

VOL. 3

OCTOBER 2024

EPIC ECHOES

MAGAZINE

Featuring:

Marie Anderson

K. T. Booker

Dave Cuzzolina

Katherine Garrison

V. J. Hamilton

Rachel Henderson

Tom Howard

Valerie Hunter

Linda Jenkinson

N. G. Lancaster

Scott Miller

Humphrey Price



Drama!

Thrills!

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From the editors...

Danger, adventure, frontiers, and wonder: these are the ideas that shaped so much of the 20th century's pulp fiction, and they continue to shape much of today's best popular fiction, as the short stories in this third volume of *Epic Echoes* illustrate.

It's that sense of standing on the brink that creates suspense, humor, and awe throughout these tales: on the brink of unknown worlds physically (in deepest space, on distant planets, or on the high seas), but also psychologically and philosophically. After all, what does it mean to be human or to be a monster? To be a villain or to be a hero, a criminal or a vigilante, a murderer or a rescuer?

These are the ideas that drive so many of the tales you'll encounter in the following pages, and we hope you find these adventures to the frontiers of time, space, and thought as intriguing, exciting, and compelling as we have.

Cole Burgett and Rachel Boylan

From old-fashioned robots to today's artificial intelligence, the danger as well as the promise of new technology has been a constant theme of popular literature. Anderson deftly adds to that tradition with her tale of tech run amok in a not-so-distant future.

Whirlies

by Marie Anderson

Marie Anderson is a Chicago-area married mother of three millennials. Her stories have appeared in dozens of publications, including Calliope Interactive, Mystery Magazine, Shotgun Honey, Fiction on the Web, and Twenty Two Twenty Eight. Since 2009 she has led and learned from a writing critique group at a public library in La Grange, Illinois.

*R*esearchers in California have developed an experimental brain implant that converts tiny electrical signals from the brain into actions in the physical world, like speaking, typing, or controlling a computer cursor... As reported in The Wall Street Journal, July 15, 2021.

Ten years later, early autumn in 2031...

Lyra didn't want to tell Jimmy she was pregnant, not yet, not on their first full day at his company's cabin deep in the woods of southern Illinois.

Late yesterday afternoon, HappenThought's helicopter had dropped them off and would return in five days—a mini, well-deserved escape from their troubled city and the drama at

HappenThought's Chicago headquarters. But she couldn't escape her increasingly stubborn morning sickness, surging unpredictably during her waking hours. It was getting harder to hide it from Jimmy.

But not today. She would not tell him today. He'd blown the whistle at work, resulting in the firing of a colleague he'd considered a trusted friend. A mentor. The colleague—Lyra would no longer speak his name—had been best man at their wedding. He'd coached Jimmy through the company's grueling interview process, resulting in Jimmy being hired as a screener. At work, the colleague was influential, well-liked. So some were blaming Jimmy, unfairly, of course, because Jimmy hadn't been the one who'd tried to sell a critical component of the company's patented secret Mind-band technology. Allegedly tried to sell. The colleague was proclaiming innocence, despite his gambling debts. The courts would figure it out. But until then, some would see Jimmy as the bad guy, the rat.

She finished washing their breakfast dishes and gathered up the knitting basket holding her latest project—a complicated sweater for a fussy customer.

“Jimmy?” She stood in the open doorway to the cabin's office, where Jimmy sat surrounded by monitors, keyboards, and other gadgets whose names she could never remember.

His fingers paused over a keyboard. He removed an earbud and smiled at her. Would their child, she wondered, be blessed with Jimmy's adorable dimples?

“I’ll be on the front porch, knitting,” she said.

“Better not hear any more swearing! F-bombs hurt my ears!”

“I’m past the tricky bit in the pattern, so I don’t think your Boy Scout ears are at risk. But just to be safe, I’ll close your door.”

Better that his door was closed, she thought as she settled into the rocker on the front porch. Less likely he’d hear her being sick in the bathroom.

As she knitted, she occasionally looked up at the creatures who ventured onto the lawn that separated the cabin from the forest. Squirrels, of course, but also rabbits, chipmunks. A fat racoon. Beady-eyed blackbirds. A doe and her fawn emerged and began grazing on apples that had fallen from the tree near the lawn’s edge.

“Hey, Mama,” she murmured. “Beautiful fawn you got there.” Tears blurred her eyes. “Simpler for you, Mama Deer. No debate for you on whether or not to have a baby.” The doe and fawn glided back into the trees.

It’s not like they couldn’t afford a baby, Lyra reassured herself. Jimmy was well paid by HappenThought, the world’s most valuable company since 2027. The company, founded in 2024, developed and manufactured Mind-bands, gadgets that with the proper training, enabled entrepreneurs to “happen” their thoughts into real products. HappenThought made its money, first, by leasing the Mind-band; second, by charging money for the extensive training and brain implants buyers needed to actually use the Mind-band; and third, by getting a chunk of the

profits from sales of products created via Mind-band.

Jimmy was a programmer and a highly paid screener, reviewing the Mind-band products thought into existence by entrepreneurs. If the screener liked the product, then the product advanced to higherups, and if it got higherup approval, then HappenThought supported the product with funding, licensing, and marketing. If the screener didn't like the product, then the entrepreneur's Mind-band was deactivated. No refunds. No re-submissions. No company-paid removal of the brain implants which carried a smallish risk of triggering early dementia or cancer. If the failed applicant wanted the implant out, they had to cover the cost themselves. Most kept the implant in, hopeful that they could think up something new that would win them another chance with the Mind-band and make it past the screeners.

So screeners were powerful and important. They were the gatekeepers, gods with the power to trash or advance a product. For that great power and responsibility, Jimmy earned six figures a year. Plus bonuses. So they could afford a child. They could afford a lot of children.

But the problem, or course, wasn't money. A wave of nausea gripped Lyra. She pushed her knitting off her lap, lurched to the tree line, and threw up behind a thick oak.

At dinner, she forced small bites of the spaghetti and meatballs Jimmy had prepared. She tried to focus on his talk about the crazy stuff he'd screened at work that day.

“If you can think it, you can happen it,” Jimmy grumbled between bites of garlic bread. “As usual, HappenThought’s motto is bringing out the crazies during this latest lockdown.”

“Partial lockdown,” Lyra said. Governments had learned the hard way that targeted lockdowns were the better way to respond to virulent viruses.

“Any level of lockdowns puts too much time into the idled hands of too many. People go bad. For example. Today I reviewed this simul of what the applicant is calling whirlies. Insect-like things, allegedly a hybrid of organic bug and robot, that supposedly can be weaponized against troublemakers. The simul shows these swarms of whirlies attacking looters on Chicago’s Michigan Avenue. These whirlies move and sound like little helicopters, land all over the looters, *thith-thith-thith*, and slice them to bits with their spinning blades.”

Jimmy shook his head, sighed, and speared a meatball. “And then, get this. He posts allegedly real vid of the whirlies destroying actual dogs! To prove they actually work!”

Lyra swallowed a sour burp. It was one thing to destroy simulated people in a demo, and a completely other thing to destroy real dogs. People would not forgive harming dogs.

“Anyway,” Jimmy was saying. “I trash canned his submission. I told him I believed the dog bit was faked. I deactivated his Mind-band, too, of course. He got so enraged he threatened to find me and send his whirlies my way, so I’d experience first-hand just how real they are.” Jimmy snorted. “Like he can do anything

without HappenThought's Mind-band."

Lyra said nothing. If Jimmy hadn't blown the whistle on his colleague, then that firewall might have been breachable. But Jimmy had blown the whistle. The firewall was intact.

Right?

Jimmy wasn't worried. So she wouldn't be. She trusted him. She felt blood heat her face. Trust. Once Jimmy learned she was pregnant, what would that do to his trust in her? She looked down at the spaghetti curled like worms on her plate. Her stomach twisted.

She watched Jimmy slurp up a generous forkful of spaghetti, and she could hold it back no longer. She pushed up from the table and stumbled to the bathroom.

Jimmy followed. He held back her long hair while she retched into the toilet.

He helped her up, guided her to the sofa. Worry puckered his face.

"We can get you back home, get you tested." He felt her forehead. "I'll order the company helicopter. We can—"

"Jimmy," Lyra interrupted. "It's okay. It'll pass."

"What will pass?" The panic in his eyes, his fear that she'd caught the virus, brought out her next words.

"It's just a little morning sickness, Jimmy."

"You're... you're pregnant?"

She nodded. “Six weeks.”

“I don’t... how? I mean, you’re on the pill!”

“Jimmy, I stopped taking it.”

He stared at her. His hands clenched into fists. His face reddened. For a long moment, the only sounds came through the screened windows—birds chirping, cicadas humming, frogs from the nearby pond tuning up.

And then his voice exploded into angry betrayal.

“We agreed!” he shouted. “We agreed it’s irresponsible to bring a baby into this overcrowded, hating world. We survive one pandemic, then another, and lockdowns bring out all that crazy nasty shitty human behavior! I refuse to bring a child into this mess! We agreed, Lyra! We agreed!”

“Jimmy, I’m sorry! I was wrong to go off the pill without telling you. I—”

“Telling me?” he interrupted. “Don’t I have any say? Is this not open for discussion? Telling me? Shouldn’t I have been asked?”

“Jimmy, I love you.” Her voice broke. Her tears flowed. “I want a baby. I want your baby! We’ll be good parents! We will!”

“We won’t,” he said. “Because we are not having this baby.”

“I’m not ending it, Jimmy.”

He shook his head. “Then you’ll be ending our marriage.”

He grabbed his phone and left the cabin.

She was lying on the sofa in the dark when she heard him return. She closed her eyes. She could sense him looking down at her.

“We have to talk, Lyra,” he said. “You awake?”

She said nothing.

She heard him walk away, a door close. A lock click. The bedroom? The office? What did it matter? There was more than just a locked door between them.

She must have fallen asleep because her eyes snapped open to sunlight and a strange buzzing. The buzzing was coming from outside. Not cicadas, but a *chack-chack-chack*.

She stepped onto the porch. Froze.

Perhaps a dozen animals lay on the lawn. Not sleeping. Blood streaked what was left of their bodies. Chunks of fur and bone pebbled the grass.

She was dreaming, she told herself. Still asleep. A nightmare. Triggered by the awfulness between her and Jimmy. Wake up, she ordered herself. Wake up. Go to Jimmy. Talk it out. Make it right.

“I’m dreaming,” she said aloud. “Am I dreaming?”

In response, she heard a soft cry, an anguished *yip-yip-yip*. She stepped to the edge of the porch, looked down. Near the bottom porch step, lay the ruined body of a coyote. Underneath its

body, still alive, its pup, only its head visible.

At the tree line, fallen brown leaves swirled up and began skittering toward her, as though caught in a strong wind.

But there was no wind.

Then, at the tree line, something moved. She gasped, but it was just the fawn and its mother, stepping daintily onto the grass, headed for the apples under the tree.

They never made it.

The brown things skittering toward the cabin suddenly swerved and fell upon the deer. From the trunks of trees, more brown things swarmed, *chack-chack-chack*, over the two animals. The deer screamed, rough, piercing wails, and Lyra screamed, raced into the cabin, shouting, “Jimmy!” over and over.

They huddled on the sofa. They’d shuttered the windows. Jimmy had called HappenThought. The helicopter was two hours away.

“Whirlies,” Jimmy said. “The guy found me, sent his bugs. Dumb of me to be in the woods last night, my phone on. Maybe that’s how he found us.”

“But you’d deactivated his Mind-band!” Lyra said.

“I did. But maybe, maybe he had help getting it reactivated. Maybe he had help finding me.”

“From...?”

Lyra still could not speak the fired colleague's name.

Jimmy nodded.

Something that sounded like hailstones battered the cabin. But they both knew it wasn't hailstones. Sawdust drifted from the ceiling as the whirlies bit through.

Jimmy dragged a large thick tarp from the mudroom. He arranged a blanket under the kitchen table, dragged furniture around the table's open legs.

They crawled under the table, sat with the tarp around them.

"If the time comes," Jimmy said, "we'll lay down with the tarp over us. I'll lay on top of you. They'll have to get through me before they can get to you and our baby."

Our baby. Lyra felt tears warm her eyes and gratitude calm her racing heart.

"Jimmy," she murmured. "I'm so sorry. I—"

He kissed her. "The helicopter will be here soon."

The sound intensifies. Loud and aggressive.

THITH-THITH-THITH.

Rescue helicopter or the whirlies breaking through?

They wait.

Insects, it seems, will always hold the power to intrigue, impress, and terrify. We love the way Booker captures that combination in this deceptively simple, creepy little tale that subtly builds to an intense though not unexpected conclusion.

You'd Die from the Beauty of It

by K. T. Booker

K. T. Booker (they/them) is a writer who lives in Northern California and writes strange stories and poems when they have free time. They have recently published or are forthcoming in Witch House and Whetstone.

It was at the full brunt of midday heat when Jack got his first glimpse of the old man. Far out in the distance, just a black stain along the hazy sea of baked red clay. Twenty-three days Jack had chased him. Twenty-three days through a dead land. Void of color. Void of smell. Void of life, except the maddening buzz of distant insects and the bloated sun swinging its way across the sky like a hungry buzzard.

“We got him girl,” Jack said to his horse, Lucy, petting her sweat-slick mane.

And yet, it took another hour to catch up to the old man in that vista of hazy vapors and cracked earth. Heat drunk, Jack began to doubt his senses. He thought it might just be a mirage, shuffling its way along through the desert. The old man’s strange

hobble seemed unnatural, stiff for the astonishing speed at which he moved. But slowly, very slowly, the distance closed. And by the time Jack overtook him, he felt half-delirious from the intensity of the heat.

When the old man stopped suddenly, Jack kept his distance, his hand resting comfortably on his revolver. Jack had been through this enough to hope for a simple catch, but not to expect it. These things had a way of getting complicated.

“I’m glad you’re here,” was all the old man said. His voice was refined and musical. “Elegant” was the first word that entered Jack’s mind, but he pushed it away.

I don’t think you’ll be so glad when they got you swinging from the gallows, Jack thought to himself, then said, “that so?” as he hopped down from the saddle. “My name’s Jack Talrick and I’m here to bring you in for murder.”

The old man’s feet were wrapped in rags. A jumble of filthy blankets draped over his shoulders in tattered sheets. Leathery skin hung loose and ghastly off his bones, and only half his face seemed to be working properly. Probably a stroke from being out in this god-forsaken heat, Jack thought. Jack remembered his mama’s face was also like that before she died after a long night of trembling.

But Jack knew this was his bounty. A spitting image of the man on the wanted poster that was folded neatly in his saddlebag. The same tangle of gray hair, the same thick mustache, the same deep penetrating eyes. In the poster, he looked to have been

a gentleman at one point. A dandy of the East. Those days were over, though. What was left standing before him was simply the ruin of a sophisticated man. Wanted for killing two prostitutes in Santa Fe.

Word was there was something strange about the killings. Some said there were bites out of the girls. Even some imaginative souls were saying this frail old man was a vampire that drained the blood of his victims. None of that mattered to Jack. He'd heard it all before. To Jack, he was just an old man on the run. Better old and weak, Jack thought, then some young fool kid who thinks he's invincible, thinks a bullet don't tear his insides out like it does others. Old men knew better than that. And this particular old man was worth a \$500 reward. That's all that mattered. That was it. Half a year's worth of drink and girls, if Jack was smart about it.

"You dragged me half across the damn territory," Jack said, not so much angry, but impressed by the distance the old man had made. "Just where you goin' in such a hurry?"

The man didn't respond, only stared off to the west. He had eyes of a deep green and there was a strange gaze in them, as though he was looking for someone calling his name far out there in the desert. Out there where there was nothing for days.

Jack moved close and grabbed the old man by the arm. He didn't seem to care. Good, Jack thought. Easy money. But as he handled the old man, getting the ropes on him, a growing sense of revulsion stirred in Jack. It wasn't just how ragged and filthy he

was. Jack had seen plenty of men and women just as rundown in his day. It was the emptiness of the old man's body that gave Jack a nauseating feel. It was as though he'd withered away into almost nothing, just a sagging husk of sunburnt flesh and heat boils. A sickly orange sweat soaked his wrinkled skin and the smell coming off the old man was positively horrific. Jack had never met someone more in need of a bath. And that was saying something.

All this made binding the old man's bony wrists tough enough. Jack had to wipe his hands on his trousers three times before he got the ropes fastened the way he thought fit. But the whole time Jack was getting the knots in place, the old man had turned his gaze on him. A look that made Jack's skin crawl. There was a smile with it, half sagging down, that gave the feel he was smiling through a mask. Jack cinched the straps tighter.

