I don't have to use it very often."

Ivan moved from the bar stool to a seat at a table in a corner, with Rosinha and Paulo each side of him, to make sure no one would disturb his body while his soul was absent.

He closed his eyes and visualized the museum's main hall, and felt a stinging sensation in his ears.



Ivan was shocked by the scene he found himself in, and for a moment he was disoriented. Bodies were scattered everywhere, and one of the freedom fighters was photographing a bloodied corpse with his phone, to broadcast it to the world and let the Selenian military know they were serious.

There was a murmuring among the hostages and someone pointed. Ivan delocated, returned to his resting body at the Lua Cheia.

He'd counted four freedom fighters and memorized the layout, and when he bilocated again, they were looking around. He shot one of them, and another fired at him and missed, but Ivan didn't. He delocated, returned to a position in front of the hostages, and shot the third gunman in the back.

The fourth freedom fighter was running toward the back of the hall. He delocated, bilocated, took aim and fired, and then there were none.



Most of the hostages had left the museum, but Ivan had stayed. He stared at the marble floor, where the blood of the guilty flowed with the blood of the innocent.

The Urso Branco freedom fighters had wanted the best for Selenia, and this was the consequence. But Ivan knew that he shared in the responsibility for that blood. When all was said and done, violence was violence and murder was murder, and he was no better than they were.

Outside, the locals would be calling home, the tourists would be telling the military police what had happened in broken Portuguese, and shortly they would want to talk to him.

There were two other people in the hall. They came over, and Ivan recognized Alicia.

The man embraced him. "My wife told me you're a Brazilian, yet you helped us, *compadre*. You saved our lives."

"I have a Brazilian passport, friend, but I was born in Selenia."

Ivan was thinking about the fourth freedom fighter, wondering why she'd fled.

"May I ask a question?" He pointed at the back of the hall. "What's behind that door? Is there an exit?"

Alicia answered. "No, *senhor*. That's just a storeroom."

Ivan pictured the fourth freedom fighter—her red t-shirt with the Urso Branco stencil, her youthful face, and the calm conviction in her eyes. She'd been raising her weapon when Ivan had shot her dead.

She wasn't fleeing. She hadn't heard a sound and turned. She was coming back into the main hall.

Ivan was running toward the storeroom when the timer on the bomb reached zero.



Alicia opened her eyes and looked around. It was almost completely dark, but in the blue light filtering under the door, she could see a small room with a worn stone floor and walls made of basalt blocks.

She knew where she was. She was in the Cisne Negro, a prisoner of the military. Some sort of terrible mistake had been made—they thought she was one of the Urso Branco fighters.

After a moment she calmed down. After all, she worked for the Ministry of Foreign Relations, and she'd committed no crime. All she had to do was explain.



The Lua Cheia was empty except for Rosinha and Paulo, who'd stayed behind with Ivan's soulless body. When they heard the explosion, they went outside, and saw a pillar of dust and smoke rising into the sky on the far side of the square.

"Paulo, we have to check Ivan."

Paulo listened at his chest, held his palm in front of his mouth and nostrils, felt his neck for a pulse, while Rosinha looked on nervously. He shook his head.

"He's gone, Rosinha. He must have been inside the museum when the bomb went off."

Rosinha wiped her eyes, found a tissue and blew her nose. "What do you think has happened to him, Paulo?"

"I have no idea." He went behind the bar and poured them both a drink.



She stood up, a little unsteady on her feet at first, and went to the door of her prison cell. The latch turned and the door opened. She wasn't locked up at all.

From a window in the hallway, Anna saw the water moon hanging low on the horizon, and for no reason remembered Tristão's words from *Tristão and Isolda*. 'I was where I had been before I was and where I am destined to go, in the wide realm of the night of the world.'

Anna?

Now she remembered. She was Anna, and she was Alícia as well. The room wasn't a cell, it was a stasis chamber where empty bodies were laid out until their owners returned.

Anna had come home to her world—the ancient moon, Alícia would have called it—and through the window, she could see the fields and vineyards of her beautiful Kierkegaard.

In the distance, the feldspar cliffs of the Indira Seafall sparkled in the blue light of the water moon. That was the name her people gave to Alícia's planet, the Earth.

In the next room, her lover, named Heitor and Dellus, would be waking up.



The police had interviewed Rosinha, pieced the story together, and left, and she was alone in the bar. It was well after midnight by the time she'd collected the glasses, cleaned off the tables, put the chairs up, and swept the floor, all the time wondering what had happened to Ivan. When she'd finished, she set the alarm.

On the street outside, an odd looking bald man in baggy clothes was standing in the shadows. "Rosinha, it's me. It's Ivan."



Through the night, and through the high night when the water moon had set below the horizon, Anna waited beside Dellus in his bed, but there was not a movement, not a sign. As the sun rose, she heard footsteps in the corridor, and her mother found her.

She squeezed her tight. "Anna, finally you've come back to us."

Her mother stood back, and noticed her eyes. "You've been crying, darling. What's wrong?"

"We died together, Mother, but Dellus hasn't woken up."

"Who? Who was it that died in Selenia?"

"Heitor, my husband. He died with me. There was an explosion in the museum."

"Anna . . ." Her mother hesitated, closed her eyes for a moment. "Anna, there are so many of us, the chance that Dellus and Heitor were the same person is minute. In your Selenian life you probably never even crossed paths with the incarnation of Dellus. I know it happens in stories, but that's not the way the real world works."

She took her by the hand and led her from the chamber. "Come, we don't want to keep your father, your brothers and sisters, waiting to know you've returned. It's not a time for sadness, it's a time for celebration."

Anna managed half a smile. "Yes, Mother. Of course, you're right."

"Everyone comes back, Anna. All we have to do is wait."



Ivan kept his alien physiology secret under a turban and long-sleeved shirts, covered the faint stripes on his face with makeup, and wore blue-tinted glasses. With a little help from Rosinha and Paulo, he arranged false documents and a clerical job at the docks.

Occasionally, someone at work noticed his yellow irises and told him he really needed to see a doctor about his liver. But apart from that, Ivan passed himself off as a human.

In a way, he was no more and no less human than he had been before the explosion at the museum.



For the *luminosos*, the time on the water moon was just a moment in the procession of the lunar seasons through their lives, and Anna knew that soon enough, Dellus would be returned to her.

But she was still lonely, and in the evenings, she crouched beside his silent body and took refuge in memories of their time together.

Memories of winter, of snowflakes tossed by the wind against the windowpanes, and making love gently under thick layers of fleece. Memories of spring, of the fields at sunset, and making love carelessly, surrounded by clouds of insects attracted to their light.

In the darkness of the stone chamber, she ran her fingertips along his spiral stripes, traced her lover's design, and thought of autumn, of making love at night under the water moon, with the whorl over his heart a Catherine wheel that burned so intensely she couldn't help but fear she'd be lost forever, consumed in her tiger's fire.



When all was almost said and done, Ivan was still Ivan. Sometimes on Saturday nights, when the music from the *avenida* kept him awake, he would lean on the windowsill of his fourth floor apartment and look out at the crowds below. He would sip vermouth and watch couples talking, dancing, and embracing, and think that perhaps his solitude was some kind of purgatory. But if it was, it was a purgatory he was accustomed to.

Now and then he went to the Lua Cheia and met up with Rosinha and Paulo, and occasionally his personal situation was a topic of discussion. Rosinha would take a napkin and draw the outlines of four bodies arranged in a square, with two cross-hatched as *luminosos*. She would connect them with arrows, and say something like, *It's perfectly obvious, Paulo. His spirit is in a bimorph, a copy of his lunar body. It was always the only possibility*, and Paulo would say, *But what about something or Haven't you forgotten something else?* And Ivan would have another *cachaça* and try to pay attention while they debated.

He'd visited Paulo's studio a few times, after Paulo had insisted that he pose for a couple of paintings and he'd finally given in. *The tourists want authenticity*, Paulo had enthused, but Ivan had no idea how they'd know what was authentic even if it poked them in the eye.

He had season tickets to the opera, although he gave his ticket away whenever there was a performance of *Tristão and Isolda*, and he was a frequent visitor at the lunar museum, which was opening in stages as it was rebuilt, and the experts somehow pieced tiny fragments of the lunar shards back together for the displays.

When he was at home, and there was no need to wear makeup and a turban to disguise his appearance, Ivan still wore a shirt. There was a peculiar spiral pattern of stripes over his heart,

and if he saw it, he was overwhelmed with an inexplicable sadness, and a craving so strong it tasted bitter in his mouth.



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Steve Simpson lives in Sydney, Australia mostly. He took up writing when the neighbors complained about the bagpipes, and his stories have appeared in various magazines and anthologies. His hobbies include experiments with time travel and negative light, and research on epileptic seizure detection.

Battle Lines

J.W. Alden

A band of alabaster orbs slipped through Aidan's fingers and into the night. His eyes traced their arc as they soared away and melted into the sea of shadows below. He wanted to see where they would land, who they would find, but the auburn seraph at his side beckoned. Laughter and melody enveloped them, and her arms slipped around his shoulders. She was lovely. He was happy.

"Hello?" said a voice, not hers, and his eyes were open.

For a fleeting instant, he thought he was back home, in bed. The fetid taste of recycled air and the faint warble of the aft pressure alarm brought his mind back to bearing. No, this was not home. Not here.

"Aidan? You there?"

He shambled toward the airlock, negotiating a web of peculiar shadows cast by the emergency lights above. His thumb found the call button as he leaned toward the speaker next to the door. "Yeah, Dez, I'm here. Wide awake and back in the land of gray walls and empty stomachs."

"Sorry, man. Didn't yank you away from any Earthside dreamscapes, I hope."

"New Orleans, as a matter of fact." He closed his eyes and tried to remember what the girl had looked like. "Mardi Gras. What's up?"

There was a pause. "Rourke is gone. I hate to wake you up for that, but I thought you might want to know."

A stale breath caught in Aidan's throat. For a moment, he contemplated turning the speaker off and trying to find his way back to New Orleans. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Listen, don't stir on it. We knew we might have to eat a bullet or two for the pleasure of coming aboard, and there wasn't nobody on my team that wasn't square with that. You did your job, soldier."

Aidan ran a hand down the lines of his forehead and wrung the drowsy eyes beneath. "I'm still sorry to hear it. You guys were just following orders like the rest of us. Rourke seemed like a nice guy."

"He was. But it could have been you, just the same. We weren't exactly firing warning shots, you know. Almost took your head off myself before the blast doors came down."

"You gave us a chance to skedaddle long before it came to that. If I had parked my ass on a lifeboat with the others, you wouldn't have had a reason to open fire in the first place. A few strings of data on a hard drive ain't worth dying for—or killing for."

"I wish you'd listen to the words tumbling out of your mouth so you'd realize how stupid they sound. This is *your* ship, Aidan. You didn't ask for this war, and you damn sure didn't ask for this boarding party. You were doing your job. Rourke knew that."

"Doesn't make me feel any better about it. It's not often you learn a mook's name after trading fire, learn what his laugh sounds like. I appreciate you saying what you're saying. I do. But we'll see where that kind of talk goes when the cavalry arrives and you get the chance to pay me back."

"I suppose we will," Dez said, "assuming my people get here first."

"Won't matter who it is. First thing they'll do is restore main power. When these fire doors open, we'll have to get reacquainted whether we like it or not. And I don't think the brass on either side would be very happy to find us sitting here playing patty cake like old buddies."

A strange gust of static came from the speaker, likely a sigh. "You can cut the tough talk, man. I just watched a friend of mine die over a couple of ones and zeros, so excuse me if I ain't exactly itching for another gunfight. I'd rather have another round of chess. We need a tie-breaker."

"My mind's too weary for that stuff. I just want sleep. No more chess for me, Dez. No more gunfights, either. Hell, I don't even have any ammo left. Used my last round on Rourke."

A long silence replaced the subtle hiss of the open intercom. Dez must have taken his finger from the button. When it returned, his voice was faint. "That was stupid, Aidan. You shouldn't have told me that."

"I know."

Aidan stepped away from the intercom and flopped back down into the officer's chair, hoping to dream of mirth and music again. He drew his sidearm as he reclined, ejecting the magazine into his lap. As his breath slowed and his muscles began to ease, he couldn't help but wonder what had brought him to this side of the door and Dez the other. In another life, they might have been ringing up each other's groceries. He flipped the magazine between his fingers for a few seconds, then ran his thumb down the witness holes in its side, counting the number of unspent rounds. One. Two. Three. It made a satisfying click when he popped it home.

After a few somber moments, his mind finally began to recede into the dark of sleep again. While he was drifting into the abyss, an abrupt hum filled his ears and the light behind his eyelids

swelled. As he embraced his auburn beauty once more, he could almost swear he heard the telltale hiss of an airlock sliding open.



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J.W. Alden has always had a fascination with the fantastic. As such, he's made speculative fiction his domain. He lives just outside West Palm Beach, Florida with his fiancée Allison, who doesn't mind the odd assortment of musical instruments and medieval weaponry that decorate his office (as long as he tries to brandish the former more often than the latter). Alden is a graduate of the 2013 class of Odyssey Writing Workshop and a member of Codex Writers.

Talking with Honored Guests

Alexander Monteagudo

Olufemi bowed his head and rubbed his temples. His braids fell like a curtain, shielding his grimace. He mustn't become angry. For a moment, he imagined his internal fire exploding, flames escaping his pores to engulf the small hut and the guildsmen quarreling in it.

Their shouting continued.

"A mere blacksmith disrespects the Main of the woodcutter's guild?! Foolish child!" The woodcutter, a man with night's complexion and intricate rowed braids, pointed a scarred finger at the blacksmith. The woodcutter's two assistants, sporting similar scarlet *shendys* that wrapped around their waists like a skirt, nodded.

Olufemi lifted a hand. "Honored guests, please—"

The blacksmith, a mountain of a man with veined muscles, chuckled at the woodcutter. "You call a grown man, Main of the blacksmith guild, a child?" His gold bracelets jingled with his laughter. His two followers sneered. "Woodcutters are as worthless as an unmarried woman!"

Olufemi, sitting between the two standing guilds, gazed out of the hut's window. The sun burned at zenith. Come evening, Main Tuyu would return from trading with the neighboring village to see the task he entrusted to Olufemi—negotiating a land agreement between the blacksmiths and woodcutters—incomplete. Olufemi's rise through the village bureaucracy would be stalled and he would spend years counting herds and harvest crops. He would wither away from boredom.

With his rare power to form fire from his body, many villagers had wanted Olufemi to join the militia. But he dreamed of helping Main Tuyu on trade missions, or becoming a village planner, maybe even one day ascending to village Main. He wanted to give his only family, his unmarried sister, a good life.

This job was his chance.

