

FREEDOM FICTION

Grinds You To A Pulp - Join The Cult

Journal Issue 03; Volume 01
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Editor's Note

Howdy Freedom Friends, and welcome to the third issue of Freedom Fiction Journal. We are growing well now with submissions increasing every week since February 2009. It has been a pleasure working with the authors who have shown interest in this community resource.

Do get your reading pants on and go through this issue in leisure. The fourth issue Submission Calls announced right here - do go ahead and send us **the pulp of your creative juices**. Artwork Submissions still lagging behind. I would like to welcome cartoons or caricatures as well for the forthcoming issues. In this issue we have a special bonus - an interview with **Uwe Jarling**.

North America is always represented in our author list. This time we have a SciFi from a Professor from Slovenia, European Union. Also, we have a very unique historical fiction from David Schwartz. Our first crime/detective story comes from UK.

We get a lot of SciFi and I would like to see more of Detective, Noir, Hardboiled, Horror, Satire/ Parody, and War fiction for future issues. So if you got one in any of those genres, we are gladly seeking them.

So now, behold the mega issue of over 100 pages of pulp! This is only our third issue and we have achieved this milestone for the first time so soon into our first publishing year.

Pulp To Grind Your Senses !!!

Best Wishes,

Ujjwal Dey

Editor for Issue03, Vol01.

Freedom Fiction Journal

<http://freedomfriends.in/>

Blatant Revisionism

By G. David Schwartz

Synopsis: It's the most famous and renowned voyage in recent history of civilisation. Columbus attempting to discover a new sea route goes on to discover the continent of America. But did he really?

About the Author: G. David Schwartz is the former president of Seedhouse, the online interfaith committee. Schwartz is the author of 'A Jewish Appraisal of Dialogue'. Currently a volunteer at Drake Hospital in Cincinnati, Schwartz continues to write. His new book, 'Midrash and Working Out Of The Book' is now in stores or can be ordered online at Amazon.com website.

In this historical retelling, the famed explorer of the sea attempts an alternate route to India.

Blatant Revisionism

By G. David Schwartz

Christopher Columbus stood on a sun-drenched dock in Palos, Spain, staring out to sea. The creaking vessels rocked on the blue-green water and vaguely entered his consciousness. The braying of seagulls added to the melody of port life. The stench of fish and other salt-laden things caused a crisp sensation in his nose.

But Columbus ignored everything connected with Palos. He was a foreigner, and his sense of aloneness was compounded by the fact that he was thinking foreign thoughts. The world is round. Or, if not round, then oblong.

Certainly there is something below the horizon. Every thinking person knew this to be a fact. The assumption that the world was flat was just nonsense. It was not even speculation. No crew had ever returned to report they have seen the edges of the earth. Ships disappear, that is true; but they sink as readily a knot off the coast as they do a thousand fathoms from shore. Furthermore, we can see the wreckage of ships. The hypothesis of a flat world has less validity than that of a round one.

Or is the world square?

No! Squares do not arch at the horizon. You cannot stand at one point of a square and see ships rising from the other. Look at the sun. Look at the moon. It is apparent that the God we worship created all matter spherically.



I've seen round rocks and oblong rocks, but never a square rock. Never! And only occasionally have I seen a flat rock. Even then, I am told these are pieces, which have been chipped away from a more solid mass - probably a round mountain.

No? Perhaps the world is a triangle.

No! The same problem arises. There are no triangle stars, no triangle planets. Ships will not ascend the horizon from a triangle surface. No the world is round. Or oblong.

In any event, I shall prove whichever turns out to be the case when I prove successful at that which I really want to do:

reach the east by travelling west! Now there's a feat. There's where my fame shall lie.

Columbus had such thoughts often, sometimes dreamily, sometimes with great irritation. Each time he met with the king and queen, or one of their regents, to argue for gold and supplies he became more and more convinced he was correct. The east could be found by travelling west, whether the earth was round or oblong or whatnot. A new trade route would be discovered by going over the horizon rather than hazarding the currents to the north or south. But most telling, since no one ever tried to reach the Indies by travelling away from the common routes, there would be no pirates to whom merchants would lose their goods. Not for a few years, anyway.

"We are ready. It is time."

Alonzo, his assistant navigator, was pointing toward the Santa Maria. The ship stood stoically between the two others, which wobbled amiably on the sea.

Columbus gathered the parchments he had laid on the cobblestone and walked toward the creaking wooden ship.

After the first hectic hours, before boredom settled in, Columbus sat in his quarters and thought about his faithful friend Alonzo. Columbus knew in his own heart what he expected to achieve, but what motivated Alonzo?

How can one chart a course into emptiness? How can one be as calm and dignified as Alonzo? He stood on deck, empty scrolls in his trunk, waiting to design the future course of the world.

Columbus buttoned the top buttons of his uniform and went to the quarterdeck. The ocean was eerily quiet, a methodical lapping of waves against the sides of the ship.

Alonzo was leaning forward on the bowsprit, glaring into the distance. What he saw ahead of him was as empty and seamless as the papers in his trunk.

The voyage was a banquet of tedium, punctuated by speculation intermittently greased by memory. The men began to dream and talk about green things: shrubbery, the listless plains, and women. They rehearsed adventures they had once had and composed lists of things they would do when they returned to Palos.

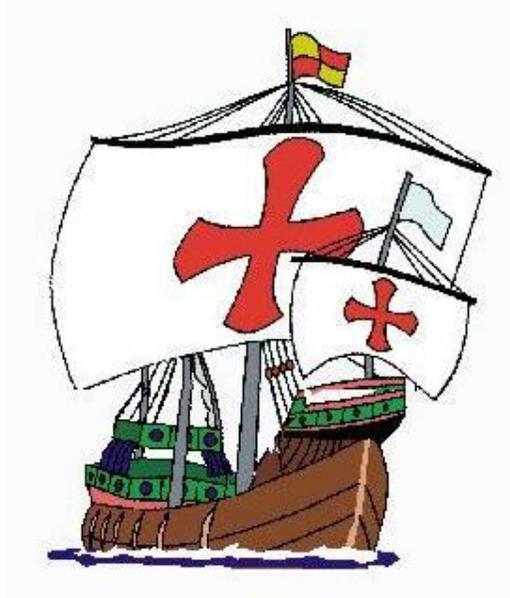
Columbus and his officers drearily listened to the men. They had heard these tales and promises so often that the human crew made them more nauseated than the rolling, rollicking, bobbing

ocean. One hundred days into the journey, unbearable monotony was interrupted when something very odd was spotted ahead.

The crew was babbling incoherently among themselves when the truth of the situation suddenly presented itself to the Captain. "Turn back!" Columbus yelled, "Turn back." But it was too late. They had been caught up in the mad rushing currents, which dragged them off the side of the earth. The three ships and all eighty-seven men plummeted into the abyss, which lies beneath this flat earth.

"There!" My father said, cuffing me on the side of the head. "Is that what you want? Does that make you happy? Now you don't have to memorize the names of the presidents! You don't have to do mathematics! Are you happy? You don't exist!"

Quite the philosopher, my father, I thought as I rubbed my ear. Yes, quite the philosopher.



**** THE END ****

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A Prompt Delivery

By Edward Rodosek

Synopsis: In an unpleasant weather, our protagonist arrives to a pleasant tavern to befriend an unusual fellow with the usual rounds of drinks and banter. But the stranger isn't toasting his health for sure.

About the Author: Edward Rodosek is a Construction Engineer, Doctor of Technical Science and Senior Professor in Faculty of Civil Engineering, Ljubljana, Slovenia, European Union. Besides his professional work he writes science fiction. He is author of four novels and fourteen collections of short SciFi stories in Slovenia. More than three dozen of his short stories have been published in SF magazines in USA, UK and Australia. Recently he has published in USA, a collection of science fiction short stories - 'Beyond Perception'.

In this SciFi, the protagonist deals with bad weather, a new friend and the grim truth of cloning.

A Prompt Delivery

By Edward Rodosek

An April shower chased me off the street into a basement tavern. Inside was dim and chockful, except in one corner some chap was sitting alone - a dark, vague figure.

"Would you mind if I join you?" I asked.

"Not at all, take a seat." I sat down and ordered a lager while he emptied his mug. Probably it hadn't been his first one, for our polite conversation swiftly developed into sort of his personal confession.



"My name is Brown, Mark Brown, kind of a journalist," he said.

"Kind of?"

He shrugged. "I'm afraid my first job as an assistant reporter for the Alternative Scientist Magazine no one could term as successful."

"Trouble finding a proper topic?"

"Exactly. Two months ago, on February nineteenth, my chief editor urged me that I had to handle an interesting story within two months at the latest. We're preparing the Jubilee Easter issue and my article ought to be in it, unless I want to get a notice to quit. So I grappled with the problem and started to surf the Internet."

"Not a bad idea. And how was the result?"

"After painful search sessions, I finally managed to find an advertisement that began with an interesting sentence: *'Who is willing to wait twenty years for the supply of goods of uncertain quality?'* A certain Dr. Mist claimed the usual cloning of a newborn child is a time-wasting lottery, for nobody could know what the person would become as an adult. But he, Doctor Mist, could deliver a clone of a grown-up young human person in only three weeks. In other words - three hundred times quicker."

"And you believed that advertisement?" I asked him.

"Not at all. However, slim though the chance of success might be, I had to try it. Of a major import in all this matter was

the question of scientific veracity. I decided to visit that Doctor Mist to find out about the whole matter. If I'd manage to unmask him as a fraud, that would be a good story, too." He leaned forward and his voice grew subdued as if he was talking about a secret. "In short, I caught the first plane available. So I rang on Mist's entrance door early next morning. He looked like an old satyr, but his much younger wife was attractive, like a movie star."

I nodded. "That fact could have been useful in his business."

He nodded. "You have no idea. At the beginning, I had to sign a statement about a strict discretion because his method had no official licence yet. When I remarked that cloning was nowadays nearly a routine procedure, he foamed at the mouth with rage. What his so-called rivals were doing, he said, was nothing more than an aping imitation of nature, with all its risk and failures. But his clones were something different. He insured his clients a duplicate of the original - a person with equal intellect, memory and feelings. He claimed he'd done it several times with full success."

I abstained from comment, but I must have looked skeptical for he hurried on with his explanation.

"Don't consider me a naive fool, sir. True or false, the idea was not altogether unreasonable. I demanded physical proof from him of his promises during the next three weeks, as promised in his advertisement. Without any hesitation, he offered a demo clone to the Alternative Scientist Magazine and the exclusive reporting rights - if we were prepared to pay the costs for the entire procedure."

I shook my head. "Interesting."

"In the next half-hour, a painful persuasion with my superiors followed. When the chief editor ended cursing me and lamenting the magazine would go broke because of these costs, I was sure he'd agree. Then I demanded Doctor Mist show his facilities to me. I had to put on a white gown and protective slippers and Mrs. Mist politely hung up my jacket on a coat-hanger. She fixed me with a long, estimative look."

He paused for a while. Now my mug was empty, so I ordered beer for both of us.

"I recall she smiled when she said I had to do something about my dandruff, but I was a bit embarrassed. I grew aware that she was staring at me, and, I must say, her provoking beauty looked capable of seducing any man she would pick out."

I grinned but Brown ignored that.

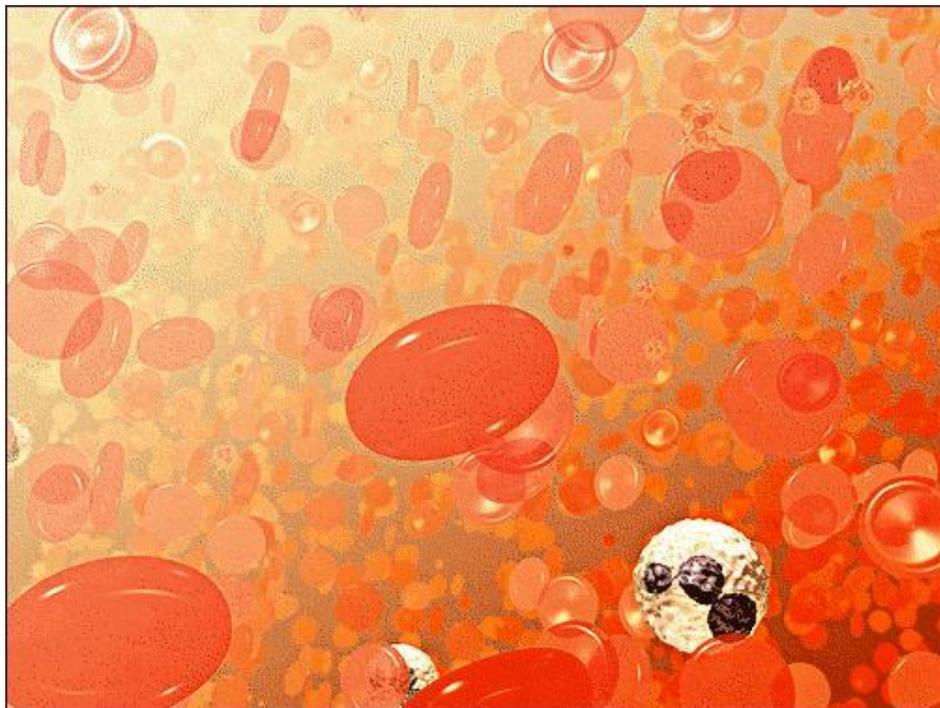
"She must have noticed I wasn't entirely unresponsive to her charm for she neared to me and started to murmur. I didn't understand all her words but the tone of her voice was plainly seductive."

"You lucky devil." I was enjoying this science report more now with the next round of beer.

"The whole situation was almost out of hand when her husband appeared and led the way into his lab. In the middle stood what I considered a big plastic incubator. The Doctor explained to me that it was a ripener, where the entire cloning procedure had been carried out. It'd be enough, he said, if he put a tiny part of the donor's tissue into the ripener; for instance, a drop of his blood or a piece of his fingernail. After that, a computer supplied all the ingredients needed to clone the embryo, which would grow up to his full size in three weeks. A perfect copy of the tissue donor."

"And who would be that donor?" I asked him. "Who on earth would be prepared to meet his own alter ego who's going to compete with him right away?"