It was three hours that Jack led the old man behind Lucy. Not a complaint out of his mouth, nor a missed step. Jack was happy there weren't any difficulties yet, but that didn't keep him from losing that feeling of unease that seemed to linger deep in his chest. Jack handled the heat better than most, but even he was quickly getting done for the day. His head pounded, and no matter how much water he sucked from his canteen, he seemed to want more. And through it all, the old man seemed unaffected by the sun. He shuffled along, the strange smile still etched on his face, skin bathed in that strange sweat of his.

Jack put Lucy up at a small watering hole near a rocky out-

crop that broke out of the earth like a shattered femur. He sat the old man down and tied him to the thick trunk of an acacia tree. He wouldn't normally go to the trouble of all that, but Jack learned long ago to trust his instincts, and they were buzzing in him like the shrill sound of the chirping insects that flowed steady in the air.

However, when Jack got the man tied up and secured in the shade, he found the sight to be a bit pathetic. He told himself he was being silly. What with all the rope he'd used and the care he put into the knots. This old man wasn't going nowhere. That was clear enough. He seemed one foot in the grave already. If the bastard could stand in the morning, it'd be a plain miracle.

Jack turned his attention to Lucy and took care to unpack her gently while she drank from the small pool, then he brushed her out, taking his time. She was the closest thing he had to a friend, or family, and she'd been with him from the beginning of his days making bread chasing down scum. He hoped she'd forgive him for this one. It had been a particularly grueling chase, but she never protested, and she got him to the old man as he knew she would.

Jack filled a canteen next to the horse and brought it to the old man. Those deep green eyes had settled again out west, where the sun was on its way towards the horizon. Jack learned a while ago, if he could get them talking, they were less likely to do anything stupid. And it usually wasn't hard. When a man knows the noose is near, the closest soul to him becomes a confessional box.

“Thirsty?” Jack pressed the canteen towards the old man, who ignored him. Jack didn’t know why, but he wasn’t surprised at the old man’s indifference to the offer of water.

When Jack turned to sit, the old man called out in his high, lilting voice. “I’ll maybe take some drinks a bit later, Mr. Talrick.”

“That’s fine,” Jack said. The copperish sweat was still leaking steady down the old man’s sagging face. “When was the last time you had a bath?” Jack said in disgust. “I’d say you smell like a pig, but I don’t want to be insulting no pig.”

The old man laughed at that, but the intensity of the laugh was unsettling to Jack. It was out of proportion, the laughter rising to an unseemly pitch, a sort of quivering shudder from deep in the old man’s throat that merged with the hum of the insects.

“Not to insult a pig! Oh, I like that, Mr. Talrick. Now that’s a fine joke.”

Jack ignored the odd manners of the old man, tearing a chunk out of his hard loaf of bread and chewed it slowly.

“Where were you going? California?” Jack knew most outlaws headed up into the thick forests of the Pacific Northwest. They’d snatch up a job with a logging outfit, then it was almost impossible to pick them out from any of the other lowlives holding a saw.

“No, not California.” The old man said quietly. “You could say I was just waiting to start my journey.”

Jack leaned against his pack, enjoying the shade. The heavy

lethargic river of insectile buzz flowing out of the acacia tree was making Jack sleepy.

“It’s beautiful melody, isn’t it?” The old man said.

Jack turned looked at the old man. “What are you talking about?”

“The cicadas, Mr. Talrick. Their bodies. Like a perfect musical instrument, made to fill the summer air with their symphony. It’s how they find their lovers.”

“I don’t know about any symphony, nor no bug lovin’. It just sounds like a whole lot of noise to me,” Jack said.

“Oh, it’s much more than noise, Mr. Talrick.”

“How you know so much about them, anyways?”

“I’m an entomologist, Mr. Talrick. That’s the study of insects if you didn’t know. Although I’m sure you did. You seem a rather smart fella, as they say. I work at the University of Delaware. Or I did. Now I’m unemployed, I suppose,” the old man said and laughed. The cheerful laugh strayed from the intense steady gaze of his green eyes and the drooping smile. The expressions on his face weren’t fitting, like a bundle of mismatched socks, Jack thought.

“Sounds like a strange line of work to me,” Jack said, looking away from the unnerving sight of the old man. He entertained the idea, not for the first time, that he should just shoot the son of a bitch here and now and get a good night’s rest and set off with his body in the morning. Pay was the same.

But that wasn't how he worked. He didn't kill the bounty if he weren't forced to. "If you're so smart," Jack said with a hint of anger and frustration in his voice. "A big shot bug expert. Tell me, how'd you end up out here? Wanted for double murder. Chased down like a dog?"

The old man was looking up into the tree. "As far back as I can remember, I've always loved insects, Mr. Talrick. As a boy I'd collect them, much to the chagrin of my mother. There is something about them, something pure... Anyways, I'm not answering your question, am I? I was sent to investigate reports of some type of ancient insect nest discovered deep under the Coleman Mound in Ohio. Have you ever heard of this sight, Mr. Talrick? It's quite an amazing sight, really. I highly suggest you visit one day. Naturally, I was sent to get as much information about this particular nest and provide a detailed report on my findings. I never did finish that report though..." The old man stopped talking and stared at Jack with his half-smile.

"Well, why not? A handsome man like you. You fall in love or something?"

"You could say something like that," the old man said, and his expression suddenly turned gloomy. "If you really knew what was out there, Mr. Talrick. You'd die from the beauty of it."

Jack wiped his forehead and acted like he cared not a fig about the old man's eerie smile fixed on the old man's half-melted face. He took his hat and knocked the dust off it for something to do, then looked at it in a brooding way. He felt like his thoughts

were getting mixed up from the heat and the odd way the man was acting, the way he was talking. Jack felt it was leaking into him somehow, making him feel funny. He took his canteen and dumped it over his head, felt the water travel down his neck and spine. Still, the lingering heat of the day and the drone of the cicadas beat into Jack's head. The god damn bugs wouldn't shut up.

"Rather warm today isn't it?" the old man asked with a hideous wink. "Did you know that the cicada has a labium. It's like a magnificent sword that pierces the barked flesh of trees, just like this one here," the old man said knocking his head back. "Then they drink its juices. The sap. They use it to stay cool. They secrete a liquid not too different from the sweat on your brow, Mr. Talrick. But a bit more effective. They're made for the heat. They live for it. And why is that? It protects them from predators, that's why. No predator is foolish enough to come out for them in such heat. They would surely die, wouldn't they?"

There was something crawling along the rags covering the old man, and Jack, confused at first, thought it was some trick being played on him. Jack tried to shake away the dizziness he was feeling. Heat exhaustion, he told himself. But the movement didn't stop. He got up and walked close to the old man, peering along his shoulder where the movement was. It was a cicada. A big one. The iridescent sheen of its wings glittered in the fading light. Jack came over and flicked it off with the steel muzzle of his pistol. The beetle fell in the dirt, and Jack stomped on it, grinding it under his boot with disgust.

“You feel better now, Mr. Talrick?” the old man asked, and there was a menace in his voice that Jack didn’t care for.

“Shut your mouth,” Jack said, looking down at the old man, getting tired now of the talk. “Or I’ll shut it for you.” What he saw in the old man’s face made him take a step back. It was an arrogant and violent expression. Steady and satisfied with some inner confidence. As though the old man had Jack tied up and not the other way around. It was another one of the ways the old man seemed to be twisting everything up inside Jack’s head. He felt tired, and he suddenly wanted to sleep.

Jack walked around the tree and checked the ropes again.

The old man snickered. “You afraid of an old man?”

Jack didn’t answer. He saw the clear husk of more cicadas latched to the tree. He pulled one off and held it gently between two fingers. It was thin and papery, like a wasp’s nest. He crumpled it slowly and watched the flakes fall on his boots. He thought maybe he should make a fire, but the task seemed almost monumental in its complexity. He rubbed his face and let out a long sigh. His breath was coming light and difficult. He splashed water on his face, rubbing it.

“They stay in the earth for years,” the old man said, his tender voice now sounding distant, like the fading sun. “When they finally come out of the shadows of their underground lair, they are ready at last for their final transformation.”

“I suppose you would know. You’re the bug man,” Jack said.

If the man wanted to talk, let him, he thought as he fell back heavily against his pack. He felt drugged and all he wanted to do was close his eyes for a bit. He'd feel better then. He pushed his hat down low on his face, to block out the reddening sky and to keeping the stare of the old man away. But the voice wouldn't leave, and Jack drifted off to sleep with the incessant drone of the cicadas and the old man's voice burrowing deep into his mind.

“Do you know what metamorphosis is, Mr. Talrick? It's quite a wonderful thing to see up close...”

When Jack woke, the shining nickel moon sat high over his head, lighting the few clouds in the night sky. He lifted himself on his elbows. His body was stiff as he stared stupidly toward the acacia tree. The old man was gone. The ropes hung loose at the base of the tree trunk where the ragged blankets were now just a pile on the ground. Jack walked over and kicked the blanket in anger, but something gave him pause. The bundle of fabric felt more substantial than a few frayed blankets. Jack moved his foot through the heap, separating it, then stepped back in shock and horror. In through the rags, Jack caught sight of the empty skin of the old man, lying in greasy folds like an old sheet, the slick orange sweat covering it still.

He pulled out his revolver and felt its reassuring weight in his hand. He looked around slowly, and that's when he saw Lucy. She was flat on the ground, near the moonshine off the small pool of water. There was something else there with her. A hump

of flickering shadows. He wanted to run, but there was nowhere to go. Dazed and lethargic, as though in a dream, he pointed at the shadow and fired a shot. Whatever it was flew off into the night in a rapid flutter of wings and a trail of glittering iridescence, wings spread out like angels, and he thought of the old man's words as it lifted into the moonlight.

“If you really knew what was out there, you'd die from the beauty of it.”

Lucy's great black eye seemed to be staring up at the night sky as Jack stepped over to the animal. He put his hand lovingly on his old companion and then pulled the hand back to see it painted with blood. A quarter sized hole in her neck, the blood still oozing out slowly. “Then they drink its juices,” the old man's high voice rang in Jack's mind. “They use it to stay cool.”

When he heard the rapid fluttering behind him, Jack turned and fired three shots. The flaming light of the pistol filled Jack's vision with an all-consuming iridescence. He gazed into the bottom of its twisting hypnotic swirl, listening to the sweet symphony filling the night, as he felt the sharp flare in his neck.

Sharp characterization with a broad comic flair drives Cuzzolina's story of money, sex, and crime, which comes alive with wry descriptions and plot twists in the style of Raymond Chandler and other 20th-century greats.

The Envelope

by Dave Cuzzolina

After a career in journalism, Dave Cuzzolina is writing short fiction. He has published stories and won honorable mentions in both the Lorian Hemingway Short Story Competition and the Annual Writer's Digest Writing Competition in the Genre Short Story category.

Arthur Tuttle bent his portly form over the desktop, sloped forehead resting in the cupped palm of one hand, chubby forefinger of the other irritably punching a calculator's numbered keys like it was the enemy. Every new number punched in brought a woeful groan. Every groan brought another swipe at the sweat oozing onto his forehead.

In a chair across the desk from him fidgeted Bootsie Mansfield-Tuttle, a former diner waitress with a limited vocabulary who oozed sex appeal from a body hotter than the diner's Hellfire Chili. At twenty-five, she was half Arthur's age. Like Nero fiddling while Rome burned, she alternately admired her spa-manicured nails and toyed with salon-dyed platinum blond tresses while her jaw worked a wad of chewing gum like a croc chomping a hunk

of meat. In terms of effort exerted, gum-chewing ran a close second to the energy she put into spending money.

With a hefty sigh, Arthur overlapped his arms on the desk and used them as a pillow for a stubbled cheek and a death stare. Swathed in her newest mink stole, Bootsie shuffled around the desk to tap his shoulder.

“Lap, Artie.”

Limp as a ragdoll, he threw himself back. What little lap remained beyond his bulging belly presented itself, and she plopped onto it. An audible “oomph” spurted out of him like a quick sneeze. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she rubbed her cute button nose on his.

“What’s the trouble, Artie?” she asked in her soprano squeal. “You ain’t lookin’ so good.”

“I’m not feeling so good,” he said, surrendering to the latest round of bills littering the desktop in front of them. His financial straits were dire. Acting on his promise to give her anything she wanted—a promise born in the heat of an all-out licentious effort to reel her in—his new bride burned through what little money remained after his divorce like an arsonist in a kindling factory.

“What’s the prob, Artie?”

“The prob? The prob is right in front of you.” He poked his head toward the desktop. “Those bills. There’s no way I can afford them anymore. Clothes and jewelry and shoes and expensive perfume by the gallon and the salon and the spa...”

He noticed the mink when it tickled his nose. “And the furs! In six short months you’ve bled me dry. I’m seriously staring at bankruptcy here, Boots, to get out from under all these expenses.”

Friskily she kicked smooth, white, spa-waxed legs and squeaked out her customary solution. “Just borrow more, Artie.”

“I can’t, Boots, I’ve scraped bottom. I’ve borrowed against my retirement account and my half-million-dollar life insurance policy—which you might get soon, by the way, if my blood pressure keeps going up. The money tree is as bare as the top of my head.”

Playfully, she tapped the tip of his globular nose. “Well, Artie,” she said impishly, “sounds to me like it’s finally time to open up that there envelope.”

The envelope again. He lamented ever blabbing about the blasted thing. When he told her his friend and coworker Hal gave it to him for safe-keeping and had been on an epic spending spree ever since, he swore the irises in her eyes turned from blue to green and the pupils morphed into dollar signs. It became an obsession.

He couldn’t discount his own curiosity, arising from Hal’s ominous instructions to open it only if he died or went missing. And, of course, the drunken-sailor spending spree that followed. They made the same money at the bank, both accountants there. “Must have hit the lottery or come into an inheritance of some sort,” Artie told himself to explain away the sudden affluence.

Ignoring for the umpteenth time her suggestion to open the envelope—she insisted it held the answer to Arthur’s money problems—he admitted a shared blame for their financial ruin.

“Well, it’s not all your fault,” he relented. “Let’s not forget that shiny red sports car I bought you for a wedding gift, all caught up in the euphoria.”

“Euphoria, Artie?”

“Joy,” he replied with a hard edge. “Boots, there’s no way around it. You just gotta stop.”

She curled her lower lip in a pout he once found cute as a kitten. “But I like to spend money, Artie.”

He nodded emphatic agreement. “Thank you, Captain Obvious.”

“And you wanna keep your Bootsie Wootsie, don’t ya?”

That was the “sugar daddy” arrangement, and he walked—no, charged into it, lustful and saucer-eyed. As for her lack of, well... mental acumen, so she thought “opera” was a talk show host and “Van Gogh” a rock singer, so what? He wasn’t after her brains.

Artie never imagined missing anything about Hilda—a nasty, nagging shrew of a woman draped in a size XXL tent dress who badgered him without mercy every day throughout twenty-four years of marriage. At that moment, he longed for her tightfisted ways. Her miserly fingers could squeeze a penny until Lincoln cried bloody murder.

Bootsie wanted an answer. “Well, you don’t want me to leave, do ya, ’cause I’ll leave.”

That prospect convulsed him with dread. Bootsie could claim half the condo, and it was so heavily mortgaged he’d have to sell it. He’d be pounding on his old house’s door a virtual hobo, pleading for a roof over his head. He could only imagine the triumphant expression on Hilda’s prunish face, the head-tilted-back gleeful cackling as she slammed the door, leaving him and his suitcases on the stoop.

With a finger under his double chin, an impatient Bootsie lifted his eyes to hers and demanded, “Well?”

Arthur stared helplessly into her baby blues, took only a few seconds to cave. “What say we open that there envelope?”

Shooing Bootsie from his lap, he pulled the mystery packet from under some papers in a bottom desk drawer. Wasting no time, he slid a letter opener along the seal, emptied the contents on the desktop and commenced to study each page under the light of a green banker’s desk lamp. Standing next to him, hand on his shoulder, Bootsie watched intently, chomping gum.

Although not expecting the contents to be any help, Arthur struggled with disappointment when they weren’t.

“I thought it was something like this, but I couldn’t imagine Hal as a blackmailer,” he finally said. “I told myself it was his will, or something to do with his estate. But it’s all here.” He rattled a page in his right hand. “A letter to the DA saying Martin Barn-

dollar—he's one of our bank vice presidents, a real jerk—embezzled more than a half-million dollars." He rattled several pages clipped together. "These document the embezzlement."

Arthur plucked out another page. "This is a copy of Hal's blackmail note to Barndollar, I guess to prove he had a big fat motive." Re-examining it, he discovered, "It's anonymous. I don't think Barndollar knows it's Hal blackmailing him. He must have it narrowed down, though, because it's gotta be somebody at the bank who has access to these records."