The guildsmen kept shouting. Olufemi felt like a child again, arguing with his sister about who would eat the last baked yam, Ife ignoring his every word.

He couldn't get angry. The memory of Ife on fire invaded his thoughts. His heart skipped. He fought away Ife's screams and the sickening stench of her scorched skin. Losing control here might lead to explosions and death. Doubt and fear gnawed at him, hyenas on a corpse.

He forced a smile. "Honored guests." He grit his teeth when they continued squabbling. "Honored guests!"

They stopped, glaring down at him.

He flinched. "Thank you. Please, no insults. Let's sit, and talk. Both guilds are renowned contributors to the village—"

The blacksmith Main snorted. "You're half right, fire boy. There wouldn't be woodcutters if not for our knives and axes."

The woodcutters rolled their eyes. "Where would you live without wood for huts? And forges don't burn by themselves. Surely *we* deserve Mama Suzi's land."

Both guilds bordered the village's market, specifically Mama Suzi's large stall. With her retiring to care for her new grandson, both guilds wanted to expand on the land. Between the fields, market, temple, and living areas, no more space existed within the village's earthen walls. Plans to expand the walls would take years.

The guildsmen descended back into arguing.

Olufemi stroked his temples.

Sandalled feet approached the curtained doorway. Olufemi abandoned them to their bickering, dragging himself outside to his sister.

"I brought you some shea tea," Ife said while lifting the tray toward him. The familiar cooked lavender aroma loosened his shoulders.

"Thanks."

Ife put the tray on the grass and poured a bowl. "I think I'll stay outside," she whispered, her good eye lingering on the curtain. "Not going well?"

He shook his head, then downed the sweet tea.

Passing militia, young men wielding spears and smirks, glanced at Ife then turned their heads in disgust. She pretended not to see it. "What will you do?"

"I don't know."

She stared at him. "You have that look."

"What look?"

"That look you had for years after you burned me."

His breath caught. The terror he felt that day after losing control years ago still threatened to buckle his knees, and a thousand tears could never take back one furious moment. She would never marry. Never have family beyond him. Because of him.

His sister grabbed his shoulders. "I should have told you long ago. Scars may heal, if you let them." She kissed him on the cheek and her wrinkled skin tickled him. She, too, trembled. "We'll have baked yams when you come home."

She let him go and strolled away.

He took a deep breath. Then stepped into the hut.

He did not sit down. "Honored guests."

The yelling continued.

"Honored guests!"

They ignored him. He felt his future slipping away like stormwater flowing downhill.

Anger boiled his blood. This time, he didn't push it away; and it wouldn't explode like with life. A lump in his throat, it surged through him, down his arms, and came out through his hands as flames flaring upwards. Pain stabbed his charred fingers like a wasp's sting.

"Honored guests!"

They stopped yelling.

He made a fist and the fire stopped. Thin smoke and ash wafted through the hut's hot air. Dizzy from fear, he pushed the words out anyway. "My job is to get us to talk together. We *will* talk."

The assistants gawked, but both Mains closed the distance.

The humongous blacksmith looked him up and down. "This is no place for boys. Never confront a man unless you are prepared to have to fight him."

The woodcutter nodded, pointing his scarred finger like a blade. "Are you? Prepared to fight, so that we will talk?"

Olufemi raised a shaking finger. Fire flared from it. His eyes narrowed. Between panting breaths, "Yes."

The blacksmith nodded his head and patted Olufemi's back. "Good. You are finally prepared to confront. So we may talk. Afterward, you may join the blacksmith guild and fire our forges."

The woodcutter grinned. "Smart one like him will learn to cut wood with us."

Everyone laughed at their jokes, except Olufemi, who smiled as he embraced his newly controlled anger. As they all sat down to talk, he put out his fire but kept his flawless hands warm.



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When not working out, playing video games, or missing Honolulu, **Alexander Monteagudo** can usually be found at the Baltimore Science Fiction Society.

How I Lost Eleven Stone And Found Love

Ian Creasey

People always ask me, "Does it hurt?"
I tell them the truth. "No, it doesn't hurt at all."
If they're the mean type—the kind of people who say, "Why don't you just diet?"—I whistle for Charlie.

Then I say, "Because this is better. Do you want to try it? Don't worry—he won't bite. Well, he will. But it won't hurt." That sorts them out. They always shrink back and make some lame excuse. When Charlie starts sniffing them, they run like hell.

Lots of people call him ugly. Don't be so judgmental, I say. After all, Charlie's from another planet, and that spotty purple is camouflage at home. That's what I've heard, anyway. I've never been out there myself. When I was a boy, I dreamed of going into space—I thought being fat wouldn't matter in zero gravity. I used to imagine myself floating between the stars, moving so easily, so delicately, like I could never do on Earth.

Yeah. The careers adviser had a good laugh at that.

I promised myself if I couldn't go into space, at least I'd get myself a really cool space creature. That'd be one up on Jody Taylor, whose dad had a snake. Not to mention Chipper Dan, who kept spiders for a while, till he got bored of them and left them all in my lunchbox.

My parents wouldn't let me have a hamster, never mind anything else. But when I moved out—well, they threw me out when I got to twenty-two—that's when I bought Charlie. He cost a fortune, but it's easy to save up when you don't go out much.

His habits took some getting used to, though he's so friendly I soon got attached to him. He's a perfect pet, really cheap to keep. And quiet. I'd far rather have Charlie than some horrible dog slobbering everywhere and barking while I'm trying to watch *When Aliens Attack*.

That's when I usually feed him, when I'm watching TV. I'll sit down with the remote and some chocolate cookies, or a big bag of chips, or maybe nuts, and of course some beer or Coke or something . . . Anyway, I sit down and Charlie snuggles up to me—those spines are softer than they look—and I don't even notice when he starts sucking. I just see he's got his thing in me. His pro . . . I can never remember the word.

Yeah, proboscis, that's it. It doesn't hurt at all. He pokes it in my belly, or the top of my leg—anywhere, really—and then he gets going.

'That's how I lost eleven stone. Sure beats working out. And there's no doctors sneering at you between psychobabble. I went from twenty-three stone down to twelve, in less than a year. Charlie didn't just suck the weight out of me, he kept me company, too. I was pretty lonely back then.

When I lost weight, I had a bit more confidence to get to know people, and they didn't laugh at me or beat me up like at school. I began going out more, even watching sports. Everything would have been perfect, if it hadn't been for Charlie.

He started shedding spines, and he smelled like a blocked drain. I kept having to push him away, because of the smell and the spines on my clothes. But he looked so out of sorts, I was really worried. I had to do something.

It took me a while to find a vet who would see him. Most vets only do Earth animals. That's a bit prejudiced, don't you think? They shouldn't be so judgmental. I don't see what right they have to turn Charlie away just because he's purple and spiny and not from round here.

Anyway, I finally found Toric's place. Turns out he's the only exotic vet in Liverpool. Looking round the waiting room, I felt like I'd walked into a comic strip. People say Charlie's ugly, but some of those aliens were out of this world. And their pets were even weirder.

Toric's one of those silver Bugcats you see on TV yapping about trade and stuff. Almost makes me glad I never got to another planet, if they're all full of strip-malls like ours. When I saw him, I remembered the tax thing they're always complaining about—the xeno-tariff—and I wondered how much this was going to set me back. But I couldn't leave, not with Charlie looking so bad. I hoisted him onto the table, and he just lay there like roadkill, his last few spines all droopy and limp.

I thought Toric would have some beeping gadget that he'd wave over Charlie to find out what was wrong. But he just asked me a few questions. I said I'd had Charlie a year, and I fed him myself, and it was only lately he'd gone off-color.

"Do you feed him as much nowadays?" asked Toric. His translator had a posh accent that made him sound like a bad guy in an old film.

"Not since I got down to twelve stone. That's my ideal weight, you know. He still eats now and then, if I'm pigging out, but I've had to shoo him away a lot. I even have to shut the bedroom door."

"That's the problem. He's malnourished."

"Like, hungry?" I was surprised at this. "The guy who I got him off said he could go months without feeding."

"Back home, perhaps—I believe they hibernate through eclipses. Here they need regular meals. You want to be careful about keeping him indoors, otherwise someone might get hurt."

"It doesn't hurt," I said. But I saw what he meant. And maybe it explained why Mrs Bhalla next door kept giving me dirty looks. "What can I do?" I asked.

Toric waved his antennae in a sort of "whatever" gesture. "The simplest treatment would be to consume more yourself, and feed him frequently until he recovers."

The perfect solution! I've always loved eating. Now I could eat even more, and help Charlie at the same time. I started planning a real nosh-up as I made for the exit.

While I talked to Toric, more people's pets had arrived in the waiting room. On my way out I noticed a purple insecty-lizardy thing with brushy spines—just like Charlie. Smaller, but definitely the same kind of critter. I'd never seen anyone else with one. I stopped to see who owned it.

She was around my age, fairly short, with blonde hair that looked like the "before" in a conditioner advert. Her collar bones poked out above a white blouse that hung loose down to her baggy jeans. Sort of wasted looking is the best way I can put it. Could have been drugs, but I didn't think so.

You know, "eating disorder" is a nasty kind of phrase. I mean, "disorder"? It's practically a sign you'd see on a broken elevator. Just because I love food, does that mean I'm disordered? If someone isn't peckish very often, is that a disorder? Don't be so judgmental.

Yet there must be something in it, because we can usually spot each other. It was as if she really did have a sign on her, which I could see because I had one, too. She had a look in her eye, a "walling off the world" kind of look that I knew all too well—from the inside. That look, that so familiar look, made me feel like we were crewmates on the *Disorderly Diehards*.

Now, I never used to be much at chatting up girls. They always laughed at me even before I spoke to them. Yeah, call me Big Lardy Fat Arse, why don't you? Like I hadn't noticed until you shouted.

I never had a girlfriend when I was fat. Never asked anyone out. And they sure as hell didn't ask me.

But losing eleven stone helps your confidence. I'd started smiling at women, and sometimes they even smiled back. A smile! If you're the type who gets laid all the time, you don't know how much a smile can mean.

Now I was ready to try talking to the girl in the white top. It helped that she was someone like me, with an eating disorder, but obviously I didn't start by mentioning that. Instead I sat

down next to her and said, "That's a rare critter you've got there. How long have you had him—or is it a her? It's hard to tell, isn't it? I call mine Charlie, but I'm not really sure either way . . ."

I stopped, because I was babbling. My face felt red, and I looked at her pet rather than her. Even though Charlie was probably too ill to do much, I kept a tight hold on him. If he attacked the other critter—or tried to mate with it—that might not go down well with the owner.

From the corner of my eye, I saw her give me a polite smile. Our two critters eyed each other up. To my relief, they didn't fight. I'm fond of Charlie, but if he had screwed up my chance with this woman—no supper for him!

She said, "This is Morna. I've had her a few months, but she's not doing very well at the moment."

I thought I knew why. Charlie had helped me so much, I could see how a critter like him would suit an anorexic or bulimic, or whatever label they'd stuck on her. But if Charlie couldn't live off me at twelve stone, no wonder her pet was so small and still. I was pretty sure what Toric would tell her.

I didn't say so. I've heard women can be put off by men who act like they know everything. And apart from that, us "disorder" types don't appreciate people getting judgmental about our eating habits. Toric might suggest that she eat more, but I certainly wasn't going to.

Instead, I said, "My name's Stuart, by the way. I live near the spaceport. Had a hell of a time finding this place."

"I'm Isabel," she said, in a tone friendly enough to encourage me to keep talking. Her voice was low-pitched, deeper than you'd expect from someone so fragile-looking, and I wondered if she'd had a voice-mod in that fad a few years back.

We chatted a little, with me hampered by trying not to say anything stupid. I knew I had to seize the chance because this could be over any minute, when she got called in to see Toric, so finally I asked if I could call her sometime.

"Sure," she said.

Yeah! I don't mind telling you I really went on a binge that night. Pizza and beer, blueberry pie and chocolate fudge cake . . . It was for Charlie, too—and he perked up a bit—but mostly it was for me. I had a date!

Well, actually I had a chance to ask for a date. And I worried that it would go wrong, that she might change her mind. But the call went okay, and I arranged to meet her in a few days.

I didn't take Isabel out to dinner, of course. Instead I met her in the park, and we made for a bench by the lake. I thought that would be safe, but just as we sat down, a gray-uniformed

NannyNurse glided by with her toddlers, who started feeding the ducks and geese. The little boy kept shouting, "Greedy goose! Greedy goose!" and, "Why's that one not eating?"

"Perhaps it's full, dear," said the NannyNurse. "Come along."

Isabel looked unhappy. At first I thought the duck feeding had upset her, or that she regretted agreeing to see me, but then she said, "Morna died."

"I'm so sorry," I said. I didn't ask what her critter had died of.

"It was awful. She curled up on my bed, then didn't move. I slept on the floor for two nights. I mean, with an alien pet you never know if they might just be hibernating or something. But she was so cold . . . And whenever I touched her—trying to see if she was still alive, begging her to wake up—her spines came off in my hand."

Isabel started snuffling as she spoke. "I took her to Toric's again, and he said she was dead. I couldn't even take her home to bury her. Toric said he had to incinerate the body, because Earth regulations class dead aliens as hazardous waste. So I just stood and watched . . . while the flames . . ."

She broke into choked little sobs. I did the best I could to comfort her, putting an arm round her bony shoulders while she cried herself out. I didn't speak, except a sort of wordless rumble of offered sympathy.

After a minute or so, she lifted her head and wiped her eyes, spreading little wet smears of that black stuff—mascara, is it?—women sometimes use on their eyelashes.

She put make-up on for me, I thought.

I saw her try to pull herself together and put on a "facing the world" expression. When she looked at me, I didn't know what to say. Earlier, I'd practised a few lines in my head—talk about the weather, ask where she worked, all that kind of stuff. But none of it seemed appropriate now.

I asked if she wanted to go home. She shook her head, but got up off the bench. We walked along the waterside. As we strolled, I took her hand in mine. It was small and thin as a child's.

The sun glittered on the windswept surface of the lake. Whenever we passed ducks waddling over the grass, they quacked and flew to the water.

I waited for Isabel to speak. About halfway round, she started talking about how when she was a little girl, her grandparents took her to a show farm. "The guide said all the animals were 'retired,' which apparently meant they wouldn't be slaughtered like normal. It was the first time I'd heard how animals got killed and eaten, and I started crying. They had to buy me an ice-cream to get me to shut up. Then we went to the bird pen, where all the hens and geese were tame, of course, and a big white goose snapped my ice-cream cone right out of my hand. So I started crying all over again."

Isabel smiled a little, but it stopped short of her eyes. "I guess now you're thinking I don't ever do anything except cry. I'm not like that, I promise. I just remembered that farm now, I don't know why. Maybe those geese reminded me."

