

VOL. 2, ISSUE 1

APRIL 2024

# EPIC ECHOES

MAGAZINE

*Thrilling  
stories!!*

*Featuring:*

Patrick Crossen

Malina Douglas

Aaron Emmel

James Patrick Focarile

Leonora Lewis

Matt MacBride

Russell Mickler

Bruce W. Most

Courtney Phillips

Mary Jo Rabe

D'vorah Shaddai

Mike Sharlow

Eva Schultz

Ginger Strivelli

James Tager

*and an exclusive interview with DC Diamondopolous*

# EPIC ECHOES

Vol. 2, Issue 1

April 2024

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*Cole Burgett,*  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

*Rachel Boylan,*  
MANAGING EDITOR

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Interested in subscribing to *Epic Echoes* or publishing your own work in a future issue? See [our website](#) for submission guidelines and more information.

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## *From the editors...*

From pirate ships to gothic castles to the surface of Mars, the second issue of *Epic Echoes* is here to take you on a jaunt through some of the best new short fiction in the classic pulp tradition.

The stories in this issue lean into the plucky good humor and the optimism - but also the hint of darkness - that suffused much of the last century's popular fiction, written by a generation looking back at the World Wars with horror and ahead to the "Space Age" with wide-eyed enthusiasm. Like their predecessors of the mid-1900s, today's writers have the perspective to approach storytelling with a recognition of the deep darkness and grief that lurks in the heart of mankind, but with no less laughter and hope for all that.

So whether it's a tensely-plotted tale of crime, a bittersweet story of love and loss, or a dark romp with the monsters of the deep, you'll find it all waiting for you in the following pages.

*Cole Burgett and Rachel Boylan*

## ***Interview with an author: DC Diamondopolous***

*We loved DC's punchy little tale, "[1949: Riders in the Sky](#)," so we knew we wanted to hear more from the author, who's making a name for her-*



**EE: How did you get into writing fiction?**

*DC Diamondopolous*

DC: Writing fiction happened in an unexpected way. I was performing in an improvisation troupe, and it was while creating characters that I thought it would be fun to write my own stories.

**EE: Are there any writers in particular who inspire you, or books that have affected you and your craft?**

DC: Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction* is my favorite book on craft. I've been inspired by many authors. It would be impossible to list everyone, Kurt Vonnegut, Stephen King, Alice Walker, to name a few.

**Are you currently working on any new stories? If so, what can readers expect?**

I'm currently working on a historical novel and a short story collection for Volume 2 of *Captured Up Close* (20th Century Short-Short Stories). The novel takes place in 1912. It's the story of an English music hall performer who comes to America on the Titanic. The short story I'm writing is sci-fi.

**If you could offer one piece of advice to other writers, what would it be?**

On my bulletin board I have a quote from Sylvia Plath, "Doubt is the killer of dreams." It's a valuable piece of advice for all writers.

**What is the best way for readers to follow you and see more of your work?**

My collections of short stories, *Stepping Up* and *Captured up Close*, are both available on Amazon. Since 2022, *Captured Up Close* has been in the top 1% on Amazon in Historical Fiction Short Stories. Because of its success, I decided to do a Volume 2. My website is [dcdi-amondopolous.com](http://dcdi-amondopolous.com).

We loved Crossen's charming story of a reluctant dragonslayer making a go at the family business in a world where "there's just no market for humane dragon hunting." With its remarkably strong narrative voice and quick pace, this is a story you'll want to read again.

# ***The World's Worst Dragonslayer***

**by Patrick Crossen**

*Patrick Crossen is a writer living in Pittsburgh, PA trying to balance reading, haphazard birdwatching, writing, and breathing. When he's not writing, he's eagerly checking under bushes and stones for the pixies he knows are watching his every move. But he's not paranoid.*

I come from a long line of dragon hunters. Back in the day, when my great-great-great... well, add in as many "greats" as you want and you'll probably be right—but back when my ancestors started, they were called dragonslayers.

I prefer the term hunter.

"Slayer" feels a bit graphic. A bit too melodramatic.

Also a bit narrow.

I don't always slay them. I mean, yes, sometimes I fail, but there are also times when slaying isn't necessary. If we went around slaying every inconvenience in our way, we'd never learn.



You can slay and slay all you want, but slaying isn't going to make problems go away.

For a while, I'd considered having the slogan, *The Alternative to Dragonslaying!* but a couple of marketing grads told me people don't want alternatives when it comes to dragons. They want results, and they want them bloody.

There's just no market for humane dragon hunting. And if you went back to Lergus mac Dungal (the first record of one of my ancestors as a dragonslayer), and told him that my name would be on a frosted window above the words "dragon hunter," he would be scandalized to find me on the other side of the door, waiting for a call about a dragon instead of going out there and manifesting my destiny against the giant things.

But I couldn't manifest my destiny any more than I could manifest a date. My destiny had done more festering than manifesting lately. In truth, my destiny was about to die of neglect and exposure when the phone rang on a hot Tuesday in August.

"You hunt dragons?"

Not even a hello. I felt a rant forming in my throat about the deterioration of phone etiquette, but swallowed it quickly to be muttered under my breath later. I hadn't had a job in months.

"I do!" I said, trying to sound enthusiastic and professional and experienced and smart but not *too* smart, not so smart that he would be intimidated.

"Monroe, Massachusetts," he said, his voice so gruff I

thought that static was interfering with the call. “We’ve got a problem with one. Big sunnuvagun. Name’s Wyatt. Call me when you get here.”

“The dragon’s name is Wyatt?” I asked, surprised at the status of this dragon to not only have a name, but to be recognized by said name by the locals.

“What?” said the voice on the phone. “No. *My* name’s Wyatt. The dragon doesn’t have a name. He’s a dragon.”

“Well,” I said, starting to get angry. “You can understand my confusion becau—”

*CLICK!*

The line went dead and I sat there, staring in disbelief at the blank screen on my phone. In somewhat of a daze, I saved the number in my phone under the name “Wyatt.” And then, still feeling heated about the conversation, I added “Dick” in parentheses.

\*\*\*

I deleted the “Dick” in parentheses when I boarded the train. A voice in my head that sounded suspiciously like my mother’s told me I wouldn’t like it if people wrote rude things about me in *their* contacts folder.

I’d somehow lucked out with my train tickets, because no one sat in the vacant seat next to me. Putting my feet up, I rested my old notebook against my knees and pulled out a pen, writing the heading, “The Monroe, Massachusetts Dragon,” and jotting



the date in the top right corner of the page.

I noted that the phone call had come in from a man named Wyatt, and I further noted that the man had asked if I *hunted* dragons. Not specifically *kill*.

An uneven lurch in the train's course caused me to fumble the notebook, catching it by the spine but losing my place on the page I had been writing in. I opened the notebook to the front page, where I kept the master list of each job I'd been hired for.

There was a key to each job. It would be highlighted in blue or red. The key read, very simply:

BLUE—Dragon successfully killed

RED—Dragon not killed

The whole page was highlighted in red.

And that's why I wanted to call my practice "the alternative to dragonslaying." It wasn't that I didn't want to kill dragons, it was that I *couldn't*. Not for some moral barrier, but because I simply was unable to do it. I'd tried traps and tricks and sneaking and hacking and slashing and shooting, but nothing worked. I could not kill dragons. I was outsmarted, outgunned or outmaneuvered every single time.

And soon, as before with my other clients, I would have to face Wyatt and explain to him why I had failed when I eventually did. He would ask for his money back or threaten to report me or leave me a bad review on Yelp. And I would trudge home, my clothes unstained from dragon blood.

I thought of my ancestors. Of their bare chests and war paint, brandishing their swords and charging into caves and getting engulfed by flames but not *caring* about getting engulfed by flames and continuing to fight anyway.

I, on the other hand, tripped.

I would fumble with my weapons or slip on moss. I couldn't imagine, even if I concentrated as hard as humanly possible, my great-grandfather Seamus getting his net tangled with his leg (which was famously wooden and had the word "Dragon-scourge" etched along it) and crashing into the ground. I couldn't imagine great-grandfather Seamus standing up after the fall and looking out into an empty field, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

No, great-grandfather Seamus wouldn't slump. He'd chase the damn thing down. He'd run through the trees and brambles and would find the beast and leap into the air and knock it out cold with one clean punch. Then the sun would burst through the trees, creating a perfect spotlight on his toothy smile while he winked at an invisible camera.

That's what all the dragonslayers in my family would have done. They would have done the job and done it well.

Friends have asked me, as gently as possible, why I kept the family business going. It wasn't because I liked it. Not because I felt some great pull toward it, some ancient calling, deeper in me than the roots of the trees in the Earth (though sometimes I tried to trick myself into thinking I *did* feel that pull). And I certainly didn't do it for the money. I do it because, well, it's what's done.

And who am I to rage against the way things are?

\*\*\*

The train slowed to a stop at 4:10 a.m. I jolted awake as a hand placed itself on my shoulder. I looked up, squinting in the darkened train car, the tiny lights in the ceiling outlining a figure's silhouette so sharply it was hard to make out their face, but the voice was familiar, even in my daze.

"Dragonslayer?" asked the shape, not taking its hand off my shoulder.

"Must be," I said, laughing in a groggy morning voice. "Otherwise people will start asking questions about my sword." I chuckled nervously as I stood, shaking the man's hand. "You must be Wyatt?"

The man nodded and grunted. He turned and walked purposefully off the train and I followed, tucking my aforementioned sword into the sheath strapped to my back and closing my notebook quickly, ignoring the red highlighting that seemed to bleed from the page. This time there wouldn't be red highlighter. I promised myself that.

\*\*\*

The ride in Wyatt's truck was silent. This was mostly due to the fact that I sat in the truck's bed, pretending to take notes in my notebook. I'd squint at a tree and scribble something like "trees seem to be taller here." Anything to justify the quiet and not let Wyatt the Dick know that he was dictating the silence. I

was an important dragonslayer preparing for my important task.

After about fifteen minutes of hushed traveling, the road became more uneven, and the trees closer together, like they were trying to form one massive tree. They seemed to curve as we drove, creating a sort of woodland tunnel around the truck. Wyatt didn't notice. Maybe he was used to it. Or maybe he was just ambivalent toward the beauty of nature. I was about to cave, to break our unspoken vow of silence and remark how beautiful the forest was, when the truck slammed to a halt.

Wyatt looked at me in his rearview mirror and nodded.

I grabbed my pack from the truck bed and slung it over my shoulder so that my sword was tucked between my back and pack.

"This is the spot then?" I asked, leaning my arm against the driver's side door and looking through the window at Wyatt. He just nodded again.

"I'll be back at dusk," he said, rolling up the window with a crank-powered knob.

He made a sloppy but quick three-point-turn and sped back the way we came, the dirt dusting up in his wake so that I lost sight of him almost at once.

To my left, a path was just visible in the overgrowth of tall grass and weeds. I stepped on it experimentally, as though expecting it to entrap me like quicksand. When I found myself still firmly on my feet, I started forward on the path with determination.

The forest was quiet, save the occasional shriek of a mockingbird here and there, and the almost always startling sound of an acorn dropping from the trees to the forest floor. But still, nothing jumped out at me or tried to eat or bite or snap or claw at me. It seemed I was the largest thing in this forest by far. For now.

Hours seemed to pass as quickly as minutes, and I felt as though I could see the sun sped up on a reel of film, making its trek across the sky toward the horizon.

When the dragon's tail hit me, it knocked the wind from my stomach and sent me sprawling to the ground. My head swam for a moment as I looked in all directions, trying to see where it had come from.

A roar bounced from tree to tree, ringing in my ears and further disorienting me. The dragon finally charged, breaking down trees in its path. It ran toward me, baring its rows of sharp, thick teeth.

At the last moment, or nearly the last moment, I rolled to the side and scrambled around a tree, out of the dragon's direct line of vision, and pulled two hand-held mirrors out of my pocket. I held the first out, focusing toward the sky, trying to catch the sunlight. After a moment, I found it. I reflected a small splotch of light against some nearby trees. It worked perfectly.

The dragon grunted and ran toward the light, trying to catch whatever it was that it saw moving so quickly.

With the other mirror, I surveyed the space beyond the tree

I hid behind, trying to find the dragon in my reflection so I could get a look at it without fully exposing myself. A few moments adjusting, a ray of sunlight blinding me, and then I found it.

The dragon was clinging low to the ground, its tan underbelly dragging against the leaves and sticks and rocks, but his scales were tough enough that none of them pierced through.

The underbelly seemed to melt in color, molding itself into the deep red that covered the rest of the beast's body. Four legs crushed the earth beneath it as it walked, and on its back, two wings were tucked into its sides, looking like closed beach umbrellas. Its tail swished from side to side as it walked, keeping its balance. Its long nose ended in a slight horn, perfect for uprooting trees that it needed for nesting with its mate. It was a creature of apex. Perfectly designed to hunt. To survive. To rule.

From my reflection-view, I could guess it was at least twenty feet long, from snout to tail.

The dragon sniffed at the ground, each exhale sending miniscule sparks at the fallen leaves, which I heard crackle and burn out quickly.

"Shit," I muttered. Not because the flames burned me, or that I was afraid the dragon would find me. But because I knew what I had to do, and I knew that if I didn't listen to my gut right now, I wouldn't do it.

I stood up, my back rubbing against the tree as I kept my body pressed close to its trunk. I shook my head and stepped out

into the clearing, planting my heel into the soft earth and turning on it to face the dragon, my sword raised above my head and my breathing heavy.

*No red highlighter this time*, I thought to myself. I might have said it out loud under my breath. Or maybe I screamed it. Either way, it was the mantra coursing through my head as I stared into the clearing.

The dragon was already staring at me. Yellow eyes with two black dots for pupils, squinting at me and blinking in that reptilian way that always made my spine shiver.

“No red highlighter,” I said, positive I’d said it out loud this time. I stepped forward, but the dragon didn’t move. It crouched lower to the ground but didn’t charge at me.

That was odd.

Dragons weren’t shy. Sure, they could be patient hunters if they wanted, but their success rate was so high that they didn’t worry about waiting for the opportune moment. They were apex predators. Any moment they chose was opportune.

I stepped back, testing the dragon’s movement and tracking.

As I stepped back, the dragon’s tense shoulders eased into a more comfortable, slightly upright position. I stepped forward and the dragon’s spine arched, a deep rumbling emanating from somewhere in its chest.

And then I saw the eggs.

Four eggs, each the size of a football, sat in a slight indenta-



tion in the ground that the dragon had clearly dug itself

“Shit,” I said, straightening up and looking from the eggs to the dragon. “A nest.”

The dragon snorted.

“I’m not... I’ve never...” I said, trailing off and staring at the sky in annoyance mixed with disbelief.

After minutes of us standing there, the dragon turned to her eggs, using her long snout to adjust them into a new position and rearrange the sticks and brush that surrounded them. Her actions spoke clearly; she did not consider me a threat.

I thought about charging. About stamping my foot and insisting that yes I was a threat and I most certainly was capable of putting her head on a spike and bringing it back to Wyatt the Dick.

But my shoulders slumped and I dropped my sword. Later, when I left, I forgot to pick it back up. I cleared away some sticks and stones and sat with my legs crossed, putting my head in my hands and watched as this mother dragon tended to her young.

I found twigs and tied them together with bits of sweet grass I found. I wasn’t making any particular shapes, just shaping individual pieces of wood into a jumbled something.

Hours passed as the dragon and I worked, each of us tidying and calculating with meditative busy work. The sun shrank behind the hill-filled curves of the forest and the shadows on the trees grew. The dragon snorted sparks around the nest and a fire

caught, crackling gently underneath her eggs. I stood up, without hesitation or fear or a second thought, and walked to warm myself by the fire. The dragon did not acknowledge me. She just laid with her head on her crossed paws and stared at her eggs with her wide yellow eyes unblinking in the firelight.

\*\*\*

When I woke up, the dragon was gone. Light filtered through the canopy of leaves above me, creating beams that looked like pillars supporting the entire forest. The ground was blackened from where the dragon's nest had been, and I remembered reading somewhere that forest fires could help new plantlife to grow where the earth had been scorched.

I thought of my ancestors. Of my great-great-great-grand-somethings. But for the first time, I didn't wonder what they would think if they could see me leaving another job without a dead dragon. I thought of my descendents. I thought of the pressure of killing dragons that I wanted to die with me.

I stumbled for a moment in my walking, realizing that I'd stepped on something that made the ground beneath me uneven. My notebook, open to the page that listed my jobs. I took the red highlighter from my bag and highlighted the date. And I marveled for a moment at how beautiful the color red really was.

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Douglas' story snaps off the page with an intensity that mirrors the drive and violence of its narrator, a monster treading the boundaries of human civilization and imagination, but its note of redemption and hope is as compelling as its darkness.

# A Monster's Consolation

by Malina Douglas

*Malina Douglas weaves stories that fuse the fantastic and the real. She explores ruins, caves and jagged rocks that could be the homes of monsters, ghosts or trolls. She was awarded Editor's Choice in the Hammond House International Literary Prize and longlisted in the Bath Short Story Prize. Publications include Cast of Wonders, Because That's Where Your Heart Is, and others. She curated and edited the anthology Winter Enchantment. You can find her fishing in the sky for story ideas or on X [@iridescentwords](#).*

**M**y claws dug into the ground as I ran, the twist in my guts telling me something was wrong.

Drawing near to my burrow, I smelt blood. Saw twisted limbs, blood-splattered fur, felt unquenchable anguish, and roared, till my fury echoed through the dark pines of the forest.

I sunk my teeth into a nearby tree, twisted side to side and ripped it in two. For all I knew, I was the last of my kind.

I swore vengeance.

\*\*\*

We used to run together, bounding through the forest as

one. Tails swishing, feet padded against stones and thorns, we raised our heads to roar out our joy.

The villagers lock their gates on those nights. Put up straw crucifixes to ward us off.

I'll tell you a secret. They don't work.

They didn't understand the deep comfort of darkness, that it thrilled us to merge with the shadows. That we needed something to sink our teeth and claws into, or they became uncomfortably long. That our claws curled as they grew and dug into the charcoal-gray pads of our paws.

They didn't understand the way we hunted. The racing, the pulsing, the thrill in our blood. Taut muscles straining and poisoning to spring. The stirring, joyful game of it, the final satisfaction of teeth sinking into soft flesh.

To feast to satiation and curl up in our burrow, a mass of furred bodies breathing as one. They did not understand that our guttural sounds were language, that the feeling between us was love.

\*\*\*

Once a woman caused me to question myself

She was moving through the forest with a basket in her hands, plucking something from the bushes around to fill it. She hummed as her skirt drifted over the grass.

Seeing me, she dropped her basket.

I saw the look of terror in her eyes. Heard her screams and wondered if I was really that frightening. After I ate her, I went

to the stream and gazed at my rippling reflection. A pleasing face stared back at me: yellow slitted eyes framed by chestnut-brown fur, a fine set of fangs and curving tusks protruding from the outside of my mouth. I saw my mother's flared nostrils and my father's elongated snout. Seeing their features reflected in my face stirred sorrow like a bud curled tight within me, unfurling to reveal withered black petals like my kindreds' ruined lives. I raised my head and roared.

\*\*\*

I dug a new burrow in the crook of a valley where the earth no longer carried the scent of sadness.

When night fell I went to the village and slunk along the houses, my padded paws making no sound.

I watched them emerge and disappear in short, hurried steps.

I waited till the lights blinked out. Till a single figure slipped out of the house, looked left and right, and walked towards the forest.

I pounced.

Felt his blood gush out as I sank my teeth into him. His flesh tasted of sour milk, poultry, root vegetables and sugar. It's an acquired taste, and I can't say I prefer it.

I felt the grim satisfaction of crunching into his bones, but once his lifeless remains lay scattered across the ground, I felt empty. I ate more of his flesh and left the rest for other scavengers in the forest.

Despite my bulging belly, I felt bereft, and as I slunk back to my burrow, I wondered at the feeling.

I assumed that it was not enough. That the hole would not be filled till I slaughtered and feasted on all of them.

I vowed to return to wreak my vengeance.

\*\*\*

I met the manling at night in a snow-covered clearing. Manling, because he didn't look fully grown. He was wrapped to the face in layers of wool.

He should not have been there, but I knew he felt the same way about me.

I raised my head and stared him in the eyes.

He stared back.

Then he ran, wool flapping, feet thumping and churning up snow.

I gave him a few seconds' head start before I pursued him.

The manling ran, clumsy feet snapping branches as he turned at odd angles down a path that did not make sense.

I followed him at an easy lope from a distance, watching him, smelling his sour-milk fear. When I sensed he was about to burst from the forest, I sprang on him.

There I had him, pinned beneath my claws, yelping and struggling. I could have devoured him on the spot, but I have to confess I had no desire to.

I saw the fierce look in his eyes and recognised it as one of my own.

I spared him.

\*\*\*

The manling changed everything.

He returned in the spring, when flowers like shy children peeked amongst the bristly groundcover.

He stood in front of my burrow and held his hand out. I approached, sniffing the residue of cabbage and salt on his fingers.

He stroked my fur with his small pale hands and scratched me under the chin till I growled with content. As I walked through the forest, he kept pace beside me. I showed him the trees that curved low and were perfect for climbing, the places where streams fell into pools for bathing, hidden glades with carpets of blueberries. I watched him pluck and pop berries into his mouth while I scratched the ground for insects and small mammals. I couldn't eat those sweet, exploding things, but I could nearly understand his enjoyment of them.