Sighing noisily, Arthur relaxed back in the chair, a bit envious. "Good ol' Hal has that SOB Barndollar by the short hairs to the tune of five grand a month. That son of a bitch."

With index finger and thumb, Bootsie fished the wad of gum from her mouth and whistled, then tilted her head like a sword-swallower and dropped it back in. "That's sixty thousand dollars a year."

Her speedy, accurate math calculation drew a gawk of disbelief from Arthur. Stunned, he doubted her ability to add two plus two. Literally. He was always correcting her math on his diner checks, part of what Bootsie called their "meet cute." Absently now, she coiled strands of platinum hair around two fingers. "So, exactly why is he paying your friend all that money?"

"Barndollar stole from the bank and he's paying Hal not to tell the authorities."

"Authorities?"

“Yes, dear, like the police.”

From behind him she threw slender white arms over his sloping shoulders, crossing them on his chest and resting her chin on his head, talking and chomping. “So, Artie? If this Mr. Dollar is paying Hal not to tell he stole money, would he pay us, too, now that we know?”

“It’s Barndollar, and that’s not something worth even thinking about. Hal’s playing a serious game. He could get killed if Barndollar finds out it’s him doing it. Besides, Hal got there first. Barndollar’s his chicken to pluck.”

Six days later, Arthur reported for work at the bank to hear grim news. Hal was dead. Killed getting into his car after leaving work late the previous night. The police called it robbery. Arthur had doubts. Mourning his friend, plagued by suspicion, he dragged himself through the lingering day. That night, pacing the living room carpet, tapping a forefinger to his double chin, he worked through the uncertainty, Bootsie watching from her curled-up position on the sofa.

“Hal told me when I left yesterday that Barndollar stuck him with extra work and he had to stay. Barndollar could have done that so he could catch Hal after dark in the empty employee lot?”

“You think that Mr. Barndollar guy killed him, Artie?”

“I want to, but I can’t believe Barndollar is a murderer,” he

reasoned. “But then I couldn’t believe Hal was a blackmailer. I mean we’re dealing with some serious stuff here.”

He dropped himself onto the floral-print sofa beside her. Uncurling herself, Bootsie slithered her arms around his shoulders, nibbled on his ear. “Artie, I’m sorry about your friend, but I’m thinking this could turn out to be real good, you know?”

“How could it possibly be real good?”

“Well, isn’t Mr. Barndollar our chicken to pluck now?”

“My answer’s still the same. Too risky. And I’m no blackmailer. Haven’t the stomach for it. Besides, I need to turn over the damn envelope to the DA now. It’s what Hal wanted.”

“But this could solve all your problems, Artie,” Bootsie cooed into his ear. “Five thousand dollars a month, maybe more now that we know he killed someone. It would keep me here for sure.”

Keeping Bootsie. Not having to crawl back to a Hilda who acted like nagging was part of her wedding vows. She had his attention. He wavered. But loyalty to a friend, and abject fear, soon won out. “No, if Barndollar did this he needs to pay for his crime. I need to see that he does, like Hal wanted.”

“But, Artie,” she said with persistence, “he’d still be paying for his crime, but with money.”

He had to admit Bootsie was on fire. Her observations that murder was worth more to a blackmailer and that Barndollar would still be paying for his crime, added to her previous multi-

plication in her head of twelve times five thousand, made three astonishing deductions in less than an hour. All regarding money. He wondered if the thought of it activated otherwise dormant regions of her brain, like the scent of prey puts predators' senses on high alert.

"I don't know, Boots, I could go to jail if I'm caught," he said. "And what if Barndollar did kill Hal, and he finds out about me blackmailing him?"

In an instant, the cooing temptress became a spoiled child. In a sudden huff, she pulled away and crossed her arms. "Why are you being such a chicken?" she huffed, then blurted out, "And after what I did for you."

His nose wrinkled and his eyelids squinted. "What exactly did you do for me?"

"How do you think your Mr. Dollar found out it was Hal blackmailing him?"

"Barndollar." A quick chill traveled down his spine. He gaped, stupid for a second. "You?"

"Yes, dummy."

The revelation sent Arthur flopping backward in stunned silence, sorting through a torrent of emotions. Had he, by giving Bootsie a taste of luxury, created a Frankenstein's monster willing to ravage the countryside without conscience to maintain that lifestyle? Clearly this wasn't the same naïve girl he married. Or was it?

She renewed her threat. “Now all you need to do is write one little letter to keep me here forever.”

The image of a cackling Hilda roused him from his stupor, helped him regain his wits. He shuddered.

“Okay, Boots, you win,” he shrugged. “I’ll write the letter.”

Bootsie’s squeal of delight came out like a game-show contestant who’d just won the big prize. He disappeared into the den to his laptop on the desk.

“First of all, we’re very sorry about your wife, Mr. Tuttle.”

Arthur lifted his head to nod his gratitude and resumed contemplating the beige carpet from the edge of his chair, forearms on his thighs, hands clasped. Two men in slate-gray suits leaned toward him from their perches on the sofa’s edge, the older man a Lieutenant Flynn with large ears and a crew cut; his younger partner, detective Dobbs, with a pasty, eager face and red hair.

“Not sure how much you know,” Flynn said, flipping pages in a pocket-size notebook. “Things were pretty hectic at the bank this morning. Barndollar made a full confession. Said when he got your wife’s letter in this morning’s mail he just flipped out. He’d already killed Hal Bascomb, who was blackmailing him for embezzlement and thought he was in the clear, then along comes someone blackmailing him for murder. He said he cracked, couldn’t take anymore. Slipped out of the bank and came to this address. Your wife opens the door, says yes, she is Bootsie Man-

sfield, he shoots her and returns to the bank as if nothing happened. Neighbors report hearing shots. We investigate and find the whole thing on your porch camera catching him red-handed, as you know.”

Flipping the notebook shut, he repocketed it. “That’s the enchilada in a nutshell.”

Still in his suit from work, necktie loosened, Arthur slumped himself grief-stricken and weary against the back of the chair. “You said you had some questions.”

“Only a couple, really,” Flynn said. Dobbs opened his notebook, touched the tip of a pencil to his tongue and jotted notes. “First, we need to ask if you knew your wife sent that letter?”

“No.” He wagged his head regretfully. “But I’m to blame for letting my curiosity get the better of me and opening that damn envelope before I should have. It gave her everything she needed to write that letter.”

“When Bascomb was killed, why didn’t you turn it over to the DA like he wanted?”

“I don’t know.” Leaning forward, fidgety, he said, “I probably would have. I was thinking over whether I wanted to get involved. Guess I thought it over too long.”

“Good enough, but there is one thing that bothers me, though.”

“What’s that, lieutenant?”

“Well, what got your wife killed was putting her name and

return address on that envelope,” Flynn said. “A fool thing to do.”

“Well, I hate to speak ill of the dead, but you have to understand, my wife was not the smartest person.”

“Still, it’s just real hard to believe anyone could be that... unwise.”

Arthur smiled wistfully. “You had to know her.”

“I guess,” Flynn said. “It’s just that, well, why use her maiden name, Mansfield, rather than her married name? Your name. Which might have gotten you killed, too.”

Arthur saw the suspicion in Flynn’s gaze and shrugged in terse reply. “What can I tell you?”

“What, indeed?” The lieutenant locked eyes with Arthur, appraised his stoic face closely for a long moment before rising. “Well,” he said, “I think that’s all we need.”

After showing them out, Arthur returned to his chair, opened a drawer next to it and pulled out the document he was admiring when they arrived—a half-million-dollar life insurance policy he took out on Bootsie just after they were married.

“How about that,” he said aloud to the emptiness around him. “You were right, Boots, the envelope did have the answer to my money problems.”

In this brief nautical horror story, Garrison takes us to the edge of the deepest ocean trench and to the edge of our seats in suspense. What terrors lie becalmed in those waters no one knows, but you'll want to peer into the mist with Garrison's sailors and find out.

Oh Mariana!

by Katherine Garrison

Katherine Garrison is a private chef and baker by trade with a passion for writing, particularly in the form of flash fiction and poetry. When not writing or cooking she loves to hike with her partner and their dog, bird watch, read, garden, forage, and be outside in general.

Reid didn't know why he bothered to look at the weather report. He'd seen the mackerel sky yesterday, a sure indicator that the bright blue skies they'd experienced up to this point were about to change. The only question was when.

He felt confident they'd reach the Trench before then. It was only half a day's sail away, by his estimation. They should reach it a little after midday. At least the new intermittent cloud cover provided enough breeze for them to sail.

The scent of their post-crossing roast dinner wafted from the galley. Stomach growling, he checked the AIS and horizon for any other vessels before setting the autopilot and going to see if he could pilfer anything.

“No way, you can wait like the rest of us!” Victoria swatted his hand away as he attempted to sneak one of her Yorkshire puddings. How she made them at sea would forever be a mystery.

Dejected, he returned to the helm and stared toward their destination, lulled into a daydream by the whispering lap of water moving against the hull. Soon, the first mate, Chris, joined him.

“Is the champagne ready?” Reid said. “We’re T-minus thirty minutes from the start of the Trench. You should call the crew together.”

“Roger that, Captain. It’s in the ice bucket at the bow of the boat.”

Everyone made their way to the bow, eager to celebrate the beginning of their joint goal of crossing the Mariana Trench. Reid stopped the boat at the precipice of the Trench. The crew fell silent as they marveled at how the blue turned midnight, extending all the way to the horizon.

Reid put the boat back on autopilot and went down to join them. A forty-three-mile-long expanse, it marked the start of an eight-hour journey. They all cheered as Reid popped the cork of the champagne bottle. Fizz sprayed everywhere as a freak gust of wind blew and created a series of waterspouts around the vessel. Even the air shimmered as if in celebration.

“Now all we need is some dolphins to guide us in!” Reid laughed. He felt they should have seen more dolphins, given how long they’d been at sea.

Later, Reid and Chris sat at the helm, watching as storms built around them. Towering, dark clouds appeared on the horizon, approaching with concerning swiftness. The deep blue ocean gave way to gunmetal grey swells that doubled in size. The sails snapped with each gust of wind.

“Let’s bring the sails down before it gets any worse,” Reid said. Their boat creaked as he turned it into the wind, the swell causing it to shudder as it rose and fell between the troughs.

With the sails tucked away, they motored on; the bulk of the storms haunting their periphery. Then, light gray mist rolled in around them and the ocean went flat.

“That’s not right. Shouldn’t the swell be deepening even farther with those storms around us?” Chris said.

Reid nodded. “The wind’s died down as well, though that’s less surprising. There must be a monster of a storm brewing out there.”

Victoria joined them from below deck. “I swear I heard knocking in my cabin. Sounded like a loose line against the hull. I didn’t see anything on my way up, though. We haven’t run into anything, have we?”

Chris shook his head. “No, I’ve been up here this entire time.”

A faint metal *clang-clang-clang* started as he said this.

“Hold on, that sounds like loose halyards,” Reid said.

The din grew as they continued forward, reverberating

through the thickening mist. The last sliver of gold on the horizon disappeared.

“God, there must be hundreds of them!” Chris cried, covering his ears.

They peered into the mist, trying to make out the location of the offensive noise. Faint outlines of masts and wheelhouses materialized, looming as they approached. Reid whacked their boat into reverse to avoid ramming into another that had appeared without warning. It had no navigation lights on and looked to be dead in the water, floating directionless.

“Hello?” Reid called out.

There was no reply. The mist flowed like a sluggish river, changing in density to reveal other vacant ships before shrouding them again. His palms went clammy, and a chill ran down his spine as they idled in front of the minefield of boats that lay before them.

“What the f— Chris, go put fenders on either side of our boat. I don’t think we’ll get out of this without hitting some of these.”

Reid pulled out the satellite phone to call the nearest Coast Guard. “Dammit, there’s no satellite signal. I swear we had it moments ago. We’ll have to call this in later. Victoria, can you keep an eye on the phone, and let me know when it picks up signal again?”

They wove their way through the graveyard of ships in si-

lence, each one in more disrepair than the last. The pervasive halyard clang felt like ticking clocks, counting down to who knows what.

“Stop, I think I saw someone jump across to another boat up ahead.” Chris said. He made to wave his arms as the person continued to clamber from vessel to vessel.

“Wait!” Reid hissed. Chris froze, arms mid-rise. They watched as another figure emerged from the mist. Shadows eddied around it, warping the air. The smell of decaying fat coated the back of Reid’s throat, choking him.

The person spotted them, and their voice cracked as they screamed, “Go! Turn back!”

Reid’s heart drummed as a wail pitched through the mist when the specter reached the person. It enveloped them, turning pallid and glowing so that the person’s figure was visible within it. The body writhed, trying to break free, then shriveled before dropping with a thud.

In quiet agreement, the crew turned the boat around, all cringing as a fender squeaked between theirs and another vessel. The shadow snapped its faceless head toward them.

“Push the boats out of the way as we reach them!”

Reid jammed the throttle to full rev, but it proved a pointless attempt. The shadow glided over the fathomless water, reaching them in seconds.

Weird tales often begin in the most ordinary of places, with the most ordinary of people, like Hamilton's skillfully drawn story of a teenager who encounters something tiny but shocking during a routine evening at work, and finds his life forever changed by it.

Closing Time

by V. J. Hamilton

V. J. Hamilton currently calls Toronto home. Her work has been published in The Antigonish Review, Litro, and The First Line, among others. She won the EVENT Speculative Fiction contest.

Closing time was always a struggle. Zack was not used to playing the heavy. He was new on the staff at Safeway, still in high school, working part-time. He should have been figuring out his next step; instead he was clearing shopping carts from the parking lot. And wishing he could clear his head. Briana, the girlfriend who used to welcome him so warmly into her world of dance and Instagram teddy bears, had cast him aside the week before Thanksgiving. Now he was entering a downward spiral, like water trickling into a funnel, with no way to climb back up the steep smooth walls. Except for work, he hid away in his parents' house, headphones cranked high as he numbed the pain of breakup with virtual NASCAR, and secret shots of bourbon cut with Nyquil from the family medicine cabinet.

This Thursday night was worse than usual. Blizzard warn-

ings had deterred regular staff from coming in. Most stock-clerks booked off early to pick up emergency generators and heavy-duty shovels from the nearby Canadian Tire. Soon, the CLOSED signs were up and only Zack and Tomson, the grizzled security guard, were in charge of closing time.

Tonight was the one-month anniversary of Zack's break-up with Briana. He had a bottle of ultra-extra-strength Nyquil and planned to get into his virtual NASCAR buggy and speed toward melancholic oblivion that much faster. (His parents had a rule of "screens off by midnight," but he could still sit in his room, listening to throat-ripping metalcore on headphones, and get wasted).

As he scanned customers' items at the check-out, Zack glimpsed the snow swirling hypnotically outside the glass doors. Then reality intruded, first in the form of Big Jim, and second in the form of the cheerleaders. Big Jim often panhandled outside the mall, and sometimes bought supplies at the supermarket. Tonight he was already into the booze, and had declared he was going to "hole up" at Safeway for the duration of the blizzard. At 5 foot 8 inches and 130 pounds, Zack could not physically remove him.

Tomson, the security guard, offered Big Jim a ride in his 4WD Jeep, final destination the Shepherd of Good Hope Mission. "I hear they're serving hot cocoa and marshmallows tonight," he said. "If we get there in time." Burly and battle-scarred, Tomson could defuse the touchiest confrontations. But he was also a meddler.

Once, Tomson caught Zack sneaking a half-dozen empty Nyquil bottles into the recycling box. “Got a bad cold?” he asked.

Zack had lied. “Yep. Whole family caught it.”

Tomson had given Zack The Look.

Neither had mentioned it since. Zack felt he lived under a shadow. All the adults were waiting for him to screw up.

Tomson corralled Big Jim. “I’ll be back to do final round,” he said to Zack before driving off. “There’s basically no one in the store. Keep an eye out, eh?”

Zack was on his own when he had to shoo out the cheerleading squad. Thursdays were practice night, after which they’d pick up snacks and drinks at the supermarket. He recognized them from the grade below his, including some of Briana’s friends.

“Wow, Zack, you’re looking really swole,” the sassiest girl said, and they collapsed in gales of laughter. Except for one girl: “Mini-Bri” —Briana’s kid sister. She hadn’t joined the taunting. She had an elfin chin and large, shining eyes that seemed to understand the subterranean depths of his anguish.