"I can go over and make them apologize, if you like." I nearly added, "Get your ice-cream back," but I bit it off just in time.

A long pause later, I realized what she really expected me to do was come up with a matching anecdote, something that told her about my feelings and all that. I cast about in my memory and said, "My family were mad on taking me to stately homes with big flower gardens. When I was a kid I never really saw the point of flower beds. But I remember one place where they had a pond with black swans. Back then I was moody and angsty the way kids get"—the words touched lightly as feathers on the vast lonely void of my childhood—"and I thought it would be cool to have black gardens. Tall dark walls casting long shadows, and inside everything black—flowers, bees, swans. I loved the black swans with their red beaks. But when they stretched their wings to clean them, I was surprised to see they had white under-feathers.

"White feathers on a black swan." I stopped for a moment, knowing I didn't have the words to explain. "It was a kind of weird zen moment, like I'd seen the answer to a riddle I hadn't heard the question of."

I didn't think Isabel understood what I was getting at—and I could hardly blame her, since I'd described it so badly—so I finished by saying, "And the swans had this funny high-pitched squeak."

I tried to do the squeak. Isabel didn't laugh as I had hoped, but she smiled a little more, and it reached her eyes this time. The sun shone on her blonde hair. Just for a minute—because of the smile, and her being so thin—she looked like she'd stepped from the cover of a magazine.

We fell into a conversation about where we'd go if we could fly away for the winter, like migrating birds. Then we talked about our boring jobs, and what we'd originally wanted to be when we grew up—we laughed about that, and promised to be spaceman and actress, just for each other.

Isabel did a little skit as if from a one-woman outdoor show. "Oh cruel grass, you looked so greener when you led me on. I wanted to make hay, and you gave me hay fever. Oh heartless tease, oh cruel sneeze—when will I find my final ease?"

I pretended the park was an alien planet, and reported back on what I found: "A wire mesh receptacle, filled with ritual offerings of plastic bags and sacred cans. A beautiful native dressed in white and gold, such a gorgeous vision to a man who's been alone in space for years . . ."

The evening passed quicker than a rocket reaching orbit.

She came back to my flat. I felt like I'd won the lottery the first time I bought a ticket. On the way we picked up a bottle of wine, though when we got home we didn't even open it.

Isabel turned her back on me while she undressed. I noticed that she wore a bra, although she was so slim she had no breasts to speak of. In bed, our figures looked a little odd together. Even though I'd lost so much weight, she was far thinner than me, so delicate-looking that I almost feared touching her.

We kissed . . .

I think it went as well as could be expected. Not as well as in books, or in porn. In truth, I didn't find it quite so great as I'd dreamed. And yet afterward, when we snuggled up to each other, I loved the warmth of her skin, the sense of togetherness.

I woke early, with dawn's gray light creeping through the thin curtains. I was so used to waking alone that it took me a few moments to realize Isabel had gone. A sick feeling seized me when I thought she'd left in the night, but then I saw her shoes still under the chair. Perhaps she'd got up to use the bathroom, and that had woken me. I waited, but she didn't come back. A few minutes later, I tried the bathroom anyway. She wasn't there.

Well, maybe she was an early riser. My stomach growled, and I decided I might as well get some breakfast. We'd have time to talk before we headed off for work.

On my way to the kitchen, I saw Isabel lying naked on the living room sofa, with Charlie's proboscis sucking her flesh.

Funny, Charlie's feeding never looked ugly to me until I saw it on her. It was like a scene from a monster movie. Yet Isabel's eyes looked so rapt—far more than they had last night.

The sick feeling returned, ten times worse. I felt stupid and pathetic as I realized how I'd been duped. Isabel had never liked me at all. Her critter was dead, so she needed mine. She'd only slept with me because she had to. Right then, I hated her for using me. And I hated myself for being so easily taken in, for being stupid enough to think that any woman would ever care for me.

"So that's what you really came for," I said.

Charlie scuttled away at the sound of my angry voice, leaving a small pale mark on Isabel's flat stomach.

She jerked in surprise, and turned to look at me. "No," she said. "I came to be with you."

"And yet here you are, with Charlie."

"I thought I could resist this." Isabel's low tones sounded flat and weary, lifeless as Toric's translator. "I was going to invite you back to my place, but if we're going to be together, I knew I'd have to visit you sometime. I thought I could be strong. I should know by now I can't be

strong. I'm weak—I've always been weak." As she spoke she got up and walked past me, back to the bedroom.

"I know how it feels to be weak," I said. And I did know. All those years of being fat had taught me how a resolution made one day—*diet; exercise; eat fruit, not chocolate*—can crumble the next.

I desperately wanted to believe her, and I thrilled to the thought of her words, "if we're going to be together". But if we were going to be together, why was she gathering her things?

"I'm sorry," Isabel said as she began dressing. "I shouldn't have come. I never meant this to happen." She had a horrible defeated look in her eye. "I don't want to take Charlie away from you." She put her shoes on and headed for the door.

"Don't go!" I raced round her and blocked her way in the hall. I can run, now I'm twelve stone. "I don't mind Charlie feeding from you. I just thought that was the only reason you came—that you didn't really care for me at all."

Isabel didn't try to push past me, but she didn't go back either. Her expression wavered between doubt and determination.

"Look, at least let me make you some coffee," I said. "Then we can talk."

The pause stretched for a dozen of my speeding heartbeats. At last Isabel nodded. She returned to the living room and sat on the sofa. I went into the kitchen. While I waited for the kettle to boil, I watched Isabel delve into her handbag for a hairbrush, and start wrenching her hair into shape with savage jerks. Little clumps of thin blonde hair hung all round the edge of the brush.

I made myself a bowl of corn flakes, but didn't bother getting anything for her. I was pretty sure Isabel wasn't the type who ate much in the mornings. I remembered some white-coat type telling me, *Breakfast is the most important meal of the day*. Yeah, sure it is, if you're a food fascist.

Out of habit I nearly flipped the TV on, but I just managed to stop myself. I gave Isabel her coffee. "Morning," I said, like we did this every day.

She took a sip. A small smile crept onto her face, like the sun peeping up over the spaceport. "You didn't put sugar in it," she said.

"Of course not." I sat down next to her.

"Anyone who ever makes me coffee—my parents, the nurses at the clinic—they always put sugar in. It's like they think I won't notice they're trying to force-feed me calories."

"I'm not judgmental," I said.

And that's how I found love.



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The Great Excuse

Jacob Michael King

I wish I had died without seeing those things. Then it would've been simple: there I'd be, just another homeless drunk, stiff in some alley somewhere. I could handle the dull remorse in those last moments, and the knowledge that I had wasted my life.

The tragedy would've been a local one. Long forgotten by whatever family remained, my passing would make the most marginal of ripples. The bums of Los Angeles (those who weren't mad or fried beyond coherence) would mutter about it almost as a footnote, then head to the library or the streets with their cardboard signs and their cups. We die all the time, and that's the procedure.

There would be Rosie, of course—assuming she outlived me. I hope she'd cry at least a time or two; I hope she'd sleep alone for at least a couple nights in our ramshackle tent beneath the Silver Lake Boulevard exit on the 101. But then she'd get loaded and fall asleep. Maybe it would hit her when she woke up with the needle still in her arm. No matter how drunk I was, I always used to take the needle out; I didn't want her rolling over and breaking it off.

But these are just idle speculations, footsteps echoing down the path I did not take. I am witness to a horror. It has wrenched me from my stupor (decades-long) of apathy and selfishness. I can't be silent. I'm compelled to sound some note of warning before mankind is swallowed up.

And maybe it's for nothing. I'm not a competent man: I can't tell you what to do, only *what I've seen*. Maybe someone unlike me (someone strong, whose hope hasn't atrophied) could find some means to stay the coming darkness. Then again, maybe not. At least I said something—I can die without *that* on my conscience.



It began in the library.

Not all bums are fools. But intelligence, of course, doesn't translate to success. By and large, we're lacking what you might call a "citizen's temperament." Whatever it is that makes you want to worm your way up the ranks, acquiring status and capital and stability, we don't have it. For the record: when I say "bum," I mean those of us who make a career out of it, not the folks who've caught some breeze of misfortune. The unlucky may wind up homeless, but, almost without exception, their state is temporary. Rosie and I were bums.

But not all bums are fools. I'd always told myself that I was a writer. I read like one and drank like one, but this is the first time in years I've put words on a page. Rosie got the bug for

classics in high school, and studied Latin for a year at some university before she discovered junk. If we weren't hustling or panhandling, we'd be in the library. We'd huddle close between seldom-visited shelves, snickering at the bad taste of our destitute compatriots: usually pop-fiction or self-help. One guy, though, read those romance novels with the soft-porn covers, rubbing himself under the table. He was banned soon enough. Rosie and I fancied ourselves elitists. We'd read for hours, then head outside to roll cigarettes and talk over Plutarch or Milton.

It was a good time (and it was free) but there was always a bitterness creeping in: books were written by (and about) those with the temperament we lacked. There was something absent in us, a design flaw, which the works of the masters served to highlight. It was a disappointment, a perpetual reminder of our nature; unpleasant, but familiar as morning breath. There was a warped comfort there, too, a confirmation of our brokenness.

Initiation into true bumhood comes when you find The Great Excuse. The Great Excuse is the bum's Holy Grail—hold it up to justify your wrecked life. Favorites included the government, childhood abuse, or whatever drug had its hooks in you. Don't think I'm turning up my nose: we are all, rich or poor, slaves to our disposition.

The library was our Great Excuse. There we found volumes of proof that we were unfixably fucked. We could cite passage after passage, chapter and verse, on how it was better not to try. And our Great Excuse (unlike "Daddy touched me" or "I got screwed by Uncle Sam") lent our state—indisputably, it was as pathetic as any bum's—a kind of romance, let us entertain the lie that we were special.

I'm sure it sounds sentimental, but I look at those times as a kind of Eden from which we were expelled. Sure, you'd call it ugly: panhandling, performing sexual favors to feed a habit and waking up every morning a little sicker, a little more resigned to not waking up at all. Maybe it wasn't the kind of life you'd want—hell, it wasn't the kind of life that *we'd want*—but, with all those books and Rosie as my only judge, we felt like we lived in a world we could *understand*. One day, though, Crawford Tillinghast arrived, and he shattered that petty illusion.



The library we frequented had these giveaways every Saturday. There would be a couple racks of books, stuff no one wanted: self-published religious crap, old magazines, *Minutes of the Echo Park Ladies' Bridge Club (1948–52)*, etc. We'd usually stop and survey the titles for a laugh.

Tillinghast was there one Saturday. He was impossibly gaunt, leaning against the steel frame of the double doors, with that ratty tangle of white hair (bowl-cut) and those thick glasses. He glanced absently at the pages of a book: the thing was arcane-looking, though cardboard-bound, and seemed to carry a strange gravity.

We were, of course, instantly curious. But he spoke first.

“It’s my great-grandfather’s,” he said. It was the first time I saw that half-smirk, and that look I took, initially, for affectation. His eyes cut into Rosie, and her shoulders opened to him. I didn’t mind—if he wanted her and he paid we’d be set for a day or two.

“Was he tall like you?” Rosie asked, and bit her lip.

But Tillinghast bristled as if she’d spoken a blasphemy.

“He was *serious*,” he said, “and so am I.”

When Tillinghast stood upright, his neck stooped forward and his forehead blocked the light, casting sickle-shaped shadows from his eyes to his ears.

“Imagine a ground spider,” he said, “as it scuttles along. It has many eyes, and is, without doubt, convinced that the world it senses is *the world*—that it *understands* the realm through which it moves. It sees a shape—immense, in soft focus—beside it. The shape moves, and, in its movement, the ground spider recognizes both a surface and a threat—but that is all. How could it know that it stares at a man’s pant leg, and his shoe? Imagine it had language, and could listen to some lecture about human beings, and their clothes, and their civilization. Imagine its bafflement—it would no longer be a spider but something else, a kind of bridge between spider and man. We are chained, as men and as mortals, to the bounds delimited by our nature. We are slaves, every one, to our *disposition*. The ground spider sees only a surface and a threat, and is blind to the revulsion rising in the man after the man notices it scuttling along. Revulsion—what an alien sentiment it must be to the ground spider! Were it granted some key, some access to the knowledge of this man and his revulsion, the ground spider would elect, in all likelihood, not to cross his path. But, as it stands, this wretched thing has only base instinct for a guide. Naturally, it is crushed!”

With that, Tillinghast slammed the volume shut, walked past us and out of the library. Rosie laughed in his face as he passed, though now I wish she hadn’t. Now I wish I’d followed him, and killed him when I had the chance.



We laughed that night in our ramshackle tent. We laughed so hard that we shook the walls. We slurred our words like dopes. We took turns doing bad impressions of that lanky creep from the library.

On Sundays they’d give out soup downtown, so in the morning we made our way by bus. Scores of bums were sitting on sidewalks with their backs against buildings or crowding in alleys along Los Angeles Street. Tillinghast stood, bent forward but still a head taller, in a suit and tie among a dozen or so homeless.

He had one of them in his arms, a batty old wino who called himself St. John Miracle. St. John had hair and a beard that hadn’t been washed or trimmed since the Reagan era—it was

piss-yellow and gray and stiff with stink. Around three in the morning you'd hear him yelling insanity about how Jesus Christ himself drank orange juice, or how the angel Gabriel had drilled a hole in his left eye and hid diamonds there.

But Tillinghast pulled him close like a lover. He whispered to St. John, combing his fingers through that awful mane. The little cluster of bums looked silently on, and soon a black car pulled up to the curb. He led St. John to the car, opened the passenger door, and helped buckle him in. Tillinghast cracked the rear door and put one long leg inside. He stopped and looked back at the rest of us.

“All who are willing shall become a bridge,” he said.

Rosie laughed again, and whispered, “What the fuck?”

Then the car drove off and they were gone.



A few days later there was talk of a man in a white robe, bald and clean-shaven, who walked the streets barefoot and went around preaching to bums. Apparently, they were listening: he'd gathered a following. We heard he was giving a sermon in Echo Park. Rosie and I, starved for shits and giggles, decided to attend.

Echo Park was newly renovated. The town, also called Echo Park, was in the throes of gentrification. Between downtown and Silver Lake (which all the trust-fund hipster twats called home) you'd find an ungainly amalgam of lower and upper classes. Immigrant families would gather at the picnic tables with a dozen or so children, while twenty-somethings in high-end vintage duds would sit beneath trees with guitars.

Although it was a Saturday afternoon, lazy and cloudless and temperate, there were only bums in the park. There must have been a hundred of them, fixed on the picnic tables like barnacles or choking the city's grass with their lazy backsides. A few police cars were parked across the street, and cops looked on with their arms folded.