"I've asked doctor Mist the same question. He said he'd look after that person. There were families with an only son, which would gladly accept his twin brother."



"And you were satisfied with his explanation?"

"Why not? The lawyers of our Alternative Scientist Magazine made a contract with doctor Mist for which he pawned his house as security if he failed. We didn't risk anything. And in that case, I was convinced I could write an excellent article about the fraud."

"I see. That was obviously a nothing-could-go-wrong situation."

He nodded gloomily. "Now I know that kind of situation is the most deceptive. To make a long story short, three weeks later, on March eleventh, Mist informed me his cocoon is ready for the great event, so I should come to him at once."

He paused for a while, thoughtfully rolling a pellet of a crumb, but I didn't want to interject any remark.

"In his house, Mist walked me into the lab and showed me the ripener with a triumphant gesture. But I was disappointed. Through the translucent plastic, I could see nothing more than the indistinct contour of a human body, lying peacefully as Tutankhamen in his sarcophagus. Mist explained to me we had to wait till this evening when the computer would open the ripener. Then his phone rang from above and he climbed the stairs."

"How convenient."

"I tried to follow him but she... well, suddenly, she was in my arms. She whispered in my ear that her husband wouldn't mind if we have sex, on the contrary, he would enjoy watching. Stricken by the surprise, I felt overwhelmed. Still, I resisted somehow, the urge to kiss her. I tried to explain to her that our meeting must not be fun but business, for that, after all, was why I was here."

"So, virtue triumphed, God Almighty," I said.

"Mrs. Mist, obviously, wasn't used to refusal. Her face grew pale and her light blue eyes turned to anger. But when I went upstairs, followed by her, a polite smile returned on her face.

I shrugged. "So to say, you spoiled the opportunity."

"They invited me to dinner. Then we had a couple of cocktails before dinner and a burgundy during the dinner and an old brandy after it. I became a little sleepy, so Mist suggested I

should lie down and take a short nap in their guest-room. They'd wake me in time, no worry."

"Alas!" I said.

He nodded. "You can say it again, sir. That was really a mistake. But then I had a drink or two too much beneath my belt and I couldn't think sensibly. So I went into their guest-room and stretched fully dressed on the bed. Finally, sleep enveloped me.

Mark Brown and I nursed our drinks, staring at the vast number of people hustling about in the tavern. The pouring rain made them all thirsty. The cool air made us all savour the drink even more. In a brief encounter, we seemed to have become confidants and the spirits flowed in the tavern; spirits were high tonight. He kept silent for so long I couldn't endure it any longer.

"Well?"

He shrugged in resignation. "Some clamor from outside dragged me back from my dreamless sleep. A loud noise woke me up, there were several people talking agitatedly in the doorway. When I opened my door, still a bit dizzy, I noticed the entire house was full of cops and detectives. Mrs. Mist was excited and dissolved into tears. She told me they'd taken her husband away for interrogation; she had no idea why. The lab's door was open, the cover of the ripener was off, the ripener was empty and many small tubes and wires were hanging out of it."

"The clone has disappeared?"

"Yes. Probably he woke up earlier than expected and left the house - or Mist had put him out of sight so the police couldn't accuse him of any crime. But then, my greatest concern was my interrogation by the cops. I told them the whole truth and my editor confirmed my story by phone. Then they got me tactfully to understand I'd no business there any more."

"Oh," said I, a bit disappointed. "Was that the entire outcome of your adventure?"

"Just a little more patience, sir. The next day, the management of the magazine fired me. The whole story leaked out, so neither the magazine nor any newspaper wants my services any more, not even as a freelancer."

"Life consists of ups and downs, as you know."

His voice turned into a hardly understandable murmur. "You're right, that isn't my greatest concern now. I fell sick lately, and about a dozen different doctors have diagnosed a dozen different illnesses. My back hurts, my head aches, I've lost two teeth during the last week and several others are loose. I'm only twenty-six years of age, but my sight is weakening swiftly and by night my heartbeat gets crazy."

I couldn't find any proper response, so I waved the waiter for another round.

"Not for me, thank you very much," he said. "I don't want to take advantage of your patience, sir. The shower is over now, so I can go home."

I paid, and as I noticed he hardly got up, I offered to help him upstairs.

When we reached the entrance hall, he was totally breathless. I opened the door and as we stepped on to the sidewalk, I saw him in daylight for the first time.

I stared in surprise at the bowed old man decayed with age, with wrinkled skin sown with pigment freckles and bluish veins on his hands.

"A shocking sight, isn't it?" he asked. "Now you can watch the outcome of my adventure with your own eyes. As you see, I shan't live to see the Easter issue of Alternative Scientist Magazine, for it'll come out not earlier than two long weeks from now."

"Oh, my God! But how is it possible..."

"You still don't grasp the point, do you? That damned Doctor Mist had 'forgotten' to tell me the vastly rapid ripening of the clone couldn't be slowed down later. There is no way to arrest the mad rushing of time any more. Because every clone attains the biological age of twenty years in an equal number of days, it remains to him - well, young man, reckon it for yourself."

I was confused. "But... But if it's so then you are not... I mean, you are in fact..."

He nodded feebly. "Yes, you've finally guessed where the clone had to have gone. Mist had used only a tiny speck of Mark Brown's dandruff for my composition. And later... Well, I won't speculate what Mist and his charming wife have done with a new lover and when he'd become a redundant witness."

"Oh my God."

He fixed his tearful eyes on me. "And now, could I ask you for a last favor - to pay for a ride for me to the nearest public park?"

I waved to a taxi, put money into Brown's clone's pocket and helped him crawl into the back seat. Then I stood there, gazing at the taxi driving away, until it disappeared into the foggy night.

****** THE END ******

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Amesbury Heights

By Joseph DeRepentigny

Synopsis: The past is beyond change, the present is tumultuous and the future remains uncertain. What if today wasn't the way you awoke into? Are you unhappy with your present fate? Maybe you never could have had it this good.

About the Author: Originally from Massachusetts, Mr. Joseph DeRepentigny now lives in the Atlanta area. A former DeVry student and computer professional he presently works as a Government employee with over 15 years of service. A member of the Georgia Writer's Association, to date he has published 37 short stories in a variety of venues both online and in print.

In this spooky SciFi, we are taken to a quaint old town only to have our entire civilisation thrown into disarray.

Amesbury Heights

By Joseph DeRepentigny

Amesbury Heights was nothing much to look at; a small green blob in the middle of the black slate roofs and red brick houses of a prosperous New England town. Reputed to be the estate of one of the old and powerful New England families, it was now little more than a patch of land surrounded by a rusting iron fence. From a distance, it looked like the last gasp of wilderness in the city, but up close, it was a scene of decay and overgrowth.



For the better part of two centuries, this piece of land went unnoticed by the town fathers. To them the owners, the Amesbury family, paid their taxes and only dabbled in the local government. Despite being the wealthiest family around, they seldom made themselves nuisances. In the eyes of the municipal government, this was the perfect relationship.

Then one morning, a representative from a major retailer came to town with promises of jobs and tax revenues. "We want a central location for our business." Mr. Dery said with a grin. He was a lean man with deep blue eyes, an expensive suit and neatly styled hair; he looked more like a predator than an executive.

"The old Shoe Mill is closest to the center of the town." Mayor Sims said pointing at a location on the town map. He was a middle-aged man, balding, with a bit of girth on him. Though he looked weak, Sims was a tough calculating man. He was the type of man who grew up in the world of dirty municipal politics. Still somehow, he held the high ground. A champion of the working classes he sought programs and job opportunities for the people in his city. "The property is abandoned and quite cheap."

"No," Dery said shaking his head. "Such places usually require clean up of abandoned chemicals and the like. This is an expense my company does not take on easily, even for a location as lucrative as your town."

Sims nodded. He knew that the two of them could spend the next few hours prodding and searching for what the other wanted. A duel of wills, he often enjoyed such encounters. Unfortunately, today he was not in the mood for such a thing. An election was

coming up soon and he needed to be out there pressing the flesh if he wanted to keep his office. Deciding to get it over with he asked the direct question. "Where do you want to build your store Mr. Dery?"

Mr. Dery smiled. Figuring he was at an advantage, he placed his demand on the table. "Amesbury Heights would be perfect."

"Why there?" Sims asked.

"It is in the middle of a working class neighborhood." Mr. Dery explained. "Our experts tell us that that demographic makes up 60% of our customer base. Therefore, we prefer our locations to be near them."

"Yes, but that property is presently owned and occupied by a very wealthy citizen." Sims said. "Besides, the old Shoe Factory is closer to the highway. That will encourage working people from other communities to come and shop in our town. It is a blighted area in need of a boost in revenues."

"We want Amesbury Heights!" Mr. Dery said leaning on the table. "Else we will go to the next town over."

Sims saw the potential sales tax revenues and jobs slipping out of his fingers. With them also went his chances of holding office.

"The owner may not want to sell." He said in a near whisper.

"Then declare the place blighted and condemn it." Dery said looking Sims directly in the eyes. "It is all completely legal."

"But not popular." Sims said standing up to Dery. He knew there was something more that Dery was not telling. "There are a large number of people who believe that property rights come before tax revenues. Angering them could cost me votes and end my political career!"

"If word got out that you let a major opportunity for getting jobs into a working class area slip through your fingers that would also end you career in politics." Dery suggested. "Besides by the time of the next election this will all be old news. Tell you what, set up a meeting with the owner and let me do the negotiating. That way your hands are clean."

"That is a problem." Sims replied shaking his head, "Mr. Amesbury is a recluse."

"You must have some method of contacting Amesbury," Dery persisted.

"Yes, I have a relationship with one of Amesbury's lawyers." Sims relented slowly.

"Good, set me up to see him!" Dery said with finality.

"This is quite unorthodox but I'll contact my friend and tell him the situation. I should be back to you in about a week." Sims replied.

Dery shook his head, "That is too long! If you will not set up a meeting immediately then I will go to his house myself and demand to see him!"

"Good, go it alone and risk annoying him. I will tell my contact that you are coming despite my warnings. Then you will see what Amesbury can do to your company." Sims said with a smile. "Old families like his have private law firms that have a way of taking big companies like yours apart."

Dery frowned and pursed his lips. He knew that this last statement was quite true. Old money meant old connections and favors. The law would be on his side but the system might not. He still remembered last year when an old Virginia family's lawyers sued them. The cost of the case was immense. After court costs and attorney's fees, nearly 30% of the annual profits were lost. That fiasco resulted in several board members losing their jobs including the CEO and the man Dery replaced. Reluctantly, he said. "OK, I'll be in my hotel room waiting for your call."

A week later Sims showed up at Dery's hotel room. With a stone face, he asked Dery a direct question. "Are you certain you want to meet Amesbury?"

"Yes!"

"Alright be it on your head then," Sims said with a sigh.

"Their lawyer will meet us at the house in an hour."

"Then we will get to see the almighty Amesbury?" Dery said in a sarcastic tone.

Sims said nothing. Yet he wondered if this was a mistake.

The ride there was uneventful. Sims chattered away about the Byzantine procedures he went through to contact the old man, all things that neither interested nor concerned Mr. Dery.

Still, every now and then he would comment with a grunt. When they arrived, it was to an old black iron gate with an ornate "A" and "H" in the center. The top of the gate had nasty looking spikes on it, as did the nearby fence. The neighborhood consisted of medium sized brick houses occupied by local factory workers. Their house pride showed in their well kept lawns and the clean streets.

"This is the only entrance." Sims said getting out of the car. "We walk from here."

"Is it far?" Dery said getting out of the car.

"No, just a few hundred yards up the footpath to the house." Sims replied walking up to the gate. From his pocket, he pulled a brass key. In a moment both he and Dery were inside the estate, relocking the gate behind them, Sims tested it twice. It was then that he wondered if the gate and fence kept Amesbury in rather than keeping the public out.

Walking up the well-worn cobblestone path Sims began talking about the family history. "The Amesbury family has been a part of our town since before the revolution. The original Amesbury arrived here around 1735." Sims said with an air of authority. "The story goes that he was a sea captain who traveled around the world several times. When he arrived here, he bought the hill where the family mansion now sits. Since then an Amesbury has owned or invested in the local businesses in our fair town. At one time one of them was Vice President of the United States."

While listening to the story Dery looked the grounds over. Everywhere were tangled weeds of blackberry thorns and poison ivy. Beneath the layer of sickly green growth, he saw an oily soil. Here and there, gnarled oaks protruded through the weedy mess. Like giant hands of mother earth reaching out from the mire.

"How'd this place get to such a state?" Dery asked Sims.

"Neglect," Sims explained. "Like all things over time they are taken for granted and become corrupt."

"It would be an act of mercy clearing this land." Dery said shaking his head. Stopping he asked. "So how do you feel about us buying the place?"

"At first I was against it." Sims said looking him straight in the eyes. "Then I talked to their lawyers. They felt that this might be good for them. Besides this place is an eyesore."

"And what about Amesbury himself?" he asked.

"I don't know." Sims replied. "He just agreed to meet you."

Turning a corner, they came upon the house. An old Victorian building with a rounded tower in the center, it would have been a beautiful home if someone had maintained it. Instead, the house was grey in color with patches of green where moss was taking hold. The cedar shingles were discolored and falling from the roof. As they got closer, Dery noticed that the windows were dark. Boarded up from the inside with plywood the house looked abandoned.



"Are you sure someone lives in there?" He asked.

"Yes, as rich as he is Amesbury hates spending money." Sims said with a sigh.

"And glass is expensive." A voice said from the left. He was a portly man in a three-piece suit sitting on a concrete bench smoking a cigarette.

"This is Mr. Wallace," Sims said with a smile. "He's the family solicitor."

Mr. Wallace stood up and held out his hand. "I'm here to keep you honest." He said with a bright smile.

"Strange work for a lawyer," Dery said shaking his hand.

The two of them laughed. Then Mr. Wallace said in a low voice. "We had the property appraised and we came up with a fair sum for the place. All we need to do is to get Amesbury to agree. Then I can get out of here."

"Have you been waiting here long?" Dery asked looking at the dozen or so butts on the ground.