Finally the cheerleaders noticed the worsening weather. They made their purchases and left, Mini-Bri giving a silent nod. He had the impression that, if only they could talk one-on-one, she would tell him where he’d gone wrong with Briana, and what he needed to do to become fully human again. But he didn’t want to seem clingy. Or like a stalker. Or like he was messing with his girlfriend’s sister. *Ex-girlfriend. Damn.*

Aisles, washrooms, perimeter: Zack finished his last round of asking customers to leave. Stockroom and freezer were off-limits to customers but, as Tomson had often said, “You never know.” So Zack had checked those places, too. No customers.

Once all the customers had left, silence descended. It was eerie, this quietly humming supermarket, with darkness cloaking every window. Zack aimed for oblivion every night, but tonight the oblivion was rushing to meet him—and this made him uneasy.

Now the twisted killer would pounce, the one who was standing between the hanging slabs of cold beef, waiting, hunting knife poised and gleaming. *Sheesh*, he’d been playing too many first-person shooters.

On his way back to the staff room, near Aisle 4, Zack heard the lip-smacking. Every hair on his neck rose. A growl, a curse, a murmur: none of these was as obscenely horrific as the sound of lips being smacked.

Heart hammering, he ducked around the corner. He pressed the number for Store Security on his phone. No answer. Damn, why didn’t Tomson pick up?

Zack listened intently through the silence. He heard a faint sigh. No doubt about it—someone—or some *thing*—was waiting for him in the upper east stairwell.

He inched closer, phone in hand. Surprise gave an advantage, so at the next lip-smack, he jumped into Aisle 5.

There, at his feet, lay a cardboard box, the type that bananas come in. The box held what looked like a red-and-black flannel lumberjack shirt. Something moved in that bunched-up shirt. Zack's first thought was: *kitten. Or pup?*

As he bent closer, he saw a baby.

“Good evening. Emergency Dispatch,” An officious voice from his phone splintered the silence.

“Oh. Uh. Sorry, I guess I accidentally pressed 911—”

“Please be more careful, sir. Tonight's full of emergencies.” The voice was mellifluous and strangely calming.

“Well, ah... I just found a baby. Does that count as an emergency?”

“Are you or the baby in any immediate danger, sir?”

“No—but—the baby is all alone.”

“Sir, have you looked for the baby's parents?”

Embarrassed, he hung up. He carried the box to a counter and spoke into the P.A. mic. “Will the parents of the... unclaimed baby... please come to Customer Service?” He paused and added cryptically, “No questions asked.”

His phone beeped: Tomson returning the call. In the background, Big Jim's voice sang, “Five hundred miles, five hundred miles...”

“I found a baby, Tomson. What do I do?”

“A baby what?”

“A *baby*.”

“Ha ha ha. Sounds like someone forgot their bundle of joy when they checked out their bags of groceries,” Tomson said. “Happens all the time. Is he in a car-seat or stroller?”

“He’s—he’s bald and just lying there! Smacking his lips!”

“A sleeping baby—well, you are lucky, Zack.” Muffled noises interrupted Tomson and he disconnected.

Zack waited for callback, gawping at the baby’s tiny chin and nose and slightly puffy eyes. Such fine, fine skin. He felt big and bony and coarse-skinned. He called his mom, although he’d been trying to avoid her snoopy sympathy ever since the break-up. She would know what to do with a baby.

No answer.

He texted his best friend Shiloh, although he’d been avoiding him lately, too—feeling defective. The teens used to out-weird each other with work stories and, well, Zack figured he had a winner tonight. He texted: “You wont believe this.”

Shiloh phoned, causing Zack to jump at the noise. “Is this about Briana? You’ve *got to let her go*, man.”

“No—it’s a weird work thing,” Zack blurted. “Someone left a baby.”

“Like, you mean... *in ze fresh meat section*?” Shiloh imitated a sepulchral voice.

“Shut up!”

“Or hanging in... *ze cold room where zey make salami?*”

“Shut *up!*” Zack felt even jumpier than before. But then he made himself take a deep breath—and he had to laugh at his bizarre friend. He sent Shiloh a photo of the baby sleeping in the box. For good measure, he sent it to his mom and Tomson, too.

“There’s gotta be some clue,” Shiloh said. “Maybe a diaper bag close by? Can you remember any women acting strange?”

Zack hesitated. Recalling the cheerleaders, he felt hot shame all over again. Was this some sick prank from Briana’s friends? No, he decided... Briana was dating some new guy; she didn’t have an axe to grind.

“Announce it over the P.A.,” Shiloh said.

“Already did,” Zack said. “I’ll go check Express Food again.” That area was most popular just before closing time.

“Yeah,” Shiloh said, “maybe the babysitter’s in Baked Goods—with her throat slit.”

“Shut up!” Zack hung up.

When he arrived at Express Food, the air was pierced by a thin clear wail from Customer Service, where he’d left the baby. *Oh Christ.* Panic pinched his heart. He ran to get the baby.

Just then Tomson called, and Zack answered, breathing hard. “It’s crying,” he said desperately. “I swear I didn’t touch it.” He suddenly remembered a baby bird he’d once rescued. It had cheeped a lot until it crumpled up and died.

“Hey, calm down.” Tomson sounded amused and this irri-

tated Zack. “Thanks for the pic. You’ve got a *really little* one there. Bananas, eh?” He cleared his throat. “Listen. I’m still with Big Jim, trying to find a bed at another shelter.” He explained to Zack how to lift a baby, giving full support to the big cabbage-head on the tiny celery-neck. “Hold him against your chest, so’s he can hear your heartbeat.”

Zack propped up the phone and picked up the baby like he would pick up a cat. He brought the baby closer to his armpit. “Oh no... he’s wagging his head side to side.”

“Looking for Mama,” Tomson said.

“Oh no! He’s gonna cry again...”

Tomson told Zack to wash his hands really, *really* well and then let the baby suck on his little finger. He hung up.

“Gross!” But Zack did it. The baby, his small face contorted with effort, sucked very hard on Zack’s pinkie.

The baby was so tiny and so hungry. The darkness outside the supermarket loomed, like true oblivion, ready to repossess the tiny being. Zack curled his arm, pulling the baby closer.

He felt a sudden bloom of wet heat near his armpit and smelled a stench. Something was leaking through the lumberjack shirt, and into Zack’s clothes. Remembering the change table in the family toilet area, Zack hustled down there, the baby wailing. He made nonsensical *beep-beep-boop-boop* noises until the baby quieted as he unwrapped and cleaned... her. *Her?*

What he saw next made him phone 911. “Yeah... I called

earlier about the baby?” He gave his location, trying to steady the quaver. His voice sounded damaged. Like that night a month ago when Briana finally broke it off. Maybe even more so.

He had seen things—*weird things*—when he cleaned the baby’s mess: the protruding stub from the belly, raw and meaty, and her femaleness, covered in dark oozy poop. It had been hard to wipe the wriggling babe, but he felt compelled to take a picture of the stomach injury. “She’s very small and badly injured. Part of her gut is hanging out,” he told the dispatcher, and he sent the photo.

“Oh, darling, that’s a *newborn*,” the dispatcher said, her voice radiating delight.

“Newborn?”

“That’s the umbilicus.”

A balloon of excitement begin to inflate in his chest.

“Are you *sure* the mother isn’t around? She’ll be needing medical attention.”

“I can’t check—the baby’s...”

“Right, I get it. Your hands are full. I’ve dispatched the E.M.T. van. You need to wrap up the baby. Do you have a scarf or towel?”

“Yeah.” He fingered the cuff of his sweater, a gift from Briana, that he had chosen to wear for maximum wallowing effect on the break-up anniversary. He’d been planning to burn it later that night, but getting it smeared in shit and blood, like clothes

from a battlefield, was somehow more appropriate.

He wrapped up the noisy baby and walked around, straining his eyes everywhere to find the mother, as he stayed on the line with the dispatcher. She asked about his plans for the rest of the evening and Zack unloaded about his recent break-up. “Aw, that’s rotten,” she said. “You seem like a decent guy.”

“I do?”

“Yeah.”

Thuds shook the front door. He speed-walked to the security panel and pressed the release code. Two men in fluorescent garb entered, all bustle and blare. That roused the baby, and Zack felt a surge of annoyance.

“Son, I’ll take him,” the taller paramedic said. They did a quick physical assessment, swaddled the baby, and reported to the dispatcher: “Apgar of 9.” The baby kept wailing, so the other paramedic got out a bottle fitted with a rubber nipple and containing clear fluid. “Sugar water,” he told Zack. The baby went silent, focused on tasting the nipple.

“Good work, kid. You assisted the mother?”

“No—I can’t find her.”

The paramedics kicked into high alert. They questioned Zack about what places he had checked. “How about outside? You checked there yet?” They grimaced, looking out at the blizzard, and conferred quickly, then one turned to him. “Hold the baby, we’re going outside.”

“For sure.” Zack took the small bundle as he watched snow-dervishes whirl around the parking lot. While the paramedics strode about with flashlights, a 4WD Jeep drove up and Tomson climbed out to speak to them.

Inside, the baby lustily sucked from the bottle. Her first nourishment ever—and he was giving it. How far away his old life seemed: the twilight existence of aching and oblivion. He imagined meeting Grownup Baby years from now and saying: *I found you. I held you. I watched over you.*

He watched paramedics disappear around the side of the building and suddenly reappear, running toward the van. Something in their faces made him anxious. He stared at the baby, who was drowsing again.

Tomson entered Safeway in a blast of icy air and stamped his feet. Sparkles of snow on his watchman’s cap faded to droplets as he spoke. “The dumpster,” he said. “We found her beside it. Maybe trying to get shelter.”

“Shelter,” Zack repeated numbly.

The baby opened her eyes and Tomson bent toward her. His voice went high: “Whassup, Pop-eye?”

Zack felt the solid warm weight in the crook of his arm and an aching lump in his throat. He watched the paramedics push-run the loaded gurney into the back of their van and a chill went down his spine.

Tomson ran out to talk to them—then the E.M.T. van drove

away, lights flashing. The siren began to wail. He re-entered, face somber. “Hemorrhage,” he said. “Touch and go. C’mon, we’ll meet ‘em at Saint Jude’s.”

At the staff lockers, Zack passed the baby to Tomson so he could don jacket and boots. At that moment, her eyes flew open and fixed on Zack. Those clear, perfect, shining eyes. They had seen so little—but they had seen him—and somehow, he knew, they would never let him go.

A guilty conscience is a powerful motivator, and when it faces relentless justice, conflict explodes off the page as it does in Henderson's "Mantra." Taut suspense and an unexpected setting for a showdown make this a compelling tale of guilt and revenge.

Mantra

by Rachel Henderson

Rachel Henderson lives in Louisiana. When she's not crunching numbers at her day job, she spends her time writing horror fiction and playing bagpipes. Rachel's short stories have appeared in Finn McCool's Short Story Anthology and The Writer's Arena. In 2021, she won first place in the NYC Midnight Short Screenplay Competition.

I helped murder Julie Sloop.

This is my mantra, and I keep to the schedule: ninety-six whispered repetitions daily, ten minutes apart. No exceptions.

Mirrors are a common audience for my mantra. Mirrors, blank walls, anything that can't understand and won't respond. Saying the words out loud is comforting, like digging into a fresh mosquito bite, but the itch comes back quickly. The itch—and the pain.

Anyway, comfort is beside the point. Comfort makes it sound like I have a choice.

I don't have a choice.

My watch buzzes. I lean closer to the enormous tank and address an angelfish:

“I helped murder Julie Sloop.”

Relief

The angelfish glides away, leaving me to my own reflection—little more than a smudge, surrounded by fifty other smudges, all jockeying for fish-front real estate. Children teem around my legs, adults swarm against my shoulders. I press one palm against the glass and breathe. Take a few minutes. Relax.

A school of tetras swims by me, to the tank’s far end—

He’s there. The smudge I was worried about. The one from earlier, in the Redjays cap.

He’s followed me into the aquarium.

Redjays fans don’t live in this city. Since I quit the team and moved last year, I haven’t signed a single autograph, posed for one selfie with a stranger. Nobody here cares about women’s soccer, period. Pure heaven—until Redjays Cap trailed me out of my apartment building. Kept his distance—didn’t say a word—but I knew.

He matched my pace at first, block for block, before I took off full-tilt through downtown, swerving around pedestrians, skirting bicycles and, finally, ducking inside the aquarium when I got winded. I outran him—*of course I outran him*—ten months of no practice isn’t enough to kill my sprinting skills.

I outran him. But I didn’t lose him.

I sidestep a wailing toddler and edge my way out of the room. Goodbye, freshwater reef—sayonara, Redjays Cap. I sneak a glance his way, but the aquarium is tomb-dark and the cap's brim is pulled low. He's a featureless smudge even outside his glass reflection.

No, not entirely featureless—his chin is visible. Apple-round with a shadowy cleft.

Familiar.

I helped murder Julie Sloop.

I check my watch. Three minutes to go, and here it starts, like clockwork—that telltale thrum around my solar plexus, that wet-concrete viscosity in my larynx, that chill behind my ears. When I was a goalkeeper—the goalkeeper, according to some—these symptoms only showed up before a penalty shot. Nerves, I figured. Last-line-of-defense anxiety.

Then I learned what real anxiety is.

I push through the crowd. Moisture sluices down my arms—my sweat, strangers' sweat, everyone's sweat. Onions and polyester, patchouli and vanilla—violent odors. My head pounds.

The massive tank in this next room is brighter. Groupers and tarpons drift by. I look over my shoulder: there's Redjays Cap, stuck behind a pack of Boy Scouts, a miserable frown perched above his cleft chin.

Julie Sloop had the same frown. Sulk-face, we called it—the one she wore constantly, when she was upset, or nervous, or

concentrating. Probably a reason her hazing got as bad as it did. Nobody likes a sulk-face.

But hazing may be the wrong word here. There's a camaraderie to hazing—I felt it my rookie year, hauling teammates' luggage, sucking down one-shot-too-many, waking up with a faceful of permanent marker. We skipped the chummy sisterhood bullshit with Julie. Straight to the pain and suffering.

A woman in front of me spins around—the diaper bag on her shoulder slams into my stomach. I yelp.

“Watch yourself!”

I shove past and collide with a man in a damp Hawaiian shirt. He snarls—I keep moving.

Too many people.

Redjays Cap is making progress. He's breached the Boy Scout thron—less than thirty feet away. Still can't make out his eyes, but he must know I've seen him.

The skin on the back of my neck is cold and itchy. The fluttering in my chest intensifies—rib cage crammed with moths. Can't swallow, can't breathe. All on schedule. Always on schedule.

My watch buzzes.

I lurch forward, dry-mouthed and shaking—stumble against a younger woman—whisper into her ponytail:

“I helped murder Julie Sloop.”

Relief

The woman turns, eyebrows furrowed.

“What?” she asks.

I ignore her, diving into a gap in the crowd.

Fangs in the next room. Barracudas, piranhas, moray eels, all in separate tanks. People cluster around them, hooting and squealing, tapping the glass. I fight through the tight knots of flesh and fabric, walking sideways, watching for Redjays Cap. He appears quicker than I hoped—no more Boy Scouts in his way—and pauses under the glow of a green EXIT sign. Stares straight at me.

It’s not just the apple-round, cleft chin—or the sulk-frown—or the silt-brown eyes, swollen cheekbones and waxy complexion—he has Julie Sloop’s face. Her same, entire face. A face I last saw in her casket, at her visitation, six days after the final hazing. After we all agreed to keep quiet.

I didn’t stay for the funeral. Couldn’t bear it.

I helped murder—

He pulls a handgun out of his jacket.

I don’t make a sound. Don’t have to. Some Good Samaritan does it for me.

“Gun! Gun! That guy! Gun!”

So many humans, so much glass. The screams coagulate into one warbled roar, echoing through the room, pummeling my eardrums. I duck behind the piranha tank and miss the stampede by milliseconds. Frenzied feet thunder around me, all headed the opposite way, toward the EXIT sign, toward Redjays Cap.

Buying me a bit of time.

I jump up and bolt, dodging slow runners like they're rungs in a ladder drill. The first gunshot is muffled by the bedlam—but the second hits one of the tanks. Glass and saltwater spray my face. I vault over a huddled, quaking man and race into the next room. No more crowd. Another EXIT sign. Open door. Beeline.

The third shot hits my right ankle, and I go down.

Sharks swim overhead—dozens and dozens of sharks—all glazed eyes and gaping mouths, caudal fins sweeping the water in long, lazy strokes. Their tank arches over the entire room. The floor beneath me is gritty, but cool. In different circumstances, it'd be wonderful to lie in this room, watching the sharks, all alone.

But I'm not alone.

Redjays Cap is standing over me—gun trained on my face.

"You're slower than you look on TV," he says.

"Out of practice," I gasp.

"I know."

His nose scrunches up—just like Julie's.

"You quit the team two weeks after my sister died. Why?"

Sister. His sister.

"No reason," I lie.

"Horseshit."