St. John Miracle stood (barefoot, white-robed) atop a picnic table. Every neck was craned in his direction. He was unrecognizable: he'd lost the beard and the mane and looked younger by ten years. His eyes, distended with a zealous heat, seemed ready to burst.

I guess the sight scared all the normal folks off. I don't blame them. We stood across the street, just far enough from the cops to avoid interest. St. John started talking.

He said, “You are slaves to you-know-not-what. *But I know.* This knowledge, a bleak comfort, humbles rather than elevates. I stand before you a changed man. You knew me as mad: a deranged casualty of myself, my *disposition*. It is a cross, I assure you, that I still bear. I have found no new strength, no means to carry it as a hero's burden. On the contrary, now I am utterly defeated: I march toward my Calvary with indifference, neither exultant nor sorrowful. I know a

foul fate awaits me, and that it is not something I am fit to meet. And so I promise you no *religion*, no *salvation*. Yet I implore you—come, O wretched children, and follow me. In my embrace there lies an abyss of fear and ineffable blackness. *Come, O wretched children, and follow me.* Should you hold, still, some grain of hope, I bid you brush it from your hand. *You shall be made new*, so that none who have striven for and gained *the good life*—the companionship and shelter and sobriety you lack—could evermore kindle your envy. Your surrender, *your failure* shall be your crown. You shall know that human ambition stands as a feeble affront to the omnipotent and hateful All, which authors matter only that atom might be rent from atom. It is true that every knee shall bow, but you shall precede most: you shall sing its praises in howls of entropy. *You shall become a bridge between man and the yawning deep.*”

Rosie and I had come across a little weed (tobacco-tasting shake, the kind a high-schooler might sell) and smoked it in preparation for the sermon. Since we were far enough away from the action, Rosie felt safe giggling at first. But there was a dread in the air that struck me dumb, so I just stood and listened. Rosie felt it, too, and got quiet.

While he was talking, five jet-black buses (drivers sunglassed and suited) pulled to the curb. The cops did nothing—were they awed? Were they in on it? By the end of St. John Miracle’s bleak soliloquy, all the bums were on their feet. They walked, without so much as a murmur, to the buses. The doors opened and each bum got in.

Then the vans trundled off like swollen hearses.



The streets were lonely for three or four days, the library half-empty. But we crawled from our tent one morning to find St. John and about fifteen disciples standing in a crescent around it. They were robed in white and their feet were bare and even the women had their heads shaved. Each eye swelled with that same zealous fire, and they hardly blinked.

They just trained their unhomely stares our way. “How long have they been *waiting* here?” Rosie asked, in a whisper.

That’s when I noticed the van, stalling behind them with its hazard lights on and its side door open. Rumbling—did it yawn? The rows of empty black seats stood like rotten teeth.

“Go on,” said St. John Miracle. He didn’t gesture at the bus. He didn’t move; he didn’t have to. We felt, both of us, seduced by the resignation (immense, knowing) behind their eyes. They looked spacey, sure—but *they looked satisfied*. It wasn’t the smiling denial of the newly born-again, or the sated stupor of a junkie when stoned. I’ve never seen anything like it. Rosie and I didn’t have to ask, because we both knew: they’d found a Great Excuse to trump all Great Excuses, an Excuse so Great that it wasn’t even an excuse. It wasn’t a lie they had to tell themselves to justify

their failure—it was *some ultimate truth*, and in its face their failure was not merely justified, but a mark of election.

You want to know how scared we were. Yeah, we were scared. But when you're a bum, you're always scared: you're always cold or you're always hot and you're always filthy and you always need to brush your teeth and your feet are always hurting and there's always something looking infected. You file these discomforts away in the same place you put all your promises to clean up. You bitch about everything, but, to feed a habit, you'll endure like a Christian in the Coliseum. Rosie had sold herself for baggies of mystery-powder so many times that she didn't bother to grit her teeth and pray the junk was good. I'd swallowed swimming pools worth of mouthwash when I didn't have the coin for bottom-shelf vodka, braving blindness or gastrointestinal bleeding or whatever else they warned you about on the back label. So the sight of our destitute compatriots, bald and white-robed and looking brainwashed, hardly sent us into a panic. I wish it had.

I wish we'd run—maybe they wouldn't have followed us, or maybe we could have outrun them if they had. Or, better yet, maybe they'd have killed us. But their eyes (hollow, unblinking, utterly sated) exerted a terrible draw, and we got in the van without protest.



St. John Miracle handed us two burlap sacks, and we slipped them over our heads. The door was shut; a soft push as the van moved forward. We rode in silence. I can't speak for Rosie, but I felt an overwhelming helplessness, a surrender.

You can see it on nature shows: that gazelle will run and run, but, when the lion finally has it by the throat, there's an unmistakable relief in its dull black eyes. It's glad (can you blame it?) to be done with the routine of grazing and panicking and narrowly escaping only to graze and panic again.

I don't know how long it was, but we drove for a while. Then we stopped. We were told we could remove the sacks and, when we did, we saw Crawford Tillinghast standing before the unmarked door of a warehouse.

He looked even thinner—his suit seemed about to fall off him. His eyes were sunken, haloed in red. He grinned, laugh lines fissure-deep in his cheeks, as he strode toward us. He opened the door, still grinning.



It was dark in there; it was damp and cool. Wires covered everything: they bulged, snaking along the floor and the walls; they twisted around each other like roots; they hummed loud and deep. The sound shook our bones.

The space was massive, maybe the size of a supermarket. A single light shone, a few hundred yards away, on two empty metal chairs. Tillinghast stood between us and took our hands. We let him. Solemnly, he led us to the chairs. Rosie and I sat.

“Now,” he said, “if you will, recall our conversation about the spider, and its limited capacity. Recall my proposition: that if there were some *means* to widen its horizon, this lowly creature might transcend its own nature—it might become a *bridge*. This means is available: I shall provide it. My grandfather, whose name I bear, made the most revolutionary (and most destructive) scientific advance since the discovery of fire. For his efforts, the gods saw that he died young and forgotten. I, however, have perfected his research: I have struck depths that even his mind, immense though it was, could not picture; I have summoned daemons from distant stars, and they have borne me beyond the bounds of infinity. There are Shadows that stride from world to world, sewing death and madness . . . he, too, harnessed them. But he grew arrogant. He wished to raise his throne above the stars, to be the master of his masters. But I know that I am the master of nothing, and that even my masters are slaves!”

If it weren’t for the immense apparatus behind Tillinghast—that terrible machine into which the forest of wires fed—we might’ve mistaken his unblinking conviction for charlatanry. He shook and howled and spat and stuttered through that whole silly monologue; his voice cracked. He was the image in your mind when you think the words “Mad Scientist.” It was the kind of chest-pumping affect you’d expect in psoriatic hackers. You’d think that if the genuine item existed, it wouldn’t talk like *that*. But standing before us was the real thing, a cliché made flesh.

Naturally, Rosie burst out laughing. Tillinghast grinned weakly and shrugged with a half-blush. Her laughter withered, ending with a gasp, dry and ashamed. His faint smile, his shrug, the pink dewing his cheeks: there was (frighteningly, unmistakably) something *humble* in them—as in his embrace of St. John Miracle, reckless of the bum’s filth and status as utter anathema, untouchable even to other bums—that rooted our defensive superiority.

“Let’s forget all that for a while,” he said, and something glowed in him. “What I shall presently reveal,” Tillinghast continued, “confirms a platitude so trite that men, in our age, have ceased to believe it: *we are all equal*. But do not expect theophany—no, nothing of the kind. On the contrary, beyond that veil of wrath and tears (which we call ‘the sensible world’) looms but the horror of the shade. Ah, but what a shade!”

But now his grin was hardly meek: it was sharp, the edges of his lips whittled with malice. Tillinghast moved toward the apparatus and started fiddling. I heard a switch flip, and soon . . .



Let's assume, for a second, that you found yourself walking down Sunset Boulevard one day: not the part they named the Billy Wilder picture after, but east of it where things turn into a kind of hipster-muck (the seeds of gentrification planted) before Sunset turns into Cesar E. Chavez Avenue where it's an utterly charmless shithole, a bum-Mecca of skyscrapers and barred windows—and you encounter yours truly, now bald as a baby and robed in white, unblinking and muttering like the nut you undoubtedly think I am. Say you didn't turn away (you were brave enough, or just curious) from my fire-pregnant eyes.

I'd rattle off some cryptic aphorism with my hand open; you'd nod or grunt and hand me a dollar (or not) and be on your way. But let's assume, for one mad second, that I told you what I was really thinking. Let's say I grabbed your face and kissed it and wept and screamed with a sympathy unsolicited that we were bastard brothers, slave-children of an alien race (who never gave a damn about our petty feelings and never read the poet who claimed his soul was unconquerable) long absent but due back any day to use us like livestock because that's all we were ever created to be—livestock, and nothing more. I could slip your briefcase from your hand so gently and loosen your tie and tell you to cast your cares at my filthy bare feet because I have proof (and I do) that all your toil is idiot shadow play.

Really, what would you do? You'd shit your pants or punch me or both, but you wouldn't listen. Whatever else a bum says is prelude or coda to the inevitable moment when they ask you for money, or (especially if they don't ask) it's just schizophrenic garble from someone probably high and possibly dangerous. But, just hypothetically, let's assume you believed my every word—let's assume that you took a knee and begged me to lead you to Tillinghast's godawful machine. Let's assume that I did, and he planted you in that metal chair, flipped the switch, and peeled your reality like an onion.

Would it do you any good? Hardly. You'd be robbed of your citizen's temperament: that thin social membrane keeping you productive and hopeful, and the one invaluable accessory for any non-bum. In its place would be a bottomless hollow, The Great Excuse, crippling and indelible. So, in gratitude for your patronage all these years, for every bill you placed (with looks self-satisfied or self-righteous or at times resentful, all of which I'll remember, for now, as beatific smiles) in scavenged cups or between fingers unwashed and unashamed, I'll keep my mouth shut.



I'll keep my mouth shut, but I can't stay silent. I've written this. I'll have it printed and cheaply bound and I'll place it myself in the giveaway rack at the old library in the hope (yes, I find myself now suddenly *hoping*) that someone capable might find it and believe.

Capable of what? Even now, I can't say.

. . . to stay the coming darkness? I know I wrote that, but what a laugh. The darkness is immanent and ubiquitous, our author and finisher. In the quiet I still myself and find it indwelling. I have found the Great Excuse to trump all Great Excuses—but I am heartbroken, restless. Of late, I've started praying.

But not *to them*—Tillinghast demands no loyalty from us, nor do the cosmic monstrosities he serves. Despite our dress and shaved heads and cracked sermons, we seek no converts (though we find them) and peddle no dogma. The new wardrobe and accompanying bad attitude are, believe it or not, entirely voluntary. They are signs by which we know one another: we, who (wretches, every one) were justly deemed untouchable now groan beneath the weight of epiphany (hidden from the wise and prudent, revealed unto bums) so bleak it belied our potpourri of Great Excuses as skin-thin self-justification, our longing for surrender as half-assed; we, who (career-losers, every one) were slapped with revelation so hateful as to prove our failure and entitlement and general piss-on-the-world affect the appropriate response, now despise the validation so bitterly won; we, who (most depraved among men) found at last (and too late) that hope hidden within us all along, too deep for any vice to choke, for some beneficent force to heal and redeem us now stand beyond the rent veil of wrath and tears to behold not shade but horrors ineffable, which render all creation (atom, animal, profligate, saint) unredeemable.

But still I hope. I can speak for no one else, and fan my frail ember in secret—not even Rosie knows. I can barely admit it to myself, for it rests on the simplest deduction: having seen through one veil, I wonder if there might not be another. There is, of course, no reason to suppose that anything but evil crouches in the veil behind the veil. Still, though, I hope. I am mad enough and cannot bear to end my life, so I hope.



We've all quit: I quit drinking and Rosie quit junk and everyone's quit everything. Tillinghast had rooms for us: an unspecified location where there were doctors and nurses (and him) to nurture us through our withdrawals. Not a single relapse.



Head south on the 101, and just before the Silver Lake Blvd exit (beneath which is smuggled our ramshackle tent) you'll find a big, flat building crowned with a neon sign reading "WESTERN EXTERMINATOR COMPANY." Now, on the wall of this building there's a pretty huge mural, bizarre (and bad, and old) enough to worm its way into your subconscious and become iconic if you live here:

A man in a top-hat (looking suspiciously like a certain tycoon from a certain board game), donning a tux, holds a gigantic mallet behind him while brandishing an index finger at some petrified mouse. We know he's about to smack its bones to smoothie consistency and make the world more pleasant for all of us.

But look closely: are those sunglasses blackening his eyes, or a sleeping mask? Why can't he be wearing a monocle? You can't see his eyes . . .

Drunk, I puzzled and chortled and mused over this. But I don't drink anymore. I see *them*, and they are enough: panhandling on Hollywood boulevard, I stiffen as arachnoid star-spawn march unnoticed through a throng of tourists; in the soup-line on Los Angeles Street, I see monstrosities pale and vile and elephantine lurch along, trunk-legs passing through cars like ghosts . . .

But there is a statue, an idol of a creature more foul than all this unholy horde, slumped like Rodin's thinker on that neon crown: its octopod head downcast (jawline broken by tentacles hanging limp), its several eyes shut in a grimace; two great wings line its back, closed; its hands (fat, leathery, amphibian) folded and still, hang like an inverted steeple. Is it mourning?

No one can see it but us. I've sat for whole days watching those nightmare things making pilgrimage. They bray awful prayers and dance and writhe in orgy—primal, hungry.

Every night, around the witching hour, St. John Miracle fissures the quiet with howls so alien, so hammeringly loud that echoes roll beyond the veil. Sometimes others howl in answer, barking a dark liturgy. The cry is always the same:

"Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh ngah'nagl fhtagn."

I sleep when I can, which is almost never. If I nod off in our tent or on the bus or on a metro bench, that terrible graven image is always before my eyes.

And a great dread rises in me, for I know that Cthulhu does not mourn, but dreams: he is bent in slumber, waiting.



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Jacob Michael King lives in Southern California. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in Shroud Quarterly, Permafrost Magazine, Buffalo Almanack and Cactus Heart. His novelette, Postmortem, is available from Onyx Neon Press.

The Velna Valsis

Henry Szabranski

Herr Doktor Ostermann drops the needle. A scratchy hiss fills the decayed splendor of Charlotte's Viennese apartment. Outside, night is falling and a crowd gathers in the plaza. There are angry shouts—"Murderers! Juden!"—the sound of dogs barking. Charlotte does not know the reason for the commotion, nor does she care; her world has shrunk to the parlor, to Ostermann's blood-smeared smile as he turns from the gramophone and says, "Shall we dance, *meine Liebe*?"