"About an hour," Mr. Wallace answered. "I don't like it here. You get the feeling of being in a plague ward here."

The three of them climbed the steps up to the massive porch. The wooden floor, now covered in rotting leaves and moss, did not look too sturdy. With every step Mr. Dery was certain he would fall through to god knows where. When they got to the huge wooden door, Mr. Wallace produced an old-fashioned key and unlocked the door.

"Doesn't he know we're here?" Dery asked.

"Probably, in fact Mr. Amesbury is probably watching us through a spy hole somewhere." Wallace said with a grin.

"So why the key and lock?"

"It is his rule." Mr. Wallace explained. "He fears someone is after him. It is a family madness. According to the older members of the firm his father was the same way."

Pushing the door open took some effort on Mr. Wallace's part. With each shove, the door moved a foot wider and dust and debris fell from the doorframe. When it was finally open, Mr. Wallace stood to the side and said between gasps for air, "After you gentlemen."

"Quite a bit of effort to get inside," Mr. Dery said suspiciously.

"The door has been this way for a year now." Wallace explained. "Mr. Amesbury insists that it works fine if it locks."

Inside, the house was dark and dreary. To Mr. Dery it looked like a set from a bad haunted house film. Dust and cobwebs covered almost everything in this room. The smell of dry decay filled the air giving the place a tomb-like feel. A few candles lit the room to reveal some old paintings and a few relics here and there.

"Doesn't he clean?"

"Only the rooms he uses. It is a big house and he doesn't have but a few servants. Follow me to the Drawing Room." Wallace said with a smile. He led them down a corridor and into a room with better light and a large table in the center. A dry smell of dust and decay pervaded this room also but it appeared cleaner. Neither dust nor cobweb was in this room. In an over stuffed chair in the far corner, sat an old man.

When the visitors entered the room, Amesbury got up from the chair and walked surprisingly quickly toward them. He looked about a hundred years old to Mr. Dery. As he got closer his age seemed to increase, his skin was white almost transparent. The hair on his head though combed was thin and spider webby.

"Good afternoon gentlemen," he said in a low voice. "I am Matthew Amesbury."

"Mr. Amesbury this is Mr. Dery and you already know Mr. Sims." Wallace said with a nod.

Amesbury offered his hand and said. "I am told you want my house."

"No sir." Dery said taking Amesbury's hand. "I came for you Amesbury."

For Sims the transformation of Amesbury and Dery was a riot of lights and sound. One second he saw two men shaking hands. The next minute it was two forms facing each other. They both looked like columns of light trying to gain some semblance of sanity. Every time it looked like he could make out a face, it faded into oblivion. Then Sims felt the room rock and fell to the floor. Looking around, everything seemed to dissolve as if it was drenched in acid. Walls melted away and the sky appeared where there once was ceiling. Looking toward Dery and Amesbury he saw them shimmer and fade. Then a flash and only Dery was there.

"What happened?" Sims asked Dery.

"An aberration in reality was repaired." Dery replied.

"What?"

"The one called Amesbury was one of my people." Dery said.

"He came here and changed history. In his altered reality, one world war never happened. Through his efforts, the United States stayed out of World War I and allowed Germany to win. This prevented a number of advances. It also succeeded in making Germany a world power. Now I undo his alteration of reality."

"I still don't understand." The lawyer Wallace said.

"I was sent to make things right." Dery explained.

Sims became aware of things around him getting lighter. Looking around he saw the whole of the Amesbury heights neighborhood was gone. The brick homes faded, the road went from clean asphalt to a broken and rutted lane. Now in their place was a neighborhood of cheap wooden houses. The streets filled with trash and debris.

"What's happening?" Wallace asked.

"Reality is taking over." Dery replied. "The fantasy of Amesbury is passing."

Then slowly the clothes Wallace wore faded from a suit to urine soaked pants and a heavy overcoat. In his hand appeared a well-

worn cardboard sign. The spark of a strong legal mind faded to that of a man living for drink. Turning, he wandered away without memory of what was.

"Is that my fate also?" Sims asked. Then thoughts of committee meetings and politics faded from his mind. Unfortunately, nothing replaced them. Instead, Dery saw a tombstone little more than a chunk of white marble with a small flag next to it. Sims never got as far as he did.

"Is this better?" Amesbury's voice asked.

"Better?" Dery replied.

"Yes, I made this a safer and saner world all with just a little manipulation of the timeline." Amesbury said.

"No, but this is the way it is supposed to be."

****** THE END ******

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Replacement

By Joshua Scribner

Synopsis: In this strange account of a man's childhood, the protagonist delves into his sibling's past and reveals the extent of paranormal influences on our world.

About the Author: Joshua Scribner is the author of the novels 'Mantis Nights', 'The Coma Lights' and 'Nescata'. His fiction won both second and fifth place in the 2008 Whispering Spirits Flash Fiction contest. Up to date information on his work can be found at www.joshuascribner.com . Joshua currently lives in Michigan with his wife and two daughters.

In this tale's reminiscing, the protagonist remembers a traumatic experience and its consequence for the rest of us.

Replacement

By Joshua Scribner

I sometimes see what I'm doing and can't believe I'm doing it. I can't believe how natural it feels; like I'm just doing my part as a citizen and supporting a family member. Sometimes, I forget what happened, but every night, as I start to drift off, I remember. Some nights, it keeps me awake.

&&&

I was thirteen at the time. My brother, Jake, was fifteen. He was only a year and a half older than me, but because of his size and social skills, it seemed more like five or six years.

Jake had been sick the last week, complaining of headaches, saying his vision was blurry, bumping into things. Mom had scheduled a doctor's appointment for him.

In general, I was jealous of my brother, but he wasn't a bad person, and I didn't hate him. I was concerned about his condition.

I wasn't so nervous that I couldn't sleep. Sleep was probably my favorite activity, and I was very good at it. But that night everything went down, I was wide awake.

Our rooms were separated by glass doors and a curtain. I saw his silhouette moving across the floor. At first, I didn't think much of it. He could have been going to the bathroom or getting a glass of water. Then, because of the way my bed was situated and the location of my room, I was able to see his silhouette move outdoors.

Older kids with cars sometimes came out to get my brother to hang out. I had never known him to sneak out at night, though. I didn't want to get him into trouble or anything like that, but I was extremely curious. I got out of bed and quickly got dressed.

The outside light by the garage was bright and I could see my brother moving toward the edge of the yard, dressed only in his underwear.

What seemed like normal thoughts came to me at that moment. Considered with the other odd things about my brother's behavior in the previous week, him taking a walk in his underwear at 2AM seemed like something that should have caused me to be concerned about his safety. It seemed like I should alert my parents. These thoughts had little weight in my mind

though. Another thought came, a thought with much more weight. I knew I had to see what happened.



At the end of the yard was a dirt road, a short field, and then woods. My brother disappeared into those woods. I followed. Once in the trees, light was soon absent. I followed him by sound. It wasn't hard to track him or to stay hidden as I spied. Being an unpopular kid, I had spent much time in these woods, wandering around, exploring, imagining a place where I was big and popular. I knew where the branches were thin enough for me to move in relative silence. In my head, I had a map of where we were going. When I could no longer hear him, I knew he had moved into a clearing. I moved to the edge of the clearing and sat, waiting for him to move again.

The next sound I heard was his breath. It picked up, like he was terrified. I was about to reveal my presence, when suddenly, there was light.

Stunned by the brightness, I looked away. I could still hear my brother's breath and I was very worried about him. I turned back to see - there was something the size and shape of a basketball, but silver, with tiny lights scattered over it, hovering near my brother's head.

The orb had a slit in its middle, and from that slit came a red beam of light. It seemed to be scanning my brother's head.

"Leave him alone!" I shouted. I felt around me and found a stick to hit the orb with and then stood up. By that time, the red beam was gone. Another red beam shot out, but this one was a much darker red, and it appeared to go into his head. I ran at the orb, but it shot up into the sky. It moved too fast for me to see where it went from there.

I stood in the darkness for a second and then said, "Jake, are you okay?"

He did not answer. But I heard him move.

"Where are you going? That's the wrong way."

He kept moving. I ran toward the sound and reached for him. I felt his arm, which he jerked away from me. I knew there was no way I could stop him. I had to go home and get my parents.

I ran as fast as I could all the way home, and then I ran through the house. I stopped in my tracks when I saw the light, though. It was a familiar beam, the dark-red one. It was only there for a couple of seconds and then I heard a whoosh, like something had flown away.

Another light came on just then. It was at the end of the hall. In that light was my mother, clad in her robe.

"Are you okay, Son?"

"Jake," I said. "Something happened to him."

My dad appeared in the doorway and said, "What, Tyler? What's wrong with your brother?"

"Nothing," a voice I was stunned to hear said. "I'm just fine. In fact, I'm feeling really good."

My brother walked into the hall and placed a hand on my shoulder. This time, he had remembered to put on his pants.

My mom gave a loving laugh, looked at me, and said, "I think you had a bad dream, sweetie."

"No," I responded. "I couldn't have. I ..."

I tried to think of what to say, but the words in my head, the ones describing what I had just experienced, seemed crazy to me.

Instead of the crazy-sounding words, I said, "You're right, I guess. Just a dream. I'm sorry I woke everybody."

&&&

I went back to bed after that. There, I lay awake. It was probably an hour later when my brother came into the room.

He rushed in so fast that I didn't have time to react. He straddled me and placed a hand over my mouth. Then a light-red beam came from his eyes.

It didn't hurt. I couldn't feel it at all. It lasted a couple of seconds and then my brother said, "I'm going to take my hand

off your mouth and get off you. Do you promise you won't scream?"

I nodded. He got up and stood beside my bed. He said, "I first scanned your brother when he was a fetus. I knew then that he would eventually develop a tumor in his brain. That tumor would be inoperable and would have killed him three months from now. He was cloned before birth, except the DNA leading to the cancer was altered. I am now inside the cloned body."

I did not know how to respond to this, but I thought he wanted some kind of response, so I nodded. Apparently, he could see me quiet well through the dark, because he continued.

"What you witnessed in the woods was a history scan. His fifteen-year history was taken from his mind and placed into the brain of this body. I can access that history, which will make it much easier to fit into his environment."

I asked, "What about my brother?"

"Your brother's soul has gone to a better place. His body has been programmed to efficiently dispose of itself. There will be no trace of it."

I remembered my brother's body moving away in the woods. I had thought something wrong with him. I hadn't considered the possibility that his body was going to efficiently dispose of itself.

"Your planet has a disease. The disease is warfare. It would ultimately result in the demise of your planet, but with the infiltration of my kind, we can change its course through time. We will be like the white blood cells of your planet."

The thing sat at the side of my bed.

"There are now ninety-seven of us spread throughout your planet. Within the next two years, we will have the two hundred we need. We don't normally allow our presence to be known. Most who saw what we did in the forest would be executed, but I saw in your brother's history that you might be a person of use to us. I confirmed that in a scan of your mind. You have uncanny good instincts. That's how you knew to follow your brother into the woods instead of alerting your parents, which would have gotten them killed."

He got up. "Tomorrow, just wake up and act like everything is normal. Keep acting like everything is normal, and it will feel that way soon enough. I'll give you instructions from time to

time on how to prepare yourself. It will be many years before our real work begins."

&&&

That was many years ago. We both grew up and went to college. We both went to graduate school. He first ran for public office at the age of thirty-five. I was his campaign manager. We won.

He's forty-five now. He's never pointed out who the others of his kind are around the world. He says it's not really necessary for me to have that knowledge. That's fine with me. I've come to trust him. He proved to be a wonderful brother and an outstanding Congressman. I think we'll win the next election, and he'll be the best President of all time. He would be 'our' big brother.

**** THE END ****

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Signals

By Tom Arbino

Synopsis: One man and his gal, a chaotic public and the aliens have landed.

About the Author: Since obtaining his BA from the University of Cincinnati, Tom Arbino has published a novel, "Lots Rigged by a Phantom", eTreasures Publishing, 2009. He has also published a short story collection, "The Alchemist's Pocket Watch", RSPublishing, 2008. Tom has a volume of poetry, "Lovers Entwined in the Bounds of Timeless Time" published by The Plowman Publishing House, 1994. He has also published an article in UFO Digest and runs his own UFO forum www.ufo-secret-files.net

In this intriguing SciFi, Toby and April run through a gamut of ordeals and streets to find the truth - the truth is *way out there*.

Signals

By Tom Arbino

Toby's heart raced as the late afternoon sky turned completely black. The TV set that had been playing turned to static. Outside the coffee shop, Toby could hear the screams of people running around in the streets. The lights in the coffee shop flickered and then went out for longer than a moment before coming back on again.

April ran out of the bathroom, dashing up to Toby and putting her arms around him. She asked, "What's going on? Something really weird is going on."

"I don't know kitten." Toby ran his fingers through his goatee and struggled to stop his body from trembling. He took a puff from his Tipperello cigar.

"Is it an eclipse? Tell me it's an eclipse. Tell me Toby," April pleaded.

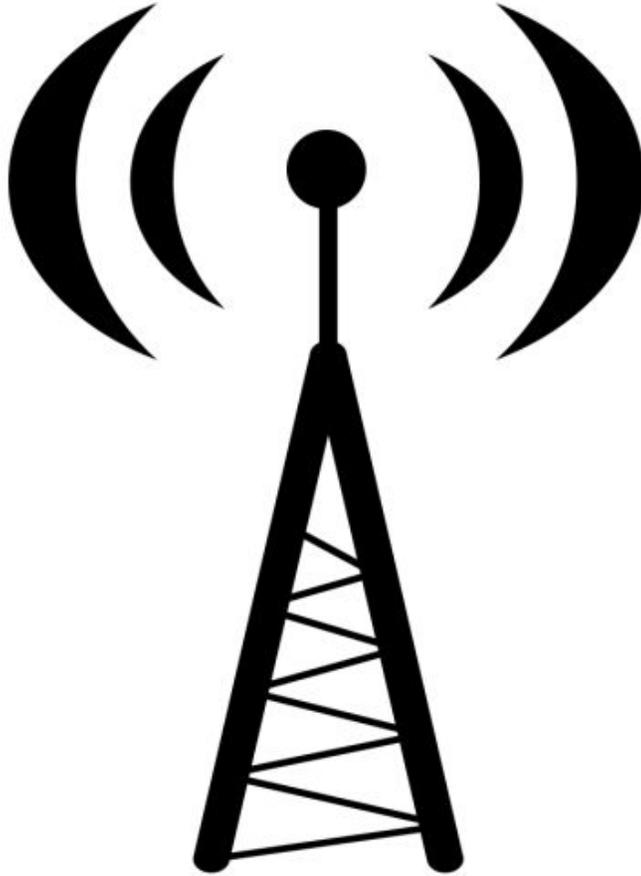
"It has to be something like that, but I never heard anything of it on the news." Toby kept his arm around her, but guided her over to the side so that he could walk to the door, taking another puff of his stogie in the process.