He stomps my wounded ankle—gut-tumbling pain floods my body.

“Top ranking goalie in the league. Julie dies—you quit. One month before the championship. Seem strange?”

No breath to respond. I shake my head.

“My sister never drank,” he says, crouching beside me. “Not even in college—and she died with enough booze in her system to kill an elephant.”

I bought the vodka that night. Three bottom-shelf handles. Bought the vodka—and helped pin Julie’s legs while my teammates funneled it down her throat. It was supposed to be funny—it was funny—until her skin went from light green to purple, and the vomiting started. Started and wouldn’t stop.

We cleaned the floor with bleach after we moved her back to her own apartment, in case the police came by to investigate, but it didn’t matter. They never did.

She was already dead when we moved her.

Redjays Cap—Julie Sloop’s brother—presses the gun barrel to my forehead. Tears stream down his cheeks.

“She told me about you. About all of you. The things you did after practices—*the things you did to her.*”

I feel it. Pulsating chest—closing throat—frosty skin.

The words are close.

“So you’re gonna tell me now,” he says. “*What did you do?*”

Toe-shot. It’s the best kick I can manage from this angle. My left foot crunches under his chin and he tumbles backward.

I try to stand—my ankle shrieks, crumples.

Hands and knees.

Crawl for the door.

I close my eyes when I hear his steps—

The deafening shot—

Blood showers the glass beside me. I feel wetness on my back and flip over, grabbing at my neck, my arms, my chest. No new bullet holes.

Redjays Cap is lying on the floor, once-waxy forehead now nothing but brain and bone, silt-brown eyes glassy as a shark's. A cop rushes past him, holstering his gun. He grasps my shoulders.

“Ma’am? Are you okay?”

I’m not okay. I haven’t been okay in ten months. And I’ll never be okay again.

The itch—the pain.

The cop’s face hovers inches over mine. His eyes are kind—compassionate.

Chest.

I don’t have a choice.

Throat.

I never have a choice.

Skin—

My watch buzzes.

Stories of modern-day vampires have been popular in the last twenty years, and Howard contributes to that tradition with the cleverly titled “Bar Sinister,” in which a precocious teenager faces a dark and sinister threat—but maybe not the kind you’d expect!

Bar Sinister

by Tom Howard

Tom Howard is a fantasy and science fiction short story writer living in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Someone pounded on the door downstairs, and Macy assumed a delivery needed her signature. Her dad, the bar’s owner, slept during the day, and most drivers left their deliveries in the alley. She ran down the stairs to open the door.

She was surprised to see two of her high school classmates standing in the sunlight.

Randy Green smiled. “Hi, Macy. You zipped out of Lit class so fast, you forgot to pick up our assignment. We brought it by.” The lanky boy’s long hair shaded his blue eyes. He wore a letterman’s jacket. At his right hip stood Lyndsey Bennet, a pretty blonde and his girlfriend. She wore a cheerleader’s outfit. Of course, the school’s star running back would date a cheerleader.

Macy didn’t socialize and couldn’t believe Randy Green knew her name or where she lived. “Our assignment?”

“Yes. You and I are partners. Mr. Nelson assigned us Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.”

She almost laughed at the man’s audacity.

Lyndsey peered around Randy at the upturned stools and small tables. “You live in a bar? I thought the other kids were kidding.”

Macy shrugged. “I live in an apartment with my dad above his bar.”

“Can we look around?” Randy asked. “We won’t drink anything.”

“I’m sorry. You’re breaking five or six state laws standing in the doorway. Where is the assignment sheet and when is it due?”

Randy pulled off his backpack, dug out a couple of pages, and handed them to her. “We can start tonight if you want. We’ve got a couple of weeks.”

Mr. Nelson was insane assigning Randy, the resident jock, and Macy, the school’s only Goth girl, as partners. The English teacher was up to something. He asked too many questions about her private life.

“Six o’clock at the public library,” Macy said. “Or is that when you two eat dinner?”

Lyndsey giggled. “I won’t be working with you. My parents don’t let me read horror. Besides, I don’t worry about you being alone with Randino.”

Macy didn’t take it personally. She wasn’t attracted to a boy

who used more hair product than she did.

“Six will be fine,” Randy said. “I’m glad Mr. Nelson assigned us as partners.”

Did Randy expect her to do the assignment for him? It might be easier, and she’d get a better grade.

“See you at six.” Macy took the assignment sheets and closed the door.

She read the worksheet and shook her head. Mr. Nelson was a problem. He wanted to see her reaction to such an obvious subject. He’d heard the rumors about her father, the pale man who owned a tavern called Bar Sinister and only came out at night.

The bar didn’t open until the evening. Dad had cleaned up after closing the night before, and Macy didn’t have much to do before she woke him at sunset. The dark wood and frosted glass interior felt like home. The bar had booths on the right side for people who wanted some privacy and a long wooden counter along the left for those who didn’t. She lowered the chairs, deciding the floors could wait one more day for a good scrub. She’d check on her dad and eat before she met Randy at the library.

A reader at an early age, Macy had read Stoker several times, laughing at the author’s erroneous descriptions of vampires. She could write a term paper on Dracula without opening the book, but she should let Randy contribute.

She peeked at her father, sleeping comfortably in the basement. She’d wake him before she left for the library. She shopped,

cooked, and took care of her dad. If she wasn't around to remind him, he'd forget to wear shoes.

After eating a burrito, she finished her Trig homework and reapplied kohl around her eyes.

Randy waited on the library's steps. Macy hardly recognized him without Lyndsey grafted to his hip.

"Thanks for doing this with me," he said. "You get an A on everything, and I don't."

She didn't know what to say. Aside from this class, they had nothing in common. "Did you have dinner?"

"Yeah."

She followed him into the library and signed out a study room. It wouldn't help his reputation to be seen cloistered with the school's creepy Goth girl. She didn't care about his rep as she selected several reference books.

In the study room, Randy removed a tattered Dracula paperback from his bag.

She took a tablet from her backpack. "First, erase everything you've ever seen about vampires on movies and television. Stoker created the vampire stereotype, and everything else is cinematic crap."

The term paper needed to be at least two thousand words, and the references must be completed by both partners.

“Mr. Nelson’s always talking about books being metaphors for social interactions,” Randy said. “I think this one is the haves against the have nots.”

She suspected someone had given him the idea. Certainly not Lyndsey. “That’s pretty astute for a football player.”

“You thought we only gave wedgies to nerds?”

She’d never seen Randy being mean to anyone. A victim of appearances herself, she knew one shouldn’t judge a book by its cover. “Sorry. There are many metaphors in *Dracula*, but haves and have nots is a good one. We’ll go with that. What examples do you have?”

He leafed through the book, pointing out the sordid lives of the servants and how Count Dracula was the elitest of the elite. The rich took advantage of the poor. She took notes. Maybe he wasn’t a dumb jock. His arguments were sound. She’d considered her usual feminist angle, but Mr. Nelson had probably seen enough of those papers.

“Do you think that’s the right answer?” Randy asked.

She shrugged. “Mr. Nelson isn’t looking for the right answer. He wants a convincing argument. With what you’ve got here, we’ll have a couple thousand words easy.”

She looked at her notes. For a minute, Randy wasn’t an idiot and she wasn’t an egghead. They were two students defending a shared point of view.

“Look at the time,” Randy said after an hour. “I need to stop

by Lyndsey's and tell her how it went."

Macy couldn't believe it was almost closing time. "I'm surprised she didn't call you."

He pulled out his phone. "She did, but she knows I turn it off when I'm studying. Writing papers is hard for me."

She understood. "I'll type up our notes tonight. We can meet tomorrow to come up with a mission statement and a summary."

He froze halfway to his feet. "Can we do it the day after? I'm helping my dad tile the Wilson place. I help him as much as I can since Mom died. It's hard being responsible for a parent."

She smiled. "I hear that. I'm raising my dad instead of the other way around. What happened to your mom?"

"Cancer when I was ten. You?"

"Psycho ward upstate. Sorry about your mom. Think about the major points to include in the summary. Day after tomorrow?"

He nodded. "Thanks again, Macy. It'll be weird finishing before a deadline for a change."

She felt weird when he said her name. "You did a good job today, Randy. This kind of critical analysis will help you in college."

"College? My dad can't afford college. I'm hoping for a football scholarship. You?"

She'd not considered it. Her dad took all her attention. "I'll

probably take over Bar Sinister when I'm old enough."

"Same here. I'll work in my dad's construction company if the scholarship doesn't come through." He held out his phone. "Let's exchange numbers in case something comes up. Same time and place?"

She nodded, and he left after trading numbers. Did Mr. Nelson hope she'd break down from the pressure of dealing with Randy or think she'd become so enamored that she'd share her family secrets? She wasn't the breakable type, but Randy's personality was a pleasant surprise.

That night, she entered their notes on the PC in her dad's office. The large window in the office was a one-way mirror overlooking the bar. She could observe the customers, but they couldn't see her. Macy stayed out of the bar during work hours because sixteen-year-olds were considered children in this part of the world. She handled the orders and invoices for the business.

The crowd was average for a Tuesday night, not too big but large enough to pay the bills. The Bar Sinister, in spite of its name, was a local watering hole. People on their way home from work, old friends, and neighbors frequented the place. Nothing more sinister than an occasional illicit office romance took place.

Dad entered the office. Tall and thin with a silver-blond ponytail down his back, he didn't look much older than Macy. With

his tinted glasses and tie-dyed t-shirt, he could be a hippie from the sixties. “Is there a bottle of Jägermeister stashed in here?”

“Uh-oh.” She looked up from the keyboard. “Someone with a divorce or a pink slip?”

“Poor guy at the end of the bar. His wife ran off.” He moved to the shelves containing expensive liquor. “I don’t see any.”

“There’s some in the basement.” Macy kept the inventory. “I’ll run down and bring you a bottle.”

“Thanks, kiddo. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” He stopped and sniffed the air. “You smell like a boy.”

“You mean like old gym socks?”

“No. I mean you’ve been around a young man recently. Do you have something to tell me?”

She laughed. “Don’t pull out the shotgun yet, Pa. Mr. Nelson assigned me a partner in Lit class.”

“That nosy English teacher?”

“Nothing I can’t handle. He wants me to participate more.” She suspected his real motive was to protect the community from people he considered outside the norm.

She spotted a familiar figure through the glass as a man took a seat in a booth. “I see Mr. Trench Coat is back.”

“Third time this week. Sits in the corner and nurses his gin and tonic. He doesn’t discuss his troubles with his friendly bartender.”

“As long as he pays his tab, he can sit all he wants.”

Her father rubbed his chin. “He smells funny. Like cinnamon, only sweet.”

Macy stared at Trench Coat. Mr. Nelson constantly chewed Red Hots, the bright red cinnamon candy. It might be a coincidence they smelled alike. Why would her English teacher come in contact with a stranger in town?

“It’s not on his breath,” her father said. “The smell is on his clothes.”

She didn’t like that. “I’ll run to the basement for the Jäger. You keep an eye on Trench Coat Guy. He could be trouble.” He could be a government agent talking to Mr. Nelson. Pushing her paranoid thoughts aside, she took the backstairs to the basement.

They may have stayed in one place too long.

“Here you go, Dad.” She passed him the square bottle, and he returned to the bar. Trench Coat Guy didn’t take his eyes off her dad and barely touched his drink.

Her phone buzzed. Who could be texting her so late?

The text was from Randy. MEET ME IN ALLEY. EMERGENCY.

The office opened to the alley, and Randy, shifting from one foot to another, waited there.

“What’s going on?” Macy asked. “What’s wrong?”

“You may be in trouble. When I went to Lyndsey’s after we

worked together, other people were there.”

“Who?”

“Mr. Nelson! He and some guy in a trench coat were talking to Lyndsey. Why would they be there?”

Macy’s mind went to a dark place. Mr. Nelson had paired Macy with Randy so Randy’s girlfriend could pass on information she learned from him about Macy’s father.

“Did Lyndsey see you?”

“No. It seemed weird. I don’t want to lose my writing partner.”

She appreciated him associating her with weirdness. She’d worked hard for that reputation.

“Thanks, partner. I’ll take it from here.”

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“I’ll explain it someday.” She’d keep her promise, but today wasn’t that day. “Go home. Don’t tell Lyndsey you warned me.”

He didn’t look as if he wanted to leave, but he nodded and disappeared down the alley.

She returned to the office and pressed speed dial.

The call rang at the other end, and someone answered immediately. “Darkside Management. Can I help you?”

“This is Macy at Bar Sinister. I need a cleanup on aisle seven.”

“Understood. Are you in immediate danger?”

“No. I’ll send you a photo and location. Thank you.”

She hung up and studied the likely government agent in the trench coat. A single investigator meant an agency was only sniffing around, seeking information on Dad.

The place had cleared out. They closed at 2 a.m., but most people left before midnight. Her father washed glasses and said good-night to customers.

No thanks to Mr. Stoker, people had the entire vampire legend wrong. Her father didn't use his fangs to drink people's blood. He didn't have fangs. He took a little bit of sadness from here, a touch of happiness from there. No one missed it, and it kept him alive. Working as a bartender was the perfect occupation for a vampire.

Darkside would deal with Trench Coat Guy after she provided them with his information. Her father's safety was her responsibility. Darkside would make it look like an accident. Afterward, she'd give them Mr. Nelson's location. He wouldn't be tipping off the government about her father again.

Maybe she'd wait until after he graded their paper.

To subtly build a manic tone of horror within a few pages is not easy, but Hunter achieves it with the steadily building rhythm of a heartbeat in this masterful tale, echoing classics like *Frankenstein* and “The Tell-Tale Heart” while remaining a true original.

My Perfect Heart

by Valerie Hunter

Valerie Hunter teaches high school English, and has had stories in publications including Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Sonder, and OFIC.

The first time I held a living heart in my hand was during the war. I was a trainee at Bolton Hospital, tasked with holding the organ while my superior, Dr. Irving, made the crucial cuts. It was a very fiddly operation, and we’d practiced for weeks in advance so we could be sure of the timing. During this practice we’d used a potato as a stand in for the heart.

I wasn’t prepared for the heft of a real heart, nor the pulse of it. Of course I knew hearts pulsed—I was a certified doctor, even if I was still training as a biomechanic—but there was a difference between knowing something as a course of fact and feeling it in the palm of your hand, writhing like a small animal.

Still, I managed to tamp down my wonder and my horror, managed to ignore my own wildly beating heart. That was what it took to get ahead in this line of work—a steady hand and the

ability to act nonplussed even as marvels unfurled around you. I lifted the heart from the patient's chest cavity at exactly the right moment, as though it were a mere potato, and cradled it as I continued to watch the operation. Of course the heart was no longer beating, but it was still strangely weighty, and I held it gently, like it was a baby bird that had been pushed from the nest to make room for a more stalwart sibling.

Dr. Irving's fingers flew as he attached the new heart into place, a precise construction of gears and cogs and springs. Immune to disease, incapable of rot. Perfect.

The patient was pronounced dead minutes later, his heart still in my hand. Dr. Irving swore, but in a perfunctory way, devoid of any real anger. He had already warned us that this was the likely outcome, that it would take a few—several—many attempts to achieve our intended outcome.

And so it did. By the time we succeeded, holding hearts had become humdrum, no longer a wonder but a matter of course, a means to an end. I didn't cradle them reverently anymore but threw them aside, my hands needed for more urgent business in attaching the new heart—the heart I'd helped create—to the patient's arteries and veins as adrenaline buzzed through me, insisting that this time would be successful.

Eventually, after a few—several—many attempts, success came, just as we knew it would. The patient made it off the table, through the night, and the next, and the next. The scars on his chest were triumphant, the metal wind-up key perfectly oiled.

He had to be wound every week like a clock, and it was my job to do it because the patient—we called him Tib; I don't recall his full name—was addle-headed after the operation. We'd been just a titch too slow, Dr. Irving said. We'd do better next time.

And we did. So many men under our scalpels, their chests cracked open like walnuts, their hearts pulled out and discarded to be replaced by our superior invention. Our patients were prisoners of war who would have wasted away from starvation and disease had not Dr. Irving given them this glorious opportunity. It wasn't without its risks, of course, but surely a quick death was better than a lingering one, and if they survived the operation they had a long life ahead of them with such a well-built mechanical heart, so much more efficient than the muscle and tissue they'd been born with.

Over time our technique improved, as well as our construction. Survival rates improved, too, slowly but surely. Our hearts were mechanical miracles, and we rightly felt like gods.

Then the war ended and the government shut down our program. Word had leaked to the press, and Dr. Irving was being excoriated in the newspapers. He didn't pay such articles any mind, just set up his own lab out west and took me with him. There was still work to be done.