The crystal goblet tumbles from her hand. Ruby droplets spatter the floor. *Winterbaum would not approve*, she thinks. Her manservant had always been so fastidious. The goblet does not smash, but she thinks perhaps it cracks. She cannot tell. Her stomach roils, warm and heavy with blood.

Music swells from the gramophone's horn. A piano waltz. Jaunty. Incongruous. Infectious.

Ostermann's smile widens to a grin. He steps toward her and kicks the empty goblet aside. "Do you feel it yet, Lotti? Is it working?"

She shrinks back in her wheelchair. A burly man less than half her age, Ostermann terrifies her—especially now she has seen what he is capable of. Yet he also fascinates. Because he is right; she can feel something. Or, more pertinently, the lack of something. The constant excruciating pain in her joints is gone. She cannot quite believe it. The deep warmth spreading through her body is stronger than any relief provided by Winterbaum's laudanum-infused teas. And it's not just the lack of pain, of the cursed arthritis that blights her life, but something new. Something joyful. Pleasurable.

Perhaps the *doktor* and his bloody ritual were not so dreadful after all.

Ostermann cocks his arm. His ebony eyes glint. "Lotti. I promised you a dance."

She hesitates. Not so long ago he had repulsed her. A tolerated bore at best, full of conspiracy theories and National Socialist Party fervor, an Aryan émigré from north-eastern Europe with a dubious past and an even more dubious title. Was it really only a week since Winterbaum had introduced her to him?

"He is a doctor, a man of science. Full of profound insights." Winterbaum, usually so dour and quiet-spoken, had been full of praise for the stranger. "You must meet him, *meine Dame*. Frau Stahlecker recommends him most highly."

Charlotte had been mystified by her employee's enthusiasm. Even before the *Anschluss*, Winterbaum had been scathing about the National Socialists. Matters only worsened when he was attacked on the street by their thuggish followers; only Charlotte's personal intervention with

the police chief, an old family friend, had saved him from deportation. Yet somehow Ostermann, an unabashed supporter of the new Reich, turned Winterbaum's head.

"Don't let pain be your master," Ostermann had said, quite forward in laying his warm hand upon her knee on that first encounter. "Trust in me, Madame. I am certain I can rid you of your affliction." For that brief moment, the pain, the familiar arthritic pain like splintered glass grinding against her bone, had eased. "You are strong-willed and independent-minded," he said, his voice full of admiration. "A shining beacon to us all, not least in these turbulent times."

No doubt her neighbors made snide comments about the charlatan Herr Doktor and the doting Gräfin. They were only jealous. And what did her high society friends know about her wretched existence, anyway? Of her relentless pain, every joint inflamed and in agony? So often she masked her misery for their benefit. But where were they when Winterbaum had to lift her into the bath, to help her with her most basic needs, day after day after day? Was it too much to ask Ostermann to make the pain stop, if he could? What cruel God would deny her that?

Her toe taps in time to the music. She cannot help herself. She averts her eyes from the dark puddle seeping across the floor. "What is this tune? It's not from my collection."

"Something I came across in my travels, *meine Liebe*." Ostermann beams at her. His face ripples momentarily, as if behind a curtain of heat. "It has many names, but I knew it first as the Velna Valsis. Is it to your taste, Madame?"

She shudders. She does not want to think about taste right now. "I've not heard it before, Herr Doktor."

He leans down. He smells, she imagines, like a butcher fresh from the slaughterhouse. "It's also known as the Devil's Waltz."

She recoils. "I won't dance for the Devil."

His expression is one of mock hurt. "But there is no such thing as the Devil, *meine Liebe*. Only men and women, and the consequences of their actions."

Before she can protest, before she can stop him, he has hold of her hands. He pulls her upright, out of her wheelchair. She feels suddenly light-headed. Dizzy.

His heat is upon her; the entrancing embers in his eyes flare into renewed life. His pale skin, so stark in contrast to his full black beard, glows from within. He seems more animal than human, his dinner jacket mere camouflage. She is seized by a desire stronger than reason or sense.

She has spent too many years in that damned wheelchair, anyway.

He grips her hand, her waist. Cautiously at first, then with increasing speed, she turns with him around the room. He is young and strong and full of conviction; he holds her, deft and

assured, both guiding and following. Steps and moves from her distant youth come flooding back, and soon she is lost in the waltz. Her rough skin sloughs away like a tattered coat too threadbare to keep.

They brush against a vase her late mother had treasured. It falls and smashes to pieces. Ostermann laughs as they dodge around the fragments and Charlotte realizes she doesn't care either. They step lightly over the straight-edge razor Ostermann had used earlier. They hop over Winterbaum's stiffening body, and the discarded goblets they had used to catch and then sup upon his blood. Their feet tread crimson around the floor.

Charlotte catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror, her flesh whirling from her bones, and begins to laugh. Greasy vapors trail her steps. Ostermann, too, is transforming. He is more smoke and shadow than solid, and soon even the remnants of disguise are lost, until there is nothing left but his glee, his lust, and his rippling heat.

"Charlotte." His words are like black flames. "Will you be mine?"

She is laughing. "I already am."

The apartment windows shatter. Fire blooms along the curtains. The dancers are free.

Outside, the crowd is restless, waiting. Ostermann and Charlotte whirl down and through them, a hot gyrating wind on a dark November night. Someone shouts, a brick is thrown. Glass plate shards slide to the pavement. As the dancers pass, a group of sweaty-faced men begin to beat a terrified shop owner to a bloody pulp.

The dancers do not stop. They move out from the city center, where offices and synagogues are already aflame. Stray dogs bark after them; only they can see the ghostly pair's forms as they burn prints into the surface of the road. Charlotte can feel the heat of Ostermann's pleasure as he whirls her through the streets at ever increasing speed. She cannot breathe. She does not need to.

Together they melt into the night, and behind them the music plays louder than ever.



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Have You Seen Me?

Josh Vogt

Marissa huddled in the middle of her living room as a thousand missing people chanted around her.

Find me. Find me. Find me.

The chorus muffled Daniel's words, though he stood right before her, fists clenched, eyes pinched. She forced herself to pay attention, sensing the final thread of their relationship unravel.

"I'm gone for a week and this is what I come back to? I thought the meds were helping."

Find me. Find me. Find me.

She peeked through trembling fingers at the posters and flyers of missing people. Reams of paper covered the walls, the furniture, the floor. Plastered on the fridge and table. Scattered across the bed. Clogging tub and toilet. Crammed into every cupboard and closet.

Find me. Find us. Find him. Find her.

Taken from grocery stores, from post offices, from banks, from schools. Torn from telephone poles, from subway stations, from the hands of people in the park asking . . .

Have you seen her? Have you seen him?

Have you seen us? Please. Reward. Missing. Last seen here. Last seen there.

"Empathy is one thing," Daniel said, knuckling his forehead. "This is . . . obsession. I can't deal with this anymore."

"Then don't." The words slipped out. She didn't bother trying to snatch them back.

His face screwed up—in pain, in shock. Yet she concentrated on the thousands of other faces, ghosts peering from two-dimensional graves. If she squinted just so, the details muddled, forming a throng of shadow-people she could almost lose herself within. Almost.

The gazes of those missing souls fixed on her, eyes roving. Lips worked in silent pleas, though not-so-silent to her. A connection had been established, but tenuous. Not quite strong enough. Yet.

Paper crumpled as Daniel kicked a sheaf aside. "You can't save everyone!"

"I don't want to save anyone," she whispered. *I didn't ask to be saved.*

Find me. Find us. Find it.

She twitched. It? They'd never used that pronoun before.

Could she be close?

Daniel stared at her. Despite her flagrant abuse of their tattered love, a last flare of care flickered, the faintest beacon she could use to return, should she choose. She snuffed this with a shake of her head.

"Go," she said. "Find someone who wants to be found."

She remained kneeling as he gathered his last things. Paused at the door. Sighed. Exited.

Alone, she clasped hands. No written prayer. No hymn book. No pews. Yet this house, empty save for bits of furniture and worn clothes, became one of worship.

Boyfriend gone. Job surrendered. Family estranged. Friendships gone. It had been years of work, a complex ritual in the making.

Would it be enough?

She shut her eyes against the urge to weep while memories rose like incense.



The girl weeps into the leather as a seatbelt buckle grinds into her ribs. The back seat of the car is a well of shadows that threatens to drown her.

The father bellows from the driver's seat. "I said shut up, brat!"

"I want Mommy!"

The father wipes his arm across his mouth, lips and cheeks slick. "That bitch can't have you. Told her . . . I told her . . . not my fault the stupid bitch didn't listen . . ."

"Why can't I go home?"

"Not your home anymore. Told you. You're with me now."

"But Mommy didn't give you permission."

He twists to fix a vulture's eye on her. "I don't need permission from that slut! Always telling me what to do. *Stay away. Never come back.* Bullshit. I go where I want and take you with me. You hear me? I said—shit!"

The car swerves. Lights swirl. Horns blare. After a frantic second, the road smooths. Her screams fade to whimpers, but only after his fist pounds the dashboard.

"You're with me now and you do what I say, got it?"

She nods, because what else is there to do?

"You better. We'll get some ice cream later if you're a good girl. You like that, right?"

He drives on in sweltering silence. Sweat drips off her chin along with tears.

Then . . . a kaleidoscope of blue and red flares through the cab.

The father swears again, words she doesn't understand. His eyes are visible in the rearview mirror--bloodshot and glistening. For a moment, the car accelerates. Slows down. Speeds up once more, in time with the throbbing of the vein along his neck.

Then gravel crunches under tires as they come to a stop. The girl peers out the window. Mommy must have sent people. They'll find her. Take her home.

But the father lurches out of the car. Becomes a faceless silhouette as he yanks her door open.

A voice rises in the distance. The father's hairy arm circles her bird-thin waist and she's hauled out into the night, which hums with mosquitoes and the rush of trees in a humid wind.

More shouting. A door slams.

She's under his arm, clamped tight. Her ponytail is pinched in his armpit and it yanks hard with each pounding step. A white light washes over them, turning the world from night to day.

Then the father sprints into the woods, and darkness swallows them both.



Marissa opened her eyes, hoping for darkness. But a beam of afternoon sunlight sliced through the curtains, bathing her in a gilded haze.

Her eyes searched the innumerable faces plastered, pinned, and taped to the walls. For once in a long while, their mouths refused to move, their eyes went unblinking.

Had it heard her plea? Had it found her once more? Did it hide among them? She'd made the place a haven, a hovel for the lost and their patron. Surely it couldn't ignore one who'd once belonged to their number.

A wind rippled a handful of papers, growing to a gust that tore a swath from their places. Marissa stared at the blank space on the wall, the size of a large child. For an instant—half a heartbeat, no more—a pale shadow slipped into view. In it, she glimpsed the bare face, the knobbed arms, the padding of wide, flat feet. Featureless features she knew so well, along with a comforting hint of mildew.

And then it vanished.

Her wail cut through the quiet. She crawled over to the blank wall and scraped gnawed nails over it, as if she could tear it down and find her quarry hiding on the other side.

All this effort, and only a glimpse. She'd been sure.

At last she curled up on the floor, arms clamped around her ribs to hold the emptiness in. She tried to imagine herself covered in wet leaves at the base of a tree, where only it could find her.

What more did she have to do?

The missing person posters animated once more, and their relentless begging reverberated through her quaking bones.

Find me and find us and find it.

She lunged upright. "I'm trying! Tell me how!"

Her eyes locked on one particular chubby-cheeked girl. The child winked and beamed out from her two-dimensional prison.

Have you seen me? Have you seen her?

Marissa slumped. Of course. So obvious. How hadn't she realized before?

She stood and rummaged about until she found the car keys hidden under a stack of posters, alongside a last, rubber-banded wad of cash. No need for a purse. She'd cut up her credit cards and shredded her driver's license and any other identifying papers after Daniel had left on his last business trip.

Tucking the money into her jeans pocket, she headed for the garage on shaky legs. A minute later, as she drove to the mall, a singular purpose fueled her.

School would be out soon.



The girl wails until her father clamps her nose and mouth shut. So she gulps her sobs and tries to pretend she's flying—but the yanking of hair from the scalp keeps jerking her back to the present.

All about is the smell of marsh muck and the croak of frogs. The father slaps bugs away with his free hand, all while stumbling, lurching, almost falling and righting at the last moment. Pinned against him, she strains for a whiff of swamp rot as a way to reassure herself a world exists outside of this dark frenzy.

Then the father's foot snags on something. She is released and flies for a moment before tumbling through pine needles and over sharp rocks. Her warbling scream cuts off as her head strikes a mossy rock.

She lies dazed. Raspy breathing rises . . . hers or the father's? Her throat burns as squelching footsteps approach. The father's face appears, smeared with mud. When he grins, black grit laces his teeth. Moonlight glints on gunmetal in his hand.

"I'll show them. Can't tell me what to do."

His head jerks around, like a deer scenting predators. She's able to sit up enough to see back the direction they came, where a light flicks back and forth. Voices squawk.

The father mutters. "Told her . . . I'll show them, I'll tell them. Can't have her. Can't take her. She's mine and nobody's going to take her."

Even in the dark, his eyes take on a yellow gleam she recognizes from the times when he used to collapse on the couch, breath more fumes than air. It always means screaming and hitting and crying.

He gathers up an armload of soggy leaves and pine branches and dumps them over her. Green-smelling needles prick her cheeks and arms, and she curls into a tight ball. The father crouches over her, one hand shoving through the brush to pat her damp curls.

"You stay here, understand?" His throat bumps. "You make a noise . . . you make them notice you . . . and I'll make you regret it. I told you now, understand? You do what I say."

His thumping steps take a few seconds to fade. All is now slick and soaked, with black velvet curtains drawn around her. Fear keeps her locked in place, and she doesn't know who she wants to be found by. If her father finds her, she knows she'll never go home. But if others find her, her father will hurt her. There are many things she doesn't understand, but his threats and the consequences of defying them are eternal bruises on her bones.

She lies there even when shouts and screams erupt far away.

She lies there as the mosquitoes land, drink, and take off again. She does not slap them, even when it tickles and pricks.

She lies there as strange voices holler all around, but none are the father's and none say her name and none must find her.

She lies there until the wet earth below and wet leaves above warm in the muggy air, and she sleeps . . .

. . . and wakes to a gray morning, with streamers of mist tossed across the branches and roots all about. Frogs chirrup in a rickety chorus, while a soft yellow-orange glow hints at sunrise.

Is anyone there? the marsh seems to ask, in the voice of waking birds.

No one's here, she answers, in the aching of her elbows and knees.

Are you lost? asks the breeze.

No one is lost, she says, in the slow blink of one eye, the other plastered shut with mud.

At last, she dares to sit up. Some leaves slough off while clods stick to her forehead, her chest, her arms.

The moss-draped trees withdraw from this simple action, as if afraid of the creature that has appeared in their midst. She goes still again, not wanting to frighten the woods away.