"I don't want to go out there. Please don't take me out there," April put her free arm around him and clung to him.

"I have to see what's going on kitten. It's only an eclipse."

"I don't want to go outside. God this is so weird."

"Then stay here. I'll be back in a minute."



"I'm not going to stay here alone."

"Just come with me. You're making a big deal out of nothing."

"I'm making a big deal out of nothing. The sun went completely out."

"It didn't go out. It just slid behind the moon. Come on, it's really something to see when it comes out of the other side."

April looked at Toby and sighed. She said, "You can be such an asshole. Sometimes I don't know why I bother to stay with you. And don't start about those old horn players."

"If it scares you too much I'll bring you right back inside. I promise."

April paused for a moment and then sighed. She said, "Okay."

Toby led her outside, feeling a quiver roll through his body. He thought, *Act cool. I can't let April think I'm a geek. Not even with this happening. Think sassy baby. John Coltrane, sweet sax.*

Toby Lee, an African-American from the inner city, stood five-seven, wore a beret, and had shabby brown hair that hung about a half inch below his ears and a goatee. He just turned twenty-three and was a music major.

The afternoon appeared blacker than anything that Toby had ever seen. The sunlight didn't even reflect off the moon. Shadows crept along the street, changing both in shape and intensity, inching closer to him all the time. Not one electric light burned anywhere in sight. The cars, which were barely visible, even at ten or fifteen feet away, didn't have their lights on. All of them sat idle, and some with their doors wide open from where their owners had run out of them.

Toby looked to the sky, seeing stars, but something seemed out of place. Trying to take a deep breath only made the muscles in his upper chest tighter. He felt April gripping him firmer or perhaps he was gripping her tighter.

"Oh my God!" Toby shouted, gasping hard and staggering about, almost falling on his ass.

"What is it?" April asked in a concerned tone of voice.

Toby forced himself to stare down at the street. Though he tried hard to suppress it, his body shook, and his teeth chattered. He tried to say something, but he could only manage

to produce gurgling sounds from deep within his throat.

"What is it Toby?" April shook him.

Toby wheezed as he gazed to the sky. His arm quivered as he lifted it up, pointing to the sky with his index finger. He said, "L-Look."

"I don't see anything. Everything is completely black," April said.

"Look right there."

"Where?"

"Right there."

"I don't see anything."

"Neither do I. Look, there's no stars in that whole area. It's all black. Something really flipped out is happening" Toby flicked his cigar down the street.

"I don't understand. Will you tell me what is going on?"

"That's where the sun should be. There are no stars there because something is blocking them." Toby swallowed and then inhaled hard, producing a sharp wheezing sound. "Something big."

"There has to be..." April began.

Light flickered wildly across the sky and it was so intense that Toby had to gaze at the ground for a moment or two. Looking up, he thought that he saw a massive object move in front of the glistening light and then the sun shined once again. Toby had to squint just to see and then had to take a moment in order to make out the cars in the street in front of him. Before he could say anything, a series of gunshots rang out fast. He knew that they were less than a block away. He grabbed April's hand, pulling her back toward the coffee shop. He said, "We better get inside fast."

"Oh my God is it coming down here?" April stared up at the sun. April Crowe, a white girl from the suburbs, was attractive and had long auburn hair that flowed down to the small of her back. Toby met her two years ago during his freshman year at the University of Cincinnati. April was a design major.

Toby closed the door, finding several customers still inside. The Zozzled Coffee Shop, where Toby worked part time to help

pay for college, was located in an old run-down building not far from campus. The outdated tables and chairs seemed to go with the faded paint and cracks in the plaster walls. Behind the counter was the only thing modern in the establishment, the coffee makers.

A loud sound came out of the TV set that sat wedged in a corner on a shelf about six feet off the ground. Toby got the remote that was sitting next to the cash register and changed the channel. The set produced a partial picture, and what picture there was, appeared crackled. The signal faded in and out.

"...And now we go to the Pentagon. Air Force General Walt Cornwallis..." the reporter said.

The picture fuzzed and then cut to the General, who stood at a podium with the Pentagon logo behind it. The room before him was filled with the media.

The General cleared his throat, and then said, "There's nothing to be alarmed about. We have our top scientists working on this and they have concluded that what happened was a massive solar flare."

"Bullshit!" Toby said. "A solar flare wouldn't make the sky go black. They're covering something up."

"Shut up, I want to hear this," someone in the coffee shop said.

"How is that possible? We've had solar flares before and nothing like this has ever happened," one of the reporters shouted out of turn.

"I'll take your questions later. Right now I'd like to bring out one of NASA's leading scientists, a man who is an expert on the sun. Doctor Glen Ruby." The General stepped aside.

Doctor Ruby, a gray haired man in a white lab coat, stepped up to the podium. He tapped the microphone with his finger a couple of times, producing a harsh sound, and then unfolded several sheets of paper and placed them on the podium. He said, "The solar flare that erupted was so powerful that it disrupted the ions in the upper atmosphere to such a point that their supercharged energy blocked out the sunlight."

"That's bullshit!" Toby said.

"Shut up. I want to hear this," the man who spoke out earlier said.

Toby sat down and seized his laptop, moving as fast as he could to get connected to the internet. He ran his fingers through his goatee and then thought, *Keep your mouth shut dumb ass. April's going to think that I'm a dweeb for sure. Oh God why did I admit that I know so much? What were you thinking?*

Toby attempted to gain access to the internet, but the phone line kept cutting in and out. Glancing up, he noticed that April was glued to the TV. The government was parading one expert after another before the media. The image of that black part of the sky that didn't contain any stars flashed into Toby's mind. Toby shuddered, clamping down his jaw to stop his gasp before April could hear it.

The computer screen flashed and then Toby's homepage remained on the screen. He panted rapidly through his mouth as he typed, entering the words *solar flare* into the search engine. Scrolling down the page, he found nothing but junk.

Toby backed up and entered the words *blacked out sun*. He clicked the button and then grabbed the belt loop on his Levi's and gripped it tightly. He pounded his fist on the table and then said, "Come on."

April, along with several of the customers in the coffee shop, turned to look at him, some of them for longer than a moment. He thought, *That was smooth. Real cool Toby. You're cruising right up to dweeb city.*

Toby's stomach sank when his laptop went out and then came back on. The search engine revealed a whole list of sites with blogs that were just added. He read down the list

The sun has died, The sun went out, Alien spaceship blocks out sun.

Toby clicked on that link.

"They're lying!" Toby shouted as he read.

"Will you shut the fuck up?" The man who spoke out earlier said.

"I'm not going to shut up. Listen to this. The Russian Government is saying that an alien spaceship blocked out the sun," Toby said.

"Toby are you telling the truth? There's lots of bullshit and conspiracy theories on the internet." April wrung her hands.

"Yeah, why don't you shut the fuck up," the same man said.

"The Russian Air Force is reporting this. They have streaming video of the pilot who did the high altitude flyby, though it keeps breaking up," Toby said.

April moved right along side of Toby, and asked, "But our government is saying that it was ions. Do you even know what you're doing?"

"They're covering up. The TV and radio signals have been going out regularly now for over three years and they keep telling us that it's solar flares."

"Why would the Russians be telling the truth? If it's the Russians at all."

"How the hell would I know?" Toby threw his hands up into the air. He said, "Do I look like some fricking expert on international affairs?"

"Did a ship land there?"

"I don't know." Toby spoke with his hands. "I'm trying to check. The internet keeps fading in and out."

"Toby." April pulled on his arm.

"Just a second." Toby didn't look up from his laptop.

"Toby." April pulled even harder.

"Just a second."

"Toby!" April yanked him hard. "Let's get out of here."

Toby looked up from the computer, cringing as the look upon April's face sunk in. He stood and took her into his arms. The movement of his hand as he caressed her back was jerky at best. Before he could utter a word, the TV set buzzed. A sharp, high-pitched bray thrust itself from the set. Toby looked up at it and saw that the screen was black. The buzzing quickly became a low-pitched drone, one that pulsated at a regular rhythm. The picture flashed with white light at an insane speed. Toby believed that the set was going to blow.

In the next moment, everything stopped. The TV set didn't make a sound, and the picture had turned to fuzz.

"Toby will you please get me out of here?" April pleaded.

"Just hold on a second kitten." Toby stared at the screen.

"Toby we have to leave. God you can be such an asshole at times." April threw her hands up in the air. She said, "We can't sit here and wait for those little green men or whatever they are to block out the sun again."

"There's nowhere to go. Just hold on for a second." Toby didn't take his eyes off the TV screen. The screen flickered, and then turned to fuzz. A flashing and fading picture of an alien speaking in a strange language drew in his attention.

"They're going to kill us all!" the man who had taunted Toby shouted as he ran out of the coffee shop.

Toby stuck his tongue in between his teeth and bit down on it. He screamed out for his body to run, but it remained frozen in place. Though he could only see the alien in glimpses, the being resembled nothing that he had ever seen in the movies or read in books by alien abductees. The creature, clothed in some sort of green and white body suit that appeared to be made out of cloth and plastic, became increasingly more difficult for Toby to look at. The being had a head that was about one and a half times the size of a human head. The head, which had no hair, contained two large dull yellow eyes and a small nose and mouth. The skin color was a grayish green.

"Toby will you please get me out of here? Please stop being an asshole."

"I want to see this. I want to find out what's going on. Besides, there's no place to go," Toby said.

"I want to see my mom before they put the sun out for good. That's all I'm asking of you. Are you capable of doing that or not?"

"The streets are jammed with...Don't you think I'm afraid? I'm afraid too, and yes we can't just sit around here and wait to die."

"Okay, let's go."

Toby remained frozen, but his eyes were fixed on the TV screen. The image of the alien faded in the next moment, to be replaced by the government parading even more scientists.

Toby looked her in the eyes for a prolonged moment, and then took her hand and dashed out the door. He thought, *Oh God what am I doing? I'm going to get my ass kicked for sure. If I survive this she's going to break up with me for sure. She's going to tell the whole school what a dweeb I am. That's if I*

survive. Think sassy baby.

Toby gazed in one direction and then another. He then looked back at the first road once again. Two people were looting the Burger King that was off to his right, carting away boxes of hamburger patties and bags of French fries.

Toby stopped short and puffed hard, witnessing a man with a revolver coming toward him. Inhaling stiffly, he squeezed April's hand and ran back the other way.

"Hey!" the man with the gun shouted. "You better turn around and see this!"

Toby spun around, seeing the gun pointed right at him in his mind. It took him a moment to realize that the man had the gun pointed at his own head. Toby said, "No, don't."

"And just sit around here and wait for them to come down here and eat my brains? I don't think so."

"Wait a minute!"

"Wait for what?"

"It isn't over. Nothing has happened. If they would've wanted us they would've swooped down here by now."

"Yeah! Just the sun went out and the aliens are going to be here at any moment. Other than that, everything's cool." The man grinned with the gun still aimed at his own head.

"Don't do it."

"And why the hell not?"

"Because maybe we can prevent it."

"Ha! Our government. They can't even deliver the mail on time."

"Don't..."

The man pulled the trigger, falling to the pavement, dead before hitting the ground.

"Toby what's..." April sobbed.

"Come on." Toby yanked her hand as he dashed away, forcing his head to the side so that he didn't have to look at that man.

"Toby where are you taking me? Now is not the time to be an

asshole."

"Just keep moving kitten."

"But I thought that your car was back there."

"It was. What's left of it anyway." Toby weaved his way around a car that was burning and then made eye contact with the man who set the fire. He shivered.

"Toby we have to find a car. There's no way that I can walk that far."

"Unless you see one with the keys in it we're S.O.L."

"Where are we going?"

"To campus."

"To campus?"

"The campus police have a substation not far from the edge of campus." Toby turned to her and looked her in the eye.

"What if they..."

A man leaped out from the side of a car and grabbed Toby. The small hairs stood up on his arms, his breathing became swift and shallow, and the look on April's face made him want to piss himself.

"I have some money here. T-Take it all." Toby attempted to take a step back but the man had too firm of a grip on his arm.

"And just what in the hell do you expect me to do with your money?"

Toby gulped, and then said, "Have a party. The stores will still take it."

"Look right there."

"My lady has to get to her mom right away. It's an emergency." Toby backpedaled a step or so.

The man grabbed Toby by the back of the neck, thrusting his head backwards. He said, "Look up at the damn sky!"

Toby's knees buckled beneath him and they would've sent him to the pavement had the man not had such a firm grip on him. He reached down to grab the man's nuts, but stopped short of his

goal. His next breath missed his lungs. Toby inhaled sharply through his mouth, having to force the air inside of him.

"Do you see it now? You would have to be blind not to see it." The man said.

Toby shuddered and then paused for longer than a moment. He answered, "Yeah, I see it!"

"Look at it."

"I can see it."

"What is it Toby?" April asked in a concerned tone of voice as she took his arm.

The man let go of Toby and then looked April right in the eye. He said, "They're here. They've come for us. Look up there. See for yourself."

Toby watched the man until he drifted down the road some distance before he returned his gaze to the sky.

A black dot, one about the size of three stars, remained in stable position to the left of the sky.

"Toby I don't like this. Get me out of here now. God I can't believe this," April tugged on his arm.

"That had to be the ship that blocked out the sun. It moved off and it's just sitting there waiting to move in on us. Man there's a bad trumpet playing." Toby didn't take his eyes off the sky.