We got our patients from workhouses and orphanages after that. Children proved to be surprisingly resilient. Of course they'd eventually outgrow the mechanical hearts they'd been given, but Dr. Irving said that was fine, that it would give us more practice

when the time came for a replacement. We had several orphanages on an annual rotation, and we watched the children grow, taking careful notes, marking some as test subjects and cracking others open every three years to give them a slightly larger unit.

I dreamed of Bolton Hospital frequently, of the opportunities the war had provided. The hospital had been full of doctors and biomechanics, nurses and trainees. How it had bustled! There had been teams, dozens of teams, so many people to brainstorm with, to compete against, to observe the techniques of

Where had they all gone? Three other men had come out west with Dr. Irving and myself after the war, but one abandoned us soon after, another died, and the third grew shaky and doddered and had to be let go. Where the other dozens and dozens of staff had gone, I didn't know. Were there other pockets of them across the country, continuing to perfect their skills in secret? Or had they all lost their nerves with the government funding, gone back to pedestrian lives? I couldn't fathom that at all, though I didn't like to think of them working, either, not if it meant they were more advanced than Dr. Irving and me.

But we needed someone. Just one more set of hands. In the old days the operation had required a team of five, but with enough practice Dr. Irving and I could manage between us, the perfect team. We used machines to administer the ether and pass the instruments, but automatons had their limits, as they should. Dr. Irving always said that human parts could be replaced, but not humans themselves.

We practiced solo operations a few—more than a few—times, but we never succeeded. There was just so much to do so quickly. Two pairs of hands were necessary.

That meant finding another assistant if we ever wanted our own hearts replaced. Which we both did, of course, now that we knew how to make the perfect heart. Who wouldn't want such a marvel inside of them? Why shouldn't we fully reap the reward of our genius?

We tried to train assistants several times. Young folk from the orphanages who knew us well, could appreciate what we'd done. But the most loyal of the children were painfully dull and slow, and the ones with dexterous fingers and nimble minds were invariably sly and sneaky, not to be trusted with matters of life and death.

Thus the opportunity never came. And one day Dr. Irving keeled over mid-operation, dead of an apoplexy before he hit the floor, and I was completely alone, unable to do anything.

I tried, of course. Traveled all over, looking for anyone I used to know from the hospital. I couldn't find many of them, and those I did find denied any knowledge of Bolton, pretended not to know me. I could see the terror in their eyes when they looked at me, though. Cowards, all of them.

I wanted to beg, plead with them to give me my longed-for heart. But of course I couldn't trust them with my life when they'd given up on their brilliance, been cowed into submission, were so many years out of practice.

So I put my dream on hold and set myself up as a tinker, selling complex wind-up toys to make a living, and keeping myself in practice by assembling and disassembling hearts each night, dreaming of the life I might one day have.

I could have gone back to being a regular doctor, of course, but that held no appeal. I wanted to create things, and toys were better than nothing. I worked for months at a time, then set out in my gaudily painted wagon to peddle my creations, keeping an eye out for anyone familiar, anyone from my previous life, either patient or colleague. I saw no one but strangers eager for silly toys.

Of course I made a point never to go near the orphanages we used to frequent, as there was nothing I could do for those children now without assistance. I changed my name. Changed my residence, too, giving up Dr. Irving's lab for a rented apartment in a small city where I could be anonymous, just a simple toy maker.

It was there that the police came calling. Not regular police, but Cog Agents, who had gained increasing power in the decades since the war, sniffing out anyone whom they deemed to be using mechanics in an improper way. I'd read all about them in the newspaper. A vile business.

I'd been up all night working on a new pump for the mechanical heart, a pump that I was certain would improve capabilities, though of course I couldn't prove such a claim, not without a patient to try it out on and an extra set of hands to help install

it. Someday...

When the agents came, I wasn't alarmed. I made toys; I wasn't doing anything wrong. I invited them in to my humble rooms, bade them sit down.

One of the men was older, balding and nondescript. The other I was certain I knew. After spending so many years scanning faces, it was a shock to finally recognize one.

It took me a moment to place him. My immediate thought was the hospital, but I had been one of the youngest there and I was over forty now; this man was in his twenties.

A patient, then?

His eyes. I knew those eyes, a strikingly clear green. I could picture a young boy with those same eyes at one of the orphanages. A favorite patient of ours because he was so resilient. Three times we'd cracked him open. Three hearts we'd given him, each one a size up from the last.

But he had only been nine the last time, and that was nearly fifteen years ago. Surely he would have outgrown that heart; even if he hadn't died, he'd be sickly, blue around the lips, a shadow of a man.

The agent in front of me was the picture of virility, broad shouldered and rosy cheeked. Perhaps I was mistaken. Perhaps I didn't know him after all.

I attempted to attend to their questions. They were searching for Dr. Malcolm Irving and his assistant, Dr. Albert Edwards,

wanted for heinous acts committed after the war, mutilating defenseless children among others, doing ghastly things to their hearts.

I held my tongue, because I knew their opinions were hard and fast and couldn't be changed with my facts. I smiled gently and said I knew nothing of the two doctors they mentioned. The lie came easily; I hadn't been Dr. Albert Edwards in over a decade.

All that time I was aware of a steady ticking undercutting my words.

The agents seemed unbothered by both my denial and the ticking. "Of course we're sorry to bother you, sir, but we've been checking in with any number of tinkers just to be sure. These doctors, biomechanics—" he spat the word out as though it tasted bad—"have many terrible crimes to answer for. Can we see some of your creations just so we can confirm that you are, in fact, a toymaker?"

"Of course," I said smoothly, getting up and walking towards my work table. On the way I passed by the clock, and I reached over and stilled the pendulum, hoping that was the ticking I heard.

It wasn't.

The agents were looking at me curiously. "I have a headache, and was finding the ticking unbearably loud," I explained with a disarming smile, and they smiled back as if they understood.

I showed them my toys—a wind-up monkey that clapped cymbals, a wind-up dog that flipped and tumbled, a family of wind-up mice that chased each other around a track. Both agents seemed impressed, and so I continued to demonstrate toy after toy both to increase their appreciation and because I'd become convinced that the ticking must be coming from one of the toys, that I could find it and silence it if I just searched hard enough.

But I showed off every toy I had, describing each of them in minute detail, and still I could not find the source of the ticking. It must be the heart I had been working on last night—had I wound it for some unfathomable reason before putting it away? If I could hear it, surely the agents must hear it, too. Surely they must be suspicious. I shouldn't have stopped the clock. Surreptitiously I set it going again, but its quiet ticks seemed swallowed up by the louder ones of the heart.

The young agent, still smiling, said something, but I had to ask him to repeat himself. All I could hear was ticking.

"I said, can you give us the names of any other tinkers or engineers you might know? It will help us in our investigation."

"Is that how you got my name?" I asked, my mind flipping rapidly through the possibilities. Had one of those cowardly doctors I'd visited years ago given me up? But no, they hadn't known my new name, wouldn't know where to find me.

It must have been someone who'd seen me peddling toys, then. Someone who had recognized me. Could it have been someone like me, trying to fool these simple agents, placate them with

a name when really they were continuing their work in secret? Could this be the man I'd been seeking all these years? Might he have a whole network of assistants, and if I went to him with my new pump, my perfect heart—

“I'm not at liberty to say, sir,” the younger agent said. “Of course the same privacy will extend to you if you provide us with names. Do you know anyone?”

The moments ticked by, louder and louder. I had no names to give. I knew that agent's green eyes. I knew him. I knew him.

The agent said something else, but I couldn't hear him, didn't try. The ticking had reached a tremendous volume, a drumbeat in its steadiness and resonance.

This green-eyed agent had found another biomechanic, that must be it. Another biomechanic with a team of assistants who had given him his adult heart. Maybe this pretend outrage was all a test to see how I'd react. Maybe they'd been searching for me to offer me a place on this team. All I had to do was figure out the right thing to say, and they'd take me with them.

I babbled, my excitement gushing out of me in great waves. I boasted of my skills, how talented I was, how I had done many great things during the war and after, what an asset I'd be. I paused, hoping for a reply, but the agents just smiled and nodded, urging me to go on.

So I did. I barely knew what I was saying, the words lost beneath the beautiful, incessant ticking of that heart that was nearly

mine. I was careful not to mention Bolton or Dr. Irving, but I waxed poetic about hearts, their inner workings, how easy it was to create them if you knew what you were doing.

I went on and on, but they didn't give me the invitation I sought, the acknowledgement I was waiting for. They just kept nodding and smiling like a pair of simpletons until I couldn't take it any longer. "You know my brilliance," I insisted to the young agent, taking him by the shoulders. "You've had my hand inside your chest!" I pulled the buttons of his shirt apart to reveal my handiwork.

His broad chest was unscarred. I blinked once, twice, the ticking rising to a crescendo. I looked from his chest to his eyes, not green at all but hazel and ordinary, unfamiliar. Unsurprised as he gripped my wrists, putting his manacles around them.

"I'd know you anywhere, Dr. Edwards," another voice said. It was pitched low, but I could still hear it, pulsing between the beats of the ticking heart. The other agent, the one I'd barely looked at, had unbuttoned his own shirt, and I stared at the patchwork of scars, the wind-up key.

"Sheridan Workhouse, back in '71," he went on. "Do you remember?"

I didn't know this man, though I'd once torn his heart from his body. I couldn't be expected to remember them all; there had been so many. But I'd bestowed on him a perfect heart and he had the gall to come arrest me, to take me away, to treat me like a lowly criminal—

I lunged at him, wanting to rip my handiwork from his chest, take it back, take it for myself, somehow, anyhow. But the young agent held me tight and wouldn't let me go.

And all the while my glorious, perfect heart ticked on, waiting for me to reclaim it.

The conflict between brothers and between fathers and sons can run as cold, deep, and deadly as an Arctic winter, as Jenkinson depicts through her strong narrative voice and memorable characterization in this tale of danger and survival in the Yukon.

The Visitors

by Linda Jenkinson

Linda Jenkinson has been writing one thing or another throughout her life starting as a radio copywriter and ending as a commercial freelance writer. At retirement, she rediscovered a passion for creative writing, and enjoys putting life's warts and wrinkles into stories and poems.

Like my kin, winter comes unexpected and stays long in the Yukon. I'd snared a small rabbit. Too small to make a meal. If I added the last of the carrots and taters from my root cellar and the onions from the loft, I'd have stew enough to last until tomorrow. I set the pot on my old box stove not long before my brother Clint and his boy, Leo, showed up.

I never understood why it's called a box stove. The thing looks like a barrel. It's likely the same reason folks call Clint big. He's all beer gut and blubber.

Clint and I never got along, but I always had a sweet spot for Leo. The boy was as kind as his pa was mean. Clint had been a brute since we was kids. He never grew out of his meanness. I hoped Leo never grew into it.

I hadn't seen either of them for, I reckon, ten years. The two of them tramped into my cabin without a knock or a halloo. If I'd had my shotgun, Betsy, in hand, I shudder to think on what might have happened. In the Yukon, it's rare to get visitors and rarer to get 'em in mid-winter.

It don't take long for that box stove to set a pot boiling, and Clint's nose started twitching right off. He wheedled and whined like a rusty hinge. "Whatcha got cooking there, Reuben?" He rubbed his belly. "Smells like rabbit."

At least, Leo had took the time to stomp the snow off his boots. You'd expect his skin to be red from the cold like the chapped hands he pulled out of his pockets. But it was pale and sallow. He must be fifteen, sixteen years old now, taller than me by a head—near as tall as Clint. A slim boy, but with muscles that rippled under his shirt. Living with Clint's hair-trigger temper, the kid needed those muscles to stand up to his pa.

I wish I had the guts to put Clint in his place for once... anywhere away from me. Clint edged towards the stove and reached for the stirring spoon.

"It were a small rabbit... it'll be a thin split for three of us," I said.

"Don't worry Rueb. We're willing to share." Clint nodded towards Leo. "Ain't that right, son?" And then to me, "I'll fill my bowl, and then you and Leo can divide up the rest. Hows about that?"

“That rabbit ain’t gonna cook through until supper time anyways,” I said.

“Yer right. Taters and carrots is still crunchy.” Clint put the spoon down. He sucked his fingers as stew dribbled down his whiskers. Then he swiped his hand across his mouth. “We’re in no hurry.”

Leo crossed over to the box stove. He stretched his fingers to soak up the warmth.

Clint snarled at the boy, “Go sit down!” Leo pulled a chair over to the window and slid onto the seat. He rested his chin on the straight wooden back and fixed a steady eye on the window.

I went to my cupboard. “Leo, I’ve got some liniment that’ll heal up those hands. It’s called udder cream.”

Leo cracked a smile. The name always made me grin, too.

“You ought to git yerself some gloves.”

His smile faded. “Pa says I don’t need no gloves. He says gloves is for sissy-boys. I use my pockets.”

I pulled out the udder cream and handed it to Leo. He took it with a quiet thanks. His eyes never left the window.

Clint guffawed. “Udder cream. Yer gonna turn them hands into tits, boy!” Outside, the howling wind made the only other sound.

Clint settled in and started on his hard luck story. I’d smelled it coming since he walked in the door, as sure as he’d smelled my stew. He’d lost his homestead, he said, through no fault of his

own. He figured him and Leo could move in with me until he could get back on his feet. I couldn't figure how he'd get back on his feet by living with me. From what he said, Clint didn't have much of a plan for that part either. He reckoned he'd wait for his ship to come in. I reminded him the Yukon was landlocked.

Leo coughed back what sounded like a laugh. Clint flashed him a stink eye. He didn't appreciate the humor.

I muttered under my breath that Clint wasn't much of a homesteader. He was more likely a squatter who got thrown off his squat. I didn't mutter quiet enough.

"Reuben, you got a problem with letting your mouth run faster than your brain can keep up with it. You should be grateful that me and Leo are offering to help you with this place. It ain't the Taj Mahal, you know, ya dumbass!" Except that Clint said it "tadge may all."

Clint was right about my big mouth. I couldn't leave well enough alone. So, I had to bring up that pronunciation thing. "It's called the Taj Mahal. Who's the dumbass now?"

Clint raised a threatening fist. "Shut your yap or you'll be the one out in the cold. Me and Leo can get along fine without you... just not without your cabin."

I'd worked hard homesteading this plot of Canadian soil. I'd be jiggered to let this sumbitch come take what's mine without a tussle. So, we had a tussle and I ended up pushed into a chair at my kitchen table. Leo stayed out of the scuffle, but he tied me to

the chair when Clint told him to. I didn't blame the kid. I figured Leo had felt the power behind his pa's big fists more than once, and wanted to stay clear of 'em. The boy has more sense than I do.

Dusk comes early in December and hangs on until spring. I hoped that wasn't going to be the case with these two. Soon, the rising full moon gleamed on a landscape of new powder that covered a two-foot crust of old snow.

Leo rose from his chair and leaned forward. "Someone's coming, Pa. There's a sled mushing up the hill."

As the sled approached, I squirmed and pretzeled around until I could see past Leo. A man ran alongside a dog team, and a smaller form—a boy—stood on the runners behind the sled. A third person, looked to be a woman, sat in the sled's basket.

"Leo, hand me that gun," Clint pointed to Betsy, but Leo wasn't facing him.

"You got your gun, Pa."

"A long gun speaks louder than a pistol."

Leo's chair was close to the spot where I keep my rabbit gun, a small .22 caliber. He handed it to Clint. The traveling party was almost to the cabin's stoop. Clint grunted with a scowl but took the gun from Leo. He swung the door wide and walked out to face the new visitors. An icy blast of wind filled the cabin.

"Jesus! Shut the—"

Clint's fat jowls billowed a scowl. "Keep your trap shut!" he hissed at me.

The sled pulled close, and the man stepped forward. “My wife is ill. We thought we’d get to town before dark, but the snow is heavier than we figured. The dogs are tuckered. We need lodgings for the night.”

His eye fell on me, tied to the chair, and his jaw snapped shut. He had sure picked the wrong ear for sympathy. He backed up a step as he spoke. “I see you’re busy. You got a bushwhacker? Need any help with him?”

“He ain’t no bushwhacker; he’s my brother.” Clint leveled the .22 at the man.

The traveler’s eyes widened. His voice shook with anxiety. “Now, now, mister. We mean no trouble. Let us bed down on the cabin floor. We’ll be gone at first light. No harm, no foul.”

Clint fired the gun in the air. “Shut up!”

I had almost told Clint the gun only had one shot left—the other one went to the rabbit. But my sore ribs still felt the fist that put me in this chair, so I kept my lip zipped.

Not aware that he was safe, the visitor backed away, but his lead dog lunged at Clint. Though the dog’s tether stopped him short, Clint cracked the gun across the dog’s snout. The dog yelped and fell back, drooling blood.