That's when the pale shadow rises into view, a blank patch against the woolly pink sunrise. And it finds her.



Marissa sat at the food court, nibbling a tasteless sandwich while watching the children play in the nearby tube maze and ball pit. They are a rabble of mismatched clothes, piercing voices, and food-flecked faces.

One among them must become lost in order for Marissa to be found. Which one? And how to accomplish it under the scrutiny of ever-watchful parents nearby?

Mothers and the occasional father eyed the contained bedlam from the sidelines, various levels of exhaustion evident in their baggy eyes, their hunching over strollers and diaper bags, the clutching of cheap toys and book bags.

Still, many remained alert, determined to go home with all heads accounted for.

Yet this was a center of convenience, Marissa knew, and children were anything but. Sooner or later, someone would bow to the whims and press of time and savings.

An hour passed. Two. The number of children dwindled and swelled, a tide of snotty noses and dirty diapers. Marissa's patience remained intact. She'd always been good at waiting.

At last, as the court crowded for dinner, she spotted a girl get dropped off by a woman whose gleaming hair matched her shiny skirt. The girl looked five years old at most, by Marissa's estimate. The mother pointed at a nearby store—full of dresses too bright and too tight for a woman half her age—and then jabbed a neon green nail at the play area, as if pinning the daughter there by force of will.

As the mother stalked off, Marissa rose and tossed the wrapper of her third sandwich into the nearby trashcan. Wiping fingers on her pants, she headed to the benches by the play area and sat near where the girl stood, thumb in mouth. She watched the other kids race about, peeking through a drape of black hair while clutching the hem of her floral-print shirt.

As she looked around, uncertain where to begin, Marissa leaned over and waved, smiling. When the girl waved and smiled back, Marissa tensed against the clutching in her chest. Old

enough to be left alone for a few minutes. Young enough to still view the world as full of wonder, rather than danger.

She crooked a finger, playfully. With a puzzled frown, the girl eased closer. Marissa clasped her hands over her knees and spoke softly so the girl had to scoot closer to hear.

"What's your name, hun?"

The girl bobbed her head. "Kaylie."

"Kaylie, those are very cute shoes."

"Thanks. Yours are pretty too."

Marissa shuffled her bright blue running shoes so they were front and center for Kaylie to blink at. "I work in that store," she pointed at the one the mother had vanished inside. "Your mom is trying on some dresses and didn't want to leave you alone too long. She gave me some money to get you some ice cream while you wait."

She held her hand out, praying it didn't tremble. "Sound okay, hun?"

"Uh huh."

Kaylie's tiny fist fit in her palm like a baby bird.



At first, the girl doesn't know what to make of the creature she walks beside through the marsh. Back hunched, it pads along on wide feet while body-long arms sway and knuckle the earth with each squat stride. Its skin is as pale as a half-forgotten memory.

It doesn't startle her with a monstrous face—for it has none at all. A space of empty flesh with a bump here and there, as if its eyes and nose had grown bored of growing before they fully formed.

They walk side-by-side, neither leading nor following, just as it had offered no invitation to join when it first revealed itself. It had only stared at her with its eyeless gaze. Then it had turned and begun shambling away. The girl scrambled to catch up and ever since has kept it quiet company.

She squints through the fog, but discerns little beyond the dark rolls of earth and darker wells of water. How long have they been walking? Why haven't the mists evaporated? Why isn't the sun high in the sky?

The questions are there, but are not alarming in the lack of answers. Rather, it's a comfort that there's no need to worry, no need to fear. Simple acceptance of her fate and the way the world is once they are beyond it is all that's required.

For the girl, this is a startling sort of peace. It is happiness.

As they walk, she starts to glimpse movement in the shadows. If she focuses too hard, the others disperse for a few moments. Once she stops trying to make out the details, she sees them well enough.

A dozen . . . a hundred . . . a thousand . . . a hundred thousand other children walk beside them in the silent mists, until the girl is the center of an innumerable throng stretching as far as the fog.

She knows them. Not by name, of course, but by shared nature. They are all lost, just like her. Kindred spirits. The captured. The castaways. The forgotten.

The Lost.

She studies her guide . . . no . . . her friend, she decides with sudden determination. It doesn't walk beside her alone. It leads each of the Lost at the same time, drawing them together in disparate communion.

At last, they reach a spot defined by no particular time or place. There, the mist doesn't disperse, but congeals. There, the shadows of the Lost gain substance, but no color. They gain voices, but no words.

There they run and play in an ever-shifting landscape where all is hidey-holes and games of tag and exploration of mysteries that will always remain such.

Misty hands take hers and draw her into the merriment.

She is safe. She is found among the Lost.



"Who're all these people?" Kaylie asked around a mouthful of chocolate and butterscotch ice cream with sprinkles.

Marissa rested elbows on the dining table across from Kaylie. She eyed the surrounding posters and papers. Did they sense the newcomer in their midst? They'd remained silent and still since she'd returned.

"Have you ever had an imaginary friend?" she asked.

Kaylie swallowed and nodded. "Used to play with Mr. Duckers. But Mommy said the only invisible friend I can have is Jesus. So he went away."

Marissa looked down at her own ice cream cone, plain vanilla, and then back at the mass of eyes. "These used to be friends of mine."

"Real or imaginary?"

"A little bit of both."

"What happened to them?"

"I went away. I lost them. All but one."

Kaylie scrunched her nose. "Are you lonely, Miss Rissa?"

Marissa clenched her thighs together, locking down a tremble that threatened to send her to her knees, weeping. "I guess so, hun."

"I'll be your friend, Miss Rissa. And Jesus too!"

"Thank you, hun. But I still have one friend left."

Kaylie's face screwed up as she tried to work through a hidden tangle of logic. "Can't you have more than one?"

"Most people, I guess. But my friend is special. I can only have him now, or none at all."

"Where is he?"

She glanced at the living room, where the empty wall stood, haunting and mocking in its blankness. "We've been apart for a long time. I'm not sure it . . . *he* remembers to even pay attention to me anymore. I'm trying to remind him."

"Like when we go to church so God watches over us all week?"

"Kind of, hun. But my friend stopped watching over me. I have to get his attention again."

"How?"

"Well, how do you get God's attention?"

Kaylie's eyes rolled about as she recalled. "We . . . we pray. We sing. We do good things." She perked up. "Oh, and when the plate comes 'round, Mommy always gives me a dollar to put in. An offring."

Marissa smiled. "That's right, hun. You give offerings. You . . . sacrifice."

Kaylie looked about. "Do you have a dollar?"

"No. I have something a bit more valuable than that. I just hope it's enough."

They sat quiet for another minute. She didn't know how long she'd have to wait. There was no manual for this sort of thing. Maybe once reports filed in and listed the girl as an official missing person?

"Miss Rissa?"

"Hm?"

"Can I have some water?"

"Sure, hun." Marissa rose, half-eaten cone in hand. "Be right back."

While filling a glass at the kitchen sink, a murmur caught Marissa's ear. She studied the walls, wondering if they heralded its return at last. But no. The voice came from back in the dining room.

Rounding the corner, Marissa froze and met Daniel's stunned gaze. He stood a few feet from Kaylie, house keys dangling from a finger. He looked from the girl to her and back.

He knew her social circle had shriveled and died a long time ago. He knew there was no one who'd call on her for any child-watching favor.

His words came out measured. "Marissa . . . what's going on here?"

"I thought you left," she said, walking to hand the glass to Kaylie.

"I came back to grab my phone charger. Now answer my question. Who is this?"

"This is Kaylie." Marissa put a hand on the girl's back. "We were just spending the afternoon together while her mom finished shopping."

He knew. There was no way he couldn't. A crack seemed to run the length of his face, a crinkle where disbelief and fury seeped through. "Have you lost your damn mind?"

Marissa helped Kaylie hop out of her chair. "Come on, hun. Let's get you back to your mom." She started to hustle the girl past. "Back later. We'll talk then. Don't wait up if I'm late."

Daniel stepped in and grabbed her arm. "No. You stay put. I'm calling the cops and we'll—"

Years of self-defense classes had ingrained the movements, though she'd never used them until now. Stomp. Kick. Knee to the crotch. Palm to the face. Graceless, yet effective.

Daniel collapsed, hands clutching his groin. Blood streamed from his nose and he moaned, eyes unfocused.

Marissa surprised herself by not even having broken a sweat or breathing hard. Not so much as a tingle of adrenaline.

Eyes wide, Kaylie drew back from Marissa's hand.

"I want my mommy," she said in a voice even tinier than an ice cream sprinkle.



The girl thrives in a world that is not a world. There are endless friends and playmates there, though she never knows their faces or their names. They are all Lost, and yet they are all found together.

Occasionally, the girl hears whispers and glimpses forms from the world before. Every so often, a looming darkness encroaches on their play and the Lost scatter as black bulks sweep

through their midst, as voices boom like foghorns. She learns to hide from these intruders until all is well again.

There, she is loved. There, she belongs. There is where she wants to be until the end of time. And there she stays, under its watch and care.

At times she wonders, is it a protector? Does it create the mists to keep them in or keep the dangers out? What does it get from bringing them all together? Sometimes she doesn't care. Sometimes she imagines.

So many little lives never lived. So much potential never fulfilled. Where does all that future go? Does it feed off it? If so, it's a meal she gladly offers.

More join their number, adding to infinity . . . until the day when the mists shred and blow apart. One moment, she stands in the nameless throng. The next, she's up to her knees in sopping muck, wearing stained jeans and a t-shirt torn by thorns and stiff with sap and pine needles. Nearby, dogs bark. Men point. A helicopter whirs overhead, spotlight fixed.

When the police and the dogs and the volunteer search parties find her, miraculously alone and healthy in the middle of the marsh, none understand as she tries to run. None understand why she plugs her ears as they say her name over and over. Shock, they say. Trauma. It is all pity and pawing and promises that things will be better.

None see it standing, watching from shadows beneath the willow, watching them take her back home. A blink, and it is gone as so much morning vapor.

The girl screams and claws at her captors until she is swaddled tight in a gray, woolen blanket—a warm, scratchy prison that is a cruel mockery of the mists that held her until now.

Yet she knows no name to call it back by.

She is found.

She is lost.



Kaylie's cries clawed Marissa's ears.

"I want my mommy!"

Marissa kept her eyes on the road, easing off the gas whenever she crept above the limit. Speed was the devil of the determined, tempting her to go faster and be caught by the watchful eyes of the law.

Kaylie bawled beside her. No backseat in the little hybrid, though the mileage made up for the cramped space. The girl's sticky fingers and face had smudged the faux-leather, and she alternated hammering tiny fists on the seat and the passenger door.

"Mommy! Mommy!"

Marissa's head pounded by the time she found the spot. Easy to return to the location, marked not only by police reports, but also by the rest stop built there a decade back. No other cars sat in the lot when she pulled in, to her relief.

She shut the engine off and hauled the crying, writhing girl out into the muggy night. Mosquitoes hummed in their shifting swarms. To one side, a little playground sat in a pit of sand, like exposed bones of plastic and steel left by a manufactured monster that perished on the spot.

The rest stop lights warded off the darkness, creating a black wall that surrounded the area. Marissa studied the tree-line for any hint of misty ribbons. Nothing yet. She had to take this as far as possible. She had to complete the circle. The final steps crystallized as she marched Kaylie toward the rest stop bathrooms and shoved her into the women's.

She did her best to avoid glancing in the mirror as they struggled past. She pushed the girl into the bathroom stall. Forced her to sit on the toilet lid.

As Kaylie squirmed in her grip, Marissa closed her eyes briefly. Swallowed the knot in her chest. Did she have to? Yes. The memories had solidified into a ritual, which had to be completed.

First, the Threat.

A stab of a finger. "You're going to stay right here and be quiet now, understand? If you don't . . . if you make any noise, your mother will be very angry with you and she'll never come find you. You'll never see her again."

Then the Abandonment.

The stall door slammed and echoed behind her. She used a fingernail to lock it from the outside and ignored the whimpers as she exited the bathroom.

Now, the Darkness.

Marissa took off her shoes and padded through the sand to the swing set. There, she sat and hugged knees to her chest, waiting. Waiting for the mists. Waiting for it to find her again.

An hour passed in breathless anticipation.

She remained a silent fixture as the police car pulled into the lot, drawn by her solitary car like a deer to a salt lick. The officer got out and inspected the vehicle, flashlight illuminating the empty seats.

He turned to the rest stop. Headed there with the heavy-belt swagger so many uniformed public servants adopted. Marissa shifted in the swing. Chains creaked.

The flashlight swung her way. She blinked away the momentary blindness.

"Ma'am? Are you Marissa Dunden?"

Now the Chase.

She hopped off the swing, dug heels into grit, and darted for the marsh, a rabbit fleeing the wolf.

The officer hollered behind her. A radio squawked. All the pieces falling into place.

She knew what'd come next. The stumble into whatever hole she could find. The leaves. The huddle. The long night. The mists would rise and she'd—

Arms wrapped around, pinning her own as the officer tackled. Her head jarred against the loamy earth. Breath fled. Vision swam.

When she roused, handcuffs had tightened on her wrists, behind her back. The officer pulled her gently but firmly upright. One hand on her arm, the other slicing the flashlight back and forth.

"Miss Dunden, where's the girl?"

Marissa gazed blearily about. Not a scrap of fog floated anywhere. The night hung muggy, empty but for insects and a leering moon.

Hope crumpled and puffed away in the next wet-stink breeze. She'd failed. What had she done wrong? What of this life had she not surrendered that still anchored her? That kept it from drawing her away once more?

Her lips moved of their own accord. Words plopped out.

"This way."

She led the officer to the bathrooms. Shuffled in first, his light at her back until the motion sensor triggered and lit the row . . .

Where threads of mist unraveled and dissipated from one breath to the next. Where moisture coated the mirror, wicking away even as she spotted it. Where a particular stall door hung open.

She hurried ahead, lurching away from the officer's hold, already dreading what she wouldn't see.

The stall. Empty.

In a distance undefined by any dimension, soft footsteps faded away and wordless voices murmured into nothingness.

She lunged for the darkness. The officer hooked around her waist, holding her back as she cried to the empty night.

"No! It was supposed to be me! Bring her back. Take me!"

Her body struggled as a mindless animal, craving to run free across endless fields. But uncaring arms kept her locked in place until exhaustion and hopelessness dragged her down to the concrete floor.

As the officer stood over and called in his report, Marissa stared out through the gap under the bathroom door. There, a final curl of mist slipped by and evaporated.

Marissa closed her eyes, already seeing Kaylie's face as another shadow on the wall.

She is lost.

She is found.