"I don't care what it's doing just get me out of here. And stop talking about those old horn players."

Toby looked her in the eye, and then said, "Okay, let's go kitten."

Toby led her down the street, squeezing her hand firmly. The image of that black dot in the sky remained in his mind. Whatever he did, whatever else he thought about, that image remained. He thought, *Why in the hell did I let April talk me into this? I'm going to lose her anyway, if I live through this shit.* Toby glanced up at the sky for a moment.

Rounding a corner, Toby entered the main road that led back to the university, having to stop after only twenty yards or so. He eyes honed in on the liquor store, one that he had seen several times before. But this time his heart raced, and the

color left his face. What stood in front of him had to be gazed at for a while before it sank in.

"Toby let's go. Quit being such an asshole," April said.

"I'm not being an asshole. There's nowhere else to go. This is the way back to the university." Toby didn't take his eyes from what he saw.

"You're not actually thinking about going in there, are you?"

"For a bottle of booze? Hell no. They can keep it."

"Let's go back to my apartment. Anywhere but here."

"We might not be able to get there. We might not be able to go anywhere."

"Well we can't stand out in this stinking street all night."

Toby watched the looting that went on at the liquor store and observed a group of five young men fight over a keg of beer. Just as he turned to take a step back, the sky went black for a prolonged moment. Toby looked up and had to put his hand in front of his eyes to shield them from the blazing sun. Nothing appeared in the sky, and even that black spot was gone. He thought, *Oh my God they're coming in.*

"Come on Toby!" April yanked his arm hard.

Toby spun around, trying to focus in on April, but caught a fist in the face. Staggering backwards, he watched a young, tattooed man punch him again.

"Toby!" April cried.

Toby put up his fists in self-defense but caught a left cross right in the jaw. Sucking in his lips and biting down on them, he threw a punch at the man, missing his head by mere inches.

"Toby, watch out!" April shouted with tears streaming down her face.

Toby ducked out of the way of a punch and then tried to kick the man low. The man backed out of the way, and the color of his face became flush. The man inhaled hard, lunging at Toby, throwing a flurry of punches, and some of them landed. Toby, feeling pain in his face, backed up and covered up the best that he could.

The man came at him, throwing off balance, as Toby honed in on

his midsection. Toby bobbed to the left and then landed a punch in the man's ribs. The man moaned. Toby threw a punch at the man's head and missed. The man tagged him in the jaw hard; Toby feeling his jaw with his hand, moved back.

"You want some more?" The man puffed.

Toby paused for a moment as he eyed the man, searching for an area to hit. He said, "I'm not afraid of you."

"Well you oughta be."

"The world's going to end any minute now and you want to fight."

"Give it to me and I'll let you live."

"I only have thirty dollars on me."

"Not the money. The booze."

"What booze? I don't have any booze."

"I saw you cart a case of whiskey out of there."

"I've never been in there. We were..."

The man threw a punch at Toby, missing his head by less than an inch. He said, "Give me the damn whiskey!"

"We don't have any whiskey. Do you see a case of whiskey on me?" Toby said.

"He's telling the truth. Look at us. The two of us aren't even carrying anything," April said while wiping her eyes.

The man turned to look at April. Toby sucked in his lips and then kicked the man in the crotch. He then punched the man in the head several times until the man went down in pain.

"Come on Toby let's get the hell out of here!" April said with tears running down her cheeks.

"Okay," Toby puffed while feeling his face for cuts, seeing some blood on his fingertips. "Let's go."

"Come on I have to get out of here! I want to see my goddamn mother while she's still alive."

Toby wiped his hand on his pants and then took April's hand, leading her in the direction of her apartment. Three gunshots

rang out from the liquor store behind him, followed quickly by four more. Toby moved even faster.

Eighteen minutes later, Toby followed April into her apartment. Toby turned the dead bolt and then moved a chair in front of the door. While April fiddled with the TV, Toby went to the desk, which sat in the corner, and switched on the desktop computer.

April's apartment, which sat on the second floor of an old house that had been divided into apartments, had hardwood floors and plaster walls. She had mismatched furniture, a TV and stereo on a stand, and a fern by the window.

Toby tried to get on the internet, but the connection kept fading in and out. The sound of April changing the channels seemed rather loud to him. He thought, *Did they land? The whole net can't be down. Not for the whole world. What the hell's going on? There has to be somebody out there. They couldn't have killed all of our government forces. Not yet. Not this fast anyway. But what if they did? We're on our own to deal with them.*

The TV buzzed with a loud, pulsating sound, causing Toby to look up at it, and then the picture went to solid white. The sound crackled and then faded off into an intense static. The picture flashed to black, remaining there for longer than a moment. The president, who was sitting at his desk in the Oval Office, stared into the camera with a grim face.

"You need not be alarmed. What we are dealing with here is a rare incidence of solar flares that are changing the structure of the ions in the upper atmosphere," the president said.

"That's bullshit. You would think that they'd come up with a new story by now," Toby said.

April, who sat with her eyes glued to the TV, didn't turn around and glance at Toby.

"Our leading scientists..." the president began.

The picture changed to that of an alien talking. Toby couldn't make out what the creature was saying, but it kept talking. Toby thought, *Is this bleeding into the cable signal or are they trying to tell us something? God I wish I knew what it was saying. They must be close if they can interrupt our TV signals like this. Man he's bringin' me down with that sound.*

The president came back on. He wiped some sweat from his brow with a handkerchief, but the rest of his face had beads of

sweat upon it. The muscles in his face appeared tense and his lips barely moved when he spoke.

Toby typed on the computer frantically, trying to get online on any website that he could. A page that read *'This page can't be displayed'* popped up on his screen. He pounded his fist on the computer, and then said, "Damn it this can't be happening! This is bullshit!"

Toby typed on the keyboard once again, trying to call up the University of Cincinnati's web site. Again a page that read *'This page can't be displayed'* dominated his screen. He pounded his fist on the desk, and then said, "Goddamnit I can't believe this."

April turned to look at him, and then asked, "What's wrong? God you can be such an asshole at times."

"It's not me, it's the computer. I can't get this damn thing to work. And stop calling me an asshole."

"You are an asshole Toby. You can't expect it to work just because you're some kinda cool jazz man."

"And you say I'm an asshole. You're the asshole."

"But I'm not some fucking idiot who expects the webpage they want to be sitting there waiting for them! It's not going to work right now so just leave it alone."

"Why should I leave it alone? It's the only way we have of finding out what's going on. Unless you want to believe those idiots they parade in front of us on TV."

"And I'm an idiot. These damn aliens have control of everything and the reason that everything is going to hell is because I'm an idiot?"

Toby typed on the keyboard frantically and then smacked the side of the computer. He said, "Goddamnit I can't believe this!"

April got up from the couch and walked up to the desk. She put her hand on Toby's shoulder, and then asked, "Do you really think that anything is going to work? Do you really think that it's just going to bend over and kiss your ass? Toby Lee jazz saxophone player."

"Nothing works. So stop your crusade to tear me apart." Toby looked her in the eye.

April began to caress his back. She sighed and then said, "I'm worried too. The TV is barely working so it's not just you."

"There has to be some information from somewhere." Toby pounded on the side of the computer. "There just has to be."

"There isn't. So forget about it."

"You can't believe the crap that the government is telling us."

"That's all there is,"

Toby sighed boldly, and then said, "There has to be somebody out there. There has to be one website on this whole planet that's still up and running. Somebody out there knows what is going on."

"Don't let it get to you. If anybody can find it you can Toby."

Toby sighed and glanced down at his feet for a moment. He looked April in the eye, lingering in his gaze for longer than a moment, and then said, "You're right. I'm sorry that I lost my head."

"These aliens have us all...oh my God Toby look." April pointed at the TV screen.

Toby remained frozen for a moment as tension wound several notches tighter in his chest. Inhaling sharply, he bolted up and scurried to the couch. Toby seized the remote and turned up the volume as loud as it would go. April sat down next to him. Toby put his arm around her.

The alien was on the screen again, speaking in a language that Toby couldn't understand. The being stopped talking and then turned to his left. The picture cut to another alien who stood in front of a group of ships. Other extraterrestrials scurried about loading and tending to those ships. The vessels, each several stories tall and trapezoid in shape, had no windows or anything that resembled a propulsion system.

"Why would they be showing this?" April asked.

"I don't know kitten. I'm still trying to figure it out myself." Toby didn't take his eyes off the screen.

"Do they want us to see this? Are they trying to scare us or what?"

"I don't think so. Why would they want us to see their ships? None of this is making any sense."

"Maybe they're sending us a message. Maybe they don't know how to do it right or something."

"I don't think so." Toby paused and shook his head. He said, "Maybe. I think that's what they were doing when they blocked out the sun. Man I can't believe that this is happening."

"If they don't know that we're seeing this, then how is it coming through the cable?"

"The satellite dish has to be picking up the signal or something. How the hell would I know."

"They're probably sending it to the ship that blocked out the sun."

"Oh my God!" Toby gasped.

"What is it?" April asked in a concerned tone of voice.

"It's not intended for the ship that blocked out the sun. It's intended for the people on their planet. Oh man I can't believe this." Toby pulled out a Tipperello cigar and lit it up in a series of successive puffs.

"Tell me what's going on you asshole."

"Stop calling me an asshole." Toby blew out a large puff of smoke. He then said, "Don't you see? It's the news. The guy talking is the anchorman and the guy standing in front of the ships is a reporter."

"I still don't understand."

"They're showing ships being prepared." Toby missed his next breath while taking a puff. "Ships that are already here."

"They can't be showing them on the news if they're already here. You don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"I know *exactly* what I am talking about. The signal will take forty or fifty years to get here," Toby inhaled in a gasp. "Maybe longer depending on how far their planet is."

"How can TV signals go across space? You don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"The hell if I don't. There's nothing to stop them. They will keep going forever until they run into something. There's nothing in space to slow them down."

"So if all those ships that were being prepared traveled across all that space..."

Toby gulped, and then said, "Then we're fucked."

April turned and stared into his eyes. She wiped each eye, and then said, "What can we do about it? There has to be somewhere that we can do."

"I don't know." Toby missed his next breath and then took a puff from his stogie. "Let me see if I can find out."

Toby stood up, never separating his eyes from April's. She rose as well. Toby remained frozen for a prolonged moment before hugging April. The softness of her body flowed into him, but it couldn't disguise the trembling that seeped in underneath it. As he caressed her back tenderly, three gunshots rang out.

"That sounded close," April said.

"We better find out what's going on. Come on kitten." Toby broke their embrace and then took her hand, leading her over to the desk.

Toby sat down, letting go of her hand, and began to type on the keyboard.

"Is it working?" April moved a little closer to him.

"Not yet." Toby didn't look up from the screen.

"Then let's get out of here."

"Hold on for a second." Toby took a puff from his cigar.

"Let's go Toby. I don't want to die in this stinking place."

"Just give me a goddamn minute," Toby snapped.

"I know you were..."

"Damn it!" Toby pounded his fist on the desk.

"Toby don't do that. I'm nervous enough."

"I'm sorry." Toby put his arm around her for a moment.

"Let's just get out of here."

"You saw what those streets were like. There are crazy mobs

running loose."

"I don't know if I can just sit here and wait for those ships to land. I don't want to be eaten by some slimy alien."

"Let me try to find out what's going on. Look at this!" Toby's face lit up.

"What is it?" April wrung her hands.

"Let me pull it up."

"What is it? What's going on with those aliens? Oh my God they took over the city."

"They broke the code in the Netherlands. Here it is. Man this is sassy."

The streaming video showed the newscast that was on TV, but this one had the alien language dubbed over in Dutch with English subtitles.

"We have recently discovered signals traveling through space. We have pinpointed the planet that they have originated from. Here are some of the signals that we have picked up. This is what the earth people look like," the alien anchorman read.

A series of brief clips ran on the screen—Milton Berle wearing a dress, Jackie Gleason - *to the moon Alice*, a man juggling plates, Ed Sullivan, and then Beaver and Wally talking in their room.

"Remember what they look like because soon we will be dealing with these people. Qax is standing by with our military forces."

The pictures cut to the alien standing in front of the ships that were being loaded. The being said, *"We are preparing for the long journey to Earth. As soon as we arrive, we will easily take the Earth and plunder its resources. It will be necessary to exterminate eighty percent of the human species and enslave the rest."*

The video ended and the Windows Media Player that played it sat black.

"Oh my God Toby we have to leave! I can't stay here another moment. Please get me out of here." April cried while she clenched her teeth in horror.

Toby stood up, laid his cigar in an ashtray, and then took her

into his arms. His lips stammered, and he had to wipe both her eyes before he replied, "Okay, let's go."

"Maybe if we go out to the country and hide in a barn or something they won't kill us."

"I doubt it seriously kitten."

"Just get me the hell out of here."

Toby parted their embrace and then stood there gazing into her eyes for a prolonged moment. He moved in for a kiss, hearing her moan and feeling her nails dig into his back.

Three gunshots rang out, followed within seconds by the sound of a car colliding with something at a good speed. A woman screamed out in anguish and then two more shots rang out.

Toby parted their kiss, quivering upon seeing the look on her face. Taking her hand, he squeezed it tightly, realizing that he may never have a chance to kiss her again. He thought, *What am I going outside for? I should just take her to the bedroom. We're probably going to die anyway and even if we somehow survive this she's going to break up with me. Man this is bringing me down.*

Toby reached out, cupping his hand around her right breast, and caressing it slowly.

"Toby we have to leave!" April glanced down at his hand for a moment and then looked him in the eye.

"What's the point kitten? We're going to get shot the minute that we step out that door." Toby stared at her breasts.

"Toby I'm not going to bed with you. How can you even think about sex at a time like this? God you can be such an asshole."

"I love you."

"I love you too now will you please take me to my mom's?"

Toby let go of her breast and then sighed. He took her hand while saying, "Okay, let's go."

Toby scanned in all directions as he stepped out into the road. He darted down the street fast, observing several people moving about not far from him, believing one of them to be packing a gun.

Turning left, a group of several hundred people poured toward

him, causing him to change his direction fast. The sun ducked behind a cloud and the echo of footsteps marching were the only sounds to fill the area. The wind didn't blow and the clouds were without motion.