In my time with the manling, a strange feeling grew: a sense of companionship, and I realized I'd missed it.

I watched as he piled up sticks and set them alight at the entrance of my burrow. He hunched close and held out his soft, clawless hands, sitting till the fire burned low and he nestled into my fur. I would fall asleep as I listened to his breathing. It was the only time I could trick myself into believing my family were with me again.



I felt my hard edges softening. The burning thirst for vengeance receded, and at times was even forgotten as it was smothered by new experiences.

We roamed the forest, as I led him down routes he would not have dared on his own. Where paths twisted and vanished, up crumbling shale and into ravines. If the way proved wide enough he walked alongside me, resting his hand on the ridge of my back, now and then ruffling my fur.

On one of our walks we encountered a body. A chest full of arrows and a limp, outstretched hand. I sniffed at the spilt blood. Still fresh.

I crouched beside it and opened my mouth to feast. I heard a sharp, startled sound. It was the manling, eyes wide and face gaping in horror. For the first time I felt ashamed for what was natural to me.

One morning, like dewdrops from grass, he was gone, and I knew he had returned to his people, that he'd missed them.

I felt his absence.

\*\*\*

They came after me. I knew they would. Just as I knew that the boy held them back until he could no longer.

The pink-skinned monsters closed in on me, swords raised and spears levelled. I smelt the cowhide of their boots and jerkins. Their sour cabbage-skin and the stench of their fear.

I could've torn and thrashed and clawed every one of their

throats, yet I didn't.

What stopped me was the memory of the manling's fawn-brown eyes, gazing at me with innocent curiosity, with sympathy.

When I met the eyes of the hunters, I saw the mirror image of my own former hatred.

Instead of meeting their swords with my claws, I whirled sideways and broke through their lines.

I ran, claws scraping the ground as arrows whizzed past me and crashing steps pursued me. I wound and twisted to the depths of the forest till the footsteps faded to rustling and at last there was silence.

\*\*\*

He does not know how much he did for them. That a single pure spark of kind life stopped me from eating his people, from tearing off limbs and scattering them with abandon, from spilling blood in a thirst for annihilation. From him I understood that they were not all bad or cruel or bloodthirsty. That they were capable of kindness, and I realized that I was, too.

I understood their fear and their drive for blind vengeance. As I retreated into the forest in the hopes that time would dull their sharp edges and peace would heal them, I made a decision. I dropped my harboured hatred till it fell like a stone from my shoulders, and basked in a new sense of lightness.

I forgave them.

\*\*\*

I do not know how much time has passed, because we do not measure it.

The village has swelled like wood left in water. Thatched huts were torn down to be replaced with stone, and then something harder.

They have built towers. White and cream and rising above the rooftops, set with rows of eyes that flash in the sunlight. If I draw close enough, I can see myself reflected in them. My lips curl back from my fangs in a snarl and the reflection snarls back at me.

They have walled off their gardens. Small furry creatures bark with futile anger if I approach.

I've stopped hunting the pink-skinned monsters and let them be, even as they fell trees and erect oddly symmetrical boxes.

I live on the edge of their awareness, in the place between memory, history and story. I understand that I must avoid them in order to survive.

Yet dark nights bring me closer and I stalk the edges of settlements, never drawing too near, but sniffing the scents on the wind for the manling, or someone like him. My kindred would have laughed at me, said they were nothing but tales dreamed up to wile away a cold evening, but I persist in believing that gentle pink-skinned monsters do exist.

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Time travel is a staple of last century's science fiction, and so is the challenge of saving in the world in the face of an existential disaster. Emmel gives a contemporary twist to a classic premise with this story of a chance meeting that might just change everything.

# ***The Time Traveler's Acquaintance***

**by Aaron Emmel**

*Aaron Emmel's stories have appeared in Fireside Magazine, Daily Science Fiction, Apparition Lit, and many other excellent magazines and anthologies. He is a member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association. Find him online at [his website](#), or on Threads [@aaronjemmel](#), or on X [@justicioaje](#).*

A woman in mismatched clothing tried to wave me down outside Union Station. It looked like she had just learned that apparel came in different styles and decided to try all of them at once. She was so emphatic I wondered if I knew her, so I made the mistake of glancing her way and accidentally made eye contact. She waved more vigorously.

Despite being late, I might have stopped if she'd seemed lost in more than the sartorial sense, but it seemed more likely she wanted me to buy something or sign a petition. I didn't have time to stop and explain that I couldn't do either.

I walked past her.

She hurried after me.

“Henry!” she called to my back. “This is it. All the methane about to be released by the Arctic Circle Mining Project. It’s the next climate tipping point.”

I almost tripped as I turned to look at her again. “How do you know my name?”

“I’m Mina Ferraz. The one who’s been sending you messages.”

*What messages?* I almost asked, but I stopped myself just in time. *Do not engage.*

She explained anyway. “Agricultural collapse. Famine. Global war.”

I kept walking, and she kept pace. “No,” I said. It could probably be interpreted as, *No, I don’t want famine or war, or, No, I don’t remember getting those messages, or No, I don’t want to hear about famine and war, and if I had received any messages with those subjects I would have deleted them unread.* She could decide which I meant, and the good news was that any of them would be right. I reached the Columbus Circle crosswalk and stabbed the “Walk” button.

Through my disorientation and impatience, though, I was beginning to understand what was going on. There had been a lot of time travelers in big cities over the past couple of years. Experts said it was because 2031 was when the first time machine was built, so that’s as far back as they could go, but the more obvious reason was that this was the decade in which we had

screwed up the future so badly that all the survivors could do was come back and plead for us to stop.

I'd never met a time traveler. I admit, there was a lot I wanted to know. But other people had asked questions similar to mine, so I already knew the only two possible answers: "I'm not allowed to tell you that," and "You people really messed things up." I just had to hope some of us were also secretly doing a lot of good, and that's what they weren't allowed to tell us.

Either way, I was late to my interview.

The "Walk" sign came on. I walked. Mina strode beside me.

"You're Henry Alam, and I need your help," she told me.

Aha! I felt so triumphant that I stopped for a moment in the street. Then I hopped onto the curb and turned to face her as she joined me. The conversation was over, and my job interview was only two blocks away. Check and mate. "You have the wrong person. I'm Henry Ghosh."

She blinked. Her shoulders slumped like she was a toy whose batteries had just died.

"But then..." She shook her head. "I don't have time to go to someone else."

"You're a time traveler. You literally have unlimited time."

People walked around us. Lobbyists, Hill staffers, phone-scrolling lawyers. "That's not how it works. On each trip we only have twenty minutes before—"

"Right, I saw an explainer on YouTube. This is mind-blow-

ing, but I have a big interview.” I wished I wore a watch, so I could conspicuously check it.

Mina kept considering me. She seemed to make a decision. She straightened her back. “Maybe you can help me anyway.”

“I really can’t.”

“You can.” She reached into a shirt pocket and drew out a flash square. “There’s a man at a restaurant back in Union Station. I need you to distract him, just talk to him for a minute, while I switch this with his info square.”

I frowned at the inch-wide square. I had been in DC for eleven months, living in a two bedroom apartment with three other guys and working as a barista. My teachers and friends had always told me I was the smartest kid in my town, but it turned out that this entire city was full of the smartest kids in their towns, and the United States has a lot of towns. Rent was going up in a month and I’d been considering heading back to New Mexico. But the interview I was now late to was exactly what I’d been looking for: my entrée to a policy associate job at an environmental think tank.

“War,” Mina said. “Famine.”

“Who is this guy?”

“An executive at a mining company.”

“What’s on the square?”

“There’s not a lot of time, Henry.”

“What’s on the square? What’s your plan?”



She returned the square to her pocket and stepped forward as if preparing to grab me and drag me back across the street. “Nothing their customers or shareholders will even notice. We just need to slow them down for a few weeks until a new CEO comes on board.”

“What if this is all just a scheme to manipulate stock prices so you can get rich in the future?”

She stared at me. “No. What’s wrong with you people? Do you think this is a game? Do you know how many engineers and resources it takes to run a time machine?” I did not, but it was a rhetorical question, and she was not interested in my answer. “We’re trying to save the world because *you messed it up*.”

So I’d heard. “Not me personally, but—”

“Yes, all of you.”

I sighed. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

The executive was in his mid-forties and dressed in a sleek-looking blue suit. He was finishing a croissant and coffee at a café table while he read on his phone. His messenger bag was on a chair beside him.

“Hi,” I said, walking up to him. “Do you know where the trains are?”

He glanced up at me. “That way.”

He hadn’t pointed out a direction. “Which way?”

“The way you’re walking.”

“Okay, but right over there it splits into two different directions. Which one do I take?” The fact that I wasn’t actually looking for the boarding area didn’t make me any less annoyed by his unhelpful answers.

“You’ll find it.” He looked back down at his phone.

Mina walked past me, back toward the main hall and exits. I followed her.

“Sorry,” I said. “I tried to distract him, but I have no idea what I’m doing. Which you know, since I’m not the one who was supposed to be doing this.” That seemed a bit defensive, so I added, “But I can go back. Spill coffee on his table, or something.”

“No need,” Mina said. “I made the switch.”

“What? I didn’t even see you do it.”

We had reached the main concourse.

“Thank you, Henry,” Mina said. “You were a big help today.”

“Did we save the future?”

“I’m not sure we saved the whole future, but it was a help.” She saw me staring past her and turned to look.

It was her. Mina. Or, rather, a slightly older version of Mina with a shorter haircut and less remarkable attire.

That was the first time it struck me that, if I had avoided accidents, there was another me waiting in the future Mina had come from, his world shaped by everything we were doing today.

“I can’t meet myself,” the first Mina mumbled. She stepped

behind a sign advertising a bus tour, twisted a link on her bracelet and vanished.

The older Mina spotted me at that moment and rushed over. “Henry! I need your help.”

“You remember I’m Henry Ghosh, right?”

She laughed a little, but then her face got serious again. Whatever she was here for, it was not a laughing matter. “That’s why I’m back. I know I can trust you, and I need your help.”

“Didn’t I just help you? Did it work?”

“It worked. But you screwed up a lot in this era. There’s a lot to fix.”

I sighed. If I could find another forty or so jobs to apply to, maybe I’d get another interview. Until then...

“Sure. What do you need me to do?”

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Focarile's heartfelt story of love, loss, and hope balances an ordinary setting with a supernatural encounter that's as meaningful as it is unexpected. In the end, though, it's his skilled and sure characterization that will hold your attention long after you're done reading.

## *The Rink*

by James Patrick Focarile

*James Patrick Focarile resides in the Northwest, U.S.A. He holds an undergraduate degree from Rutgers University and an M.F.A. from Brooklyn College. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in the following: Mystery Tribune, Guilty Crime Story Magazine, JOURN-E, Shotgun Honey, Thrill Ride Magazine, Close To The Bone, and more. Awards include second place in both the Idaho Writers Guild's 2023 Short Story Contest and Litro Magazine's 2022 Art of Reflection Competition. For more info, visit: [JamesPatrickFocarile.com](http://JamesPatrickFocarile.com).*

**G**lenn turned the ignition key. Nothing.  
He tried again. The same.

Bundled in a fleece jacket and work pants, he had fifteen minutes to re-condition the ice before the next team practiced.

He took a deep breath and exhaled. Searching, he found the gold wedding band that hung from a chain around his neck. He pressed it to his chest.

*She's with you*, he thought. *Focus.*

Then it came to him. *Propane.*

He unhooked the empty tank and replaced it. He turned the ignition key once more. This time the Zamboni machine rumbled to life. He hit the horn twice as a warning and headed through the gates.

It was a monster vehicle, a cross between a tractor and a plow, but he drove with purpose. Turn after turn, loop after loop, the wheels hugged the ice on the straightaways and fishtailed around the corners.

Glenn dropped the blade that ran along the base of the machine's rear conditioning system. Like a scalpel, it cut and sliced away a thin layer of ice. Then, he engaged the augers. Shaped like corkscrews, they churned and removed the icy debris. Next, he flooded water to form a new sheet of ice. Finally, he lowered the towel: the long cloth that hung like a curtain in back. It swept and filled in any remaining cracks.

Driving on, Glenn glanced back over his shoulder. A glassy surface was all that remained: a perfect cut. Some players called him the "Picasso of the Ice." A trace of a grin formed on his blue-chilled lips. Polishing ice wasn't his old life as a surgeon, but he enjoyed it. Each pass was a meditation, a way to shape time and space and loss.

Glenn scanned the empty bleachers. Colorful banners of past champions hung overhead. Teenagers, laden with gear, shuffled from one skate to another, high on the promise of fresh ice. On his final revolution, they cheered.

"Ice Man! Ice Man!" They raised their hockey sticks high in

the air. “Go, Ice Man!”

Glenn waved back, a flicker of light in his dark eyes.

Back in the pen, Glenn prepped the Zamboni machine for the next cut. He emptied the bin of ice, washed the conditioner, and filled the tanks with water. As a reward, he took a flask from an inside pocket and snuck a short pull. The oaky burn of liquor crawled down his dry throat. “To the ice,” he said, toasting the air.

Then a player rushed in.

“Help!” said the boy with red hair.

“What’s wrong?” said Glenn, shoving the flask into his pocket.

“We were running drills,” he said, out of breath. “And he... collapsed.”

“Show me.”

On the ice, near the penalty box, players huddled around a fallen figure.

“Step back,” said Glenn with authority. He pressed past the wall of bodies and knelt down. The coach was easily ten years older than him and overweight. His face was whiter than the ice.

“Call 911,” said Glenn.

“I have them on the line,” said a voice from the crowd.

“Tell them we have an unconscious white male, age fifty.” Glenn repositioned the body. “No visible injuries. No pulse. No breathing—it’s a heart attack.”

“Anything else?”

“Tell them a doctor’s onsite performing CPR. Send paramedics right away.”

“Doctor?” said someone.

“Isn’t he the Ice Man?” whispered another.

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Within a few minutes, Glenn sparked the coach’s heart back to life. The beat was erratic and his breath labored, but he was alive. Ten minutes later, the paramedics arrived. With care, they transferred the coach to a gurney and exited the rink.

Glenn stood at the center of the crowd. They were patting him on the back when the boy with red hair nudged his way through.

“You’re the Ice Man,” he said, shaken. He was about thirteen, on skates, and dressed in a purple uniform.

“Glenn.”

“I’m Danny. The coach’s son.”

“I think he’ll be OK.”

“You’re a doctor?” said Danny.

“I was,” said Glenn. “I mean, I am. It’s complicated.”

“But you’re the Ice Man, right?”

“Part time.”

Danny took off a glove and extended his hand. “Thanks for saving my dad, Ice Man.”

They shook hands. Danny smiled and turned to go. The players dispersed.

Glenn walked back towards the pen, shaking his head. “Ditch the booze,” he muttered.

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On the last run of the night, Glenn spotted a boy in the upper stands. He stood alone and wore a black uniform.

*Jesus. Now what?*

Glenn stopped the Zamboni machine and shut it down. The rink went silent.

A quiet voice broke through. “Glenn.”

Glenn looked for the source. Nothing. Except for the player, the place was empty.

The voice came again. “She’s safe.” It repeated twice and trailed off. Glenn sat confused.

Then the boy in the stands beckoned, his smile like a beacon.

Glenn waved to him. “Come down!”

But the boy didn’t respond.

Glenn jumped onto the ice. Like a bee drawn to the hive, he walked to the stands. Up he went, step by step, flight after flight, his pace quickening until he reached the top. When he was a few feet away, the boy motioned him to stop and he did.

“It’s closing time,” said Glenn, catching his breath. “Sorry, you can’t be up here.”



The boy smiled awkwardly. Then whispered, “She made it through.”

“Who?” said Glenn. “Who made it through?”

“You don’t need to worry anymore.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“She’s safe.”

“Who’s safe?” said Glenn. “Do I know you?”

The boy nodded, thumbing at his chest. “It’s my turn now.”

Glenn stood still, staring at the boy. Without thinking, he grabbed the ring from his neck. It was warm to the touch. He took a deep breath. Crisp air cooled the back of his throat. The boy’s face looked familiar. The dark, wavy hair was similar to his wife Barbara’s. The blue eyes were bright and clear like Glenn’s.

“Who’s safe?” said Glenn, almost pleading.

The boy pointed to Glenn’s ring.

“Barbara?” said Glenn. He wasn’t sure why he’d said it. It was impossible. She’d been dead from the cancer for close to a year now.

The boy nodded.

“She made it through to where?” said Glenn.

The boy glanced up.

Glenn glared. Maybe this kid was on drugs. Or sick. Or playing some kind of prank. Maybe Glenn had sipped too much liquor. Or the months of sleepless nights had caught up. Or the

losses. Whatever the reason, he wanted this game to end.

“I don’t have time for this,” said Glenn. “If you’re trying to tell me something, say it. Otherwise, you need to go.”

“I’m glad I met you,” said the boy, finally. “She said I’d like you.”

Glenn’s face turned flush. He trembled. Tears rained from his eyes. Every cell in his body exploded with sensation.

“What’s happening?” he said, as his boot heels somehow lifted off the ground.

“Don’t worry,” said the boy. “You’re safe too.”

“I’m afraid.”

“Remember us,” said the boy, the tone and rhythm of his voice like a song. “Honor us. But most importantly... live for us.”

A calm swept over Glenn. It came in fast and bright, like a shooting star, and then settled. The heels of his boots fell softly back to the floor. He stood tall. Steady.

Could this really be his boy? The spirit of the unborn son that fate had stolen from Barbara’s dying womb? The small, fragile soul that couldn’t be saved?

Glenn wanted to believe. He took a step closer and reached out. He wanted to hug the boy. Just once, feel the warmth of his skin. Maybe shake his hand or tousle his hair. Anything to make a connection.

But the boy’s eyes only widened as Glenn’s hand drew near.

And then, without warning, he faded away.

“Don’t go!” said Glenn, his words echoing off the concrete walls. “Not yet. Please!”

But it was too late. The boy was gone.

Again.

Glenn fell to his knees. He looked to the heavens and beyond. “Who am I without them?” he called out.

No one answered. But deep inside, he knew. He had for some time.

Glenn rose and drifted down the stands. With care, he walked across the ice to the Zamboni machine. He hopped up and took his seat. He scanned the controls: blade, augers, water, and towel. Then he turned the ignition key and the machine roared back to life. He grabbed the cold wheel with both hands and looked ahead.

He was the Ice Man now. All that was left was the rink. And the sheen of the ice.

And that was enough.

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Lewis melds Scandinavian folklore with a tale of everyday human strife and struggle to create a compelling historical fairy tale that could almost begin with “once upon a time” and that will make you hope for a “happily ever after.”

## ***Till His Last Breath***

**by Leonora Lewis**

*Sarah Lewis now writes under the name Leonora Lewis because she was shocked at how many people share her name. She figured the name her Grandma Lewis hated so much had to be good for something. Her fiction has appeared in COLP: Feet, Trees, and Electric Spec. She lives in south east Texas and is an active member of the Woodlands Writing Guild.*

**T**age the *Nisse*, all two feet of him in his pointed hat, sat on the window sill looking out at another gray wet February day in Copenhagen, far from fields, forests and the Sondergaard estate where he was born and raised. Those same rooftops and streets crammed with buildings separated Tage from the sea and the tall ships. Some of those ships were sailing to England.

“How many years before Tage will hide on a ship to England?”

He shoved his self-pity away and pressed his brow ridges and upturned nose to the cold glass. Rosalyn and the girls needed him. They needed him to keep those dark eyes of his with

almost no whites in them peeled for Hans Pederson skulking on the street below.

If Hans found Rosalyn and the girls and forced his way into their lodgings for one night, Rosalyn's divorce from that brute would be undone.

"Damn Hans Pedersen!"

Tage didn't believe in damnation any more than any other *Nisse*, but big people's swear words helped him when the anger clogged his thoughts.

"Ta-gaaa!"

"Kirsten Marie?" Tage, jumped down from the window sill. Last time he'd checked the child had slept peacefully now that her fever had broken. The tea he'd made her from herbs he'd scavenged had done some good.

"Papa found us," Kirsten whimpered. "I saw him looking in the window at us."

If only Tage's tea could stop her nightmares about Hans Pederson. Four days ago, Kirsten had seen Hans outside a shop glaring through the window at her and her mother. Rosalyn escaped with Kirsten out the back, running through the back alleys in cold, drenching rains until they lost him.

He stroked the child's fine golden hair, so like her mother Rosalyn's, with his own brown leathery hands covered with coarse brown fur. "There's nothing out there but cold rain on the rooftops filling the canal. Even the sun doesn't want to come out

of the clouds. Even the horses' hooves sound sad, clopping on wet cobblestones. Tage knows."

The little girl turned her head on her pillow, "Papa really hasn't found us yet?"

"No, child. Now lie quiet so Mama can do her work."

Too late.

At the sound of her child's voice, Rosalyn left her piece work the factory boss allowed her to take home. She limped over to the child's bed. It saddened Tage to see new lines creasing Rosalyn's forehead and the squint she'd developed in the last couple of years.

"You're safe," Rosalyn told her.

Kirsten piped up before Tage could remind her not to talk about him again. "I know. Tage told me there's no one outside. He protects us from Papa."

Rosalyn opened her mouth to scold Kirsten again about her invisible friend before thinking better of it. "Kirsten, if you're going to make up stories at least get them straight. *Nisse* aren't real and if they were, they wouldn't live in the city. They live on farmsteads, where they bring luck and prosperity."