Clint set the rifle against the cabin wall and pulled the .38 from his belt. “Mind your dog and git on yer way before I put a hole in its head and yours.”

The visitor unhooked the injured animal and carried it to

the sled. He laid it across the blanket on his wife's lap. With a word to the remaining dogs, the man turned the sled, keeping an eye on Clint. Then, he and his family traveled back down the hill.

Clint held the pistol steady until the sled disappeared into the dusk. Then he returned the gun to his belt. He came inside, closing the door behind him.

He set the rifle beside the door and rubbed the cold out of his hands. "What's wrong with you, boy? Handing me that kiddie toy?" He cuffed Leo across the face. "Little nancy-boy."

Leo's face held the same expression Clint gets when he's riled. "You didn't need to hit the dog!"

"Hit the dog? Who gives a goddamn about the dog? You care more about an animal than about your Pa. Worthless pup!" Clint turned and spat on the floor. He walked around me, rubbing his whiskers. Then, at my side, he hooked his thumbs through his belt loops and rocked back on his heels. "Now... what will we do with you?"

Leo cleared his throat. Neither Clint nor I had noticed him get up and reach for Betsy. Now he stood, the shotgun leveled in our general direction, his gaze as steady as his hands. For a second his pa was caught off guard.

"What are you doing, boy? Oh..." Nodding, Clint grinned and cocked his head in my direction. He guffawed. "Well, go ahead. I was gonna wait until we ate, but more for the two of us, eh?"

I swallowed. Was it for the last time? Had I been wrong about the boy? Maybe he had more of Clint in him than I reckoned.

Leo turned, took aim, pulled back the hammer, and squeezed the trigger. A blast of heat streaked by my left ear and landed in Clint's chest, knocking him to his knees.

"You can't keep beating on people, Pa. You beat on Ma until she couldn't take it anymore and killed herself. You beat on me, beat on Uncle Reuben, and now you even beat on that poor, dumb dog."

I shrank back in my chair, unsure of what came next and hoping Leo didn't find my extra shells.

The boy glanced my way, a slow smile brightening his face. "Good to see you again, Uncle Reuben. I've missed you. You was always good to me when I was a youngster." He crossed behind me, the gun still trained on Clint.

"Pa, you had no reason to hurt that family or that dog. Your meanness has turned plum evil. I thought it was just talk, but you was going to kill Uncle Reuben. That was your plan from the get-go. You wanted this place without your brother in it. Maybe I was next! Kick that pistol over to me. Then, get up and move to the door, slow and easy."

Leo picked up the pistol. He loosened my bonds and handed it to me. I rose from my chair and pointed it at Clint.

I recognized the swagger and suspected Clint had left more

than one mark on the boy. “I don’t fault you for shooting your pa, but now what will we do with him?”

Leo’s voice grew low and quiet. “Okay, Pa. Now open that door and go through it.”

Clint’s face crumbled. “Ain’t you coming with me? I’m shot! I’ll die out there all alone in the cold and wind.” His voice creaked like a rusty hinge.

“Now who’s the ‘nancy-boy,’ Pa? No. I ain’t goin’ with you. I’m done with you.” That slow smile came back to Leo’s face, but this time, it had a touch of meanness in it. “Maybe you can catch up with them other travelers. Maybe they’ll help you out... like you helped them. Now get out and don’t never come back this way again!”

Leo pulled the gun tight into his shoulder and cocked it. He took a menacing step towards Clint, who opened the door and went through it into the night.

“You can call this home, Leo, if you’ve a mind to.”

“Thanks, Uncle Reuben. I got nowhere else to go.”

My stomach grumbled. “There’s enough stew for two. Let’s eat.”

Leo pulled his chair up to the table. I got out two bowls, a couple spoons, and dished up the stew. I glanced into the pot to see what remained. Darned if there warn’t enough for three.

In this unusual monster story, Lancaster achieves an original and deeply compelling perspective on well-known themes: vampires, power, God, and ultimately life and death itself. This is the kind of story that sticks with you long after you put it down.

Monster

by **N. G. Lancaster**

N.G. Lancaster is a writer in the Midwestern United States. He's fond of crows.

Before you finish this, give me the last privilege of the condemned. Let me speak.

You'll want to hear my final testimony, for it concerns the ones I took. Here it is:

I am not their end.

Believe that, if you'll believe anything I say.

I am not their end, but you will be, if you complete your task tonight.

Your weapons are still raised, but you no longer approach. For that, I thank you. In the time you grant me, I shall explain.

I take the blood of others. You know this, of course. But the blood I drink? It is never mine. It remains theirs, always. And when the last of their red life slips past my lips, their soul buoys

along that stream.

It's all right. Be horrified. I can imagine your thoughts.

It's harrowing enough to lose them. But their immortal souls imprisoned? Inside this body you see before you?

Were I not a monster before, I surely am one now.

I'm sorry. I don't mean to presume your notions. I only predict them because they are thoughts I had myself, shortly after I became as I am.

Countless starving nights followed my transformation. My hunger matched, pang for pang, by the disgust at what my maker told me: that all whom I consume continue on inside me.

Would I be condemning them to some hell, I wondered? The soul of my every meal, trapped in some windowless and unmapped chamber of mine own heart?

And what of the alternative? That they might all become voices in my head? All vying to bend me to their will?

I sound callous, I know. But I put the same quandary to you. Would you ever eat of bovine or lamb or hart, if you knew their souls would be trapped inside you forever? Or that you might hear their lowing in your mind, forevermore?

As I said. Countless nights of starving. But hunger makes of any of us a monster, in the end.

I broke. I stalked a street, one long since buried, and on that pathway, I devoured a man. And even after all of those starving,

agonizing nights of pondering, I still wasn't prepared for what came after.

I had prepared for guilt. I had prepared, even, for a dead man to whisper in my mind. But I hadn't prepared to see that man, whose body still lay in my bloody arms on that roadway, reborn inside me.

Forgive me. "Reborn" is not a term taken lightly when dealing with my kind. Allow me to rephrase.

I saw this man, Flavius, open his eyes beneath a verdant tree whilst the summer sun shone on above. I saw him, this land, this sun, in my mind. Or so I thought. Here I stood, still upon the midnight road with a cooling corpse to hand, and yet I beheld this wondrous sight so clearly.

I saw it with none of the gauziness of dreams. I saw reality. Or some reality, anyway.

Do you understand?

I saw the man as God might. And, just as He did, I watched my first man open his eyes, rise, and look about creation. From amid the grass, in the boughs of trees, even from behind the moon, I watched Flavius explore this great expanse neither with terror nor dread, but wonder.

As I slept beneath the ground, hiding from the sun we know, I witnessed Flavius explore this new land that, I deduced, must somehow be within me.

When he followed a stream to a waterfall, he wept at its

beauty. As did I, though I wept for him. This man was within me, but he was alone. He had none with which to share this sight.

And that wouldn't do.

So I went to another town. In this new place, in a quiet and sleeping temple, I found for my Flavius a companion. This new man was quiet and nurturing where Flavius was bold and clear.

And when Decius awoke within me, I watched him, too. I found I had endless attention. Countless invisible eyes.

When my two found each other, they embraced. And I wept again for the beauty of it all.

I swear to you, all of you, I was not prepared for this. I was prepared to be a monster. A gaoler.

A torturer, even.

I was not ready to look down at these two, holding one another against the night's breeze, and wonder: how might I care for them?

The answer to that question is what brings us all here, tonight. What has caused you such pain, and driven you to seek vengeance.

All I have done, I've done for Flavius. For Decius. And for all those that came after.

Every person I've taken from our world, I selected for this other.

Indeed, how could I do otherwise? I know not from whence the souls of this world arrive, but I know the origin of every soul

populating the strange world within my veins. I know because I made it my task to know. For all the long nights of my blasphemous existence, I've never taken a life at random.

Always I have chosen with a mind to the world within me. To the growing population therein.

That is the prison, my brave destroyers. Total and complete responsibility.

You, my lady. Would it cause too much pain to hear of your husband? Do you wish to know the new life he's made for himself? He doesn't remember our world, but I think his soul still hears its echo. He's taken to cobbling. He makes shoes for his fellows, and his joy when lacing a completed pair shows in the wrinkles on his face.

Please, do not weep. I don't mean to hurt you. I only want you to know that he is not wandering. He's not lost at the edge of Charon's river. He's making shoes for a girl whose feet were always too large—but she smiles when wearing the slippers he made for her.

You, good doctor. You're a student of history as well as of the body, are you not? That's why you think I'm lying. That I'm painting a quaint and utopic tale to save myself. But that's only because I haven't told you of Decius's end.

He remembered something of this world, my dear Decius. That, or he saw something of me in the new one. He would look into the sky and meet my gaze. A breeze crossed the field of grass beyond his cottage and he watched my invisible hand brushing

over the stalks. He saw something of my mind, my intentions, and that made him a seer. A prophet.

And you, my good doctor-historian, know how the lives of seers and prophets so often end.

I was with him as he burned. I might as well have been tied to the stake alongside him, for I felt the heat. I also felt his pain, as keenly as if it had been mine own.

Sometimes, I awake in my coffin, screaming from the realness of those flames.

You see? I do not promise some false paradise for your lost ones, my slayers. This world I cultivate within me is a world, not a simplistic lie. It is bright and dark, both.

I smile at the weddings, though none see me there.

When a mother's child is stillborn, I weep with her.

I regret.

I wonder.

Had I taken a child from its crib in this world, perhaps the mother's child might have opened its eyes in that other one.

If our God has to make such choices, I sympathize.

But, then, perhaps all gods are as I. Perhaps we all pump through the veins of a fanged monster like me, who is hunted by ones such as you. All in a world beyond our sensing.

That's a terror for all of us, is it not? That even our little drama in this crypt, tonight, might be snuffed out when a wooden

stake plunges down into the heart of our God?

We could all go mad thinking on this, I know. What's madder still is that, when considering such a consequence, I sympathize with the task ahead of you all the more.

The gravity of what you're here to do.

You seek to kill me: a wolf at the edges of your flock. But what sin might you commit against the flocks for whom my body is the very fields upon which they graze?

Would you, loving widow, destroy that world where your husband has found a measure of peace, amid his lasts and his leather and his smiling patrons?

Don't despair, my dear. Of course, I could be lying. Desperately trying to save myself at the precipice's edge.

But, perhaps, I'm not.

Perhaps he really is inside of me. Living in a new world. Under a shining sun.

Such names the rest of you call me. But consider why you are here, dear slayers. Consider on whose behalf you would destroy me.

You're willing to die for a world that will, in its time, kill you all.

Go out into your world, heroes. Look upon a leper's ward.

Go and listen at the red floor of an abattoir when the swine or the bull begins to understand.

If all my kind were so much dust, would this world be any less wretched?

But, so long as I remain, you have a choice. You can decide which world is worthy of your loyalty. Of the bravery that brought you here tonight.

Would you defend this world, where a husband's body was drained dry by a fanged monster in the dead of night?

Or would you prefer the world within my veins? Where spires rise high, and where senators still debate?

Where he sits in his small study, in the home above his shop, and waits for you?

The complexities and conundrums of time travel present endless scope for imagination, and in “Inevitability,” Miller makes use of that concept to tell a tale of otherworldly adventure and unexpected fate that consistently intrigues and fascinates.

Inevitability

by Scott Miller

Scott lives in a yurt, in a fen, in end-of-the-road Alaska with a very patient wife and the world's oldest puppy. When he's not splitting wood or hauling water, he spends his time making up stories and cutting pictures into rocks.

The Utz-Taq-Win-Aq shouted and waved from the roadside and rooftops of their hillside village. The little people were a choppy sea of bright robes against grey stone, as they jostled for a view of the Terrans.

A shiver towing a sense of dread ran through Pierre Aiza as the sun beat against his back. He shrugged it off and waved at the villagers without breaking stride. He was among friends here. He grinned at his shipmate, John Zurruna, and put his arm across his shoulders. They were a two-man parade following their long shadows up the center of the cobbled street.

Pierre beamed at the throng and waved again. “Damn, welcome to the Ch’umil system. Do you think the first ship got this kind of reception?”

“Wasn’t in their report,” John said. “And don’t expect this shit on every planetfall, Rookie.”

“Sure, I know. But it’s nice to be welcome, isn’t it?”

“It’s kinda creepy if you ask me. And remind me why we have to see the rock on top of this hill.”

“We’re supposed to be explorers, aren’t we? The delegation that met the ship said we needed to visit the hilltop shrine. They practically pushed me up the road.”

“Okay, Marco Polo. But why do I have to come?”

“Because you love me and couldn’t bear to spend the day without me. I—”

Pierre almost tripped over the child that dashed into the road in front of them. The little one clutched his pants, gazed up through tangled white hair, and whispered “Abaj” before an adult, not quite chest high to the Terrans, ran out to collect him.

The villager bowed with a hand to her chest. “Maltyoxinik, Abaj.” Then herded the youngster back to the roadside.

“What the hell was that all about?” John asked as they continued uphill.

“Beats me,” Pierre said. “But they’re making me feel mighty welcome. I like them.”

“They seem to like *you* too.”

“They do, don’t they? Maybe it’s my light hair. Or maybe it’s because I’m not scowling at them. You’re not a very friendly guy, John.”

“I prefer my engines to most people, and these creatures are just annoying. I wish I’d stayed on the ship.”

“Come on, John. What’s the point of getting leave if you’re just gonna mope around shipside? Now me, I’ve felt right at home since we landed. And that’s odd because when I plotted a course to this system, I was all antsy about it. And when I first laid eyes on their star..”

“What?”

Pierre glanced at him, then looked down. “It’s embarrassing, but it scared the piss out of me.”

They left the crowds and buildings behind when the street dissolved into a pebbled path winding through tall grass. Shaggy white quadrupeds grazed in the distance, and the air smelled of sweet grass and manure baking in the heat.

Pierre strolled up the path and took it all in. His shirt clung to his back, and sweat ran down his face. He couldn’t stop grinning.

John trudged along behind until they reached a long stairway ascending the steep, final slope. He mopped his face with his sleeve. “We’re not going to climb that in this heat, are we?”

“You want to turn back now? We’re almost there.”

“So you say.”

“Come on, John.” Pierre stumped up the stairs that were obviously built for shorter legs and smaller feet. His shipmate followed.

When he finally stepped off at the summit, Pierre stretched out his arms and turned a full circle. A mystery in the shape of a walled courtyard lay before him, and an honest-to-god alien world stretched behind and below. The grey village rambled down the hillside to the edge of a forest of the greenest green. The sky was the palest blue, almost white. The sun, a disk of whiter fire, was almost at its zenith.

John tripped off the last step and stumbled away from the edge. He bent over, red-faced, with hands on his knees while he caught his breath.

“John.”

“Shut up. Give me a minute.”

Most of the flat hilltop was a paved space enclosed by a waist-high stone wall. The only structure within was a thatch-roofed hut at one end. Its wide doorway facing the courtyard was open, and before it, a villager in grey robes swung a bucket billowing smoke.

He set the bucket down inside the hut and called out. “Greetings, Abaj and companion. You are/have been most welcome here.”

Pierre raised his eyebrows, looked at John, then back at the villager. Then he strode across the courtyard and bowed with hand to chest. The villager returned the gesture, then grasped Pierre’s right hand in both of his.

“Tew chi b’al, Abaj. I am honored-fulfilled by your presence

at our holiest of shrines. And your companion, of course, is most welcome too. I am Qajaw, the priest.”

“Nice to be noticed,” John said as he joined them. “Your English is very good, Qajaw.”

The priest glanced at him, then returned his attention to Pierre, whose hand was still in his grasp.

“Those on your first ship were excellent teachers. We had many interesting conversations, and I could see that your people would be/were important to us. I am eager to learn more about you.”

“As we are eager to learn about you,” Pierre said. “Would you tell me about this shrine?”

Qajaw flashed a smile and pressed his hands to his chest. “It is/was my honor-duty to do so.

“To begin, please point your eyes toward the stone inside.” He touched his fingers to his lips, then up to a horizontal fissure near the top of the man-high stone. “This is the gape, the mouth through which it receives offerings. Observe with attention. This is important.”

Only the gape-side of the massive stone was visible in the dark and smoke of the shrine, though there were weighty shadows beyond. The gape and the stone below bore a stain, while the area above was worn smooth. Offerings lay on the floor. Heaps of food, carved objects, and mysterious bundles extended into the dark.

Pierre reached toward the gape, but Qajaw grabbed his wrist and pulled his hand back.

“Not now. That will be/was but is not now. If you will sit, I will tell.”