"Toby where are all these people going?" April turned and looked him in the eye.

"How in the hell would I know." Toby kept his eyes fixed in front of him.

"My mom lives back that way."

"We can't go that way. Maybe we can double back. Maybe we can steal a car. Maybe it will turn out sassy."

"Where did all these people come from? Something big is going on."

"I think they're running from something. I think maybe a ship landed over at the football field."

"Toby don't say that. You're scaring me."

"The university would be a good place to take from a military standpoint." Toby glanced over at her for a moment. "It would be a good place to establish a base. It has..."

Something shoved Toby and April to the side. Excitement swirled around in his stomach, Toby fighting to maintain his composure grabbed on April's hand. He stopped in the intersection as a second group of several hundred people flowed into his group. In the next moment, April's hand slipped from his.

"Toby!" She shouted out.

"April!" Toby stood on his toes and craned his neck.

"Toby!" Her voice trailed off.

Toby tried to work his way against the flow of humanity. The crowd, which moved at a quick pace, pushed him back. Several people shoved him out of the way and a few of them did so violently. Toby gave up fighting against them, choosing instead to let them flow around him. He cupped his hands around his mouth and then shouted, "*April, where are you? Man this is bringing me down.*"

Toby turned up his ears and listened, but he could only hear the clatter of footsteps crunching. He jumped up in an effort to see above them. He yelled, "April!"

A voice responded, albeit faintly, in the background.

"April!" He hollered.

The thud of the footsteps died out. Toby shoved his way through the crowd, pressing toward where he had heard April's voice. Silence filled the area and the crowd became a trickle. Toby stopped and then sprang forth when he saw April standing in the street crying. He ran up to her and took her into his arms. He said, "I thought that you were trampled to death."

April gasped hard and then sobbed uncontrollably for several moments. She said in a barely audible voice, "So did I."

"The road is clear now. I think we can make it to your mother's."

"Alright. Just get me out of here. Anywhere but here."

"Did the crowd hurt you?"

"I got pushed around but I'm okay."

"I thought that the crowd swept you away and that I'd never see you again."

April sobbed and then sniffled while inhaling hard. She said, "So did I."

"I..." Toby felt someone grab him and yank him free of April. Toby reached out and seized the arm of the alien that had grabbed him, ready to yell a string of obscenities at the violator.

Energy coursed through Toby's body, tingling on the surface of his skin, requiring that he force air in through his mouth in order to get it into his lungs. His teeth chattered as he stared at the alien that stood before him. Looking down his arm, he discovered that he held the limb of an extraterrestrial. The being's flesh felt hard and cold. It contained no freckles or other marks from where sunrays had touched it.

Toby let go of the alien's arm and took a step back. The creature said something to him in a language that he didn't understand, but the tone was quite clear. The being pulled what appeared to be a weapon from its belt. Toby gasped and then took a step back. The extraterrestrial fired, sending a laser beam into the pavement several feet in front of Toby. The blast, which didn't produce a sound, blew a good-sized pothole

into the asphalt.

Toby put his arm around April and began marching. Tears streamed down his face as he walked, and at one point he had to wipe his eyes just to see where he was going. He felt April dig her nails into him, and at that point he really didn't care. He thought, *I'll never know if she would've left me or not. I'll never know if she really loved me. I'll never be in a real quartet.*"

Once Toby made it to the next block, he came to the top of a hill. He could see below the several blocks rising. A train sat blocking the road, having several boxcars that were filled with terrified people huddling together. Aliens with laser weapons patrolled the area in front of these cars and loaded people into them.

The alien that strolled behind Toby and April said in a voice that attempted to mimic Jackie Gleason, "How sweet it is."

****** THE END ******

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The Directive

By Peter Swanson

Synopsis: In a world where political news is subdued by celebrity scandals - a Government agency will feed the dull minds of citizens by causing celebrity deaths to divert attention from the real issues.

About the Author: Peter is a graduate from Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, and from the MFA program at Emerson College in Boston. He has been writing and publishing for fifteen years, and has recently appeared or will appear in Asimov's Science Fiction, The Atlantic Online, Epoch, Measure, Orchard Press Mysteries, and Yellow Mama.

In this futuristic fiction, Manda will go through her daily chores and so will her boss.

The Directive

By Peter Swanson



Manda Stickler got to the office, as she always did, at 7:45 A.M. On her swivel chair was a sealed brown envelope, Mr. Barnard's name handwritten on the front. It was unusual, but not unheard of, that there would be any kind of mail or memo delivery prior to Manda's arrival. She brought the envelope into her boss's office, placing it squarely on his geometrically-arranged workspace, then she retreated to her own desk to begin a long and tedious day. She knew she had a good job, with all the perks - healthcare, time off - that a government job provided, not to mention well-paid for the most remedial of administrative work, but still, in times like these, with her husband out of work and drinking too much, and their three-year-old Jake diagnosed with a defective heart, she sometimes thought it would be better to have a job that kept her mind occupied throughout the day. Something challenging. She logged on to her computer, checked her emails, and opened a web-browser. She began hunting down information on Jake's medical condition. Later, she tried to find jobs for which her husband might be qualified.

&&&

Clay Barnard had not been entirely surprised to find the familiar envelope on his desk. He was keenly aware that it was roughly eighteen months since there'd been any kind of tabloid incident of note. He inhaled deeply then slit open the envelope and pulled out the single sheet of paper. On the sheet were ten names, all celebrities, and since Clay's job, as an analyst, involved the constant monitoring of tabloid newspapers and entertainment entities, he knew quite a bit about all of them. Five were actors, three were musicians, one was a model that had developed a secondary career as a television host, and one was an infamous judge on a televised talent show. Five were male and five were female. They ranged in age from mid-twenties to late-thirties. None had children.

Clay squeezed shut the pale lids of his eyes and ran a finger down the names. The names had been typed on a typewriter (the company only trusted computers for certain types of correspondence), and the mechanics of the typewriter had left palpable ridges and indentations in the bonded paper. Clay could almost make out which name he was touching by the letters it contained, its length on the page. He opened his eyes again.

There was no directive on how he was supposed to determine a finalist. That was entirely up to him. He understood that the

list of names, as it moved through the bowels and corridors of power, as it was whittled down, altered and edited, needed to pass through many fingers, that there needed to be plausible deniability in case of anything surfacing. Clay had no idea who had the names prior to him, just as he didn't know the name of the person to whom he would pass on his selection.

He sighed deeply, the sigh turning into a sniff and then a cough. If he chose to, he could simply pick the celebrity he liked least, or the oldest, or the one he knew the least about. Clay preferred, however, having performed this particular task before, that his selection be entirely random. He opened his drawer and took out a pair of dull scissors. Careful to make every piece the same size, he cut out each name, dropped them back into the brown envelope. He put the scissors back then reached into the envelope and jumbled the slips of paper around before picking one and pulling it out. It was probably the one name he'd been hoping to not pick: Camilla Sapp.



She was an actress who had been in a succession of hits a number of years ago. She had acted in one of Clay's daughter's favorite movies, a modern retelling of 'The Sun Also Rises', playing the role of the Lady Brett character. She'd been nominated for a Golden Globe for her performance but hadn't won. Still, it had established her career, and provided several fruitful years in the spotlight, whether she wanted it or not. Lately, she'd been through a messy divorce from a drug-addicted music-video director and her last two films had been flops.

Clay stared at the name for some time. Maybe he could draw again. If he picked her twice, then he would be forced to acknowledge that fate had tipped its hand. But he knew that fate had already made its decision. He pursed his thin lips and nodded to himself. This was not a job he enjoyed doing but he'd done it before and had learned that in the boxy hours of the early morning the only sliver of light was that the choice had been made the way that nature made its choices. Indiscriminate, dispassionate, as random as the footfalls of a tornado.

He flipped through his rolodex till he came to the phone number - nine digits, no name. He pulled that particular card out and set it down next to the phone. After he'd made the call he would follow protocol and deposit everything - the cut-out names, the brown envelope, the phone number - into the ancient, wheezing incinerator that was located on the basement floor of his building. How many names, the lucky and the unlucky, had been reduced to ashes in that blackened relic over the years?

&&&

Oliver Knott had just lowered his substantial frame into the stinging recesses of his claw-footed tub when his cell-phone rang. He had an orange juice in one hand and a copy of a New York Times Crossword Puzzle book in the other, both of which he deposited on the chair next to the tub as he awkwardly scooped into a sitting position. Gripping the edge of the tub he leaned out and palmed the rattling phone with wet fingers.

"Camilla Sapp," came the voice on the other end, it had no accent.

"Okay," Oliver said, pushing out with both feet to keep himself in the seated position. The skin around his muscled midriff, where it had just been submerged in water, was the color of cooked freshwater shrimp.

"Do you know who that is?"

"She's an actress, right?"

"Right."

"I haven't seen her films but the last one was called ... *A Year Abroad*?"

"*Semester Abroad*. You got it ... she's the one."

"Okay," Oliver said then listened to a faint click, the sound of the call being terminated. He dipped the phone into the tub, not for any good reason, but to see what would happen. It was a phone he would shortly be destroying anyway, a phone he would never use again. He looked at it, wet with bath-water, its screen still illuminated, then allowed himself to sink back below the fragrant water, his free hand reaching out blindly for his juice.

Later, dressed for the day, now drinking coffee, he went through his instructions. They were not written down but he knew them as though they were. It must happen within thirty days of the phone-call. If you are unable to succeed in that period of time, then the job is cancelled. It must appear to be a suicide or an overdose, although if it later becomes apparent that foul play was involved, that would be deemed acceptable. It is not acceptable to be caught or discovered. It is not acceptable that anyone else dies.

Upon initially accepting the job, he had been given a retainer in cash, plus a key to a storage locker at Port Authority station. One week after the job was finished, the remainder of

his fee would be in that locker, also in cash. The fee for the job was enough for Oliver to retire on.

He finished his coffee, and rinsed the mug. He had research to do, and a complicated job to plan.

&&&

Camilla Sapp had spent three weeks filming in London, but because of something called a Bank Holiday Weekend she had three days off before she had to be back on set, and she was determined to spend it in New York, even if it was only for two nights. The film she was doing was an ensemble romantic comedy, with the working title of 'Barmaids'. It was like 'Coyote Ugly' set in a London pub, and her agent had convinced her to do it, despite the fact that she'd need to speak in a genuine North London accent. She'd had daily lessons with a voice-coach and her accent had become workable but the stress of maintaining the correct inflections was wreaking havoc on her acting job. She knew she sucked; she could read it in the eyes of her co-stars, and in the jaw-line of her director. She'd cried herself to sleep on more than half the nights she'd spent in England.

Taking the limousine from LaGuardia to her apartment on the Upper West side, Camilla felt the tension leaving her muscles like tight bandages being unwrapped from her limbs. It was November but she rolled down the window to listen to the sounds of Manhattan. Her cellphone vibrated in the pocket of her jeans.

"Hey Jamie," she said into it.

"Yay! You're back." Jamie was her best friend, someone she knew from Winnetka, from way back when she'd been known as Candace Sapirstein.

"Thank God I'm back. I swear, another day of filming, and..."

"You wanna go out tonight? Amy's in town, and she keeps calling me, asking me..."

"Not tonight. I'm literally the walking dead. Tomorrow night, though. Promise."

Her apartment smelled stale and lemony. Jane had probably had it cleaned the day before. She went through each room, her chest aching with how good it felt to be home. The last thing she wanted to do was to go back to London and finish that crappy film. Maybe returning home had been a bad idea; it was going to be effing miserable when she had to turn back again in two days and head to London.

She made herself a Captain Morgan's and Diet Coke, took a shower and got into her pajamas. She called her assistant Jane and told her she was going to eat, go straight to sleep and that maybe they could meet over brunch the next day. She dialed Wang's and ordered the Number 31 with tofu and brown rice, channel-surfed on her widescreen TV as she waited for the food, and downed two more rum and cokes. When the food came she was able to walk to the door to pay for it, but she was so exhausted she felt like she was moving underwater. Without touching the food, or brushing her teeth, or even doing her facial routine, she stumbled toward the bed, and fell asleep before she was able to pull the covers over herself.

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Lying as still as he could underneath her bed, Oliver Knott listened to Camilla Sapp hit the bed and fall asleep almost immediately, her deep regular breaths turning into low purring snores. He'd learned enough about the actress in the previous week to find out that Captain Morgan's was her favorite drink, so he'd spiked the bottle with a crushed-up prescription sleeping aid. He would've used something more potent but there was bound to be an autopsy and rehipnol in her stomach would start a manhunt he'd rather not be on the other end of. He listened as she shifted position, and as her breathing got even more regular. When he was sure she had been asleep for at least twenty minutes he inched himself out from under the bed, and stood up, so that he was standing over her sleeping form. When she'd shifted position she'd kicked most of the covers off of herself. One bare foot hung over the side of the bed. It was a fortunate break for Oliver; it would make it that much easier to lift her from the bed and throw her from the balcony before she had any chance to regain consciousness and put up a fight.

Before lifting her, he moved silently across the dark room he'd memorized earlier that day - seven steps to the French doors that led to the balcony. He separated the gauzy curtains and unlocked the doors, swung them apart. Cold air that carried the distant sounds of the city rushed into the apartment. Now it was just a matter of speed. He had no idea how much sedative was in her system, and that a jolt of adrenaline could kick in if she sensed her life was in danger. But he also knew that if she woke up and fought back that she wouldn't have enough time, and he was right, as he always was. She did come to but not until after he'd scooped her from her bed (she weighed next to nothing) in both of his trunk-sized arms and reached the balcony. Her eyes opened and she shuddered like a fish pulled from water. He threw her hard over her thirty-first floor balcony just as her fingers were trying to hook their way into the slick nylon of his tracksuit. He was taking a risk that she

might hit a pedestrian on the pavement below but he'd watched her street for a while and he thought the chances were good that she'd hit nothing but pavement.