Kirsten couldn't accept being told by her mother that Tage wasn't real any more than Rosalyn had all those years ago. "Tage brings us luck. He told me he played with you in the big garden where grandmother and grandfather live, and he came to stay with us after you left Papa. He makes sure Papa can't find us and

he does your work when you're asleep.”

Tage had lost count of the times he'd comforted Rosalyn while she cried and cried after being punished for lying by her mother, her nurse and later her governess.

“A whole week's grocery money gone for a truancy fine! Do you think we have luck?” Rosalyn snapped.

How dare Rosalyn blame the child for getting sick! For the fact that what she and the girls earned over the years wasn't enough. Never enough for a doctor and a doctor's note to show the truant officer when he came by to see why Kirsten wasn't at school.

Tage fought the urge to bare his pointed canines.

He knew Rosalyn would never hear his voice again, but he said his piece: “Because of Rosalyn no *Tomte* wife for Tage.”

He'd left the group of *Nisse* males heading for Sweden to marry the daughters of their *Tomte* cousins. He never reached the Swedish farmsteads with *Tomte* families living on them. He never stood in line for one of the *Tomte* daughters to tap him on the shoulder and say, “I choose you.”

“No son of Tage's to travel back to Denmark to marry *Nisse* daughters because of Rosalyn. Tage cannot cross the sea to England!” If Tage wasn't chosen, Old *Mormor*, the *Nisse* matriarch, had given him her blessing to try to find the English Hobs. Finding new cousins to marry with meant more healthy babies. More *Nisse* to grow up. There were so few *Nisse* and *Tomtes* now.

The hold Rosalyn had over his heart was so great Tage had to see Rosalyn one last time. Even after she'd stopped seeing him. Forgotten him. Even after she'd run off and married that red-headed gardener's boy, Hans Pedersen!

It was when he saw Rosalyn and her children's plight that Tage chose not to leave for Sweden.

Tage remembered that night seven or almost eight years ago now, when he hung by his sharp little claws on the windowsill to peek into Hans Pedersen's Copenhagen lodgings.

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What a sight met his eyes! Two little girls cringing in the corner with a baby shrieking in pain clutched between them and Hans showing them his belt. Were those belt marks on the little girls' legs?

If any *Nisse* hurt a *Nisse* young'un, every member of the tribe would rise up and bite, scratch and beat the offender until they died or were driven out.

"Make her stop crying!"

"Please, Papa. We can't," The girls begged.

Rosalyn raced past Tage and flung open the door. Her sleeve slipped up and he saw mottled bruises. "Agnes, what's wrong with your sister? Kirsten Marie was quiet when I left. Her eyes are so red."

The baby wailed louder.

"Your brat stares at me."



“Hans, what have you done?”

Hans hauled back his fist and hit Rosalyn hard, “Worthless bitch! I rubbed red pepper in her eyes. Teach her not to stare at her Papa.”

No female *Nisse* ever allowed a male to strike her. If he did, she'd make him very sorry.

Tage barely managed to avoid being swept aside by the skirts of a large woman who came bustling in as soon as Hans stormed out. She took charge of the two girls until the baby stopped crying. Tage pricked up his ears to hear what she said to Rosalyn in a low voice.

“See you bar the door so he can't get in when he comes staggering home. Once my nice policeman comes by for supper, he'll take Hans to sleep it off in a cell. You pack up the girls and be long gone. I've given you my cousin's name and two written references.”

Rosalyn pulled the door closed and turned the key. “Agnes. Barbara. Pack your clothes. We'll be leaving before morning,” she told the girls while she struggled to drag a table over against the door.

Rosalyn almost fell over when Tage took hold of the other end of the table, sliding it easily into place.

Rosalyn and the girls made ready to leave while, unseen by them, Tage rocked the baby. He peered over the edge of the cradle at little Kirsten Marie. She looked up, smiled, and cooed,

waving her chubby fists at him.

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Tage hung his head. “Tage’s chosen. If Rosalyn left Hans for her daughters’ sake, Tage will see them safe.”

Seeing the look on her youngest daughter’s face, Rosalyn’s expression softened, reminding Tage of the Rosalyn from years ago. “I need to work in peace so we can eat.”

When Rosalyn sat back down to her sewing, Kirsten curled up beneath the quilt and began to cry. “Mama’s angry at me about the grocery money.”

Tage took the child’s hand in his. Kirsten’s hands were bigger than his now. “No, child. Mama’s not angry at you. Mama is tired and sad. Don’t cry and make yourself sicker. Remember what I told you.”

Kirsten sniffled. “Grow up like a sunflower.”

“Because sunflowers are strong and grow anywhere. Roses are beautiful, but need a lot of care. Do you remember the other thing I told you?”

“Talk to Mrs. Jonas down the street about being a nurse when I grow up so I don’t have to worry about a husband?”

“Yes. And do not talk about me to Mama. It makes her sad.”

“Why can’t Mama see you now? You told me she could once upon a time.”

Tage pulled off his pointed cap and punched it. How could

he answer Kirsten, when he didn't know the answer himself? "Most big people can't see *Nisse*. But some of the big people's children can. Then they grow up."

He cast his mind back to *Mormor* in her little rocking chair by the hearth of their home beneath the mound, gripping the fire tongs in her toes to grab a coal for relighting her clay pipe. A lump formed in his throat thinking about her, about his Onklers and Tantes. Did any of them ever think of him?

"It's the way of things," he told Kirsten, echoing Old *Mormor's* last word to him about that subject. "Once big people are taught that *Nisse* are impossible, they can't see us anymore. Your Mama saw me years longer than most children could."

"Because you're magic?"

"No. *Nisse* know the growing of plants and the tending of animals. That's not magic. *Nisse* are born. *Nisse* get sick. *Nisse* grow old and die, just like you."

"I'll never stop seeing you."

Tage clutched his chest.

"Tage?"

Ah, the little innocent. She didn't know how those words pierced his heart.

Once Rosalyn had called him her dearest friend in all the world. He'd found her lost doll when she was only a year older than Kirsten. Tage looked down at the striped socks Rosalyn had made for him, now faded and much darned. She'd even remem-

bered to leave openings for his strong grasping *Nisse* toes.

“Will you tell me a story?” Kirsten asked. “About the big house and gardens where you and Mama played. Where my grandparents live and your family, the *Nisse*, live in the old burial mound.”

Tage sighed. “Long ago and far away,” (before Rosalyn Sondergaard became Rosalyn Pedersen), “There was a fine house surrounded by beautiful gardens and fruitful farms. Your mama was a golden-haired girl, beautiful as any princess. But she played alone in those gardens, for she had no brothers and sisters. Until the *Nisse* chose one of their children to watch over her and play with her.”

Kirsten interrupted, “Why do *Nisse* live in mounds?”

Tage sympathized with all his relatives who’d dealt with his continual asking why. “When the first *Nisse* came to Denmark, they found that when a big person died, his family buried him in a mound on their land. Burial mounds make good homes for *Nisse*. At night *Nisse* came into big people’s houses and ate food big people left on the hearths to feed their ancestors. The *Nisse* began working on the farms. The better off the farm, the better off the *Nisse* living on the farm.”

Tage left out the part about how the *Nisse* who stayed in the wild got into big people’s houses and stole babies to eat.

“Why don’t the *Nisse* lead my grandparents to buried treasure under the mound? Then they can come for us and take us

away from here.”

“What?” Tage asked. Kirsten’s question took him by surprise.

“My teacher told us about burial mound treasures in school.”

“There’s no treasure in that burial mound. I know. I grew up there,” Tage snapped. “Your grandparents are never going to come for you, your mother, or your sisters. Don’t you think for one moment they are!”

“The Sondergaards care about only two things. Making certain Hans (Tage was never going to call that bastard Papa to Kirsten) will never get his hands on their money, and punishing your Mama for running away with him. They won’t lift a finger to help you!”

Kirsten shrank back into her pillow.

Tage pulled his hat down over his ears, shocked by his harshness. He must not crush the child’s spirit, but he couldn’t allow her to pine for impossible things. She had to learn to make the best of things as they are. Like a *Nisse*.

“Child. Child. I’m not angry at you. I want you to be happy. You don’t find happiness by wanting impossible things.”

Tage’s ears caught the sound of the two older girls, Agnes Sophia and Barbara Christine, on the stairs. “Your sisters are home to look after you. I must go out. I’ll be back.”

An old school friend of Rosalyn’s paid for the girls’ tuition, books, and uniforms, so they could go to private school. Their classmates didn’t know that after school the Pedersen girls picked

up cut out flat cardboard matchboxes from the factory. Next morning, they turned them back in, glued together, for money.

“I want you, Tage.” Kirsten cried.

Rosalyn said, “Be a good girl, Kirsten. If you are able, try to help your sisters put the match boxes together. They won’t expect you to put as many together.”

Agnes and Barbara often complained to their mother that Kirsten dawdled at the work, although Tage helped her try and keep up.

“I have to find food for us.” Tage told Kirsten. “Do you want your Mama and sisters to become weaker and slower? Easier for Hans to catch? I’ll be back soon.”

“Promise me you’ll come back, Tage.”

“I promise. Now you promise not to cry and make yourself sick again.”

Kirsten stifled her tears. “I promise.”

Agnes Sophia and Barbara Christine rolled their eyes at each other. Tage crept around the two girls. He stood watching Rosalyn gather up her work. She leaned on the table, overwhelmed. She was growing faded and brittle like a rose crushed between the pages of a book.

“How will I make the food last?” Rosalyn whispered.

She looked down at him. For a brief, wild moment Tage thought she saw him standing in front of her, truly saw him for the first time in years. Then she shook her head as if to clear it.

A cold tear dripped off Tage's nose. "Even if you've forgotten me, I'm here. I will find food for you and the girls. Till my last breath, I will take care of you and the girls."

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Tage shouldered his sack, heading back for Rosalyn's lodgings in the dark. He'd found a couple of potatoes, managed to filch a sausage link from the butcher and persuaded a friendly cart horse to part with some carrots.

There were advantages to not being seen by most big people. However, Tage kept to the shadows. If anyone clapped eyes on him, they would mistake him for a child or a runaway organ grinder's monkey.

He left the sack on the stoop, then knocked on the door. Rosalyn would assume her landlady or a neighbor had heard about the policeman taking her grocery money for the truant fine. Then Tage meant to check in on Kirsten and then go on watch. He'd helped the child develop a sense for knowing when Hans was lurking nearby, but it didn't hurt to have a second pair of eyes on the lookout.

Tage froze and pricked up his ears at the sound of a familiar hated voice.

"Where is she? I pay you good money. You tell me where they are!"

Hans! Tage slunk into the shadows, then scurried into an alley after Hans' staggering form. Swine! Hunting Rosalyn and

the children down. Determined to never stop ruining their lives.

“I’ll find you, my fine lady. You’ll give me my due! Maybe, when I break a few bones instead of just leaving bruises, your parents will open their money bags.” Hans climbed rickety steps groaning beneath his heavy boots, no doubt leading to whatever filthy hole he rented.

“No!” Tage grabbed the man’s legs and didn’t let go, sending both crashing down the steps which collapsed beneath them to the stones below. He felt his ribs crack and then a jab of pain when Hans fell on him. Then Tage heard an even louder sickening crack as Hans’ head hit the pavement hard.

Hans didn’t move. Tage gasped, but couldn’t draw air into his lungs. Pain stabbed his insides when he tried to muster the strength to squeeze out from under the mountain of Hans. He tasted the metal tang of his own blood mixed with his tears’ salt.

He thought about Kirsten promising not to cry because he told her he’d come back as his eyes and mind went dark.

She’d never know why he didn’t come back.

He’d promised her.

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Sci-fi often takes us to distant, unrecognizable worlds, but the brilliance of MacBride's storytelling is in the way he humanizes an encounter with the otherworldly, focusing his lens on an ordinary man in an ordinary garden... and the not-so-ordinary thing he finds there.

## ***The Kubota Stimulus***

**by Matt MacBride**

*Matt MacBride is an aspiring British writer and podcast content creator enjoying retirement on Spain's beautiful Costa Blanca. He writes short stories, novellas, and screenplays in a variety of genres and has been published online and in print in the UK, USA and Spain. A selection of his stories can be found on [The Coffee Break Podcast](#).*

“Hello, love. How did it go?”

Gordon steeled himself for the answer. He knew the moment he'd prised his work boots off outside the kitchen door it hadn't gone well. He'd seen scraps of red rosette scattered across the terrace like confetti.

“How did it go? How did it go?” Alice fumed. “Second... again! That's how it went! And can you guess who got blue... again?”

“Roger?”

“Yes! Bloody Roger!”

“Oh, I'm sorry, dear.” Gordon winced. Roger had won the

village “Most Beautiful Garden” competition for three years in a row, and it was driving Alice crazy. She had come second three years in a row. “Maybe next year?”

“Definitely next year,” his wife decreed, “because I found out the problem. One of the judges whispered it to me. It’s because I don’t have a central feature. Roger has that stupid fountain thing in the middle of his lawn.”

“And that’s his central feature?”

“Exactly, so I’ve decided you’re going to make me an ornamental fish pond and I’m going to buy a statue of a stork to stand on the edge.”

Gordon was well used to Alice’s horticultural whims. Ever since they’d discovered she couldn’t conceive, the garden had been her baby, so he indulged her demands without complaint. But, even in his wildest fantasy, Gordon couldn’t have dreamt the outcome of this particular demand.

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Gordon watched his wife patrol her domain, squinting at it from different angles. The garden was pampered to within an inch of its life. The lawn was billiard-table smooth. The surrounding flower beds had never suffered the presence of a weed. At last, she made up her mind and began squirting shaving foam in a kidney-shaped outline on the closely cropped grass. Gordon was expecting a small pond. This was verging on a boating lake.

“It’s a bit big, isn’t it?” he ventured.

“If they want a central feature, I want something they can’t miss. And it has to be five feet deep or the fish will freeze in the winter.”

“I’m going to need the Kubota.”

“I don’t care how you do it... just don’t damage my lawn!”

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Gordon ran a small construction business, and the Kubota mini-digger was his favorite toy. He trailered it home on Friday evening along with a few sheets of fiberboard and a large tarpaulin. The fiberboards formed a roadway to protect Alice’s precious lawn. The tarpaulin was spread out ready to receive the spoil. Gordon maneuvered the Kubota into position, and by the time dinner was ready, a sizeable hole had already appeared in the center of the marked area.

It was the following morning when the Kubota’s bucket struck something hard. Gordon swore, jumped out of the cab and retreated a few yards. Their house on the Lincolnshire Fens had been built on a former wartime airfield that had later been industrialized, so he’d half expected to hit old concrete and other rubble. But the impact had produced a distinctive metallic clang. His first thought was unexploded bomb. Gordon knew the airfield had been attacked several times during the war.

After waiting a few minutes, Gordon approached the hole and glanced in. Enough of the object was visible to see it wasn’t cylindrical. He climbed into the hole and brushed dirt away to

expose an area of flat brown metal. Gordon cursed again. If it was an old steel road plate it would be a devil of a job to dig out. He retrieved a tape measure from the cab of the Kubota and measured the depth of the hole to the plate. Four feet. Alice had specified five feet. Gordon knew she would never settle for less. With a sigh he went back to work. He'd have to find the edges and then crane the damn thing out.

He spent the rest of the day scraping dirt away, trying to find an edge. The plate extended seamlessly in all directions, and the Kubota's hardened steel bucket left no marks or scratches. What he'd initially thought was surface rust proved to be the plate's natural finish. Before giving up for the night he spread a thin layer of dirt over the metal surface at the bottom of the hole. The less Alice knew the better. She had a seismic tendency to make volcanoes out of molehills.

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Every Sunday, Alice went to visit her sister in Mablethorpe and, although Gordon loved his wife dearly, it was always a relief to see her tiny Fiat disappear into the distance. Over breakfast she'd asked him if the hole for the pond would be finished today.

"I don't think so, love. I have to dig out... a few rocks and stuff."

"Well don't take too long about it. I've been reading up on fish ponds. It can take a year to get them established, and I want it ready for next year's competition."

“Yes, dear. I’ll do my best.”

Once Alice was out of the way, Gordon put his plan into action. He’d lain awake the night before thinking about the strange artifact he’d unearthed. The most plausible explanation was the wing of a WWII bomber. He’d googled airfields in Lincolnshire and found out theirs had been home to American B17 Flying Fortresses. That would certainly explain the size of the object.

Gordon dragged the fiberboards across the lawn and repositioned the Kubota on the east side of the lawn next to a shrubbery. After carefully cutting and removing the manicured turf, he began to excavate a deep trench. Gordon was convinced he was beyond the wing and was just about to stop digging when a loud clunk announced he’d hit metal. He measured the depth of his trench. Six feet.

Repeating the exercise at all four points of the compass produced the same result, so Gordon knew the object wasn’t wing-shaped. Then he had a brainwave. He remembered as a child seeing huge gasometers dotted around the countryside. The tops were circular and domed. That would explain everything. But he couldn’t possibly dig out something of that size. He’d have to cut a hole in it.

One of the Kubota’s many accessories was a pneumatic drill attachment that replaced the digger bucket. An hour later Gordon was ready to attack the gasometer.

The clatter was enough to wake the dead and disturb neighbours for miles around, but Gordon didn’t care. This was getting

personal. After a few minutes he realized the drill was having very little effect and slid into the hole to examine his handiwork. Not only was the metallic surface intact, there wasn't a single dent or scratch to be seen. No gasometer top could be that sturdy. Gordon's imagination worked overtime. He began to wonder if the stories about crashed UFOs could possibly be true. He was still staring at his Unidentified Buried Object when his wife appeared.

"Gordon!" Alice shrieked. "What have you done to my lawn?"

Gordon looked up at Alice as she slowly pirouetted, staring in horror at each of the trenches he had dug in turn.

"Don't worry," he promised. "I'll fill them in and re-lay the turf tomorrow. It'll be like new."

"But... why?" she gasped.

Gordon thought fast.

"Clay!" he blurted. "We've got clay and I'm checking the water table, for the drainage you know, otherwise... flooding." He waved vaguely towards the neat flower beds. Alice turned on her heel and stormed into the house on the verge of tears. With a sigh, Gordon watched her go and backed the Kubota onto the terrace before he followed her.

That night, for the first time in years, they argued. Alice said she couldn't understand what he was doing; why was he ruining her beautiful garden? Gordon was reluctant to disclose his discovery. Alice was already highly-strung, and any talk of flying

saucers could easily push her over the brink. He made up a story about surveying their land, saying that it was important to know the soil types and any waterlogged areas. He pointed out that they would then know the ideal places for different types of plants. He almost managed to convince himself, and Alice seemed somewhat mollified.

An exhausted Gordon slept like a hibernating bear that night. He was woken up once in the early hours by loud rumblings of thunder and flashes of lightning. He remembered thinking the weather forecast had been wrong as usual and went straight back to sleep.

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In the morning, Alice must have been feeling remorseful because she offered to bring him a cup of tea in bed. She hadn't noticed the electrical storm, but then, she always wore earplugs because Gordon snored. He languished in bed, trying to decide what to do about his UBO, until he heard Alice scream and the crash of breaking crockery, closely followed by pounding footsteps on the stairs.

"What now?" he muttered to himself

"What have you done? What have you done?" Alice yelled repeatedly as she rushed in and dragged Gordon to the window. She flung back the curtain.

"Look! Look at that! You did it on purpose while I was asleep!" she wailed.

Gordon looked out of the window at where Alice's prize garden had once been. From fence to fence and right up to where his Kubota stood on the terrace was one vast, perfectly circular hole. No billiard-table lawn, hardly a root or a petal remained as evidence of the immaculate flower beds.

Alice threw herself on the bed, sobbing hysterically, while he continued to gaze at the void in amazement. So all those stories really were true, Gordon realized, and then had to smile at the thought of their little piece of Earth, heading for the stars.

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From its strong opening fight scene to its surprising yet satisfying conclusion, Mickler's historical fantasy carries the reader along with a compelling tone and a gradually building sense of suspense and uncertainty that pays off with an unexpected twist.

## *The Miller's Wife*

by **Russell Mickler**

*Russell Mickler writes fantasy and science fiction. His micro/flash work appears in several short story anthologies. Black Anvil Books is Mickler's imprint for self-published fantasy and serialized fiction: [www.black-anvil-books.com](http://www.black-anvil-books.com).*

Beitidh parried, sending her attacker's cudgel to her left. She returned her blade back-handed but slipped, disrupting her timing. Her arc tracked too far from his body.

Gripping his weapon two-handed, he issued a war cry and lunged at her with all his weight. Beitidh braced.

The impact shattered her wooden shield; her arm fell limp. Racked by a terrible pain racing up her left shoulder, Beitidh took advantage of his exposed belly to thrust the tip of her blade into his abdomen.

His bearded mouth gaped as she withdrew, his black eyes fixed on hers, then keeled over to bleed out in the snow.

Beitidh writhed on her back. Releasing her sword, she dug

her fingertips into her shoulder. Clutching her upper arm and moving to her elbow and forearm, she recoiled, finding the simple fracture in her radius.

She remained still to recover and scrambled to her feet when she could. Unbuckling her pauldron to salvage its leather strap, she discarded the armored plate on the road. Stepping over the two bodies, Beitidh collected her canvas pack and recovered her sword to head toward the river.