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An author and full-time freelance writer, **Josh Vogt** has been published in dozens of genre markets with work ranging from flash fiction to short stories to doorstopper novels that cover fantasy, science fiction, horror, humor, pulp, and more. He also writes for many RPG developers. His debut fantasy novel, *Forge of Ashes*, adds to the RPG Pathfinder Tales tie-in line. *WordFire Press* is also launching his urban fantasy series, *The Cleaners*, with *Enter the Janitor* (2015) and *The Maids of Wrath* (2016). He's a member of SFWA as well as the International Association of Media Tie-In Writers.

Graphic Story: Shamrock #6 – Perseverance

Shamrock, part 6 PERSEVERANCE

Josh Brown Alberto Hernandez
Story Art













to be continued...

Interview with Author Karri Thompson

Karri Thompson grew up in San Diego County and attended San Diego State University, earning a bachelor's degree in English, a master's degree in education, and her teaching credentials. She is a high-school English teacher in the East County of San Diego where she also lives with her husband, John, their son, and two dogs. Her bucket list includes earning a Ph.D. in English and teaching at college level. Karri is the author of the Van Winkle Project series; the newest installment in the series, *Ascendancy*, was published in November 2015 from *Entangled Publishing*.

To learn more about Karri, please visit her website at <http://www.karrithompson.com/>.

Q&A

Iulian: Hi Karri, thank you for being with us today. Tell us a little about yourself: How/where did you grow up, what was your upbringing and what were the most influential factors that made you who you are today?

Karri: Hi, Iulian. You are welcome. Thank you, too. I am a native San Diegan. I love San Diego. I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. I have an older sister who taught me to read and write before I even started kindergarten, so I've been reading and writing for as long as I can remember. My mom and dad are also both avid readers. Seeing them read for pleasure greatly influenced how my sister and I viewed books and reading. Growing up, books were always on my Christmas list, and every time my teachers passed out the Scholastic order form, I'd circle the books I wanted and beg my mom to buy them for me. Reading and writing are definitely my thing. My parents' strong emphasis on education and going to college also made me the person I am today.

How did you get involved with writing? Give us a brief history of your path.

I always loved creative writing, but it wasn't assigned very much at school, so I'd write on my own—short stories in a spiral notebook. I'm not sure what happened to that notebook. I wish I still had it. Anyway, I majored in psychology at SDSU. During my first semester in a general education English class, the professor came up to me after class one day, and said, "Do you know what an amazing writer you are?" I was stunned. I told her "no," and then she asked me what my major was. I told her psychology and she said, "That's a shame. It should be English." I switched my major to English the following semester and took a "writing of fiction" class. That gave me my start and helped develop my passion for writing even more.

You call yourself a music freak and that's something you and I have in common. You also list one of my favorite bands, Avenged Sevenfold, among your favorites. How much of a role does music play in your writing? What were the latest and the most all-time memorable concerts you've seen?

Yup, I'm a total music freak. Music has played a role in my writing because I've based characters on hot, lead singers. Travel's appearance is actually based on Michael Hutchence from INXS, and my first book, *AMATEUR ANGEL*, is about a girl who was the guardian angel of a rock star who she used to have a crush on when she was alive. Growing up, my celebrity crushes were always on musicians and singers rather than actors. The last concert I went to was on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. I saw Unwritten Law. They are from San Diego. I love their song "Seeing Red." I've seen Pearl Jam about ten times. They are absolutely amazing. Aerosmith also puts on a great show and hearing "Dream On" live and ten feet from the stage will be something I will never forget. Seether and Korn also rock it. I haven't seen Avenged Sevenfold in concert yet, but I plan to the next time they come to San Diego. I'm dying to see them.

Could you name some of your favorite contemporary writers and their works? What's the one thing you read that you'd read again, and again, and again... (for me it's *The Hobbit*!)

Wow! That's another thing we have in common because I'd have to say *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. I get lost in that series. I start reading it, and I can't put it down. Those books are the only books I've ever read more than once—other than the books I teach. I can't tell you how many times I've read *The Lord of the Flies*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Power of One*, and many more that are part of the high school curriculum.

If you had the chance to resurrect any author and have dinner with them, who would that be and what questions would you ask them?

It would have to be William Shakespeare. First of all, I'd immediately see if he really looks like that picture of him that we've all grown up with. I'd also ask him if he is truly the author of all of the plays that are attributed to him. That would end that debate. After that, I think I'd be sitting there so mesmerized that I wouldn't know what else to ask. But I'm sure I'd come up with something.

Your most recent novel came out in November from *Entangled Publishing*. What is the overall idea behind the Van Winkle Project and how did this come to you?

The Van Winkle Project is a government-driven program designed to save humanity. Cassie, the main character, is the key to the survival of the human species. Something about her makes her different from anyone else on the planet. Without giving away any of the plot, I can say that the

idea behind the project came to me because there are so many people I wish I could have met, but I couldn't because they died before I was even born.

Why Dystopian YA? What attracts you to the genre?

I'm a high school English teacher, so when I decided to write my first novel, writing for teens seemed like the logical thing to do. Turns out it was a perfect fit. I also love reading sci-fi and fantasy novels as well as watching sci-fi and fantasy movies and television series, so I mainly write in the genre that I love. My dad first exposed me to fantasy when I was seven or eight. He read *The Sword of Shannara* by Terry Brooks to me every night before I went to bed. After that, I was hooked on that genre.

Who were the most fun characters to write, and who were the hardest? Do you have a specific method for developing characters? Can you describe Cassie for us?

I really enjoyed writing my character Magnum. I don't want to give anything away, but I will say this—he holds a special place in my heart. If you've read the first book in the series, *MIRROR X*, you'd know why. Magnum is beyond cool and a total rebel. Michael was probably the hardest character to write because he evolved so much from book 1 to book 2. From the very beginning, Cassie didn't let herself get pushed around. Unlike Michael, who needed to grow a set, Cassie doesn't take any crap. Cassie is incredibly mature and independent for her age, something that doesn't go over so well in 3025 A.D.

Will this series continue and if so, what are your plans for it?

I am actually contracted for three books, so I'm currently working on *RELEGATION*, which will be the third and final book in the series. I'm only at about 10,000 words, and so far, I'm loving how it's turning out. At the same time, it's kind of sad that it will be ending. I love all of my characters so much!

Even though the Van Winkle Project is your latest work, you also published the Amateur Angel series. Can you tell our readers a quick overview of this series?

AMATEUR ANGEL is about a girl named Ashley who dies in a car accident. Upon arriving in heaven, she is accidentally sent back to earth as a replacement guardian angel for a famous rock star, Cannon Michaels. It's not long before she discovers that Cannon is not the guy she thought he was. He's hot-headed and irrational, conceited and selfish. But maybe Ashley can change that?

Where can we find you online and in real life? Will you visit any conventions in 2016?

You can find me on Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/authorkarrithompson/?ref=hl> and follow me on Twitter @KarriThompson and on Instagram: authorkarrithompson. I have two books signings, February 20 and 21, at the Barnes and Noble in Santee from 1 to 3 p.m. each day, and I'll be at Romantic Times Booklovers Convention in April. I'll also be attending the Romance Writers of America Conference in San Diego in July.

Is there anything you'd like to add or plug?

I'd just like to thank you again for this opportunity. I also love hearing from readers. I can be contacted through my website: www.karrithompson.com.

Karri, thank you very much for participating in this interview!



Interview with Author A.L. Davroe

AL. Davroe writes both YA and adult speculative fiction. She prefers revisionist tales in paranormal, romance, Steampunk, and fantasy. She is the author of *Salvation* ● *Station* (adult psych horror), *The City Steam Collection* (adult psych horror), *For Your Heart* (YA Paranormal Romance) and her YA Sci-Fi novel, *Nexis*, came out with *Entangled Publishing* on December 1, 2015!

By day, Amanda lives in Connecticut with her two feline hench-creatures. She's a terrible blusher, has a weak spot for cuddly animals, loves Laffy Taffy and Cadbury MiniEggs, and she's a huge advocate of alternative healing methods. Amanda also wears purple shoes and corsets . . . Though not always in the same ensemble. She's a Capricorn, a Hufflepuff, a bit gothic, and a few nuggets short of a Happy Meal. Amanda also suffers from Resting Bitchface Syndrome (RBS), so even though she might look like she'll tie you in a knot if you come near her, she's more afraid of you than you are of her (see blushing problem above).

I personally met Amanda at Lunacon a couple of years ago at a panel on young adult fantasy writing, and I am very happy to have her talk with us today.

To learn more about Amanda, please visit her website at: <http://www.aldavroe.com/>.

Q&A

Julian: Please share with us a little bit of the history of AL Davroe: How/where did you grow up, any particular influences in your life? Did you live up to your high-school yearbook quote?

Amanda: I had a fairly normal childhood: Born and raised in Connecticut, grew up the only child to a single parent. I'm pretty close with my family, love my friends and my cats, drink way too much tea and eat too many scones. I listen to Goth music, have lots of art all over my walls, and wear hoodies like it's nobody's business. Like all of us, I've had my ups and downs and defining moments. I have a degree in English and a degree in anthropology. I make cheese for a living. My car can legally buy its own drinks and I'll continue to drive it until I can't anymore. I had a couple of quotes in my senior yearbook, but my favorite is one by Helen Keller (one of my heroes): "The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched they must be felt with the heart." I personally, think I've lived most of my life adhering to this thought. While it's nice to have money and nice things, it's the experiences and the people you have them with that matter most. Love, friendship, family, and those moments that seem to make your chest all fluttery with joy — I wouldn't trade those for the world.

Can you recall how you came to be involved with writing? Was there a defining moment for you?

With writing in general? Sure! I had a friend my freshman year of high school who convinced me it was a good idea to go halves on writing this epically bad *Dragon Ball Z/Digimon* fan-fic. I had so much fun writing my sections of it and she seemed to really like them, so that's when I knew that my mom was telling the truth about me having talent as a writer and wasn't just doing the "mom thing."

Could you name a few things that influenced you the most in your writing career? Was there a person, a writer, a set of events, some circumstances?

A little bit of everything. My mom always told me my writing was good and that I should write a story. My friend from high school that first encouraged me to write a fan-fic with her is what ultimately got me into writing. Tamora Pierce, whose books made me sit down and start working on my one unique idea... The list goes from there — other creative minds who have influenced me, people in the industry who encouraged or assisted me. I really never could have gotten where I am if it weren't for so many other people.

Who are your favorite contemporary writers and works and who are your favorite classics?

I love Holly Black, Neil Gaiman, Brandon Sanderson, and Amy Tan. I think that for classics I love the classic children's fantasy stories like Peter Pan, Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, the Wonderland stories, and the Narnia stories. I'm also a fan of Shakespeare and Robert Frost, of course.

If any writer (dead or alive) could come to you today and ask you to co-author a book, who'd that author be and why?

Neil Gaiman, hands down. Does that even need explaining? I just love everything about his work and his style. I think I could learn so much from working with an author like Gaiman. Plus, he just seems like a cool dude. It would be awesome to sit down with him at a café for an afternoon and have a chat.

Your most recent YA novel just came out on December 1st from *Entangled Publishing*. Can you summarize the series for our readers, and then give us a hint of what happens in this first installment?

Overall, the series is about a young woman (Ella) who has to navigate a futuristic world where fantasy and reality collide on a technological level. In the first book, Ella starts playing a virtual reality game called, *Nexis*, in order to escape her harsh reality.

Tell us a little bit about the main character, Ella.

Ella is a young woman who is a “Natural” in a futuristic domed city called Evanescence. Everyone else in the city has been genetically customized to perfection and continue to alter and modify their bodies to further stand out among their contemporaries. Ella is incapable of doing any of that and, because of it, she feels like an outcast despite her brilliant talents at programming and fashion design. She becomes even more of an outcast when an accident renders her physically handicapped, but she finds solace in Nexis, the virtual reality game that her father created.

Who were the most fun characters to write, and who were the hardest? Do you have a specific method for developing characters?

Guster has been and always will be my favorite character to write. He’s just fun times and he brings an air of mischief and fun to Ella’s more grounded personality. No one was particularly hard to write; however, when I had to do my content edits I was asked to alter Nadine’s character from what she initially was. It was difficult at first, to change her from what I’d meant for her to be, but ultimately I like her a lot more this way. I don’t have a particular method of character development, I just sort of let the characters write themselves and I haven’t been disappointed by who comes out of my head yet, so I’ll stick to that method.

Without spoilers, what should readers expect from the next installments in the series?

The sequel to *Nexis* is called *Redux* and it’s a very different book than *Nexis*. *Redux* has more of a post-apocalyptic feel than the futuristic and fantasy feel readers experienced in *Nexis*, but it’s a necessary switch for the time being. It’s a little darker and is going to focus a lot on “internal affairs” as opposed to fighting dragons and Damascus Knights, but I hope that the readers will love it just as much. I can tell you that you’ll get that burning “who played the game” question answered and you’ll get a lot more about the Disfavored as well.

Your site shows lots of works in progress, which is great. What is the most exciting project you are working on right now? How about the hardest undertaking, maybe one that isn’t even started, but just in the back of your head?

The most exciting project is another futuristic YA I’m writing. This one is set in space and is my ode to my favorite anime. The hardest undertaking is and may always be *The Will of the Fallen*...I wrote it years ago and it still manages to allude the necessary “ah-ha” to make it shine. I love it though...so, so much. And I hope one day I can share it with you all!

Where can we find you online and in real life? Will you visit any conventions in 2016?

Online I’m most active on Facebook and Twitter. In real life I have a number of signings, library, and school visits lined up for the beginning of 2016. And yes, I’ll be at a few cons, but I

am still trying to figure out which ones. For certain, I'll be at The Novel Experience Event, Authors After Dark, and Balticon. I'm hoping to get into DragonCon too!

Is there anything you'd like to add or plug?

I'd like readers to know that I'm always willing to answer questions or comments if you'd like to shoot some my way. I also have a reader group on Facebook if you'd like to discuss the book a little further after you read it!

Amanda, thank you very much for participating in this interview!



Artist Spotlight: Jeremy Vickery

Jeremy Vickery is a concept artist, currently working as an Assistant Art Director at Ubisoft in Quebec City, Canada. He worked for seven years as a Lighting Artist at Pixar Animation Studios on the films *The Incredibles*, *Cars*, *Ratatouille*, *Wall-E*, *Brave*, *The Blue Umbrella*, *Toy Story of Terror*, and *Inside Out*. He's been a freelance concept designer and illustrator and has done work for clients such as Disney, LEGO, Ubisoft, Sony, Mattel, and many other smaller studios and companies. At the beginning of his career Jeremy worked as a 3D modeler / texture artist for the animated kid's series *Veggie Tales* and later as the Director of Photography on the animated feature film *Delgo*.

Q&A

Julian: Tell us a little bit about yourself: where did you grow up and how did your early life influence your future as an artist?