John shook his head and walked away. Pierre sat cross-legged before the priest and breathed in the burnt musk of the incense rising from the bucket. He seemed to know this place, this gape-stone, this Qajaw. He shivered again and wiped sweat from his eyes as heat rose from the stones beneath him.

Qajaw spoke. “All that will be/was/is has its beginning/continuance here.” He pulled a blade from his sleeve and sliced his left palm. Then he closed his fist over the blood, reached up to the gape, and fed himself to the stone.

“K’ak q’ij chul/K’ak ulew k’asi’k. The gods alone walked the land among the beasts in the time-before-the-sun. It was dark, but there was warmth. The beasts went about their lives. The gods did whatever gods do.

“The first rising of the sun would be the age’s ending. Any beast touched by its light would be turned to stone. Even the gods, if they chose not to avoid it. The dawn of that first day would burn all else to cinders.

“You, who arrived from above, have seen the scorched, empty places. This land alone lives because of a great sacrifice at that first dawn. That sacrifice took place/will take place *here*, against this stone.

“K’ak q’ij chul/K’ak ulew k’asi’k. K’ak q’ij chul/K’ak ulew k’asi’k. K’ak...”

Pierre’s eyelids sagged in the incense-heavy air. He shook his head, rubbed his face, and strained to concentrate on the insect buzz of Qajaw’s chant. The sky wavered, and the courtyard fell away. Only the dripping gape remained. No sun, no self..

Then he was again. Flat on his back in a dusky place. Cool soil lay beneath him. Soil, not stone. *He was... Pierre Aiza. He was... not where he should be.* A voice, faint, fading, gone. *Qajaw.* He sat up. Then with a hand on the gape-stone, he hauled himself to his feet.

He was alone. No Qajaw, no shrine, no John. Only a dirt clearing surrounded by glowing, fungus-pale forest. And the gape-stone in the center. He touched the unstained gape and shivered.

“John! Qajaw!”

The forest swallowed his shout, and he pressed his back against the gape-stone. He looked left and right, drew a shuddering breath, and blew it out. *Steady now. Remember your training. Observe, evaluate, form a plan.*

The towering palm-like trees, the brush, and the grass all emitted a firefly glow. The forest revealed itself in a twilight of its own making.

A rustling, like dry grass in the wind, rose from somewhere below, and a million stars studded the sky. There was a whiff of

smoke in the air. On the horizon, a brighter glow shone through the trees. Was that east? He'd call it east. He had the gape-stone, and he had the east, so he wasn't lost.

Bullshit, he was absolutely lost. A hot ache jittered his gut, but he tamped it down. He strained eyes and ears for any detail, clue, or revelation but—*What's that?* Something moved in the forest to the east. Heavy footsteps approached, something big.

He bolted from the clearing and crouched in the brush above a steep slope, a shadow among the glowing stalks and leaves. His heart thumped. The footsteps thudded toward him. A phosphorescent insect crawled up his arm, and he brushed it away. A stream of them moved across his feet.

Finally, a giant being emerged from the forest and trudged to the center of the clearing. Two arms, two legs, and a head upon broad shoulders. They were at least twice Pierre's height and built as if quarried from quartz. Naked, hairless, and apparently ungendered, they towered over the gape-stone. The gods alone walked the land...

The giant touched fingers to lips, then down to stone. It sliced a fingernail across its left palm, closed its fist over the wound, and fed radiant, golden blood to the gape. Then it knelt to the side and pressed forehead to stone.

Time stumbled, missed a beat. Pierre's breath stalled in his lungs as the moment spun on the pivot of the gape-stone. At last, the giant stood and looked to the east before turning toward Pierre. Its face was chiseled crystal, and its eyes pure starlight.

Pierre held his breath as the giant raised an arm and pointed a long ivory finger. Thunder tumbled from its lips, “ABAJ.”

Pierre jerked back and fell down the slope behind him. He grasped at stalk and branch, but the brush broke away. He rolled and slid, cracked his head on a stony ledge, and dropped off the far side. Down he plunged, crushing a dark path through the phosphorescent forest until he thumped onto level ground and lay prone in the midst of chaos.

A thousand tiny feet raced over his body before he jerked to his knees and faced the rush of creatures that now broke around him. Smoke stung his eyes. Insects swarmed past and mobbed his nose and mouth, and the air above his head was full of bird-like flyers. Furred, feathered, scaled, and chitinous, all fled the light rising in the east.

He pushed himself to his feet, but a pale-furred, dog-sized creature knocked him back down, then sprang away. The small beasts raced across him again. On him, on him, on him. He rose to his knees, flailed, and swatted, desperate to clear a space.

He couldn’t catch his breath, had to move. He crawled with the current, stumbled, got his feet under him, and ran. He fled the smoke and light, one more panicked beast.

More of the dog-sized creatures ran alongside him. Obvious predators bounded past, ignoring the prey all around. He ran flat-out, crushed smaller creatures underfoot, and sucked in insects with every breath. Then, a blow from behind knocked him down, and a clawed hand flipped him over.

The man-sized monster planted forelegs on his chest, whipped its long tail around, and clenched his throat with the hand on its tip. He turned his face from stiletto teeth and rot-stinking breath and pushed against black scales like armor plating. Then the beast raised its head, sniffed the air, and looked back over its shoulder. It crushed the breath from him as it bounded off.

Pierre rolled over, crawled, dragged himself across the stampede until he gained the slope, and staggered up. He collapsed onto his back just above the mad exodus and gasped for breath like a fish on a riverbank.

His breathing slowed. Reason gained over hind-brained terror until he could think again. When he could manage it, he sat up facing downslope, elbows on knees and face in his hands. What the hell was happening? He needed a point of reference, something he could hang his reason on and construct a coherence.

The gape-stone. Maybe it was more than just a cracked rock. Maybe it was a way back. But that was crazy. How could it... Never mind how. He had to try something. He stood and began the long climb back up the hill.

His head throbbed in time with his steps in a steady slog up the steep slope. Right foot forward and push. Left foot forward and push. He pulled himself along where branches availed themselves. He slid back, then regained the lost ground.

What was this place? Maybe *when* was the better question.

Qajaw had spoken of the time-before-the-sun. But how could that be? More likely, he was lying in front of the shrine with a head full of that incense. He could just stop, sit here, and wait for his head to clear.

No, he really couldn't. He felt the rough bark of the trees, smelled the smoke in the air. His head wouldn't pound like this in a dream, would it? He pushed harder for the summit.

By the time he reached the top, the stars had faded, and smoke had settled in the clearing. He knelt at the gape-stone as the giant had done. *Now, what are the words? K'ak... something. "K'ak... q'ij chul..." Think, dammit. "K'ak q'ij chul/K'ak... ulew... k'asi'k" That's it.*

He pressed his forehead against the stone and closed his eyes. "K'ak q'ij chul/K'ak ulew k'asi'k. K'ak q'ij chul/K'ak ulew k'asi'k."

Footsteps approached—"K'ak q'ij chul—" from the east—"K'ak ulew k'asi'k." He glanced to the side as three giants entered the clearing, then closed his eyes and bore down on the chant. "K'ak q'ij chul/K'ak ulew k'asi'k..." Rapidly now, in a bid to escape before—

The giants halted a stride from the gape-stone, and he slumped back onto his heels. He waited, but they stood still as statues. Their chiseled faces revealed nothing.

The hair on his arms and neck rose under their gaze, and every nerve twitched with the need to flee. But hadn't he come

to the stars to meet the unknown? He was an officer on a ship of exploration. He needed to get hold of himself and do his damned job.

He rose to face them, took a deep breath, and sought his voice. But, before he could untangle his tongue, the giant in the center spoke. “Tewchib’al.”

It felt like a blessing as the word settled in his chest. He breathed easier even as smoke burned his lungs.

Treetops behind the giants burst into flame, and stone birds dropped from the sky to shatter against the ground. The center giant made a cutting gesture across its left hand and nodded.

Heat rose with the light, and another stone bird crashed at his feet. He used the sharp edge of a shattered wing to slice his left palm, then closed his fist over the blood and fed himself to the gape. He knelt to the side again and pressed his head to the stone.

The center giant spoke, “Maltyoxinik, Abaj.”

And the words unfolded in his mind. He understood the gratitude. He understood it all. There was no way back, but... there was a world to save, a people to come.

Pierre squeezed his eyes shut and resumed his chant as the giants trudged past. “K’ak q’ij chul/K’ak ulew k’asi’k.” *Let the new day begin/Let the new age rise.*

He focused on the whispered words rushing from his lips. As the giants’ footsteps receded down the far side of the hill, the forest burst into flame around him. Smoke, gusts of scalding

wind, and then the first rays of the first sunrise stretched across the clearing.

A sudden breeze lifted the dust as John reached the far end of the courtyard. It clung to his face and neck, gritted between his teeth. He coughed and wiped his eyes, then turned toward the shrine where Qajaw stood alone.

He ran back across the pavement and grasped the priest's shoulder. "Qajaw, where's Pierre?"

The priest droned on in his cloud of incense, eyes closed.

John shook him. "Qajaw!"

The priest blinked his eyes open and smiled. "The cycle is complete. We are/will be. Life persists."

"What the hell are you talking about? Where did Pierre go?"

"Abaj is/was here, always."

"No more of your bullshit. Where is he?" He barged into the smoke-filled shrine and kicked offerings aside as he crashed through the dark space.

"Pierre. Are you in here?" Votive objects crunched under his boots. Incense tangled his thoughts. He felt his way along the wall, then around the gape-stone until he stumbled into a man-shaped form leaning against it.

"Pierre?" But it was stone, not flesh.

Outside, the wind rose, and a gust cleared the air in the shrine. He made out a much-weathered statue of a wild-haired, kneeling man. A human man. He ran his hands over it, then crouched down and peered up from underneath.

The features there were still sharp, unweathered. He saw closed eyes and a brow furrowed in concentration. That long nose, the old scar on his right cheek... No, it couldn't... He looked at the figure's chest, at the name tag that shouldn't be there. *AIZA*.

“P... P... Pierre. H... how...?”

He leaned his head against the stone shoulder. How could this be? An ancient statue of Pierre, dozens of light-years from Earth, among people who could never have seen him. Was this his shipmate?

Outside, Qajaw was speaking. “...made the sacrifice in the-time-before-the-sun. He is/will be honored above all beings. My people...”

John knelt among the crushed offerings. The priest continued his sermon. And the life-giving sun burned a path across the sky.

For years, mankind has viewed outer space as the last frontier, and what's a frontier without swindlers and adventurers? With a bright sense of humor and strong, realistically drawn setting, Price's "Space Slag Swindle" takes us on a joyride with couple of jetpack-wearing, ray-gun-toting rogues out in deep space.

Space Slag Swindle

by Humphrey Price

Humphrey Price is a space systems engineer who has contributed to robotic exploration missions to the Moon, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. His goal is to introduce interesting plausible ideas for space travel, aliens, and the future of the human race through highly realistic hard science fiction stories. Information on his publications can be found at <https://humphreyprice.com>.

We call 'em slag asteroids—metal globs that are remnants of failed proto-planets. This one was a rare beauty—almost pure rhodium. My spaceship was in foreclosure, lawyers were biting at my heels, the government was threatening jail time for back tax payments, and I was desperate for cash. Our technology has advanced over the past ten thousand years, but the human condition remains the same.

After a four-month voyage, I had finally caught up with my prize. It was the size of a small house, with a market value of over \$200 billion. Of course, taxes, fees, mining costs, space transportation, and middlemen would eat up over half of that, but still—not a bad haul. I stared longingly at this motherlode that could

save my butt and was looking forward to a future life of obscene luxury. To make a legal claim, it had to be tagged using a transponder with a registered code.

I was suited up outside my ship, ready to nail that baby, but the problem was, I was also staring at another vessel that wasn't supposed to be there. It was an unfamiliar privateer featuring a provocative graphic of someone's derriere on the bow next to the name Golden Hind written in script letters. Floating alongside was a bloke in a spacesuit likewise looking to nab my find, obviously having hacked my confidential notice of discovery. Arriving at the same time was no coincidence, since the scallywag had also stolen my optimal trajectory.

It was going to be a close race to stake the claim. As I jetted toward the slag, so did my adversary. Not expecting a shootout, I was surprised to take a hit from a laser pistol which took out my suit's gyros. I was thrown into a spin and had to manually control my orientation to recover from tumbling. I was eyeballing the asteroid for reference while rocketing around in evasive maneuvers, dodging more laser shots.

This thug was playing for keeps, so I pulled out my own trusty ray gun. We chased each other around the asteroid with our jetpacks, firing laser pistols and using the edge of the slag for cover.

After trading quite a few shots, I finally landed one that punched a hole in the pirate's helmet. While my opponent was distracted with slapping on a leak patch, I pulled out my tran-

sponder and placed it on the asteroid. Before I could power it on, a laser hit wiped it out. I was pissed and fired back, blowing out the pirate's jet pack, leaving the scoundrel floundering around, tumbling and helpless.

Without a functioning transponder, I had nothing else to do but jet over and tow the scumbag back to my airlock. I could never justify leaving another spacer out to die. Back in my ship, with the pirate's arms zip-tied, I removed the helmet to see who was behind that mirrored visor. I was surprised to find a rather fetching platinum-haired broad giving me a seductive smile and saying, "Well, hello there, James Ardby."

I let out a long whistle. "If it isn't Anne Lufford."

"When last we met, you cheated me out of fifty grand at the poker table."

"I never cheat. I won fair and square. But now that I've got you out of the way, it's time for me to claim that beautiful slag with my spare transponder."

"I'll take you to court on that one. I have video automatically relayed to my server on Earth showing that you fired at me, took me prisoner, and stole my asteroid."

Unfortunately, I had no video, and an investigation could be risky. My next bid was a tough call to make, and I felt it in the pit of my stomach. "Tell you what, Anne, we'll split it fifty-fifty."

"No deal. I've got evidence of foul play. It's all mine."

"Out here, twenty million miles from Earth, with you tied

up, I'm holding all the cards. I have my own video showing that you fired at me first and then wiped out my transponder." That was a bluff.

Anne pondered for a moment. "Okay, Jim, let's play poker for it. Winner take all."

Now she was talking my language. "You've got a deal."

Anne winked and said, "So, here I am, all tied up. What are you going to do with me?"

I smiled and said, "Maybe just cut you loose and see who's going to lose their shirt in poker."

After releasing the bindings, I thought there might be some hard feelings, but once out of her spacesuit, she was really quite friendly. Maybe that's because we had each been alone in space for the long outbound journey. Asteroid rendezvous trajectories typically call for single-crewed prospector missions. You just can't afford the mass of food and resources to support an extra person. And, who wants to share the booty anyway? Speaking of booty, with her being so friendly, it was a little while before we finally got around to the poker game.

We freshened up, made some sandwiches, popped open a bottle of wine, and sat down to poker. I had spun up the ship for artificial gravity, so things stayed nicely in place. We began with equal stakes, trading turns as dealer. Anne shot me a stern look. "No cheating this time, Jim."

"Said the pirate to the honest prospector."

“Honest like a swindler.”

Anne scrutinized my every move, thinking I might have a few tricks up my sleeve. Although I never cheat at poker, I got some lucky hands. It was close at times, but I played out my winsome pirate pretty well, and after a dozen deals, I had taken the pot.

Having lost her gambit, Anne seemed surprisingly calm. She departed in her repaired suit and jetted back to the Golden Hind. I wasted no time suiting up, flying over to that shiny jewel of a rock, and planting my transponder. I switched it on, and the device measured the isotopic content of the surface for future verification and transmitted the claim code back to Earth. Done! Ownership was now irrevocably established. Then an error showed up in my confirmation of the code. I checked the numbers and was shocked to find it was not my ID. *Crap!*

I got on the horn to Anne. “How the hell did you switch the ID code to yours? They’re locked in and sealed by the Space Mining Commission.”

“So, you think I might have hacked your transponder with some kind of pirate gizmo while you were freshening up after our delightful little tango? No way. The Commission claims those puppies are tamper proof. But, thanks for the nice rhodium slag, Jimbo! I guess I’ll see you back at the Grand Space Hotel casino.”

I jetted to my airlock and cycled inside. I still had an ace in the hole. The expected call came soon.

“What the hell did you do to my ship! The propulsion system is toast—red lights across the board.”

“Oh, that. Maybe while we were playing our game of laser tag, your rocket engines accidentally got hit with some stray shots. That’s too bad. Now it looks like your only ticket home is with me, or I can leave you out here to see how long your supplies hold up. My transportation fee is half the claim on the asteroid. I’ll have a contract for you to sign.”

We set up the slag with a docking ring and sent for an ion drive tug to tow it into lunar orbit for mining. In the end, Anne and I had a good laugh and a nice friendly trip home. Honor among thieves.