She trudged through thigh-deep powder along a stand of white aspen trees to reach the riverbank and, rolling her sleeve, dunked her left forearm into the frigid water. Beitidh glanced behind her, panting in frantic, steamy breaths, fearing another attack.

Satisfied, she used the leather strap to bind her wrist and secure her left arm to her torso. She gathered her skirt, tartan shawl, and cloak to travel upriver, avoiding the road.

The fast-moving water roared in her ears. Clinging to roots, outcroppings, and branches, Beitidh crawled steep inclines and crept across slippery, icy crags. Snow arrived at dusk. When she submerged her arm once more to numb the trauma, she lost sight of her pack. The river took it downstream.

Yet, when hope seemed most fleeting, Beitidh saw chimney smoke rising around the bend.

Invigorated by the prospect of shelter, she pressed on, encountering a dilapidated grist mill, cords of chopped firewood,

scattered kitchen refuse, and the snow-covered stones of a burial cairn.

Beitidh looked back at the river. She risked hypothermia if she continued into the night. She needed warmth, rest, food, and an opportunity to set her arm.

She pounded on the door.

An old woman with matted white hair cracked it open.

Beitidh bowed. “May God be with you. I was attacked on the road and fled to the river—”

“Not that.” The woman glared at Beitidh’s sword while she gummed her jaw. “There.”

Beitidh hesitated before unstrapping the scabbard to throw her weapon on the stack of firewood.

The crone scowled, turning away. “And leave the rest of your demons on my doorstep.”

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Sweat cascaded from Beitidh’s brow. She bound her left wrist and brought the strap around the arch in her boot. She exhaled repetitively, preparing herself, her gaze going to the crone beside her.

Yanking the strap to pull on her arm, Beitidh shrieked and strained against a worn strip of biting leather. Holding the belt taut, Beitidh’s eyes rolled into their sockets as she reset the bone, shoving it back in place.

The old woman quickly placed two slats of kindling, keeping them steady, while Beitidh used the slack to wind the splint tight. Buckling the strap, Beitidh grasped at the air and sprawled from the bench onto the stone floor.

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*Strong scents. Garlic and vinegar.*

Beitidh awoke where she fell beside the hearth. An elderberry wreath decorated the mantel shelf, and an iron pot hung from a hook over the fire. Her arm throbbed, her head ached, but she was warm and dry.

“Cabbage. Stock. Lamb bones and meat.” The crone dished the broth into a bowl. “Can you sit?”

Beitidh squared her back against the sturdy leg of an oak table. Wisps of untamed auburn hair escaped her thick braid. Wincing, she accepted the bowl with her good arm.

“Marta.” The old woman fetched a wooden cup from the table and placed it next to Beitidh.

Beitidh tipped the bowl to her lips. Salty and gamey, it was her first hot meal in days. “Beitidh Dunaidh.”

“Your tartan.” Dressed in a tattered shawl and drab cotton dress, the old woman dragged the bench closer. “My husband did business with men from Sinanne.” She flicked her wrist at the door. “You met him earlier.”

Beitidh recalled the cairn. “Yes, I am of Sinanne.”

“A soldier?” Marta pointed a bony finger at the silver torc

around Beitidh's neck.

Beitidh sipped from the bowl. "I am firstborn to Ualraig and trained for combat. He leads our village."

Marta leaned in. "You're a chieftain's daughter?"

Beitidh shrugged. "I'm of my own mind."

Firelight and wax candles illuminated the residence. There were no windows but a pine door that likely led to the millhouse. Wicker baskets of shriveled potatoes, onions, and carrots waited against the wall. Aside from the oak table and bench, a modest bed adorned the room, its frame constructed from aspen wood. It rested on a sheepskin rug.

Beitidh gestured outside. "When did he...?"

"Fall. Before the first snow." Marta slurped her tea. "He was kind enough to leave me the firewood."

Barefoot, Beitidh felt prickly sensations in her feet. She adjusted her legs. "A good provider?"

"He was a gregarious man, enjoyed his drink, and made friends easily. He'd a soul as gentle as a lamb and thus was easy prey for wolves." She glanced at the pine door. "His talent for trade gifted us a meager life."

"I grieve your loss." Beitidh drank more of the broth before setting the bowl on the floor. She raised her cup—hot tea, thyme and mint. "You may relate to my bad fortune." She was pleased to taste honey. "After denying him my consent to marry, a laird sent his clansmen to arrest me on the road. Imagine that!"

Marta frowned. “Your pick?”

“My father’s.” Beitidh examined the splint. “Connal, the son of a neighboring lord. Ualraig would see me traded to preserve our waning peace.”

Marta watched Beitidh closely from behind the rim of her cup. “Braying mules are the first to meet a master’s whip.”

Beitidh shot back, “I’m no one’s mule.” Firelight crawled across the ceiling. She loosened the wrap around her wrist and then tightened the belt. “Connal is a pig. I want nothing from him.”

“Save your father’s bargain goes unfulfilled. Should you return to Sinanne unwed, he’ll render you to Connal—”

“He will not!” Beitidh slammed her palm into the floor. “I’ll not yield to that man, nae an inch!”

“Your father?” The crone smiled, her eyes narrowing. “Or Connal?”

“Neither!” Beitidh snapped, laughing, then moaned, gripping her broken arm. “If I am to go to Connal, I take an army.”

Marta sipped the last of her tea. “You risk much for your pride. War and suffering; your father’s honor. You are all kick and spite. And while you may long for vengeance,” Marta shrugged, “your arm will take a season to mend.”

She was right. Beitidh figured she wouldn’t be in fighting trim until summer.

Marta sent her cup to the table, then paused. “There are...

*alternatives*. Can you walk?” Marta lifted herself to her feet.

Beitidh looked at Marta skeptically. “Aye.” Bringing her legs underneath her, Beitidh steadied against the table to stand. “What’s your meaning?”

Marta brought an iron pricket from a nightstand. “Come.”

Beitidh followed Marta into the millhouse through the pine door. They met a freezing draft that wobbled the candlelight. A solid shaft ran through a frame of intermeshed wooden gears to a round enclosure near the floor.

“I await the spring thaw. The river is too low to enter the millrace. The wheel does not turn, and the stone cannot grind.”

Marta pointed above them to the second floor, accessed by a crude ladder. More than a dozen grain sacks were piled up there near the hopper. She ran a trembling hand along the millstone’s cover. “My husband departed without milling the barley, and I’ve exhausted my supply of flour for the winter.”

“Marta, you’ll starve.” Beitidh, careful to brace her arm, stepped under a crossbeam and circled the enclosure. She ducked her head to look underneath the frame. “There must be a pin to free the stones.”

“There is.” Marta lifted the pricket, pointing to a metal rod below the sieve. Marta’s face soured. “I’m too frail to walk the millstone, but if you were to do it—”

“First thing come the dawn,” Beitidh assured her. “My back is the least I can offer.”

Marta smiled and nodded. “Good.”

Turning, she lowered the candle and muttered as they re-entered the residence. “A miller’s stone is as a blacksmith’s anvil. Have you heard of this?”

“I haven’t.”

They returned to the fire, both taking the bench. Marta set the candle on the table.

“A curse.” Marta twirled her finger. “A turn of the miller’s stone is like the strike of the smith’s hammer, bestowing death on any enemy he chooses.”

Beitidh’s heart skipped.

“Grind my flour,” Marta breathed, “will his demise, and you will strike Connal dead. His eyes will not see the light of the next morn. I swear it.”

Beitidh swiftly backed from the table. “You are a witch?”

“I am a woman.” Marta scowled, standing. “And I am all too familiar with the shortcomings of lesser men. I’ve the means to spare you from Connal, your father—your people from the ravages of war. Save me from hunger—grind my grain—and I will help.”

Beitidh’s chill returned, this time, from the ice forming in her veins, for making pacts with witches or fae was to court disaster. Still, there was wisdom in Marta’s words. Beitidh remained silent, pensive, intrigued by the thought of exacting revenge.

Marta collected the cups and bowls. “As I said, the miller’s



curse is but one option. There is another.”

Beitidh glowered. “Tell me.”

Marta rinsed the dishware in a water basin. “The torc is silver. It can be bewitched. Return to Connal and offer it to him in reconciliation. When worn,” Marta smirked, “you will find him amenable to... *suggestion*.”

“But Connal is repugnant—”

“Connal is *clay*.” Marta tossed a dish towel to the floor. “Marry, then sculpt him as you see fit.”

Beitidh sneered, looking away disgusted, unable to imagine returning to Connal’s village, let alone sharing his bed.

“Selfish girl,” Marta scorned, folding her arms. “Come to your senses. Uphold your father’s promise. Save your kin. Stave off the threat of war.”

“I will walk the wheel,” Beitidh concluded, defiant. “I will levy the curse, and we will part ways, never to see each other again.”

Marta grunted, tipped her chin at Beitidh, and nodded her head.

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Beitidh slept near the embers of the dying fire, restless, every aspect of her choice churning in her mind. And when dawn finally arrived, Marta and Beitidh set to work.

Daylight entered the millhouse from gaps in the paneling to stretch across the floor. Beitidh pushed a wooden crossbeam

with her good shoulder, outstretching her arm to press against it with her ribs, digging her toes into the stone flooring. Walking a circle, it slowly turned under all her might.

Above her, Marta cut open the burlap sacks to dump grain into the hopper. The stream fell through the sieve and flowed down a chute into the eye, where the grain met the millstones.

This continued, with Marta adding more and more grain and Beitidh turning the wheel. The millstones meshed and slid across one another, wrenching and crushing. Sweat streamed down her cheeks and chest, and at times, she'd lunge at the cross-beam to angrily shove and push it, fueled by her temper, hate, and need for vengeance. She pictured rocks placed over Connal's purple and bloated face, and as the sun's angle sent daylight up the walls, Beitidh *felt* Connal dying as if she were grinding away every bit of his life.

Marta descended the ladder. "All but two bags left." Taking a tin pan, Marta opened a hatch under the turning stones, inducing a cloud of tan, dusty flour to rise up from the floor. She panned a bit before closing it. "I will prepare a bannock for your travel."

"Is it done?" Beitidh huffed, wiping the grime away from her brow. "Has Connal met his end?"

Marta shook the pan, inspecting the quality of the flour before testing it between her fingers. Marta's eyes met Beitidh's. "Keep turning. Put your back into it."

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Soon, the smell of fry bread filled the mill, and the millstones' grinding slowed. Damp from exertion, Beitidh entered the residence to find a plate of palm-sized bannocks and a pitcher of cold river water waiting on the table.

Seated and already enjoying the bread, Marta gestured to the bench. "Sit and rest before you go."

Beitidh slumped behind the table. Golden brown, the bread tasted sweet, and the oil made it crisp. She didn't hesitate to take more from the plate.

"Eat," Marta said, gnawing the bread. "You'll need your strength."

Beitidh and Marta shared the bench. Marta ate slowly, deliberately, savoring every bite, whereas Beitidh devoured her food, gobbling the bannock down as fast as she could.

Beitidh spoke through a mouthful of bread. "Connal is dead?"

"Is that what concerns you?" Marta grinned and licked the oil from her fingers.

Beitidh snatched another, ignoring the crone. The bannocks were delicious and exactly what she desired.

As moments passed, Marta's posture changed; she sat more erect, and her hands were no longer withered and streaked with blue veins. The bags around her eyes receded, and her liver spots vanished, leaving her skin smooth and tan. Her lips filled, her

cheeks reddened, and her white, scraggly hair bloomed into wavy auburn tresses. A youthful, womanly shape returned, and she glanced alluringly at Beitidh—as *Beitidh*—with her own fiery, green eyes.

Now a crone, Beitidh trembled, hunched over the table in a stupor with half-chewed bread and drool oozing down her chin. Her clothes hung on her like a sack.

“For all that kick and spite,” Marta whispered, leaning in to wipe the old woman’s mouth with a cloth. “You know so little of this world. Look.” She revealed her flawless, mended forearm. “Reborn, simply from consuming your contempt and malice.”

Standing, Marta rested a gentle hand on Beitidh’s shoulder and removed her silver torc. “I go to Connal to wed. Assured a life of comfort, what you’ve scorned I’ll take for myself, and, in so doing, will honor your father’s name and spare your clan from war. The firewood and flour will keep you through winter, but trust me—the miller is better company dead.”

Her new body foreign, decrepit, and weak, Beitidh trembled as the changeling exited the mill, confiscated the sword, and returned to the road.

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Most's story is a compelling little shocker that serves as a masterclass in point-of-view writing from a third person perspective. Vivid descriptions and excellent pacing make for a story that reads quickly, but the ending ensures it will linger well beyond its final blistering lines.

# Something That Doesn't Love a Wall

by **Bruce W. Most**

*Bruce has published short crime fiction with Mystery Magazine and several murder mystery novels, including with St. Martin's Press. His latest whodunit is No Time for Murder. His free noir crime novella, Harrington's Game, is available via his website, [brucewmost.com](http://brucewmost.com).*

From the rocky knoll, the man tensed as he watched the old man and his dog make their way across the field where sheep once grazed. The dog—a deerhound, he guessed from its large size and distinctive blue-gray coat—bounded in all directions, chasing real or imaginary hares. But its master, shoulders hunched, steps unsteady, trudged in a straight line toward a section of crumbling stone wall where he had reluctantly agreed to meet. As if life weighed heavily on him.

As it should.

The man on the knoll rose from his perch on a moss-covered boulder and took in the Scottish Lowlands, finding comfort

in the familiar tapestry of dry stane dykes—dry stone walls to the rest of the world—that threaded through the dale and up the fells, linking stone field barns and pastures like bloodlines. Walls as imposing and majestic as any structures on earth. Walls that had stood guard and done their duty for centuries. Even millennia.

But the section of crumbling wall where the two men would meet had not done its duty. It separated what should never have been separated.

He took a deep breath, adjusted his knit hat against the cool autumn air, and began his descent. He crossed a field, now fallow, that once produced spring barley, winter wheat, and for a few seasons, potatoes, now bearing only scatterings of musky-smelling heather, flowers lurid pink and purple. At one point, he spotted the rare sprigs of white heather—a sign of good luck and protection. He would need both.

He arrived at the crumbling wall first and observed the old man as he approached, dressed in a muddy pair of yellow Wellingtons, bib overalls, and a ratty flannel shirt. A dark Highlander Tam half-hid scraggly gray hair working its way to white.

Once the strongest man in the dale, regularly winning the annual caber toss competitions, the old man now appeared shriveled and frail. Word among the locals rumored failing health. Yet the younger man still sensed a coiled power within the old man, a power he'd feared even as a lad.

The dog burst past its master toward the wall, barking menacingly. The man jerked back, despite the waist-high barrier be-

tween them. Deerhounds were big enough and strong enough to take down a full-grown deer.

The old man, a faint smile creasing his lips, made no effort to silence the dog, as if approving of its behavior. The dog quieted when its master reached the wall.

“Hello, Uncle Magnus,” the younger man said, nodding a hesitant welcome. “It’s been much too long.”

Watery, secret-filled blue-green eyes studied him warily beneath eyebrows as thick as hedgerows. “Ye claimed in yer note thir’s a problem with my wall.” His uncle always got directly to the point. Magnus glanced at the stones sagging like his shoulders. “Looks damn fine to me, nephew.”

That’s what his uncle always called him. *Nephew*. Never by his name, Callum, even when he was a lad growing up on his father’s farm next to his uncle’s land.

Magnus offered no words of acknowledgement or condolences over the recent death of Callum’s father, his uncle’s younger brother, freshly buried in the village cemetery not two miles from where they now stood. He did not attend the funeral, and Callum doubted he’d visited the cemetery since.

Callum nodded toward the wall. “It’s showing obvious signs of deterioration.”

“Ye saying I done a poor job building it, nephew? I say it’s hard winters of late. Hard snows. Freezing rain. Them’s hard even on stone walls.”

Callum paused to respond carefully, not wanting to insult his uncle and destroy what small chance he had to mend the past between them. He didn't point out, for example, that the other stone walls in the dale had survived the winter fine. Centuries of hard winters. Only this newer section was crumbling.

He had examined the wall several days before to assess its poor condition. Many people don't realize it's not the winters that are hard on poorly built stone walls; it's spring thaws that do the damage. Dry stone walls are effectively two walls angled inward, like the letter A, bound together with through-stones. When one side of the wall faces south, as did his uncle's side, it's the first side to thaw, leaving frost and ice on the north side. His uncle had not layered in enough through-stones to properly bind both sides. Consequently, the weight of the icy north side slowly pulled the sides apart, causing the wall to collapse over time

His uncle had compounded his poor workmanship by building the wall thicker than necessary, with shallow footings on unstable soil, poorly stacked ill-fitting stones, and insufficient fill stone. Building a stone wall without mortar is an art, like piecing together an intricate jigsaw puzzle.

"I'm not making any judgment about the quality of your work, Uncle Magnus. Whatever the cause of the damage, I'm saying the wall will not stand."

"Weel ain't ye the smart one."

"I know something about stone walls."



“I heard ye become a dry stane dyker.” He coughed, raspy and deep.

“Over twenty years now. All over Scotland and northern England repairing and building walls. Even walls on the Queen’s Balmoral Estate. And once, all the way to America. To New England. Built walls not far from where that Frost fella set that ‘Mending Wall’ poem of his.”

“So I ain’t no dyker like ye, nephew. So the wall’s crumbling a wee bit. Just like I am. It’s still a wall. It still serves its purpose.”

*Yes, to keep your brother and your nephew from what they once loved.*

His uncle built the wall going on forty years ago, when Callum was just a lad. It spanned only twenty yards. Less a wall than a barricade. But that twenty yards cut off his family’s access to an alley that ran between two long field walls that afforded access to a trout stream 300 yards away. One of the best trout streams in the Scottish Lowlands.

As a small boy, Callum walked that alley often with his father, late in the day after chores were done, fly rods slung over their shoulders, eager to cast wet flies and nymphs into golden waters.

Until one day, the wall suddenly appeared, almost overnight. A wall “built out of anger,” his father later told him.

Callum didn’t understand why at the time. Neither his father nor his mother explained, other than to say it was on his un-

cle's land and there was nothing they could do about it. Through his tears he sensed the *why* was bad because he never saw his father and uncle speak to each other again.

He didn't learn the why until years later, long after he'd left home to build stone walls. After his mother died and his taciturn father, deep into his whisky, was morosely talkative one evening.

Uncle Magnus had shown up at the house one day. Callum was away at the time with his mother at a neighbor's delivering fruit pies for a community gathering the coming weekend. Uncle Magnus was his usual crabitt self, being hot-tempered by nature. His wife had left him, he told Callum's father. Flitted off to Edinburgh to live with some toonser.

For this, Magnus blamed his brother. Yelled that he'd set her against him with lies. Gossiped among neighbors that he was abusive. Drove her from him out of spite because he had courted her before Uncle Magnus stole her heart.

They'd nearly come to blows.

His father admitted he'd once loved the woman, before meeting and marrying Callum's mother, but swore he'd never said a bad word about her. Never set her against his brother. Callum believed his father. It was not in his nature to be cruel or spread lies. Though he remembered being shocked to learn his father once loved a woman other than his mother.

The day after their argument, Magnus began constructing the wall. Couldn't build it fast enough, he was so angry, Callum's

father told him those many years later.

And from what Callum gathered from those in the dale, his uncle had carried his misplaced grudge to the day his brother died.

Little wonder the wall was collapsing now. Walls built out of anger do not stand.

But that was past. It was time to mend. It was in Callum's nature to mend that which stands between people.

"I have a proposal, Uncle Magnus," he said.

His uncle's watery eyes again searched his face. "Ye gonna sell the place to me, nephew? Ye ain't no farmer."

When the brothers' father died, Callum's father proposed they own and work their father's farm together. It would be more efficient, and a way to keep the land whole. But Uncle Magnus stubbornly insisted they divide it between them. Out of it was born the enmity that grew into a wall.

Callum's uncle was right. He was no farmer. He was a stone waller in his soul. "I don't know what I'm going to do. Maybe sell it, maybe rent it. But it's the wall I came to discuss, not the farm."

His uncle shifted his weight unsteadily. "What? Ye want to fix it right 'cause ye're the dyker?"

"No, I—"

"Weel, nephew, there ain't no need. The wall still stands."

If there were any hope of persuading his uncle that his brother had not betrayed him, that he might drop his misguided

grudge and embrace his nephew again, it would start with the collapsing wall.

“No, I don’t want to repair the wall, Uncle Magnus. I want to mend the past. Mend the rift between you and my father.”

“How ye planning on doing that, nephew?”

“I want tear down this wall.”

A tick of wariness and anger emerged in the old man’s eyes. “That ain’t gonna happen, nephew. Ye ain’t touching that wall.”

“I want to go trout fishing again, Uncle Magnus, like when I was a lad. Maybe us together.”

The old man stepped toward him, surprisingly fast, until the wall stopped his momentum. The dog, who had wandered off in search of hares, returned suddenly, as if it sensed its master’s anger. “No! Ye’re not tearing down the wall.”

“We need to make this right, uncle.”

“No, we dinnae!”

Enraged at his uncle’s obstinance, Callum began clawing stones off where the wall was the weakest. Clawing with bare calloused hands that had built miles of stone walls.

“No, nephew, no,” snapped his uncle. He slapped his big hands atop the capstones. “Stop.”

The dog growled.

Callum kept yanking at stones, flinging them aside. It was easy, the wall so poorly built out of anger.

“Stop!” his uncle cried, his rage replaced by a keening, as if pleading to the gods instead of his nephew.