Jeremy: I grew up in a small town in New Hampshire where art was not really considered a strong career choice, so my influences were few. But that did not stop me from being creative and I was always drawing and coming up with ideas. Imagination played a huge part in my childhood and film influenced me greatly. I remember watching *Star Wars* at a drive-in theater when I was only 4 years old and I was inspired. Luckily, I had a family that supported my creativity. My Grandfather would draw with me and taught me to see like an artist, how to see value and perspective and not just lines. And yet when I finally reached my teenage years I wasn't sure what to do as a career. I loved movies but had no idea how to break into that industry. It seemed too far away and unattainable. I also loved music, acting, technology, so I considered careers in each of those fields, but none seemed to fulfill all of my desires. It wasn't until after I had graduated from High School where the idea of computer animation was presented as an option, and it seemed perfect, a grand combination of art, music, acting, and technology. There was a school near my home where I could study animation, so that kick-started my career as an Artist.

What are your favorite design tools and how did you get to learn them?

I have so many different aspects of art that I love, so it depends on which craft I'm working in as to which tools I use. For painting and concept design I prefer working digitally and use both Adobe Photoshop and Corel Painter, though I still pull out pencils and oil paints occasionally too. For 3D, I use Maya. And for video work I like After Effects and Premiere. I learned the basics of these tools in university, but that was so long ago Maya did not even exist and Photoshop was on version 2 I believe. Much of what I know now I've learned on the job or am self taught. Hurray for the internet as a fast resource to learn software.

Are there any other artists out there that you admire and whose work has helped shape your work?

Indeed I find inspiration from many, many artists, so if any names come to mind as to who inspires me I would say James Gurney, Dylan Cole, Sam Nielson, Dice Tsutsumi. But I would have to say that the people who've influenced me far more have been the co-workers I've made movies with over the many years of my career. There are too many people to name as each has had a profound influence on my style, methods, and inspiration.

Where do you find inspiration?

Inspiration comes from so many places. Movies are probably my biggest source of mind-blowing inspiration. I often take dvd's and do screen captures of key moments that inspire me to use for reference later when creating my own artwork. I think I have over 12,000 images of inspiration on my machine. But I also find inspiration from travel. This past July I took a trip to New Zealand and almost everywhere there is epic. It's funny, many people talk about writer's block or not knowing what to paint as an artist. For me, now that I've been creating for many years there seems to be a tipping point where I have far more ideas than I have time to create. I am constantly trying to find ways to work faster so I can get the ideas out more quickly.

How would you break down your workflow in steps?

My workflow is in constant change as I keep trying to find better ways to create detail, so I'll tell you my 2 main methods. Traditionally I've worked in Corel Painter all on one layer. I start with a crazy loose sketch to figure out my composition. I always have a rough idea of the story of the piece I'm working on before I start, so the loose sketch is super sloppy, but helps me find general shapes and proportions. I then block in rough colors to try and find the light. This is all done very fast and there's almost no detail, just big blobs of color where the key items are. I find the cohesiveness of my overall illustration is best if I find the core colors first and then use that as the foundation for the details. Once I'm happy with my basic color choices I zoom in and start refining the details, picking the local colors from what I've already established in the loose color sketch. I try not to worry so much about local color until after the light color is decided on. That's really hard to describe in only words without pictures to show what I mean. If you go to my DeviantArt page (<http://jermilex.deviantart.com/gallery/36793494/Tutorials>) I have a section of tutorials of how my process works. It's all about patience to complete the piece from that point forward. Recently I've started to find a new workflow though in Photoshop. It's a bit more complex but allows me to add a lot more detail than hand painting each pixel all on the one layer. I'm experimenting with using a lot more texture layers that I then warp into perspective and keep everything on separate layers. The image done for the cover was created using this new method. But in essence the idea of doing a loose sketch, finding the light color and then refining the details is my standard workflow.

Your work is very fantasy-driven. What drives you to that subject?

I've always been drawn to fantasy and the ultimate compliment on my work is for someone to say they want to go to the worlds I've created. When I watch amazing films that have environments like nothing here on earth I want to visit and explore those worlds, and that is the magic I'm always seeking to capture in my art. The real world is great, and if I want to find amazing images of real life I look to photography (goes along with my love of traveling). But if I'm painting, I want to make worlds that no one has ever been to before. I also have a very playful side to much of my work, and I think that goes with my sense of humor. I think the whimsical is a wonderful place to dwell.

You have an impressive portfolio with works for Pixar and other well-known studios. How did you manage to get to work with them? Give us some details about working for these outfits versus being a freelancer.

I feel very fortunate indeed to have had the opportunities I've had. If I die today I can say I've lived a very full life and have seen and done things that far surpassed my dreams in childhood. But I plan not to die today and to continue living my dreams. They did not come so easily though. I've had to work my butt off to get where I've been. I remember when I was in college "Toy Story" came out in theaters and the unknown company "Pixar" positioned itself in history. I already had computer animation as my goal and yet that moment was pivotal, watching an entire feature film that was animated that way. I remember during the credits thinking "I need to work there". So a couple of years later upon graduating I sent my demo reel to Pixar. In my naivety I expected to get hired directly from school, but got the standard rejection postcard that they used to send out to all applicants that did not make the cut. I still have that post card and it reminds me that if I don't succeed to just keep trying. I eventually did get hired at a small studio in Chicago that was making the animated kid's show "Veggie Tales". I worked as a 3d Modeler building the characters, props and sets for the show for 3 years. I also kept advancing my 2d art skills and continued to draw and paint. It was during this time that I really started to play with digital painting. In 2000 I thought it was time again to try applying to Pixar, but again got turned down, so I moved on to stretch my skills. I got hired at another small studio in Atlanta working on an animated feature film "Delgo" (which sadly took too many years to make and did not come out in theaters until well past it's innovative point in history). I learned a ton working at the studio as there were only 15 of us making the entire film. We all did a bit of everything, but at the end of my time there I realized that 3d Lighting was really really fun. It was as close as I could come to painting in 3D. In 2003 I saw that Pixar was hiring Lighting Artists for "The Incredibles", so I thought I'd apply again, not expecting much. But this time my demo reel had improved tremendously from my college days and I got hired. I moved to California where I worked on the films "The Incredibles", "Cars", "Ratatouille", and "Wall-E". It was amazing and I was learning like a sponge. But my wife and I had a son and wanted him to get to know his

grandparents and cousins, so in 2007 I left Pixar and moved back to the east coast closer to family. During these next 3 and a half years I worked as a freelance artist and stretched my skills yet again. I suppose I tried every aspect of this industry, working alone as a freelance, at smaller studios, and as a specialist at a large studio (Pixar). During those years on my own I did mostly illustration and concept design for such clients as Disney, LEGO, Sony, Ubisoft, and many smaller studios and companies. But the travel itch hit us as a family and I really missed working in a studio environment so in 2011 I returned to Pixar and worked on the films "Brave", "The Blue Umbrella", "Toy Story of Terror" and "Inside Out". In the summer of 2014 I again resigned my job at Pixar and decided that as much as I love "lighting" I really wanted to try my hand again at concept design. Painting goes back to my roots as a traditional artist, so I'm taking a year off to improve my design skills and plan to be looking for work at a studio about the time that this article is published. That's my story.

If there was one piece of advice you could give other beginning artists, what would that be?

Never stop creating! It's not easy working professionally as an artist and competition is fierce, so it's not for the weak of heart. But... if you cannot imagine doing anything else and love creating art, just keep learning and creating. You will eventually increase your skills to a level where you can do anything you want to. Just because I did not get hired at Pixar directly out of school, didn't mean I gave up trying. I just kept creating and learning and eventually the day came where I got that dream job. And that's my attitude for the future of my own concept design. Never stop creating! Oh... and create what you love. If you make what inspires you the love will show through in your work and make it all that much better.

We selected one of your pieces for the cover of our magazine. Tell us a few words about how that piece came to be.

I call this piece the "Fueling station" as I imagine a city in the future where ships dock to recharge their double-A batteries (yes, it's a very efficient future where ships run on 2 AA batteries). It was actually homework for a class I was taking and the focus was to create futuristic architecture. I wanted it to have a sense of scale and feel very large but also more detailed than much of my older work. You can decide if you think I succeeded, but it was a lot of fun to create.

Where can we find you on the web?

My main site is jermilex.blogspot.com but you can also see my work on deviant art at jermilex.deviantart.com/gallery. Thank you again for featuring my artwork. I'm highly honored.



Book Review: Tales of My Ancestors

Mary Layson

Tales of My Ancestors

by Bruce Edward Golden

Shaman Press (November 27, 2015)

From 11th century France to 20th century America to 17th century Ireland. From the Salem Witch Trials to the signing of the Magna Carta to the Civil War, the new fantasy/science fiction book *Tales of My Ancestors* takes you not only on a trip through time, but to various lands and cultures. This is Bruce Golden's sixth book, and once again he's managed to do something completely different than he's done before. This book is so unusual, I can't think of another like it. He not only combines historical fiction with science fiction and fantasy, he adds his own ancestral line to the mix. Each of the 18 tales which make up this book features at least one of his great grandfathers or grandmothers. Sometimes they provide the viewpoint character, other times they're just supporting characters.

Three of the stories follow one family, whose patriarch is determined to make his fortune in the New World. From Newfoundland to Jamestown to the first settlement in Maryland, we learn George Calvert, who's had to hide his Catholic faith for most of his life, is resolved to not only colonize this new world, but to establish a place where religious freedom is the law of the land.

Another tale is about a 16-year-old who, in conflict with his slave-owning parents, lies about his age to join the Union Army, and one about a young girl, descended from English kings but forced to live in exile in Hungary. Later she becomes not only the queen of Scotland, but a Catholic saint.

However, not all of Golden's ancestors, as presented here, are heroic . . . or even admirable figures. There are barbarians aplenty, including a marauding Viking, a philandering duke, a pedophile king, and a queen who's known as "the She-Wolf of France."

I think the best story of the lot is "Salem's Fall," told from the viewpoint of Golden's great (x7) grandfather, who lives in a small town near Salem. Benjamin Willard isn't directly affected by the trials, but it's through his family connections (including a cousin accused of witchcraft) and his observations of this phenomenon that we get a sense of what it must have been like at that time.

Unlike most speculative stories about Salem, this one, in keeping with historical accuracy, has no actual witches. What we see instead, is humanity's dark side, the rule of the mob, the fanaticism that often coincides with religious belief. The fantasy element here, is that Satan himself appears

to Willard. He says he's done nothing to create the turmoil in Salem, but that he is enjoying himself watching it, feeding off it. This story drew me in, made me believe I was in Salem of 1692, and shed some light on one of mankind's darker moments.

Another story I particularly liked was "Micagor's Gold," a good old-fashioned science fiction adventure, featuring Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, Cochise, and other notable figures from the Old West. A trek into Arizona's Superstition Mountains to look for gold leads to a fantastic discovery and a shootout with . . . (I won't spoil it). My favorite part was the explanation of the historical fact that, despite dozens of gunfights in his life, Earp was never such much as nicked by a bullet.

Golden reports in his intro that he conducted extensive research for each tale, and that, despite the speculative elements, he never contradicts recorded history. He says that all of his stories could have happened, and that there's nothing contrary to what is actually known. I'm no historical expert, so I can't speak to that. But I do know the extensive historical details in these accounts make them feel real.

Is every story great literary fiction? Of course not. No collection of fiction is ever full of total winners, and Golden's work is usually far south of the type of writing known as "literary." But he is a great storyteller, whose characters come alive, and whose style keeps the narrative moving. He never gets bogged down by his prose, and his stories are worth reading just for the dialogue.

Some of the tales are dark, and a few are humorous—like Golden's sexy take on the Robin Hood legend, where the Prince of Thieves encounters a willing wood nymph. Also brimming with laughs is the *Three Musketeers*—like romp that features not only a great grandfather, but Golden's grandchildren in a time travel adventure.

Through the pages of *Tales of My Ancestors* you'll find out how one of Shakespeare's most famous plays might have been influenced by Queen Elizabeth's encounter with the fantastic, and how an alien incursion might have led to a dynasty of English kings. You'll learn how Native Americans came to be called "red men," how sheer chance led to the birth of William the Conqueror, and witness the freak accident that led to his death.

Will Golden find more ancestors with great stories lurking in history for his next book, or will he forego, as he has in the past, any thought of a sequel? Based on this effort, I can't wait to see.



Movie Review: Turbo Kid (François Simard, Anouk Whissell)

Mark Leeper

CAPSULE: ROAD WARRIOR on BMX bikes. From the viewpoint of a 1980s-style SF film we see a cinematic adventure in 1997 after the coming great apocalypse. The Kid on one of the bikes gets military super-weapons and makes himself a super-hero.

Together he and his newfound friends (a girl and a tall cowboy) are pitted against the evil Zeus who has a monopoly on all the local pure water. This Canadian/New Zealand production has a bright spirit and a lot of fun as it looks at what a mess we might make of the world and at The Kid who is setting things right. There are film references, strange people, mutant rats, robots, and nearly everything that makes post-Holocaust living fun. The team of François Simard, Anouk Whissell, and Yoann-Karl Whissell both write and direct the film. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

When TURBO KID starts you are no longer in the present year. You are back in the early 1980s watching a cheap post-apocalypse sci-fi film set in 1997. The main character—the Kid (played by Munro Chambers)—rides around in the only vehicles that seem to have survived the apocalypse, those little BMX bicycles. Figure that one out. This is a world where pure water is more precious than gold. And the most powerful man, who is also the most evil, is Zeus. Zeus holds onto his power by putting people into a juicer—like machine that takes all the water out of its victims and purifies it for safe drinking. Michael Ironside plays Zeus. And he might well have played Zeus if this film really had been made in the 1980s. The only man big enough to stop Zeus is not a man at all but a kid. But he is not just any kid. He is The Kid. This is a Mad Max back when he was only PO'ed. Coming with The Kid is his new girlfriend Apple (played by Laurence Leboeuf—who names a girl "Laurence?"). Much like the film itself Apple is irrepressible. Sadly for Chambers, off-the-wall Leboeuf steals every scene she is in.

If you look for them there are film references to all sorts of pop media. Film references go from Indiana Jones to SOYLENT GREEN to THE ELEPHANT MAN. And it is fun to see so many clichés recycled. The film is a little gory in a comic way as limbs are hacked off in fights and ridiculous fake looking stage blood spurts like from a lawn hose. But none of the gore looks remotely real and it is all in what may be your taste in fun. The special effects are not there to fool anybody. TURBO KID is campy fun as a reminder of the films kids liked some three decades ago. It has the magic to turn "are you kidding?" into "that was fun." This film is better than it has any right to be. I rate it a low +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 7/10.



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Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3672742/combined>

What others are saying: http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/turbo_kid/

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