He checked his tracksuit just to make sure she hadn't manage to tear any of the fabric, then felt the shower cap on his head to make sure it had stayed in place. The apartment didn't need to be wiped so Oliver left the French doors open and scaled the relatively easy climb up the corrugated stone to the balcony immediately above, into the empty apartment where Oliver had left a gym bag with a change of clothes. He hoped to be back on the street before the first civil servants arrived on the scene of the crime.

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Clay heard about Camilla Sapp's suicide on his drive in to work on Monday morning. It had probably hit the web midday on Sunday, and made nightly news that evening; but Clay and his wife had a long-standing policy of no television on Sundays, both for the kids and for themselves. They'd played 'Apples to Apples' and made a big pot of chili for dinner. The kids had gone to their respective rooms at night and Clay and his wife had listened to Aaron Copeland and read their books.

Now, Clay, humming along with the traffic making its way to the city, listened to the bare details. Found dead on the sidewalk. Apparent suicide. Been filming a movie in London, and had been due to return to the set this evening. Her friends and family were deeply shocked, and requesting privacy at such a tragic time. No plans yet on what would happen with the film. Then he flipped away to a music station, some top-forty station playing a hit song with a heavy bass line and nasal vocalist. But as soon as the song ended, two DJs started talking about Camilla, what a freak-out it was, going on to ignorantly speculating on the reasons she might have had to take her own life.

At the office, Clay passed by Manda, and slowed down to ask her how her weekend was. She looked up at him from her computer screen with big eyes, said, "Fine, yours?" She passed him another sealed brown envelope. Clay thanked her and took it into his office.

At his desk, Clay opened the envelope and removed the file card that contained the new phone number. He placed it in his rolodex; moving on to begin a long overdue report on the Indian film industry, in particular a scandal that had demolished one of its top-flight studios. He tried not to think too hard about Camilla Sapp. There was nothing he would've done differently, and his small role was one cog in a machine that had been running for a long time. An easily replaced cog. Besides, it

would be at least one-and-a-half years until the next directive arrived at his desk. Probably longer. He knew that the chances of a naturally-occurring incident happening in the next eighteen months was greater than the chances on one not happening. It was possible, even maybe probable, that he would be given a promotion before being asked to select another name.

He took a break from his report and browsed through some of the major web-based news outlets. Each of them was leading with the mysterious death of Camilla Sapp, most of them using the same picture, a black-and-white headshot, eyes impossibly large for her face, half-smile showing just a glint of a tooth. She really had been beautiful, Clay thought. He scrolled down the webpage he was looking at, glanced at the other stories - wars, famines, coups - that had all come in second to a young star's death.

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Manda, having sorted the mail and updated some magazine subscriptions, found herself, not surprisingly, with nothing left to do. She went on the web to browse posted items about Camilla Sapp. Ever since hearing that Camilla had killed herself the previous evening she'd become fixated by the story and oddly saddened. She'd seen most of her movies so it was, in a way, like losing a friend, someone she had gotten used to seeing on a regular basis. One of the gossip sites she liked to visit had already put together a photo sideshow. Camilla had been a child-star on a sitcom that Manda used to watch, and there were several photos from that time-period - Camilla with curly hair and big glasses and a wide smile. Then a stream of pictures from later years - red carpets, in and out of limousines, her wedding in Mexico. She'd gotten divorced, and that might have had something to do with her death, but still ... all young stars got divorced. Manda tried to imagine Camilla's pain, tried to imagine the desperation needed to willingly climb over a balcony and free-fall to certain oblivion. She shuddered at the thought and involuntarily touched the wood surface of the window sill next to her.

She would never admit this to anyone but something about Camilla's death had temporarily made her feel better about her own fucked-up life. It was like her mom always said, 'there's always someone better off than you, Manda, and always someone worse off'. It was true. The world kept moving, second by second, and every moment was someone's worst moment, and every moment was someone's best. All you could do was to live your life as best as you could. It was all anyone could do. Life was hard. Still, it was a surprise, always, to hear that someone like Camilla Sapp had despaired of her own life so deeply. You never knew what was going on in the head of anyone. If only

someone had known how bad it had been for Camilla. If only someone had known, then maybe they'd have been able to talk to her - to tell her that the world wasn't such a bad place after all.

****** THE END ******

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You Should Have Closed the Door...

By A D Dawson

Synopsis: A small town with the regulars at the favourite café will encounter irregular activities.

About the Author: A D Dawson is a short story writer, poet and playwright. He writes from the very heart of Sherwood Forest. Most of his work can be found on the internet and he regularly contributes to webzines. Dawson's work is also included in numerous anthologies - both in print and on the internet - such as 'Sick: an Anthology of Sickness' paperback (2003), 'Angels with Salty Tears' download (2004), 'The Dream People' (2003-2007) webzine. 'Twisted Cat Tales' paperback (2006). A section of Dawson's dissertation 'Margaret Oliphant: writing the supernatural' was featured in 'All Hallows'#41. His novella, 'The Instigation Bureau' (2007) was published in the 'Swallows Tail', a literary journal, edited by Forrest Armstrong. His webpage is at www.myspace.com/theenglishdevil.

In this dramatic crime fiction, Sergeant Bert Dalton will deal with crime and cranky café customers.

You Should Have Closed the Door...

By A D Dawson

The A614 road bisects the east of the county of Nottinghamshire and takes the traveller up onto the Great Northern Road. A few miles before meeting up with the A1, as the Great Northern Road is now known, there stands a café; *The Lemon Café*. The Lemon Café takes its name from its colour - it is painted in a peculiar yellow hue. The café, they say, has been here for upward of 60 years - no one really knows if that is true. Lorry drivers, bikers, builders, white van drivers are its usual patrons - however the business types don't want the smell of bacon fat on their suits when they attend their next meeting.

Coming up into the café from a badly maintained shingle car park, the outer door opens to a narrow dining area. There stands a long wooden serving counter that runs nearly the whole length of the café with an open door behind, which leads to the steaming kitchen. There are a dozen or so tables lined against the opposite wall next to the windows and they are topped with an easy clean blue and white-chequered tablecloth of sorts. Its not that they are kept very clean; a stray elbow will often find itself covered in ketchup or a blob of egg yolk that has escaped from someone's breakfast plate. If you are visiting for the first time, the thing that hits you when you walk in the door is the smell of frying fat and an accompanying vapour that you could quite easily cut with a knife if you wanted to. If it's a belly-busting meal you want or a chat with the other diners over a mug of strong tea, indeed this is the place to be. It is a usually friendly place and even if you are a stranger you will be greeted by the cheery smile of Esther as you look to the menu, which is chalked up on boards above her grey head.

Esther has owned the café for over 20 years and she has a great knowledge of her regular diners.

"2 fried eggs and chips for Fred," she will shout into the kitchen well before Fred has parked his artic' up. Fred will then walk into the café to be greeted with a steaming brew with lots of milk and 5 sugars.

"There you are, Fred, just how you like it. Is the missus okay? Recovered from her haemorrhoids has she?"

The patrons liked her; she made them feel at home.

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The A614 is a fast road and it sees its fair share of motor accidents; it is well patrolled by the local constabulary as a result. Sergeant Bert Dalton, a tall well-built police officer originally hailing from the northeast of England, usually finds himself early on in the café before his morning patrol starts or later on when his night shift has nearly drawn to a close.

Dalton was on a dayshift today and he held up his newspaper with one hand whilst he chewed noisily at a greasy bacon cob, which he clutched in the other.

"No wonder there are so many crimes going off with you planted in here eating bacon cobs all morning," said Dave, a good-natured taxi driver.

Bert looked up from his newspaper and laughed pleasantly.

"Leave him alone, Dave," said Esther from behind the counter. "I'll have him in here anytime."

"I bet you would," Dave returned sharply before guffawing loudly.

"Would you listen to him, Bert? He thinks I'm after you."

Their conversation suddenly came to an abrupt end as the door swung violently open and in limped Old Rex. Heads dropped; Bert lifted up his newspaper and Dave attended to his eggs. Before he went to sit at his usual table, to the right of the door, he turned and shut the door with a bang - Bert grimaced and Dave nearly dropped his fork.

"You'll have that door of its hinges one day, you old bugger," shouted Esther loudly as she poured his tea.

"You got to make sure it's shut; I don't be wanting a draught at my age," he replied as he sat down at his usual table near the door.

He looked aged 80, but was probably much younger. He lived in the mining village of Blidthorpe, which was across the road - not that there was any mining happening of late. His daughter dropped him off every morning and picked him up an hour later when he had finished his breakfast.

"Why do you always sit next to the door if you don't like the draught?" asked Arthur a thickset lorry driver; Rex bitterly ignored him.

The Raider looked on with dark eyes and without a word as usual as he maniacally sipped at his milky tea. He owned a small

business nearby running a handful of white removal vans around the area. He was, as his nickname suggests, a Redford Raider and he rode with a local chapter of the biker club as the illustration on his leather jacket signified. He spoke little and kept himself to himself; no one even knew his real name. His moods had become darker of late and no one, not even Esther, would ask of his fettle when he came in - which was early every morning. It was supposed that he wasn't happy about the rival *Green Shift Company* that had recently opened up on his doorstep; they were taking away his business with their cheaper rates - as the larger companies usually do.

"They won't be fucking closing me down," he had once growled indiscriminately one morning as he threw his fork down. The place had gone silent at his outburst and even Old Rex had not dared to make a comment.

Arthur suddenly let out a wolf whistle as a new and attractive waitress stepped from out of the kitchen cautiously carrying his overflowing breakfast plate.

"She's young enough to be your daughter you dirty old sod," drooled Dave, as his own eyes never left her cleavage.

"What's your name, love," asked Arthur saucily as she carefully placed his plate onto the table.

"Her name's Michelle and you had better be polite to her," shouted Esther from behind the counter, "she's my niece."

"I am being polite to her," replied the lorry driver with a cheesy grin, "aren't I love?"

"I'm not your love," she replied in a surly manner as she threw his cutlery noisily down. With this she stomped off back into the kitchen.

"You made a good impression there, Art," laughed Dave; Arthur gave him the finger.

It was still dark outside and the headlights of a van flashed across the windows as it pulled up sharply and skidded on the loose shingle.

"He seems in a bit of a rush," remarked Dave as he stood to put on his coat.

The door swung open and in hurried a skinny lad just into his twenties; he wore the green livery of the Green Shift Company. He went straight to the counter.

"Can I have a bacon cob and a tea to go, love," he asked impatiently as he looked at his wristwatch.

"Shut the door you stupid young bugger," growled Old Rex as he shivered for effect.

The youth turned to face him. "Keep your wig on, granddad," he said without any mirth.

The youth suddenly felt a heavy hand on his shoulder and he turned to be confronted by a wild-eyed Raider. "He said, close the door... why don't you do as you're asked?" the Raider said menacingly.

"I'm sorry," the youth managed shakily, "but I was going straight back out again."

The Raider straightened down the green collar of the youth's jacket. "Nice jacket," he said as he spun him roughly around to see the *Green Shift Company* emblazoned in blue across his stooped shoulders.

"That's enough of that in here," said Esther; the Raider made no regard to her request.

"You heard Esther," said Dalton as he squeezed in between the Raider and the petrified lad. He put his hands on the Raider's shoulders and pushed him backwards. The Raider looked up at the taller man. "Get the fuck off me, pig," he said as he shook himself free.

Dalton didn't flinch; his nerve stood as steady as a rock. "I'll ignore that remark... but just the once."

The Raider did not reply but just stared hard at the officer as if he was trying to look into his very soul. Dalton motioned that the lad should move out of harm's way as the Raider silently deliberated over his next move, his eyes darting around like a cobra's. Suddenly the Raider lifted up his hand and pointed a sausage index finger towards the officer's face.

"You'll get yours, Dalton," he threatened as he turned towards the door. Just before he left he turned to the Green Shift Company driver, who was skulking behind the officer for protection. "You'll get yours as well, boy; you mark my words you will."

Dalton breathed a sigh of relief as the Raider exited; but he didn't relax until he saw his white van drive right out of the car park.

"Isn't anyone going to shut the bloody door?" Rex suddenly shouted to the officer's annoyance.

Dalton stormed over to his table. "If you ever say that again when I'm in here, I'm going to run you in." To emphasise his point he thumped his large fist down onto the table upsetting Rex's teacup. "Do you understand?" he added in the same angry tone.

"You can't speak to me like that," raged Rex.

"I'll speak to you how I like, you old nuisance," said Dalton as he looked into the old man's cod eyes.

"I don't think you can," returned the old man coldly. Dalton tried to hold his stare but something he saw in Rex's eyes made him turn away. He shuddered slightly.

"Are you all right, Bert?" asked Esther. "That could have turned really nasty if it hadn't been for you. Your breakfast is on me tomorrow."

"How about my supper? I've got to do a night duty tonight; staff shortages and all that," he said as he glanced at Old Rex from the corner of his eye.

"Your corn beef pie and mushy peas will be ready for you at midnight," she said cheerily.

"With lashings of brown sauce," returned the officer as he turned to leave. "Are you all right, lad?" he asked the Green Shift Company driver before he stepped outside.

The lad nodded his head nervously.

"There's a caravan on the lay-by just next to the A1 round-about; I suggest you go there for your breakfast from now on."

The lad nodded again.

"Good day to you all," said the officer as he stepped out into the darkness. He deliberately left the door ajar.

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As he drove back out onto the main road, Dalton thought about the look that Rex had given him and he suddenly remembered where he had seen it before - the memory hit him like a thunderbolt and his face reddened; he felt anxious and he could feel his heartbeat quicken. He pulled over into a nearby lay-by to compose himself.

As a boy, Dalton had lived in the next village along from Blidthorpe and Rex's son Brian who had been in his class when he was at primary school. He was a stocky, dark and brooding character who, unlike his father, rarely spoke. Thick bushy eyebrows that met in the middle matched his shock of jet-black shoulder-length hair that gave him a beast-like appearance. He never interacted with any of his classmates and he was given *special* work to do that was different from the others. Classmates called him 'stupid' and 'thickhead' and punched him in his arms when the teacher wasn't watching. The bullying got much worse for Brian after a P.E. lesson when he was in his third and penultimate year at the school.