Callum stopped. Not because of his uncle’s pleading, but because something caught his eye.

He bent over to look closer.

“No, dinnae,” said his uncle.

Callum went to his knees and leaned closer.

He blanched.

Bones.

Not the bones of small animals that often sheltered within the gaps of dry stane walls.

Human bones. Fragments of a skeleton buried in the center of the wall. An arm and shoulder bone, maybe.

“Callum. Please,” his uncle cried again, anguish in his voice.

Bones that belonged to a woman, of that much Callum was certain. Remnants of a patterned blue and red dress clung to the bones.

He jerked back in horror.

“My god, what did you do, Uncle Magnus?”

He looked up, still on his knees.

A capstone ripped from the crumbling wall was already on its way. A large stone hurled by the raised, still powerful arms of the old man.

The stone struck Callum just above his right eye. He had no

time to even raise his arms in defense, still stunned by the horror of the woman's skeleton.

He toppled to the ground. Blood soaked his knit hat and began to stream over his right eye and onto his cheek.

Dimly, he grew aware of his uncle pushing away stone and clambering over the collapsed wall, stones sliding off under the old man's weight.

"I told ye no," came his uncle's voice, ghost-like, as if out of a heavy morning fog. "I warned you, nephew. I pleaded."

His uncle's voice was strangely sad, regretful. A voice he'd never heard from the cantankerous old man. The man who built a wall not to separate brothers but to hide the crime of his past.

Callum tried to rise, but a heavy foot pressed on his chest. Through a haze of pain, he sensed his uncle lifting another heavy stone over his head. Wondered in those last moments whether he too would be buried for centuries amid the beloved stones of a dry stane wall.

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Gothic fiction is part of a longstanding tradition that also found a home in the pulp magazines. Phillips' story checks all the boxes of the genre, capturing the moodiness and atmosphere we've all come to associate with the most significant works of gothic literature.

## ***Thornhall Manor***

**by Courtney Phillips**

*Courtney Phillips is an aspiring author and young actress. Aside from working on her current novel trilogy, she enjoys writing short stories in her free time. As a high school sophomore in the sweet state of Arizona, she has submitted countless short stories to various competitions.*

In a beautiful, lonely old mansion, a lovely young lady was by the window, watching the rain fall on the dismal world around her. With her eyes filled with tears and her hair unbrushed, she may have been a symbol of elegance and power, but she did not feel like one.

“M'lady, please hurry! Duke Vayrheith has instructed us to take you to the Manor at once,” a voice warned, startling her.

She had been so immersed in her own thoughts; she hadn't heard one of her lady's maids enter the room. Her tears were wiped away by the time she spun around to face her lady's maid.

“I was told the insignificant little visit wasn't until next week,” she countered, her face cold, emotionless.

“My apologies m'lady, the Duke said I must come and get you now.”

The girl's eyes darkened at that and she cursed under her breath. *Father must be very eager to send me away for his profit.*

They were all the same, all obeying him. No one could care less about her. Even her own lady's maid reported daily to her father on her mood and whereabouts.

He was insane to send her to Thornhall; didn't he know the horrors and tales of what had happened in that place? But he didn't care.

*Tomorrow afternoon I will arrive at Thornhall Manor to meet the three suitors, she thought, her eyes returning to the window. But make no mistake. I, Lady Roselyn Vayrheith, will not take any part in my father's wretched plans.*

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Roselyn carefully followed her maids out the front door to the lavish carriage, the cold wind billowing the satin of her long gown and her tumbled, pale curls.

“Goodbye my beloved daughter,” a voice Roselyn hated above all exclaimed.

He wrapped his arms around her in what looked like a fatherly embrace. It was nothing of the sort. Roselyn felt as if he would break every bone in her body and enjoy it.

“If you dare disobey me and repeat the little ‘incident’ that happened with your last suitor, you will be punished,” he whis-



pered, adding louder, “My dear, darling little treasure.”

Roselyn remained stiff as ice, hoping her careless facade wouldn’t break. She hated giving him more delight than he already had as he made plans to sell her.

“I understand,” was all she said, the words sickening.

His grin widened. “Good girl.”

Lowering her head, she stepped into the carriage. The door was secured and she did not look back, smile, or wave. She was satisfied enough to go on this journey alone, never to return.

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By the time the carriage started to slow, the sun had long disappeared and the Thornhall Manor loomed in front of them. Thornhall Manor looked much worse than Roselyn had imagined it would, a place more suited for the dead than the living.

The Manor was a huge mansion with three floors and four little towers, but iron gates surrounded it as though it were a prison rather than the home of possibly the richest men in the country.

Soldiers with long, pointed blades and scythes lined each wall, and Roselyn tried her best not to shudder when the gates closed behind her with a loud clatter like a scream. The horses looked around them wildly as the driver urged them on.

Eventually the carriage came to a halt, and Roselyn stepped out.

The doors of the manor opened and a woman and three young men with guards all around them approached her, their

gazes as cold and uninviting as the house itself.

“You must be Lady Roselyn,” the woman said, her taunting smile at odds with her warm words. “We welcome you to Thornhall Manor.”

Roselyn curtsied before once more meeting the gaze of the duchess and her sons.

The youngest son of them seemed much more amiable than his brothers, who barely looked at her.

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” he replied, stepping forward with a self-confident air and a childish sort of smirk on his face. “I am Lord Rowan. There, now at least you know who *I* am, but titles are silly, don’t you think? Call me Rowan. These are my brothers: Killian, you know, the cold one who never talks, and there’s also Silas, who keeps his sword with him every waking hour. You’ve already met Mother. At times she can be rather maddening—”

“Rowan, that’s enough,” the duchess snapped.

Rowan only shrugged, but he offered Roselyn his arm.

“Don’t let them get to you. They only hate your father, Rose.”

Roselyn blinked, baffled at Rowan’s forwardness.

“Pardon me asking, but do you not hate my father as well?” she asked.

He laughed at that.

“No. I hate your father just as much as all of them. I just don’t

hate you... or don't have reason to... yet," he replied, giving her a small wink. "But, Rose, why don't you entertain us tonight? We'll be having dinner in five or so minutes. I'll have the pleasure of showing you to your room until then—"

He reached up to brush the side of her face where a loose curl had untucked itself, and she immediately shrank away as though he were about to slap her.

"Something wrong, Rose?"

"Thank you for your kindness," Roselyn told him, trying to keep her voice steady and carefully unlinking her arm from his as she stepped aside, "But I would rather my guards escort me."

He looked taken aback for a moment and Roselyn left him.

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Once she had disappeared down the corridor, Rowan smiled and chilling laughter filled his voice as he ran his fingers through his pale blonde hair.

"So, your charm didn't seem to work on the lady, eh?" Silas taunted, putting a rough hand on the shoulder of his younger brother, who immediately shook him off.

"It should have worked—!" Rowan practically screamed at Silas, who rolled his eyes.

Before Silas could say another word to provoke Rowan, the duchess' chilling soprano voice cut through the room.

"Silas, enough."

Her voice alone was enough to silence them.

“And Rowan, if you can’t fulfill your part of the plan, then leave it to one of your brothers. I want that despicable Duke Vayrheith to suffer for what he has done. Am I clear?”

Three heads nodded in solemn silence. Rowan shifted uncomfortably, not daring to look at either of his brothers and his laughter long gone.

“Good. Make sure to dispose of the body.”

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Dinner was laid in the grand dining hall, where delicate silver was carefully set on the long table and stone-faced footmen carried plates. Ivy covered the windows, blocking the view, and only half of the candles were lit. The duchess sat on one end of the table and Roselyn on the other. Silas and Killian were already eating, but Rowan seemed more interested in Roselyn than in his dinner.

“Rose!” he had practically sang as she entered the room, “Rose, look, you get to sit by me!”

She smiled, glad at least there was one person who enjoyed her company. “Yes, isn’t that wonderful?”

Rowan beamed.

Roselyn turned to her meal: bread and strangely spiced meat with a tall glass of pinkish-rose colored wine, filled to the brim as if they supposed she could drink all of it.

She was about to take a sip of the wine when she caught Kil-

lian's cold eyes on her. He seemed to mouth something, but she couldn't tell what he meant until she raised the glass to her lips and he immediately shook his head. She set it down, untasted.

"Do you not like wine?" the duchess asked as the meal drew to a close.

Roselyn glanced at Killian, who remained a statue of a man, as if he'd never tried to talk to her in the first place.

"I would rather drink tea," Roselyn replied, warily.

The duchess looked unimpressed. "Well, aren't you the peculiar one?"

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That cold night Roselyn was alone in her room as she tried to fall asleep. She heard a footstep and froze, slowly sitting up in bed, her eyes never leaving the door for a moment.

Someone was opening the door, the lock slowly unlatching with a creak as the knob began to twist open.

But then it stopped as if whoever was on the other side had second thoughts.

Roselyn could barely catch her breath. Hugging herself, she tried her best to keep warm. There was no use locking the door; they could open it at any time they wanted.

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"Did you sleep well?" the duchess asked at morning tea where the five of them were sitting around a smaller table with crumpets and green tea. Roselyn, exhausted, had barely spoken a

word that whole morning.

“The tea is great, Rose!” Rowan exclaimed. “You said just yesterday how much you loved tea!”

“It is wonderful, dear; you should try some,” the duchess added.

Roselyn didn’t reply, nor did she touch her cup of tea.

“Lady Roselyn doesn’t seem to be feeling well,” the duchess mused, “Silas, why don’t you take her to the gardens to get some fresh air. That may cheer her up.”

“Mother, *I* want to take Rose to the gardens,” Rowan sulked. “Can’t I?”

The duchess only gave him a look before turning back to Roselyn with an overly sweet smile. This was the first time she’d smiled at Rose, and it didn’t make her feel any safer.

“Please excuse my son’s impulsive behavior,” the duchess replied before turning back to her second son with a scolding look. “Silas.”

Begrudgingly Silas stood up, hand on his sword with a careless but jagged air about him. He didn’t offer Rose his arm or even say her name, but he looked at her, scowling.

“All right, let’s go,” he said.

The two of them walked to the gardens, Silas always a pace ahead as Rose tried her best to keep up. Strange plants Roselyn had never seen in her life grew all about them. There was one plant which was a sickly green color and oozed a purplish liquid,

and another full of needles that wound around the place, making it easy to trip on its thorny vines.

“Be careful,” Silas told her carelessly as she struggled after him.

“You’re very slow,” he remarked.

She tried to catch up to him, but her dress snagged on some thorns. He didn’t even offer to help as she did her best to pull the skirt of her dress away from the thorns. As she did so, a delicate little red flower caught her attention. Before she could even think, she reached for it.

Silas slapped her hand away with such force that she cried out in terror. He must have come back, wondering what was taking her so long.

“WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING?” he screamed at her. “TRYING TO GET YOURSELF KILLED?”

“Is it poisonous?” was all Rose could think to say as she looked at the flower and backed away.

“Of course it’s poisonous,” he spat. “Along with practically everything and everyone in this house. Do you think that I don’t know what I’m talking about?”

Roselyn bit her lip, her head lowering in her ignorance and embarrassment. “S-sorry.”

He laughed bitterly. “Sorry? Is that all you have to say? I just saved your life.”

Her face red, she looked back up at him, and as her eyes stared into his he thought she looked almost pretty.

“So, you care about my wellbeing?”

“Absolutely not,” he said, but he flinched as he said it.

“But you did save my life. I doubt your mother or Killian would have done the same...”

He laughed bitterly at that, not able to believe that he had just saved a Vayrheith. It would’ve been easier to watch her die, but he’d acted without thinking. His mother would kill him if she knew he’d messed up an easy shortcut to the plan. But now that he knew Roselyn a little, he doubted he’d be able to turn away from her in the future and leave her to die as his mother fulfilled her plan. Clearing the path ahead of them, he finally walked only a few steps ahead of her, glancing back to make sure she was keeping up with him. She kept her eyes on him, her pretty smile full of amazement.

“Don’t expect me to come to your rescue next time,” he lied.

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Much later that day a knock was heard on Roselyn’s door.

“Hello, Rose? Are you there?” a voice she recognized immediately called out, and she rushed to get the door.

“Rowan?”

“I came to see you,” was his sincere reply, “I wanted to make up for the other day and spend a little time with you ever since Silas rudely interrupted me.”

Roselyn nodded. “I suppose that’s all right with me...”



He happily stepped into the room and shut the door.

“I’ll call my lady’s maid to bring us some tea,” Roselyn offered, uncomfortable alone with him, but Rowan shook his head.

“There’s no need for that. I just want to talk, the two of us. That is... if you’ll let me.”

An uncomfortable silence began to settle over the room as they stood there, Rowan shifting slightly as if trying to decide what he wanted to say and how to say it. He then looked back up at her, the hope unmistakable in his eyes.

“Rose,” he began, the look in his face telling her that he’d thought over this quite a lot. “I was wondering what you thought about your father’s whole arrangement, marrying you off to one of us for his profit. It’s horrible, isn’t it? I doubt you even want to be here.”

What he was saying sounded almost scripted.

She could only reply with, “I hate it.”

“But I doubt your father will let you out of that deal anytime soon.”

“I suppose that’s right.”

“Mother may choose to give you to Killian. He would be a silent, careless husband. Or Silas. He may seem great, but he has a quick temper. He can be rather violent, too. Or—”

“What are you getting at?” Roselyn snapped.

He looked at her, his gaze calculating. He took a step closer to her.

His voice lowered. “Or Mother may choose to give you to me, and we both know that would be the better decision.”

She stepped back as he drew nearer.

“You like me better than the rest,” he whispered, his face inches away from hers.

“Oh?”

He nodded, a small smile flickering over his face. “Mother told me that she’d let me marry you if you were in agreement... and I want you, Rose.”

With that he leaned in, his lips barely brushing against hers before she pushed him away.

“Rose...?”

She couldn’t answer. It was almost enough that he actually liked her, but to give in to him would be to give in to her father, and she’d vowed not to do that.

“Rose...?” He repeated in vain, and when she remained silent, a strange cloud seemed to pass over his face and a startling look flickered across his eyes.

The dinner chimes echoed loudly throughout the manor. Rose didn’t look at Rowan as she opened the door and motioned for him to leave.

“You are my dearest friend, Rowan. Believe me.”

“Nothing more, nothing less,” he replied.

“I will see you in a few minutes,” she said, turning from him.

He nodded glumly. “Yes, Lady Roselyn.”

And with that he closed the door.

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At dinner that night the candles flickered as rain poured outside, the silence broken by peals of thunder and flashes of lightning.

“Tell me, Roselyn, what do you think of my sons?” the duchess asked abruptly.

“They all very nice,” was Roselyn’s reply, and it wasn’t a stretch at all; each was kind in his own way, though she wasn’t sure about Killian.

Rowan looked flattered, while Silas just rolled his eyes.

“Would you be happy as the wife of any of them, perhaps?”

Roselyn paused for a moment, then looked back up, with determination. She spoke triumphantly, as if at that very moment she were setting herself free, come what may.

“Duchess of Thornhall, I have meant to tell you, to tell all of you. I don’t intend to marry.”

The duchess’ eyes filled with rage, a nasty snarl forming over her face. Rowan laughed, but the sound was neither charming nor comical. Silas watched his brother struggling on the verge of madness.

And then something happened that none of them expected. Cold, heartless Killian, who had been watching Rose intently, smiled.

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Roselyn had cried herself to sleep that night, the beautiful moonlight dancing through her bedroom window. She drifted in and out of consciousness, her thoughts and worries fading and coming back time and time again. But a shrill scream brought her back to reality.

Eyes filled with madness were the first things she saw, along with a glinting knife held up against her neck. She couldn't speak a word as she recognized the man who would be her killer. Rowan's cold smile flickered over his face and she knew that he would take his time to kill her.

"I told you I wanted you, Rose," Rowan drawled, his smile widening.

Silas thrust the door open, his chest heaving from running and his sword at his side. Killian was right behind him with his own sword, his cold eyes, usually devoid of emotion, filled with anger. Rowan paused for a moment, a look of surprise and confusion passing over his angelic features for a second before he broke out into chilling laughter.

"Killian... Silas... you're here!" their younger brother exclaimed. "You remember what Mother said; she can have one of us... or die!"

He erupted into another fit of laughter and was about to kill Roselyn when Silas lunged at him, with a furious yell. Rowan stopped suddenly, his eyes widening and the madness leaving his face all at once as Silas's sword went through his chest. Rowan's knife slipped from his hands, falling onto the floor. His eyes filled

with tears.

“I’m sorry, Rose,” he choked out, “I’m s... sorr—”

His eyes clouded over as he fell onto his back, blood seeping from his clothes. His mouth was still gaping and his eyes slowly closed. The boy who had been both an angel and a demon would never wake again.

Silas’ shaking hands still held onto his sword, unable to fully comprehend that he’d just killed his brother for a Vayrheith.

“TRAITOR! YOU WITCH! BECAUSE OF YOU I’VE KILLED MY OWN BROTHER!” Silas screamed at Roselyn, brandishing his sword.

Killian stepped in immediately, his chilling hand resting on her shoulder and a look on his face, a small reassuring smile flickering over his mouth. Roselyn was terrified.

“Silas, control yourself”

Those may have been the first words Roselyn had ever heard Killian say. He had a gentle voice, filled with grief he couldn’t hide. Killian possessed all the madness, jealousy, and hatred of his family, but unlike them, he knew it; unlike them, he felt the guilt of it and the need to control it.

“Go away, Killian,” Silas snarled, but Killian only wrapped a protective arm around Roselyn’s shoulder and stepped in front of her.

Silas seethed, his brother’s blood still on his hands. His eyes steady on Killian, he threw open the window and stepped off the

ledge.

Roselyn cried out, rushing to the window, but Killian's arm held her back.

“Rose, he's gone.”

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Deep within the ruined Thornhall Manor, a lady with emerald-green eyes and vanilla-blond hair watched the window. She was known as Roselyn Thorne. Her cold demeanor was akin to the coldness of the manor itself, and although she was a woman of delicate beauty, she'd seen more than anyone would ever know. Her husband, Killian, stood beside her, his sword by his side as ever. They were the only ones left of the ill-fated ones: they and their little girl, Ethel May Thorne. One day she would be the heir to Thornhall, but not to its tragedies, not to its darkness, not to its hate.

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Pulp magazines so often traded in the kind of science fiction that fixes its gaze with wonder on the blurring lines between alien, human, and machine. Rabe writes within that tradition, telling a tale of art, technology, and hope on the surface of Mars.

## Hiram's Sculptures

by Mary Jo Rabe

*Mary Jo Rabe grew up on a farm in eastern Iowa, got degrees from Michigan State University (German and math) and University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (library science) where she became a late-blooming science fiction reader and writer. She worked in the library of the chancery office of the Archdiocese of Freiburg, Germany for 41 years, and lives with her husband in Titisee-Neustadt, Germany. She has published [Blue Sunset](#), inspired by Spoon River Anthology and The Martian Chronicles, electronically and has had stories published in Fiction River, Pulphouse, Penumbra Speculative Fiction, and elsewhere. Find her online at [maryjorabe.wordpress.com](http://maryjorabe.wordpress.com).*

Hiram Dorsey drove his self-printed vehicle from the Habitat garage out onto the Martian surface. The electric motor hummed pleasantly. The oxygen-nitrogen mix that wafted gently out of the air distributors felt refreshingly cool on his warm face, although the peroxide stench of the surface dust annoyed him as always.

His blood pressure was probably too high, but it would go down as soon as he started his test drive. The view of the Martian surface always calmed him. He didn't need Doc Brach's nanobots

swimming around in his blood vessels to keep his circulatory system working correctly.

He had been an engineer too long to let non-obligatory machines interfere with his life any more than necessary. Machines were convenient assistants, but sooner or later, they always showed themselves to be randomly unreliable. He only used them when there was no other option.

The ride in this driving machine he had designed and developed, however, was pure joy, the perfect contrast to the bureaucratic stress he had endured from the mayor of the settlement for the past Martian year.

Hiram looked at his once bright, white, surface suit—now reddish-gray from the dust. He hadn't put on the gloves or helmet yet—perhaps a safety misdemeanor—since they were annoyingly bulky. He could get into them quickly if he had to.

It was time to accelerate and see what the rover could do out on the surface. He knew how well the virtual vehicle rides had gone. Now he needed to find out if reality matched the computer simulations. The surface area in front of the Bradbury habitat was full of jagged, red rocks covered with a slippery dust, but the oversized, heavy wheels made for a smooth ride. Hiram relaxed.

His communicator lit up. It was Mayor Berry, probably complaining about some damn fool thing or another. Hiram had no use for idiots, not in general, and certainly not for this one in particular. He shouted a few insults at the blinking device for his own amusement and ignored the threatening music that the



communicator began to broadcast when he didn't answer the visual signal.

The inside of his five-meter-long surface rover reeked of burnt plastic, but the molded windows were gleefully clear and dust-free, just as he had calculated. He loved all the interior space he saw: plenty of room for stone-carving tools, hammers, ladders, pulleys, cables, and a sturdy dolly.

So far, so good. His vehicle design calculations had worked out well, and Hiram now had a functional, completely mobile atelier. He could sculpt out on the surface of Mars as often as he wanted. Officially his job title was habitat structure and appliance engineer, but in his heart he was a sculptor. That was why he left the American Midwest in the first place and eventually ended up on Mars.

He was named after Hiram Powers, a famous sculptor his great-grandmother had admired. She had seen works of Hiram Powers in museums in Cincinnati and Pittsburgh and collected photos, all of which she left to her great-grandson. Even as a child he had been fascinated by the idea that you could carve up rocks to make them look like people, real people, funny-looking people, or even people who only existed in his imagination.

Despite a demanding major in engineering, he had filled up his electives in college with sculpting courses and spent summers in Europe where he could experiment with different kinds of stones. His first pieces sold well, and once he started working as an engineer, he negotiated long vacations in exchange for low-

er salaries. He needed the travel time. The better his sculptures sold, the less money he needed from his engineering work. Companies he worked for tended to give him everything he asked for in hopes of keeping his services.

One of his bosses even speculated that it was his sense of aesthetic perspective from sculpting that helped him recognize potential engineering flaws in structures. In reality, Hiram was just curious about how to make stuff.

Eventually he exhausted all the kinds of stones on Earth and started looking for new challenges. He heard about the settlement on Mars and applied. They didn't want the sculptor but actively recruited the famous engineer.

His communicator lit up again, but this time he saw Emma's face. She was standing at the panorama window of her cafeteria up on the surface.

"How's the test drive going?" the cafeteria lady asked. Hiram didn't tolerate questions from many people, but he knew from experience that Emma genuinely cared about the welfare of all the Mars settlers. According to her job description, she only ran the cafeteria, but in fact, she was everyone's counselor and cheerleader.

Emma had to be over forty Martian years old and at her age had only gotten the job because her brother Ned was the crazy billionaire who was footing the bill. She was short and chubby with curly, white hair, but when she smiled, she looked like an exuberant teenager.

Hiram, half her age, with his thinning, brown hair and twenty excessive kilos, no longer even looked middle-aged, except when he was sculpting. Emma often said that he looked like a little kid when he was carving away at a big rock. He couldn't tell. When he was sculpting, he was in his zone, euphoric as long as his tools kept moving.

"As expected," he answered.

"So, perfectly?" Emma asked.

"Let's say, well enough," Hiram said. "I need to be able to retreat to a shelter every now and then when I am out carving up my rocks. Doc Brach impressed upon me the dangers from radiation and other surface conditions not conducive to human life. I'm not suicidal."

"Make sure you protect yourself," Emma said. "I love your sculptures as much as anyone, but they aren't worth shortening your life for."

"Don't worry," Hiram said. "I don't let the doctor inject any medical nanobots, but I have no problem with external ones. I'm happy to let them scurry around over the surface suit and tell me when my time outside is up."

"I'm glad you found a way to do your sculptures outside on Mars," Emma said. "Even if it means you won't always be around to troubleshoot everything that could go wrong inside the habitat."

The work he did as an engineer was appreciated in the hab-

itats. The Martian authorities, except for the mayor, had long since let him set his own working hours. They recognized that he was irreplaceable.

“I have the robots programmed to fix most things,” he said. “And with this mobile atelier, I can leave my sculptures to be viewed out on the surface.”

“Why on the surface?” Emma asked.

“Just a feeling I have,” Hiram said. “But now, I’ll take a quick test drive and then come back to pack my tools.”

“Uh,” Emma said. “That’s actually why I called. The mayor seems to be exhibiting his more psychotic tendencies once again. Apparently he doesn’t like the sculpture you made of him and placed down in the bar where most of the settlers spend their time.”

Hiram chuckled. “Who says the sculpture is of the mayor? It is merely a short, naked man with exaggeratedly disproportionate extremities and a foolish look on his face. Who knows why the mayor identifies with it?”

“I think it was the patrons of Eddie’s Barsoom Bar and Grill who saw the resemblance and then commented on it over the habitat net,” Emma said. “The mayor wants you sent back to Earth.”

“Again?” Hiram asked. “Let him try. My sculptures bring in money, and I doubt that your brother wants me to leave.”

Emma laughed. “Well, you still might want to stay out of

the mayor's way," she said. "Let me know when you have your first surface sculpture finished. I can't wait to see it." Her broadcast was finished. Hiram drove away from the habitat.

He concentrated on testing all possible maneuvers for his rover. Considering that he didn't want to be disturbed while he carved away at the rocks, his rover had to have the capacity to rescue him.

If anything happened to him out on the surface, if the transmission of his vital signs showed abnormalities, the rover would extend mechanical levers, haul him back into the vehicle, and administer any necessary medical treatment.

To test the vehicle's audio sensors, he had them broadcast the swish of the wispy Martian wind, which, when amplified sufficiently, was a haunting, almost hollow but persistently mournful sound.

The sensors were also powerful enough to let him hear the sand scratching the outside of his rover as the wind picked it up and transported it. He found the sounds intensely Martian and decided he would have the rover broadcast them to his helmet when he was out scraping away the parts of the rocks that hid the figures he wanted to release.

Programmed perhaps too timidly, the rover stopped a good fifty meters away from the edge of the Valles Marineris. From the tourist balloon trips across the chasm Hiram already had a vague idea about carving a huge figure all the way down one wall. He just hadn't decided what the figure should be yet.

In any case, he concluded that the vehicle met his requirements. Hiram drove back to the habitat and loaded all his sculpting equipment so that he could begin sculpting the next day.

The first figure he had sculpted on Mars was the version of the mayor that was now located in Eddie's Barsoom Bar and Grill ten stories below the habitat surface, but that wasn't large enough for Hiram.

He remembered the giant rock figures created by Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi that he had seen in his travels through the Alsace region of France. The man was most famous for the Statue of Liberty, but Hiram had been more impressed by his red sandstone Lion of Belfort, a good twenty-two meters in length and eleven meters high. That was the size of a figure that Hiram felt like sculpting.

During the next few months he created a truly giant figure of the mayor, sculpted out of red, Martian, volcanic basalt. This time the facial features were undeniably those of the mayor and the extremities even more ridiculous.

With the help of his vehicle robots, he placed it next to the surface road from Marsport to the Bradbury habitat. The mayor was vociferously unhappy, but the figure was soon the one most often photographed and most often used in advertising for Martian products.

After that, Hiram felt the urge to create more giant sculptures, spread out over the planet, many recognizable as current settlers or famous human beings on Earth. Then he started

sculpting figures that were clearly not human beings. They had eccentric shapes and with strange, asymmetrical extremities.

He couldn't explain why he sculpted any one figure. He always started with a vague idea in his mind, and then his hands simply took over.

All of the sculptures he created on the surface were too massive to move, and Hiram wanted them to stay in their natural environments. Once he had sculpted hundreds of these figures, he felt drawn to the Valles Marineris.

Emma asked him why, but again he couldn't explain it. He just had to create some art there.

He drove to the Valles Marineris, and with the assistance of his rover's little robots constructed a system of platforms and pulleys, similar to what window washers had used back on Earth. That way he could climb up and down an entire wall of the chasm and carve away.

This time he didn't feel like carving figures; instead, his hands insisted on making objects and paths. He began to turn the wall into a huge relief sculpture. As so often, he had no idea what he was doing, but his hands moved with a passion and obsession he often felt while sculpting.

When he was finished, he gave the wall one last glance and retired to his rover. He recognized that everything suddenly made sense. The vague hints he had felt since he came to Mars became obvious. They had turned into specific, understandable communication, and he knew how to respond.

He recorded a message to Emma and then sent an enthusiastic assent to the previously unknown mentors whose communications had finally become clear to him. Their technology was reliable in a way he had never experienced before as an Earthie engineer, and the opportunity they offered was just what he'd been waiting for.

Emma took the last batch of chocolate chip cookies out of the oven and left them to cool in the dust-proof container in her cafeteria kitchen. She walked into the customer area of the cafeteria, sat down at a floor-to-ceiling window, looked out at Olympus Mons, and took out her communicator. There seemed to be a long message from Hiram.

"Hi, Emma," the cheerful voice boomed out of the video message. "You're probably the first one who will wonder where I am. The answer is a little complicated. I'll be gone for a while, but will return. That was one of the conditions I demanded, along with high pay in materials and technologies of my choice."

"Tell your brother I will be back with more ideas for how the Martian settlement can make money with the art we produce here. I don't know exactly when, though, and so he needs to stay alive for at least another decade. It turns out that faster-than-light travel is possible, with a few limits and exceptions, though."

"My rover and I are on our way to a planet on the other side of the galaxy. The inhabitants there watched me sculpt here and asked me to come to their place and create some figures for them to look at. They promised me rocks to work with that are made



of minerals unknown to our two planets. I'm curious and can't refuse this opportunity."

"They are transporting me and my rover to their planet, since it provides me with the living conditions and supplies I need. They will transport me back to a point in time within the decade of my choice. If anyone wants to know where I've gone, look at the relief map I sculpted on the north side of the Valles Marineris. It shows how to get there from here."

"Try to get the mayor removed from office while I'm gone. I'd like a more pleasant environment to work in when I get back. See ya!" And the picture of Hiram faded away.

Emma forwarded the message to her brother Ned and made an appointment with Doc Brach. She decided she would use any and all medical nanobots he recommended so that she would still be alive when Hiram returned.

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Twentieth-century pulp magazines frequently featured such unapologetically “weird” stories as Shaddai’s “On the Rocks,” which exudes dark humor with an evenly wry tone, perfectly suiting both Queen Victoria and the cheerfully bizarre set-up in which we find her.

## On the Rocks

by D’vorah Shaddai

*D’vorah Shaddai is a disabled writer who haunts Florida and is often haunted herself by the distant past. She is fascinated by tales of antiquity, spooky stories, and wild yarns. She holds a master’s degree in creative writing and also holds cats whenever they deem her worthy. D’vorah is currently composing a horror novel set in the Eastern Roman Empire. Find out more about her at [www.dvorah.ink](http://www.dvorah.ink).*

They say there’s no sense shedding tears over spilled milk, but the same can’t be said for Bombay Sapphire gin, the finest gin in the world, heaven in a blue bottle. That’s what George Morin was doing now, crying as his shot glass tipped over onto the bar, and he scrambled, too late, to save it. It made him weep to spill the really good stuff, the stuff you drank on the rocks.

The puddle spread, coming within two fingers of splashing all over his lap. Two fingers of gin, that’s how the evening had started. He’d downed them, then more, until whole hands sluiced in his stomach, and he could feel the tide of them reaching for the

spill on the bar, twisting with longing and loss. The bar, streaked and highlighted with the corpses of cigarettes, was dingy brown, the same color as George's hair. The two browns merged, so he seemed an extension of the bar, entwined with it, his body closer than any woman had been, closer than his wife, Maria.

It was fitting. His blood was practically pickled with gin, and if he cut himself shaving, he'd gush eighty proof. His tongue inched over the bar with the zeal of a tourist in a straw hat swapping spit with a blonde at Avalon's seaside, which had been rated America's second most dirty beach for more than a decade. Not exactly the pride of California. It earned that title in tits and tail as much as it did from the beer cans that dotted the beach more commonly than shells.

Licking the bar had been a poor choice, the latest one in a long line of them. It left more of the bitter taste of cigarettes and sour sweat in his mouth than the burn of the dry gin he craved. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve. George ached for the gin's loss. But he had already consumed nearly half a bottle and wasn't aching for much else. He was your typical, low-rent gin drunk, but tonight was no typical night, and he had been steadily drinking Bombay. It was the right drink to celebrate the death of his wife, Maria. And, have no doubt, it was a celebration for him. Not even the gin could completely kill the echo of her incessant nagging. If she'd ever taken to it professionally, he'd have made a mint off her, set himself up in a glass house made of Bombay to see the world through its blue-tinted windows.

“George, George Morin, George, are you listening to me? George?” She would ask question after question, as if he were deaf, drunk, and dumb, giving him no room to answer her and punctuating her displeasure with knife-like jabs into his shoulders. “Goddammit George, I found your bottles beneath the sink and the ones behind my philodendrons where I know you’ve been pissing.” She threw her hands up. “Pissing, George! Are you trying to kill my plants? What did they ever do to you, George? What did I ever do to you?” She screamed in his face. “You’re a selfish jerk, George. And now it’s after two in the morning. You’ve had me worried sick for hours, George, and you smell like a rotten ashtray. I’ll call the police. Is that what you want, George? George! George, don’t you fall asleep, George.”

Who knows why she stayed on that merry-go-round of fruitless questions so long, spinning in a dizzying orbit around him. Perhaps because she knew he wouldn’t ask them. Perhaps because she feared he would. However long it lasted, when the ride stopped, it was always the same, tired tune. He could almost recite it like his driver’s license number. “You never call, and you’re never here, and when you are here, you’re really not here, George. You’re in a drunken stupor. George, George, I’m sick of it, George. You’re nothing but a despicable drunk, and I swear that stuff will be the death of you someday. And let me tell you something else—”

But Maria had been the one who died, killed by some cut-throat because she wouldn’t give him her diamond wedding ring.

Silly old bat, George thought, as he twisted the gold band he still wore on his left hand. Well, of course, he did. It was expensive, after all. Just like her, it had cost him. And now all that remained alive of her was the memory of her grating questions and complaints that scratched into the mirror of his mind with their diamond hardness. His thoughts had become too sober, and he longed for another shot of Bombay to free him from his unwelcome and ever-encroaching sobriety.

The bartender was out of sight, had already cut him off anyway, like he needed a nanny. But to his surprise, he saw the Bombay bottle he'd been killing most of the night was within arm's reach now. Maybe the bartender had taken pity on him after all. George grabbed the bottle and searched deeply beyond its glassy, sapphire exterior for traces of gin remaining within its walls, hearing a slush of nectar from the low sea inside. He glanced at the familiar label: juniper berries, coriander seeds, cassia bark—the words blurred as his drool rained over the ingredients, running down the seal where Queen Victoria was framed in stern, sapphire radiance. Her sharp eyes seemed to gravitate toward him, and he fancied a sly smirk played over her regal lips. Then he heard the cool and steady voice for the first time.

“Don't worry. You're not really out of gin, George.”

His stool tipped over. He grabbed onto the bar right before he fell onto the floor. He jerked his head around in every direction but didn't see anyone nearby.

“As long as I'm around, you'll never be out of gin.”

That voice again. He glanced down at the bottle, and with a surreal slowness, realized the voice was coming from his fifth of Bombay. Some drunks might have broken the bottle over the bar, sworn to never touch another drop of gin, and never darkened the doorway of this cursed watering hole again. Some drunks were not George. It never once crossed his besotted mind to kick his gin habit or break his bottle of Bombay. Oh no, not him. Instead, he gathered the bottle up in his hands and listened to it with an eager ear.

“I’ll never grow empty.” The bottle’s voice was sickly pleasant in the prim cadence of Queen Victoria.

With simple delight, he saw that the bottle was indeed full. He unscrewed the top and took a couple of chugs. The gin swam down his throat in a fiery river.

“It’s the real stuff!” George bellowed.

“Be quiet, you fool.” Queen Victoria frowned from the label. “Do you want someone to hear you?” The Queen’s eyes swept over the bar regally. “If someone else knew you had a bottle that would never run dry, they would want it. It’s imperative we leave now before someone discovers your secret.”

“Right. I’ll get an Uber.”

“An Uber?” Her snobbish voice scoffed. “Don’t you have a proper car?”

He nodded. “Yes, but I’ve been drinking all evening...”

“It hardly shows.” The grand smile returned to the Queen’s

stately face. “Come now, let us be off before that bartender returns and takes me away from you.”

“He wouldn’t do that.” His throat tightened. He still wanted another drink. His mouth felt much too dry. “You’re my bottle.”

“Yes, quite so, George.” Queen Victoria laughed. “Indubitably the bartender will hug you like a lost brother and wish you well as you walk out of here with a bottle that never empties—that’s not very good for business. Be smart, George. Let’s get out of here now.”

That’s all it took. He shoved the bottle of Bombay under his jacket and jumped into his car. Tires whirred over the asphalt, and he was driving down a long strip of road into the night. The island didn’t boast many cars. Tourists and locals alike toiled around in golf carts painted like hot rods on the narrow streets. He hated them. It was a point of distinction for him that he had a real car. But now, he was glad the road was so empty. What traffic there was plagued him enough. Headlights streaked past him, blinding him, making him dizzy, their images burned against his eyes like shooting stars against a dark horizon. He zigged and zagged, fighting to steer, but all in all he was managing well for his level of intoxication. Satisfied, he reached for the bottle beneath his jacket and took a long swig. And then he stared at it curiously. Had he really heard this bottle speaking to him before, or was it all in his head? In answer, Queen Victoria shot her crystal eyes up at him, and his uncertainty evaporated forever.

“Alone at last,” she murmured.

That startled him, and he lost his grip on the Bombay. It dropped down into the passenger's seat. It was weird how the bottle said it, like they were lovers going away to elope in Las Vegas or something. Going? Going where? he thought. It dawned on him that he didn't know where he was going; anywhere away from that bar had been enough, but it seemed like he was headed for the beach, and that was as good a place as any. He reached across the peeling vinyl seat for the bottle to kill his intruding thoughts, but it slid away from his grasping hand and burned his ears with a shrill laugh.

"Catch me if you can, drunk boy."

"You... move?"

"Oh, I have many moves, George." Queen Victoria's voice bubbled with laughter like she'd been drinking, well, herself. George knew a Bombay buzz when he saw one. Her eyes glittered in the intrusive moonlight as the bottle hopped to the dashboard and danced around the air conditioning vents, doing dead rock star imitations. She thrashed like she came down with a fatal case of Teen Spirit, and she Ziggy Stardusted him with a spray of gin while knocking the base of her bottle against the dashboard, singing a pitchy and slurred rendition of "We Will Rock You." Of course, Queen Victoria would favor another Queen. And it only got worse from there. She moved on to other rock and roll royalty. It was worse than any horror movie George had ever seen to watch Queen Victoria singing "just a hunk, a hunk of burning love" again and again like a skipping record, thrusting out her



bottleneck provocatively. George gasped and took his hands off the steering wheel.

“Knock it off!” George blurted, and that’s exactly what he did, knocking the Bombay right off the dashboard as the car swerved and screeched over pavement. The stubby bottle went flying with a howler monkey shriek and landed in the floor of the passenger’s seat. He cursed as he righted the vehicle and leaned over, reaching across the floorboard for the square shape of the bottle. This was the most trouble he had ever had holding his gin, he mused. The car drifted in and out of lanes. He almost had it, but it rolled into the back seat. He could have sworn the bottle did it on purpose too. George slurred a string of curses together, punctuating them with punches to the steering wheel. He was going to have to park on the side of the road to grab this bottle. He veered to the shoulder, and the glint of glass caught his eye in the rearview mirror.

Queen Victoria’s face smiled at him, but no... it wasn’t her face... it was Maria’s face. George’s stomach dropped to his feet. He had never wanted to see that face again. The bottle rose into the air, expanding in size, and Maria’s face took up his whole rearview mirror, but now it wasn’t her face, it was his own drunken mug. The face got larger. George’s heart got faster. All he could see in the rearview mirror now were the eyes, but they weren’t his eyes. Two red eyes, redder than any eyes he had gained from boozing, bore into him with a ferocity that made bile creep into his throat. The ashen skin around those red eyes coiled so that

he knew if he could see the mouth it would be smiling. As this occurred to him, he was suddenly glad that he couldn't see that smile. Sweat coated his skin as he thought, "What is it? What the—" but he didn't have long to think about it. Maybe that was a kind of mercy. He'd been so busy looking at the Bombay in that rearview mirror that he hadn't been looking ahead. His car rocketed over a seaside cliff, flinging him onto the jagged rocks below, ending his life how he had lived it—on the rocks.

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The car hadn't burst into flames, partly because it had landed in the shallow waters of the sea at low tide. In fact, if Dirty Dave hadn't been at the foot of the cliff scavenging through the heaps of beach trash, he wouldn't have known about the car accident until the next day like everyone else. Dirty Dave lived up to his name by every definition of the senses. He wore filth like most men wore cologne, and he'd do anything for a buck, including picking through a smashed-up car before the police arrived. It wasn't like anyone was left alive to care. Pity when he checked the twisted wreck, he'd only found that body. Well, that wasn't quite all. There was that fifth of Bombay gin. That's something the police would never get their chubby fingers on, he thought gleefully. It wasn't quite the prize he got when he liberated that diamond ring off the woman on the beach but a hell of a lot tastier. Too bad the queen on the label had such a dour face. He bet a few fingers into that bottle he'd see her smile though.

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Many of the stories in pulp magazines could be said to be “of the moment.” That is, they capture and play with the zeitgeist of the times in which they were written, and could not have been written outside of a particular cultural moment. Sharlow’s story reads like a modern evolution of that type, pulling no punches and taking no prisoners.

## **No Place Like Home**

**by Mike Sharlow**

*Recently, Mike moved from his hometown, a small city on the banks of the Mississippi, to a big city in the desert. He traded the sub-zero winter temperatures in the Midwest for the oven-hot summer in the Southwest. As far as he’s concerned, both are surreal. His professions have been wide-ranging and eclectic, from a structural designer to a special education teacher. Presently, he spends his days writing and experiencing the adventures in the Valley of the Sun. Find him online at [mikesharlowwriter.com](http://mikesharlowwriter.com).*

**I**t was a pleasant warm day late in July, as I drove the rural roads of Wisconsin. Everything was green: the thick woods, the lush cornfields, and rolling cow pastures. Country music lauds the smell of clean country air, but it always smells a bit like farm animals and manure. I moved to the Phoenix metro area a couple of years ago, but I came home to Riverton, my hometown, a small city on the banks of the Mississippi, during the summer to get a reprieve from the searing desert where the convective heat created a special urban smell, a combination of hot funk and pollution. But the winters in the Valley of the Sun were perfectly warm and inspiring, while the frozen tundra of

Wisconsin punished its residents with biting subzero temps and dark gray days that only antidepressants and alcohol could assuage.

I was on my way to see my old friend, Steve. We had known each other since 1977, and now it was 2022. Even though he was supposedly in great shape and healthy (he was a runner, and he never smoked, not even in high school like most of us did), he had a stroke about six months ago. His daughter told me that he had a severe headache that lasted two days, so he went to urgent care, where they very quickly realized the severity of his situation. While they were admitting him, he had a severe stroke that left his right side partially paralyzed, and he lost the ability to speak other than saying “Yup.” As the months passed, he also began losing his vision.

The nursing home where Steve now lived was in a small town in the heart of America’s dairyland an hour from Riverton. I had rented a Chevy Impala at the airport which had California plates on it. I didn’t consider it a problem, until a big, muddy, red pickup truck pulled alongside me, and a bearded guy with a John Deere cap rolled down his window and signaled me to do the same. I did. “Hey, California faggot! You don’t belong here!” he yelled and flicked his lit cigarette through my open window. It bounced off my chest and landed in the passenger seat. Then the truck roared past as it belched out a cloud of harsh black diesel smoke that enveloped my car, both inside and out. I tossed the burning cigarette out the window, but not before it had burned a

small hole in the upholstery. *How much is that going to cost me?*

The truck tried to distance itself from me, but that wasn't going to happen. I wasn't a great driver, but I also wasn't afraid to drive fast enough to hunt someone down. At some point the guys in the truck realized they weren't going to lose me, so they slowed down, and I followed at a safe distance. They were locals, otherwise they wouldn't have been so territorial with me. "You don't belong here, faggot," he'd said. First of all, I did belong here. And the "faggot" part, although somewhat accurate, was derogatory.

*How about if someone lights you on fire with a bundle of sticks, you son of a bitch?*

It wasn't long before they hit the brakes and made a right down a dirt road lined with cornfields that made me think of Stephen King. They drove fast and kicked up clouds of annoying dust. I kept my distance to avoid as much of it as possible.

The road led to an old white clapboard farmhouse that was about a hundred years old. There was also a weathered red barn, a rusty metal shed, and a concrete silo. Beyond the buildings were thick woods from where a big black and brown mutt appeared and raced toward my car. The men got out of the truck, but I would have to deal with the dog first.

Before I left the city, I stopped at my storage shed and got a gun. I flew into town yesterday, so I was unarmed for a day, which was longer than I liked. Right now, this was why: a charging angry dog and two shit-kicking country assholes. So I fired a shot into the air and yelled, "Call your dog off!"

One of the guys whistled and the other yelled, “Trumpy! Get over here!” The dog wheeled around and stood next to the guys, still barking.

With my gun pointed at them, I told them to put the dog in the truck. After they did, I approached them. When I pointed a gun at someone, I could gauge their level of fear. Country boys had guns, and these guys knew what it was to have one pointed at them, but did they know what it was like to be shot?

They didn’t offer an apology for what they had done to me. Instead, they stared at me quietly. I saw fear in their eyes, but it was the fear of a cornered animal. Both were formidable in size. They wore matching beer swill T-shirts, decorated with American flags, stretched tautly over their bellies.

“Anyone in the house?” I asked.

Both shook their heads. “No.”

“Toss your cell phones and wallets on the ground.”

They obliged.

“Is there a gas can in that shed over there?” I pointed.

Both nodded. “Yes.”

“Throw your lighters on the ground too,” I ordered.

The guy with the John Deere cap did, but the guy with the MAGA cap said he didn’t smoke.

Then it was over before they knew it. I bet they thought we were going to have more conversation before they died: one bullet through the John Deere cap and one bullet through the

MAGA cap. I believe there's a world after this one, not heaven, but more like another dimension or universe. I was okay with them having an existence, as long as it wasn't in my world. Once there, those good old boys would understand why I killed them, and hopefully they'd find solace in the fact that a death here became a new life for them somewhere else. Someday I will cross over also, and I might see those people I sent to the other side. I was okay with that.

The doormat in front of their farmhouse door said, "Make your peace with God, if you enter uninvited." I suspected that MAGA and John Deere were my only threats, but I still walked into the house with my gun drawn. Going room to room in a house I didn't know was always unnerving, and it was certainly not a place where I liked to be or where I wanted to die.

The house was tidy enough, but it smelled of grease and dust. The furniture and appliances were old, vintage: the 1970s, except for the big flat-screen TV. It was impossible to walk quietly on the creaky wood floors, so I stopped after a few steps and called out, "Anybody here?"

"Hello!" I heard a female voice respond from upstairs.

This was problematic, and the solution was obvious to prevent complications. I slowly walked up the stairs, and halfway up, I called again, "Who's there?" My gun was pointed towards any potential threat.

"Help me! Please help me!"

"Who are you?"

“My name is Naomi Brown! Tommy and Karl have me tied up in the bedroom. Who are you?”

“I’m here to help,” I said, but I really hadn’t made up my mind about that yet. There were two bedrooms upstairs, and I could tell which one she was in from the sound of her voice. I went to the bedroom she wasn’t in and took a pillowcase from a pillow.

The door to the bedroom was latched with a padlock. With a couple of kicks, I was confident I could pop the latch or break the door jamb. When she heard me rattle the doorknob to test it, she yelled, “The key is above the door!”

I slid my fingers along the ledge and knocked the key onto the floor.

“You found it,” Naomi said. Already I thought this young woman talked too much. By her voice I figured she was young.

I quietly unlocked and removed the padlock.

“You there?” she called.

I swung the door open but stepped back out of sight and at a safe distance. Anticipating any surprise or ambush was one of the reasons why I was still alive.

“Hello? Where are you?” Naomi asked.

“Do you have a gun or any weapon? I suggest you toss them towards the door. I have a gun, and I will shoot you.”

“Please don’t! I don’t have anything!” She paused and became quieter. “I’m tied up to the bed. I heard the gunshots. Please



don't shoot me." The panic in her voice sounded authentic. I stood out of sight and slid my phone just enough inside the door jamb to see her in the camera. She looked like a deer in headlights, as she stared towards the door. She was tied up on the bed, as she had said. The older I become, the more difficult it is for me to tell how old people are, particularly women that are much younger than me. Naomi was probably in her late twenties, early thirties, but I could easily be off by more than five years. She was barefoot and had on a white T-shirt and cutoff jean shorts. Before I entered, I used my phone to survey the rest of the room. The furnishings were spartan, with just the bed and a small table with a desktop computer and a video camera pointed at the bed. It was amazing how so little told so much. I walked into the room out of the line of sight of the camera.

"Turn your head away towards the window and close your eyes. If you look at me, I will shoot you. Understand?"

When I got into the room, I saw that the PC and the camera were off, but I still turned the camera away, just because.

"Please don't hurt me," she pleaded.

I didn't want to hurt her. I could justify killing Tommy and Karl, especially now. But I surmised that Naomi was "an innocent." The innocent didn't deserve to die, but sometimes they had to.

Her eyes were closed, and her head was turned away. I quickly walked up and placed the pillowcase over her head. She flinched in surprise. "Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you," I

said. At this point, I was telling the truth. Her hands were secured behind her with zip-tie handcuffs, which were then attached to the bedframe with other thick zip ties. Her ankles were cuffed the same way. “I’ll be right back,” I told her and went downstairs to get a knife from the kitchen. When Naomi felt the cold of the blade as I cut her free from the bed, she stiffened. “I’m going to leave your hands tied for now.” Once her feet were completely free, I helped her to her feet. “Do you have shoes?”

“I did when they brought me here. They don’t let me wear shoes. They gave me slippers for when it gets cold. This old house is drafty.”

They kept her barefoot to make her escape more difficult. Running in the woods or cornfields without shoes would be painful and difficult. In the dead of winter with a foot of snow on the ground, slippers wouldn’t provide much protection from the cold.

I found her slippers in the bedroom closet and slid them on her feet. “Th-Th-Thank you,” she said, her voice quivering.

“I’m going to lead you down the stairs. I’ll tell you when to step.” Once we were downstairs, I led her out to the porch and sat her on an old wood rocking chair. “Don’t move,” I said.

“Who’s John Deere and who’s MAGA?”

“Karl is John Deere, Tommy is MAGA,” she said. She knew them well. “You killed them?”

I didn’t answer but went back to deal with Tommy and

Karl. The guys weren't tall, but they were wide, and as I dragged them onto the porch and into the house, I listened to the annoying Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! of their heads bouncing off the pine porch steps and the yapping of the dog in the truck.

"Trumpy! Shut up!" Naomi yelled and the dog stopped barking. She had become part of the family, but was it a family she wanted to belong to? Who ties up family members? "Do you want my help?" Naomi asked. She could hear my struggle.

"What? No!" I gasped. But I cursed myself for not killing Tommy and Karl in the house.

I dropped Tommy in the living room, and I pulled Karl into the kitchen where I blew out the pilot lights on the gas stove and turned on the burners to fill the house with gas. Then I went back outside and sat Naomi on the tailgate of the truck. "Where are you taking me?"

"Nowhere," I said, as I picked up the shell casings from my gun. After rifling through their wallets, I got a total of \$242. I doubted that would cover the cost of the burned upholstery.

Then I grabbed Tommy's and Karl's cell phones and went back into the house. Most people used facial recognition or fingerprint security on their phones. Both of them used their right index. It was strange to use their limp fingers from their dead bodies to access their phones. I was looking to see if either had taken a pic of me at some point throughout our short but eventful meeting. It seemed unlikely that they had, but I had to be sure. There weren't any of me, but as I scrolled, all of their oth-

er pics told their story. There were hunting pics of them posing with dead deer. There were social pics of a pig roast at a rod and gun club. There were entertainment pics and video of a country music festival. There were Trump rally pics and a video where Karl got to shake Donald's hand. There were also a lot of other random pics of day-to-day things that didn't mean anything to me. And finally, there were the pics and video of Naomi stretched out on the bed posing nude in both provocative and intensely revealing poses. The more explicit ones were of them having sex with her.

I went back upstairs to Naomi's bedroom and threw the bed sheet over the computer and video camera. I took them out of the house and put them in the back of the pick-up truck. After wiping down the cell phones and wallets, I set them there also. This would be all the evidence the police would need.

"Can you control the dog?" I asked.

"Yeah, he's actually a good dog. He listens to me."

"I want to move the truck, so I'm going to let him out. If you're wrong, I will shoot him."

She was telling the truth again, and the dog leaped to her side when she called him. Then I parked the truck a safe distance from the house, near my car.

I got the gas can from the shed and poured it on the outside walls of the farmhouse and lit it up with Karl's lighter. The wood in that old farmhouse had been drying out for over a hundred years, and in minutes flames were climbing up the walls. When

the gas from the stove ignited, the house would become one huge inferno and blow up with nothing left to salvage.

“You’re burning the house down.” She smelled the gas and fire. “I’m glad you killed them. You want to know what they did to me?”

“No, I don’t need to.” Even though she looked physically healthy and clean, they had been hurting her. I had perpetrated a lot of ill will in my time, but it didn’t mean I was numb or apathetic to the things they had been doing to her. She wanted to tell me about her plight with Tommy and Karl so I would feel sorry for her and not kill her. At this point, I had already decided I would let her live unless things suddenly went sideways.

I cut her hands free and tossed the zip-tie cuffs into the car but left the pillowcase on her head. Trumpy kept nudging her face like he wanted her to remove the pillowcase. “I’m going to leave now. Don’t turn around, and keep the pillowcase on your head until you hear my horn. I’ll be watching you in my rearview mirror.”

“I understand. I won’t look, I promise,” she said nervously.

“I took the computer and video camera out of the house. Their cell phones and wallets are set next to them. It won’t be long before there will be authorities swarming all over here. They’re going to make a big deal over you. Be prepared.”

“They’re going to see everything, aren’t they? What should I tell them?” She sighed, then wept momentarily.

“I am sorry those videos and photos will be scrutinized, but it’s necessary to establish your innocence. As for me, tell them whatever you want. I’ll be interested to see what you say.”

“You’re a hero, and nobody will know who you are. I don’t know why you killed Tommy and Karl. I don’t know how you found me, or why you saved me. I don’t understand any of this.” Confusion and desperation made her tremble and her voice quake.

If I told her I killed those guys for revenge, and freeing her from captivity and abuse was happenstance, it would complicate things and do nothing to alleviate her trauma. Leaving questions unanswered was the only way to go. The mystery of it would keep it clean. Often people need meaning, and they tend to create their own narrative to fit what they want to believe. I believe killing Tommy and Karl and then freeing her was a beautiful synchronicity.

As I drove away, I heard her call out, “Thank you!” Once I knew I was out of sight, I honked my horn.

When I turned onto the highway to see Steve again, I felt relieved. It wasn’t long before an ambulance and a firetruck passed me. I watched them disappear in my rearview mirror, as they raced toward the growing plume of black smoke polluting the pristine country-blue sky. By the time they extinguished the fire, the house would be cinder and ash. There wouldn’t be much left of the bodies either.

The nursing home was small and set at the north edge of

the small farm town next to a vast cornfield. I walked in and I was met by that familiar nursing home scent of cafeteria food and dirty adult diapers. It wasn't strong enough to stick, and in a couple of minutes, I didn't even notice it. At the front desk I got directions to Steve's room. "Oh yeah, Steve," the young receptionist said and smiled. "He's a good guy."

"Yeah, thanks," I said and headed to his room. Steve was halfway down the hall, slowly heading towards me in his wheelchair. His head was cocked, and his body slumped like it had given up. He had on blue jeans and a Led Zeppelin T-shirt, tucked in like he always did.

"Steve, Steve, it's me." I bent down to get in his line of sight. I didn't know how bad his eyes had become.

He perked up and turned his head my way. "Yup, yup, yup, yup," he said excitedly, and gave me the thumbs up with his left hand. He turned his chair around and led me to his room where we could visit in private.

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Poignant tales are hard to pull off without stumbling, and even harder to do with a limited word count. Yet, Schultz does it brilliantly here, crafting a touching narrative that proudly stands in the tradition of strange romances that were once hallmarks of certain pulp magazines.

## ***The Bridge to You***

**by Eva Schultz**

*Eva Schultz lives in Aurora, Illinois, where she is a business writer by day and a fiction writer by night. Her work has recently appeared in The Rind, The Worlds Within, and TDotSpec's Strange Wars anthology. She lives with a cat named Otto and enjoys drawing, painting, and collecting typewriters. Visit her online at [www.evaschultz.com](http://www.evaschultz.com).*

Matthew Donovan had no way out of New York City. He stood staring down Fifth Avenue, turning a key over and over in his hand. Eventually, he slipped it into his trousers pocket and took a few tentative steps along the sidewalk.

How long had it been since he was last here? Even though the skeleton of the city was the same, so much of the flesh had morphed and modified over the years that he wasn't entirely sure what he was looking at. It had always been crowded, tough-minded, fast, but now it moved at a pace that astonished him, leaving him like a bedraggled piece of newsprint whipped about on the wind.

He rubbed his palms briskly over his bare arms and moved



forward. Walking made him feel like he was accomplishing something, moving toward a goal, even though he knew he was walking to no one, to nothing. Beverly's face flashed through his mind, and he was so startled at the thought of her that he stopped short.

A fast-moving man in a business suit brushed by him, muttering a curse. Matthew forced himself forward again, mechanically, his mind full of her.

The city rolled out before him, the only place he had ever belonged; now, he belonged nowhere. Up ahead was the Flatiron Building, eternally poised like a ship ready to launch out into the world. It had always been one of Beverly's favorites. Let tourists flock to the Empire State Building; the gleaming, triangular skyscraper held all the charm of the city for her. They had walked by it on their first date, and ever since hearing how much she loved it, he had felt a particular affection for it, too.

He gazed up at the elegant facade, imagining Beverly here with him, pointing out the details and flourishes of the architecture. Perhaps he should just stay here, standing alongside this stately old building, for the rest of his life. Maybe if he dreamed of her hard enough, she would appear to him.

His breath became ragged as the reality of his situation crushed in on him. No, he couldn't stop moving and let his situation consume him. He had to trick his mind into believing that he was doing something to fix the mess that was his life.

In a flash, he knew where he should go next.

The blocks rolled by before him, the world strange and cold and foreign. The Bowery, Little Italy, Chinatown, full of people but empty for him. The faces of the pedestrians blurred together in a mass of uncomprehending, uncaring humanity. This is how the city had always felt before he met Bev. He had met her when she was assigned as his new lab assistant; he walked into the lab one day to find her waiting for him, her red hair swept into an updo, her intelligent eyes peering out at him from behind cat's eye glasses. From that day, the lonely feeling was gone —forever, or so he had thought.

Up ahead loomed the arched entrance to the Brooklyn Bridge, like a doorway into another world. Matthew followed a stream of pedestrians, ranging from focused power walkers to ambling tourists, onto the elevated walking path. He swallowed hard as he thought of the last time he had walked this route with her. Perhaps if he walked the length of the bridge, he would think of something, anything, that might help him.

The bridge opened up before him beyond the arch. A white line ran down the middle of the wooden plank walkway, dividing the flow of foot traffic like a miniaturized copy of the roadway below. Matthew shoved his fists into his pockets as a breeze kicked up cool river air into the wide blue sky.

Growing up in the city, he had gone blind to so much of its beauty until Bev came into his life. They took walks on their lunch breaks between long sessions in the lab, testing and developing the innovations that they hoped would change the world.

Even among other scientists, he had always been the unusually enthusiastic one, the one who had to downplay his obsession with physics, mechanics, chemistry to fit in. Beverly, he soon discovered, was the one person who could match him. She poured out her theory on matter transport for much of the morning while they prepped for their first experiment, and she only broke from the subject when he took her into the city to buy a sandwich and admire the sights.

He remembered the feel of her hand in his one September day when they walked the Brooklyn Bridge. He had led her to a bench near the middle, pulled a small box from his jacket pocket, and bit back his smile when he saw that she was trying to look surprised but clearly had guessed what he was doing. He opened the box to show her a set of amethyst-purple celluloid hair combs, set with a mother-of-pearl moon and stars, and while she tilted her head to work one into her hair, he took the moment to draw the engagement ring from his pocket and drop to one knee. She laughed when she realized what he'd done, and while she loved the ring, she always seemed to love the hair combs just as much.

Matthew looked up at the famous city skyline, so meaningless to him without her. Around him, other walkers veered off to lean their elbows on the railing and admire the view, pointing and snapping pictures. He passed a group of laughing teenagers and spotted his destination up ahead—the bench where he and Bev had sat so many times, including on that last day.

It was occupied, he noted with a pang of disappointment,

wishing he could have it to himself, just him and his memories. The figure sitting there was a small woman, all in black.

She was elderly, dressed in a neat black skirt and smart jacket, a little pill hat perched on her white hair. She seemed out of place here; had she walked out here alone, with no one to keep her safe on her journey? She didn't notice him; she was reaching into a large purse in her lap.

He stopped short when she withdrew a red rose. He felt like he was invading something private by watching her, yet he couldn't look away. As he watched, she shuffled to the railing, kissed the petals of the flower, and tossed it into the river.

Matthew swallowed and bowed his head. He knew what she was feeling, every bit of it. He was seized with an urge to approach her, to commiserate—even if just for a moment—with someone who knew the type of loss that was eating him alive. He drew up beside her as she reached to smooth her wispy white hair. “Ma’am, I just want to say that I’m sorry—”

The rest of Matthew's words fled as he watched her bring her hand away from her head. In it, she held an amethyst-colored hair comb.

It had seen the wear of decades—one of the teeth was broken away—but it was the same celluloid body, with the mother-of-pearl design set into the scalloped top.

“Matthew?”

He raised his head to look into the sharp, intelligent, now

ancient eyes of his wife.

The bridge seemed to tilt and spin under his feet. Matthew leaned heavily against the railing and stared into the timeworn version of the face that he knew so well. It took a moment for his mind to register that she was swaying; he reached for her a moment before she would have fallen, guiding her back to the bench on legs barely more steady than hers.

They sat, his arm around her shoulders, and stared into one another's faces.

"It works," Bev said softly. "Our time machine works. It sent you here."

He tried to speak several times before his voice returned. At first he could only murmur her name, resting his forehead against hers, overcome by the sorrow and horror and joy. Finally he leaned back to look at her. "I saw you just a few hours ago," he told her. "We were here, Bev, right here, and then after I activated the device, everything disappeared—all I could see was light, the brightest I've ever seen. When I could see again, I was in midtown, and the whole world had changed."

He glanced out at the pedestrians moving past them, oblivious to an elderly woman and a young man, sitting together on a bench, speaking low.

"How long have I been gone?" he asked.

"Fifty-two years." Bev smiled at him. In spite of it all, she somehow smiled. Even in their darkest moments, she never

seemed to lose that wonder at the mysteries of scientific discovery. He had always admired and envied that in her.

“You were right about the bridge infrastructure.” She waved a hand at the network of cables rising above them. “It was the energy conductor we needed to make the launch work. I just never anticipated how that much power would affect the device itself.”

Matthew fished the key out of his pocket and stared down at it. “The energy blast must have destroyed the machine. I can’t believe the key survived; it was still in my hand when I opened my eyes.”

Bev nodded, her rheumy eyes sorrowful. “When you activated the device, it was like a grenade went off in front of me. You were gone; all I found was a piece of the machine casing embedded in the deck. I managed to pull it out before the authorities came; I couldn’t let anyone know we were testing a time machine, not with Cold War spies everywhere.” She clasped his hand. “I knew that, if you were still alive somehow, you didn’t have the machine anymore, so you had no way to get back.”

“What did you tell the FBI?” Matthew asked.

“Enough to make them think that it was a Russian attack on U.S. scientists. They dragged the river for days; eventually they declared you dead.” She closed her eyes, pain passing over her features. “I could never be sure if I’d watched you time travel or... watched you die.”

“All those years.” Matthew could barely whisper the words. “I saw you this morning, Bev, but you’ve been alone all this time.”

He swallowed. “Or... maybe not all alone... you must have married again? Do you have children, grandchildren...?”

Bev’s laugh rang out, a little huskier with age, but the same laugh he had been delighted by so many decades before—and just hours before. “Don’t you know me better than that, Matthew Donovan? There’s never been anyone but you.”

“...all this time?”

“All this time.” Her eyes crinkled as she smiled.

Matthew released her and buried his face in his hands. This was worse than not knowing how to go forward as a man displaced from his time. He had found the one person he depended on in all the world, but now two generations separated them. And he had put her through a lifetime of loneliness that he had never had to experience.

He felt her frail hand resting lightly on his shoulder, and he raised his head. “I’ll take care of you,” he promised. “I know it can’t be how it was, and we won’t have much time left together. But I’ll take care of you. If you’ll let me.”

“I’ve dreamed of that face for so long,” Bev said, her eyes wet as she smiled at him. “But, Matthew, don’t you know by now that I do more than dream?” She fished in the purse again and removed an oblong powdered steel object. As he watched, she opened a hatch on the side, then held it out for him to see.

He stared at the device and then at her. “What is that?”

“What do you think I did all those decades?” She laughed.

“I didn’t know if you were still out there, but if you were, and if I somehow found you again, you’d need a new time travel device, wouldn’t you? It took decades for the technology to come far enough—and for my research to advance enough—but I’ve rebuilt the whole thing. Look, it doesn’t even need a key anymore.” She ran a finger over the screen under the hatch, and it lit up. She tapped in a code and looked up at him. “I didn’t know if this day would ever come, but I had to be ready for it. And I am.”

Matthew pulled his wife into his arms and buried his face in her hair, the hair comb pressing against his cheek. The few years he had had with her rushed through his mind, and he realized with wonder that she was looking back on them as distant memories—memories that had determined the course of her life.

He rose, holding the device in both hands, and then glanced around. “What about all these people?” he said. “Isn’t it too risky?”

Bev stretched out a hand, and Matthew helped her to her feet. “Trust me,” she said with a wink. “Fifty-two years is plenty of time to develop. It won’t go like the last time. Oh, and don’t forget, my younger self won’t remember any of this. From her perspective, you vanished in an explosion, and a moment later, there you are again—a couple of hours older, with quite a story to tell!”

Matthew nodded. “I’ll tell her—you—what you said about explaining the explosion to the FBI.”

Bev laughed. “At least you know that story will work!”



Matthew touched her cheek. “I hate that I have to ‘undo’ 52 years of your life,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

She placed her hand on his. “I’m not. If I could make this breakthrough in all that time without you, just think what we’ll do together.”

“Still...” He kissed her forehead. “Part of me will always remember you like this. I’ll never forget what you did for me.”

Matthew looked into his wife’s eyes and tapped the screen.

Beverly Donovan, 82 years old, watched her husband disappear in front of her for the second time in her life, this time in a gentle wave of light.

A passing jogger looked up as a flash of light drew his eye. He did a double-take; he could have sworn he had seen a small, dark figure standing there for just an instant. Now there was no one, just an empty bench. He shook his head sharply, decided to cut back on his morning caffeine, and continued on his way.

A short distance behind the jogger, an elderly couple walked hand-in-hand to the bench. They smiled at each other, and he reached to adjust a little comb tucked into her white hair. She kissed him lightly and squeezed his hands, and they walked on, together.

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Pirate stories are a particular flavor of adventure tales that are in desperate need of a new lease on life. Along comes Strivelli's story to scratch that particular itch. With memorable characters and no small amount of humor, this is a story that knows how to have fun.

## ***The Old Pirate's Tale***

**by Ginger Strivelli**

*Ginger has written for Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine, Autism Parenting Magazine, Flash Fiction Magazine, Third Flatiron, Silver Blade, several other magazines, and several anthology books. You can find her online [@GingerStrivelli](#).*

The Old Pirate sat with his bent back against the main mast and his legs, both peg and real, propped up on an upturned empty rum barrel. The younger fellas called him Smiley, cause he never smiled. He always just introduced himself as “an old pirate.”

“It happened here in this sea!” He said, pointing at the rocky islands in a choppy dark sea. “The wyrm was here. He slinked and slimed his way across those rocks there.”

“We’ve heard this one, Smiley, how about a new tale?” The first mate, Freddie said.

“Ye gonna hear it again son, hush up.” The Old Pirate held up his cane that was made from some unidentified large leg bone and pointed it at his own broken-off leg. “That’s where me leg

went, into the belly of that wyrm!

“He was black as night with a mane like a horse, but it looked more like seaweed than hair. It was as long as this ship. Nay, it was a bit longer.” He pointed his bone cane from the bow to the stern of the pirate ship as the gathered men all looked on.

“Seagulls circled its nasty head like a halo, but for the damned instead of the saintly. It wasn’t its looks that scared us first, though; it was the stench! We smelled it before we saw it come crawling outta the waves. It was like rotten meat mixed with the cheapest perfume. We gagged and retched, all spewing our hardtack and rum overboard as if we were seasick.”

“The wyrm! It’ll get us all!” One of the younger pirates said, jumping up and running around taunting the others in jest.

“Crack on, there son. It just might,” the Old Pirate said.

“What did it do first, Smiley?” The Captain hollered from behind him at the ship’s wheel. “You always tell it differently each time.”

“It spat at us, it did!” He mimicked it by spitting a wad of mucus onto the deck himself. “It spat flaming oil that clung to everything, including us. My ol’ Cap, rest his soul, was hit with a clump of the wyrm’s spit that ate through his pretty red velvet coat and stuck to his skin. He stunk to high heaven for thirty years afterward till he died fighting that kraken.”

“Tell us about that! We’ve heard about the wrym a dozen times. Tell us the kraken tale!” The first mate begged.

“The wyrm spit on the Cap’ then spit on the deck, the sail, and even our masthead mermaid statue. She was beautiful, and on the full moons would come to life at night to give us a kiss... but after that she smelled too bad and we all ran from her.”

“Tell us about her! That’s gotta be a tale to hear!” One of the others said.

“He... or she: we never could tell what the damn thing was... roared like a lion as it wrapped itself around the ship and then grabbed ol’ Crow from crow’s nest and ate him whole, in one bite, I tell ye!”

“I thought Crow only had his arm bit off?” The Captain called.

“Nay, that was when the giant glowing seahorse attacked us the year before. The seahorse only got an arm, but the wyrm ate the rest. After it ate Crow, it came down off the mast and headed right for our little cabin boy, a lad barely eight years old. Well, I couldn’t let that thing eat the kid, now could I? So I jumped between them and threw the kid into the sea to save him.”

“Into the sea?” Freddie squealed.

“Oh, little Howie could swim better than any fish ye ever seen; he was fine. After I threw the kid to the water, the wyrm on deck came for me. I threw a cannon ball at it! It hit the monster square in its jaw. A great big bloody tooth came falling out of its mouth.” The Old Pirate pulled an eight-inch curved fang hanging from a chain out from under his blood-stained gold brocade

tunic and held it up for all to see.

“Our cook had come up on deck banging two frying pans together as if the sound would drive the wyrm away. All it did was make it mad. It lunged for the old lady, taking both pans and both her arms and her head in one gulp. It swallowed without chewing, letting the cook’s body and legs fall bleeding to the deck. The pots must have not agreed with it, cause it coughed them up. They be the very ones our cook makes your fish stew with now, sons, down there in this ship’s galley. I brought them with me as keepsakes from my previous ship after it was destroyed by the ant people.”

“The ant people?” One of the listeners burst out laughing.

“The wyrm wasn’t full, though, because it turned on me. It had eaten all of Crow, except that lost arm of his, and then it ate half the cook, but it was still hungry or maybe just mad. It was still bleeding from the mouth where I knocked its tooth out. With that bloody awful mouth it came at me. I was a foolish young lad, like you lot... so I didn’t run. I charged at it, kicking and screaming like a banshee.”

The Old Pirate picked up his peg leg from the rum barrel and waved it around for the crowd. “That’s how ye get legs bitten clean off, sons... don’t go kicking at no monsters, ye hear me?”

A few of the younger boys nodded, while the others giggled wildly at the tale.

The tale wasn’t over. The Old Pirate usually told a third act about his troubles healing from the wound that would have killed

a lesser man. This time the tale was cut short, though, as the ship suddenly jerked sideways, throwing the storyteller off his perch onto his arse on the deck.

“The Wyrn!” The Old Pirate screamed, pointing at the starboard side of the ship.

The listeners’ laughter drowned out the roar at first. It was not until the wyrn had eaten poor Freddie in one bite that the crew realized the tale had ended and reality had set in. There really was a wyrn, and it was attacking the ship!

The Old Pirate was screaming, reminding the young men not to kick it. It was indeed spitting noxious goo all over the deck and the crew. Seagulls circling like vultures over the fantastic scene.

“I’ll be damned, Smiley was telling the truth this time!” The Captain yelled as he threw his sword at the monster. It struck the thing right in the triangle of flesh between its three eyes. Everyone scattered from under it, expecting it to fall. It didn’t.

“It don’t have a brain, Cap, you gotta hit the heart,” the Old Pirate called from where he was climbing up the mast.

“Where’s the heart?” The Captain screamed as he grabbed two more swords from a barrel by the ship’s wheel.

“Hell, if I know!” The Old Pirate said, dodging a nip from the monster and falling off the mast back to the slimy, stinking deck.

A brave young pirate led half a dozen men, all armed with

swords, to charge at the wyrm, stabbing it multiple times all along its body. The wyrm just turned and slithered towards the Old Pirate, with the swords hanging out of its head and body not seeming to trouble it at all.

A small boy came running up the stairs from the galley holding a jar of honey and a bag of sugar. He threw the honey at the wyrm's head. It gulped the whole thing down but then stopped cold in its tracks and started to quiver in pain. It let out the most terrifying screech and fell to the deck. The boy threw the bag of sugar all over the wyrm's head, which made it cry in pain again, briefly, before it went into a seizure that ended with it dying right there on deck.

"Son, how did ye know that would kill it?" The Old Pirate asked, scrambling to his feet, both real and wooden.

"Me mum's a witch," the boy said calmly, then turned and headed back to the galley like it was nothing.

"Told ye there was a damned wyrm!" The Old Pirate said, heading off to his cabin to let the youngsters clean the thing off deck.

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Straightforward action-adventure tales are harder to find these days, but were once a staple of the pulp magazines. Tager's story would be right at home alongside an issue featuring the likes of Howard's Conan the Barbarian, or Moore's Jirel of Joiry.

## ***A Night in the Alleys of Andragar***

**by James Tager**

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In the back alleys of Andragar you can find anything a person could put a price to, Tobias reminded himself, stepping out into the night. It was in the backstreets of Andragar that the city's cut-throat mercantilist ethic took on literal significance. Life was for hire, death for sale. There was a saying: that only the desperate, the dispossessed, and the dangerous made their home in the Alleys. It was a saying that Tobias, who had moved to the Alleys at an early age, had always disliked—but then again, his own life certainly fit the particulars.

In the back alleys of Andragar you can find anything. Tobias only needed two jars of salt, a box of matches, and a decent bowl of kraken noodles.



He found the salt at Ethel's shop of oddities. Ethel sniffed when she saw Tobias come in, dripping wet from the rain and flapping his greatcoat about like a great black bird, but she stifled any biting remark when Tobias showed her his badge.

"Guild business, Ethel. I need two jars of salt. The good stuff"

"The good stuff? Two full jars?" Ethel sniffed, wiping at her long nose. "Who's the lucky target?"

Tobias tapped his Guild badge on the counter. The insignia, a closed fist above a weeping eye, flashed under the low swinging lights.

"The Duke of Achera visits the city tomorrow, for a procession along the Promenade. It's been decided that he won't be leaving again."

Ethel whistled low. "An assassination on the Promenade? During a procession, no less? There'll be hell to pay for that, even for your Guild."

Tobias shrugged, his broad shoulders shifting beneath his coat. "It's been decided." When Ethel continued to look at him inquiringly, Tobias shifted his weight forward, bringing his massive hands down on the counter.

"It's the Duke who has hell to pay. My Guild will be collecting."

Ethel raised her hands defensively. "All right, all right. Everyone knows that he's a villain, there's no doubt about that. I'm just saying to be careful."

Ethel moved to disappear into the back room, but turned

back around before her second step. “This does explain why someone’s been looking for you.”

Tobias frowned. “Who? Another assassin?”

“Guild of Blades,” Ethel confirmed.

Tobias sucked in a breath. “Shit.”

“Perhaps the City Watch caught wind of your plan and figured it was less paperwork to have you killed than to arrest you. Or perhaps the Duke knows you’re on his tail, and is trying to stop you.”

“Could be,” Tobias conceded. “The Blades will take any contract, regardless of who’s paying.” He pantomimed spitting on the floor, to show what he thought of mercenaries without principles. “How would the Blades know to come for me, though?” he mused.

Ethel laughed, a brief cackle. “Everyone knows that if it’s difficult enough, Tobias the Tyrant-Killer will get the job.”

“Right,” Tobias conceded. “Thanks.”

“Still, I wouldn’t want to be the Blade going up against you.”

Tobias nodded. “Right. The salt, Ethel. Please.”

Tobias left ten minutes later, the two jars secreted into different pockets of his greatcoat. No one knew what made Ilyrian salt so combustible, what particular property transformed the fragile crystals into an explosive capable of breaking through whatever defense that science, blood-charms, or simple old steel could offer. It was known, however, that not any old fire would

set the salt to combust. For that, you needed witchfire. Tobias pushed further into the night, past dimly-lit figures and the metal and stone and wood of the city. He knew where to look.

“Have you seen Taen Acheras tonight?” Tobias called out to Fehrd the crow gatherer.

Fehrd, sitting atop of his birdcage, paused to pick at his teeth with a black feather.

“The exile? I didn’t know he was a Vengeant.”

“He’s not in the Guild,” Tobias shook his head. “But he owes me a favor.”

“Witchfire?” the crowman asked. Tobias nodded. “Well, good luck with that. I think he’s at the cockfight. Three streets down.”

Tobias grunted. “I know where the fight is.”

“You always do,” the crowman replied. There was a rustle in the cage beneath him, and Fehrd looked down sharply. “Interest you in a crow?” Tobias shook his head and moved on.

It was only a few paces away from the cockfight that Tobias noticed. It started as a tingling at the base of his spine, then small sounds that caught his ears, sounds that spelled danger. The Blade was on his trail.

Tobias found Taen Acheras at the back row of the cockfight. This week it was apparently three of them, versus an Eastern basilisk. The lizard hissed uncertainly as the birds widened out into a rough semicircle.

“You know that the birds are charmed, don’t you?” Tobias sidled up beside the shaman, who watched the fight with unblinking intensity. “They’re being controlled by their handlers, like puppets.”

Taen snorted. “Who do you think laid the charm, Guildsman? I’m here to make sure that nobody interferes with the geas.”

Tobias stared out at the fight, his hulking size easily allowing him to peer over the heads of the other observers. For a moment, he was silent.

“Nice night out in the Alleys.”

Taen shook his head, wild locks of white hair flying from his face. “This place is a shithole. Half of the people here would as soon kill you as look at you.”

Tobias looked over at his fellow exile, then upward. The ramshackle buildings above him sagged from their own weight, jutting crazily at strange angles. Above them, the tattered banners of a hundred professions and creeds flapped fitfully in the wind. Above that, a faint ribbon of night stars hung suspended, framed by thatched roofs and ribbons of torn silk. He stood still for a moment as the spiced smoke from the evening’s cooked meals wafted upward, as the murmurous stirrings of a dozen tongues flowed past him into the night. “It has its charms,” he said.

Taen snorted again, turning to look Tobias in the face. “I’d like to burn the whole place down.”

“Actually—” Tobias prodded.

Taen brought up a gnarled hand, a box of matches clutched between two long nails. “When the witchfire hits the salt, you have three minutes.”

Tobias reached for it slowly. Taen watched, his eyes glinting, then his other hand darted out and grabbed Tobias’s own.

“When you see the Duke, you tell that son of a whore that Taen Talfellow sends his regards.”

“If I’m speaking to him, it means the plan has gone wrong. But the Duke will soon speak his last words,” Tobias promised.

Taen’s grip did not lessen. “I had a son. I had a daughter.”

“I know.” Tobias slowly reached out and took the matches with his other hand, sliding them into yet another of his many pockets. He kept his eyes on Taen’s. “In three days, it will be done.” Tobias felt another slow tickle at the base of his spine, a premonition. “Someone’s after me. A Blade. He’ll try to stop us.”

Taen nodded. He brought his blackened nails up against Tobias’s forehead, pressed down hard. Tobias felt the blood well up from his skin. The old man muttered in a broken language as he brought his fingers across Tobias’s face in a wide circle. Finally, he touched Tobias’s chin gently.

“A minor blood-charm. It should give you an edge in battle. Not much of one, and it won’t last long.”

Tobias blinked, resisted the urge to wipe the blood from his face. He didn’t feel the effects of the charm. Yet. “Thank you. I have to go.” Tobias stepped away. “Three days.”

Tobias drove himself farther into the narrow maze of alleyways. Midnight was long since past, and the night was beginning to lighten slowly. The tingle in his spine grew to a great itching fire. The Blade was almost upon him.

It happened as he passed the were-shifter stalls. The howling of caged animals alerted him, moments before a swift shadow fell across his vision. He hurled himself to the side, felt the air from the sword brush past him, heard the keen metal cleave through the spot he just had held. He looked up. The Blade stood above him, sword to his side, raindrops dripping from the exposed metal.

“You’re a big guy,” the Blade said. “But unarmed.”

Tobias smiled. Springing forward, he brought his heavy arms to bear, striking twice at the Blade’s exposed midriff. The assailant fell back, swinging his sword in a wide arc. Tobias, ducked, pivoted, kicked at the Blade’s leg, heard something splinter, saw the man’s eyes go wide. A thrust, which Tobias sidestepped. An overhand swipe, which Tobias fell back from. Another, tighter, swing, which cut at the fabric of Tobias’s coat.

Tobias stepped in, slammed his hand down against the flat of the sword. He felt the sharp edge slice past his palm, but the adrenaline drove him past the pain. He brought the flat of his hand into the Blade’s face, once, twice, then brought his hand down to the pommel of the sword. A step in, a twist with both his hands, then he had the sword. He brought it down on his assailant’s leg.

To his credit, the Blade didn't scream, only shook out a low whimper as he collapsed.

"I'm fast, too," Tobias explained.

He looked down at his handiwork. It was messy. Around him, the were-shifters in their cages bayed a chorus of dark excitement at the smell of blood. Tobias paused over his fallen combatant and lifted the sword, thoughtfully. The Blade held himself very still.

After a moment, Tobias shrugged. He held open his greatcoat, and the sword, impossibly, disappeared into one of his many pockets.

"Consider yourself lucky I'm only taking your leg." Turning, he shouted over his shoulder, "Tell your guildmaster that Tobias of the Guild Vengeant sends his regards."

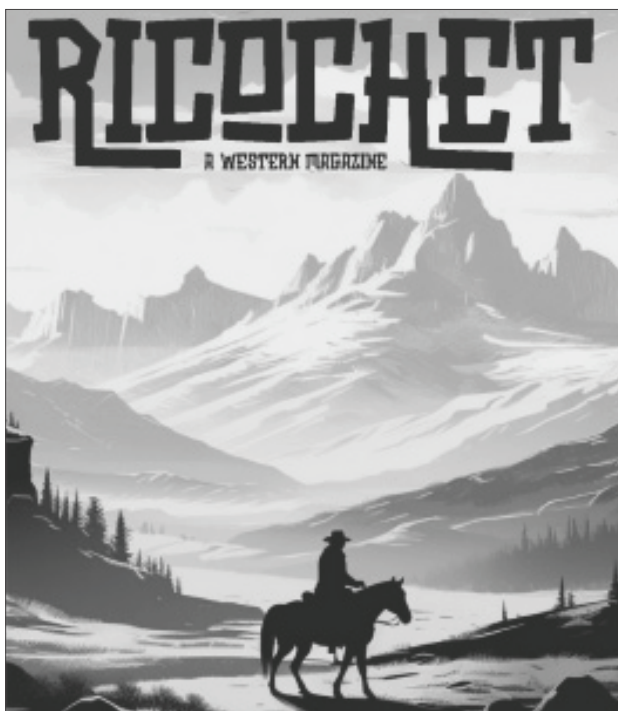
Tobias kept moving. He had one thing left to do. As he walked, he looked at his hand. The side of his palm was bloody and raw. He might lose his little finger. He'd gone through worse.

There were several stalls serving good kraken noodles in the backstreets of Andragar. Thankfully, they were nearby. And Tobias was hungry.

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