All of the class turned out in their favourite club football strips ready for the lesson. Brian could only muster a holy green vest and a pair of knee length baggy navy blue shorts. Whereas everyone else was sporting the latest sports shoe, Brian had to make the best of a pair of worn plimsoles without any laces. Owen Gosling, the class clown, came up behind him and pulled his shorts right down to his ankles. It was bad enough for him to be stood there with his shorts down in front of the other boys, but to further his shame; he was also exposed to be wearing a pair of floral knickers that looked like they belonged to his mother - even the teacher laughed at his underwear. The other boys, Dalton included, hooted and choked with laughter and several became hysterical. Brian said nothing as he pulled up his shorts. Head down he slowly walked out of the gym despite the teacher's requests to come back. He didn't return to school for several days.

Dalton felt ashamed that he had also taken part in the bullying. He remembered a nasty incident that had happened a few days before he had left primary to go on to the grammar school - he had been aged 11 at the time.

His best friend, David Armstrong, had been teasing Brian mercilessly all day and had followed him up the road after school to continue with it. Dalton had done nothing to discourage this; neither had the rest of the gang who had instead encouraged David as he set about Brian. David fetched Brian a particularly hard rabbit punch to the back of his head. Brian, who was much broader and taller than the bully, turned to face - something he had never done before.

"What you staring at, mongol?" said David to the laughter of the others.

Brian remained silent. Dalton stood to his friend's shoulder and, like everyone else, was disturbed by the look in Brian's eye and his posturing; he stood like a wild animal waiting to

pounce. David was carried on by his bravado and he did not let up. He aimed a slap at Brian's face. Brian's hand shot out and grabbed David's arm; threatening to snap it like it was a twig.

"Let go," shouted David in agony as his limb was painfully twisted.

Brian suddenly lurched forward with a growl, scattering the other boys. With no effort at all he hoisted David up onto his broad shoulders. He let out another growl and threw David hard onto the pavement. No one dared to intervene as he picked the stunned character up onto his shoulder once more. This time his motives were more sinister and he threw the hapless lad onto the road and into the path of a passing coal wagon. The startled driver managed to brake just in time or he would have flattened David under his wheels. Brian had slowly walked away and no one dared to follow him now. He was to be avoided from now on. Dalton only saw Brian a few times after the incident and he had crossed over the road when he saw him coming.

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Just before midnight, Dalton pulled off the road and drove into the Lemon Café's car park. In his headlights he saw four caravans and an assortment of vehicles parked up haphazardly in the far corner. He was hungry and tired and was looking forward to his supper and some caffeine to help him through the rest of the night. He parked up and stretched back into his seat as far as it would allow him to go. He rubbed hard at his eyes with the palms of his hands. He nearly jumped out of his skin when someone suddenly tapped on his windscreen.

"What the..." he shouted out in fright.

"It's only me, Bert," said a familiar figure - it was Esther and she looked upset.

He slowly got out of the car, stretching his tired limbs as he did so.

"It's about them isn't it?" he said, indicating towards the traveller's caravans in the corner.

"Yes it is," replied the café owner tearfully.

She went on to tell him how they had arrived not long after he had left in the morning and how much trouble they had been causing. They had been tearing around the car park on their motorbikes and letting their dogs loose to roam around. The dogs had been in the bins around the back and one of them had gone for her husband as he had tried to shoo them away. Further

to this some of the lorry drivers had been complaining about the travellers' children playing around their vehicles and trying to tamper with the security seals.

To this, the big sergeant let out a sigh. "I'm afraid there's not a lot I can do, Esther, you'll have to go through the usual channels."

The travellers had parked up here at the Lemon before and it had taken several weeks to see them gone through the legal system. They left behind a mess of litter, decaying food and piles of human excrement, which took days for the council to come and clear away.

Dalton could see how upset Esther was and he said that he would go and have a word; he would ask them to tone things down if they could.

There was little activity at the moment and the travellers all seemed to be settled inside their caravans. A grey lurcher growled viciously as he neared a familiar caravan. It belonged to Bill Bryce; Dalton had had dealings with him before. He was a bit of a rogue but the sergeant always found him to be quite amenable. The door to the caravan suddenly swung open and Bill grabbed the dog by the collar just as it was about to set itself onto Dalton.

"That was a close call, Sergeant Dalton," said the craggy-faced traveller with a smirk as he saw the officer.

"Close thing for the dog, Bill," said Dalton with a grin.

They both laughed out loud.

"What is it I can do for you, sergeant?"

"It seems that the families and the dogs have been making nuisances of themselves today, Bill, and they're upsetting people hereabouts."

"I'll have a word with them; it won't happen again."

"Maybe you could move on up the road a few miles; there's an official site just the other side of Ollertowe village."

Bill was just about to reply when a muscular youth appeared at the door. It was Bill's son, Alvin.

"Would you look who it isn't?" said the surly youth as he stepped out of the caravan. He stood at over six foot tall and

had square shoulders. He pushed his dark fringe away from his eyes.

"I'll tell you what, Dalton, why don't you go and live on the official site because we're stopping here," he said menacingly.

"Is that what you've decided, Bill? Or is it the children that make all the decisions nowadays?"

"Are you calling me a child, Dalton? I'll show you how much of a child I am. Would you like to step around the back of the caravan," the youth raged as he stripped off his t-shirt to reveal a strong and rippling upper body.

Dalton laughed. "I'd rather not step around the back of anywhere with you if you don't mind, I'm happily married."

The youth became enraged and made a move forward.

"Leave it, Alvin," said Bill as he put a strong grip on his son's thick forearm. Alvin relented.

"It seems you have a slavering beast in each hand now, Bill, watch you don't get bitten," said Dalton as he walked back towards the café. "Goodnight," he added pleasantly. He knew that Bill had listened to him; he wasn't sure about Alvin, however. The sound of dogs barking resounded about the near empty car park as Dalton stepped inside the café.

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No sooner had he sat down, Esther put his supper before him with a large cup of coffee to wash it down with.

"No luck?" said Esther.

Dalton shrugged his shoulders and sighed.

"Never mind, duck; thanks for trying anyway. Enjoy your pie." She could see that the sergeant didn't want to be bothered by this anymore so she disappeared into the kitchen.

There was only one other person in the café, it was Arthur and he was tucking into a macaroni cheese. He gave Bert the thumbs up sign whilst he shovelled a huge amount of the macaroni into his mouth.

"Do you live in here, Arthur? You were here this morning when I left and you're here now," said Dalton, warmed by his favourite dish.

"I could say the same thing about you."

"Touché," returned the officer.

"What?"

"Never mind."

Arthur sat upright. "You fair upset Old Rex this morning; you should have heard him moaning to his daughter when she picked him up - your name was worse than mud."

Bert laughed, albeit nervously.

"Have you ever seen his daughter?"

Bert shook his head.

Arthur looked around as if they were in a room full of people. "She's a bit of a heifer," he whispered behind his hand.

"I heard that, Arthur," shouted Esther from the kitchen.

Both men laughed and then continued with their meal in silence.

He felt in a better fettle when he had finished eating and he looked at his watch. It was nearly 1 O'clock; another two hours and his shift would be over. He said goodbye to Esther and Arthur, who was now tucking into an apple crumble and custard, and stepped out into the night. As he approached his patrol car he sensed something wasn't right. As he got closer he noticed that the front offside wheel was flat.



"Bother," he said as he knelt down to examine it in the poor security lighting. "Hang on a minute," he said out loud upon noticing that the tyre had been slashed. He rubbed his finger along the fissure in the tyre wall. He heard the footstep of someone behind him and he stood up to face. However before he could turn around he was violently pushed forward across the bonnet of the vehicle and he felt a hard fist thud into his kidneys. Although in agony from the blow, he tried to roll down the car's bonnet and spin around to face his assailant. However, the assailant was one step ahead of him and prevented him from doing this by sending a flurry of heavy blows into his back and shoulders. The punches suddenly stopped to leave him writhing, face down, in agony. As he made to right himself again he felt an immense pressure to his neck as two powerful arms wrapped themselves around it. Bizarrely, at this point in the attack, the officer could smell something familiar;

something that was soothing and reminded him of better times. Nevertheless, he clawed fiercely at the hands with his fingers but could not break the grip - his eyes bulged hideously in their sockets. He knew that he would soon pass out or his neck would snap, such was the force impacted upon it if he didn't do something soon. He struggled to get free and he managed to bring an elbow around hard; it connected well with whoever was behind him. The assailant let out a groan and his grip loosened slightly. Dalton set his elbow back once more. However, this time there was no contact and he was slugged solidly into his ribs for his troubles. He slid down the wing of the car and unconscious onto the floor - his body could not take any more pain and it had shut down. Nevertheless, the assailant carried on with the attack and sent his heavy boot into Dalton's ribs, as he lay lifeless, lifting him off the floor as he did so. Fortunately for the officer, the door of the café suddenly swung open causing the assailant to cease with his brutality and to step back into the shadows lest he should be discovered. Arthur stepped out of the café talking loudly to Esther as he went.

"Goodnight, Esther," Arthur said before walking towards his lorry. He heard a pitiful groan coming from the darkness. "Sergeant Dalton, are you all right?" he said as he saw the prone officer lying on the shingle next to his patrol car.

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Dalton struggled to sit up in his hospital bed, he felt like he had been trampled on by a herd of elephants. Fortunately no bones were broken and his internal organs were intact. However, he was badly bruised and his back, shoulders and ribs were black and blue. He had to stay in hospital for a few days for observation.

The door opened and a young nurse walked in followed by his grinning colleague, Alec, a plump man in his mid fifties.

"Morning, Bert," said the nurse as she looked at his chart, which was clipped at the foot of his bed. She stuck a thermometer into his mouth before he could reply. He gagged slightly at the taste of alcohol.

Alec plonked himself down on the edge of the bed and began helping himself to some grapes from a bowl, which stood on the unit next to the bed. He had nearly finished the grapes by the time the nurse took out the thermometer; she wrote the data down onto the board and replaced it.

"You can only stay for ten minutes officer, doctor's rounds will be starting soon and it is not for visitors to be here then.

Alec saluted in response and the nurse sighed as she stepped out of the room - she had heard it all before.

"Stop eating my grapes, Alec you fat bastard."

"Charming," said Alec dolefully. "After I've come all of this way to give you the news on the suspects," he added in the same pitiful tone before pushing another grape into his mouth.

"Put the fucking grapes down and tell me then," said Bert impatiently.

Alec swallowed hard. He cleared his throat. "Leonard Dixon's alibi just about stands up; he was in his local pub enjoying a lock-in at the time you were attacked. Several of his chapter were drinking with him and they swear to his whereabouts - for what it's worth." He sighed heavily. "As it stands we can't find anything to link him to the attack apart from the threats he gave you."

"What about Alvin Bryce?"

Alec smiled and rubbed his hands. "Bryce is something else. Not only doesn't he have an alibi, but also his knuckles are bruised and he has a duck egg of a lump on the side of his head where you could have caught him. We've got him down at the nick and he has been questioned."

"Has he confessed to it?"

"Not yet but he soon will."

"Play it by the book, Alec or we might not have a case at all," said the big sergeant with concern. "I want this bastard banged to rights."

"He will be, Bert, don't worry."

"Have another grape, Alec," said Bert cheerfully as he passed over the bowl - he winced slightly.

Alec was just about to accept the bowl when his mobile phone rang. "Hello, Sergeant Ballack here," he said into it. Thereafter he listened grimly shaking his head at what he was being told. "Fuck," he said as he ended the call."

"Bad news?"

"You could say that; Bryce is in the clear."

"He's fucking what?"

"He's been caught on the CCTV cameras in town coming out of a club at 1.30 AM on the night of your attack; there was a disturbance he was involved in, hence the injuries."

"Who could it have been then; who was it that attacked me?"

Alec raised his eyebrows. "I'd better get down to the Lemon café to see what else I can dredge up. We seem to be a bit short on leads right now."

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Dalton sat at home in his lounge reading the newspaper - he had discharged himself early from hospital after only a day of observation. Because of his injuries he couldn't get comfortable and he threw the newspaper down in exasperation. His wife, Tizzy, had gone off to work early leaving him some sandwiches in the fridge for his lunch. He was hungry and decided to go and eat. He struggled to push himself out of the armchair to go to the kitchen and he knocked his wife's scarf off the back of the chair as he did so. He grimaced as he bent to pick it back up to replace it. "She shouldn't have left this here," he grumbled, referring to the scarf. He held it up to his nose and sniffed it; it was the same smell he had smelt during the attack - it was the smell of perfume, his wife's perfume. His thoughts were disturbed when he heard a knock at the front door.

"Who is it?" he bellowed.

"It's me, Alec," came the shouted reply.

"Let yourself in."

Alec let himself in and Bert sat back down again. Alec came into the lounge and sat down on an armchair opposite his disgruntled colleague - he was a bad patient. He picked up Bert's newspaper and began to read it.

"Er... is this a social call?" Bert said sarcastically.

"What?" said Alec inattentively as he became engrossed in the sports page.

"What do you want?"

"You know what? I don't know why I bother with you, you are always so bloody rude and ungrateful," said Alec as he folded the newspaper down. "Why are you clutching that scarf?"

"No reason," replied Bert defensively.

"As it happens I have some news for you."

"You've found out which toe rag attacked me?"

"I'm afraid not."

"What then? What have you got to tell me?"

Alec sat back into the armchair. "You know I went back to the Lemon café after I had visited you in hospital?"

"Yeah."

"When I was in there a young lad came in; he was from the Green Shift Company."

"That was the lad I told you about; the one Dixon was going to thump if I hadn't stepped in. I wouldn't have thought that he would have had the bottle to go back into the Lemon."

"He didn't have the bottle; it wasn't him you see, it was another driver, one of his mates."

Bert looked puzzled.

Alec continued. "Esther asked the lad how his mate was after the incident with Dixon and he told her that he didn't know because nobody had heard from him since teatime the day before, when he had left for home after his shift had ended. Apparently his parents rang the Green Shift manager up yesterday morning to get him to tell their son to contact them because they were worried sick about him. The manager couldn't ask him because he hadn't clocked in for work either. Up until now he's never missed a day's work since leaving school and he's never been late home or stopped out all night... this is most unusual for their son, Kevin and he's still not turned up."

"He could be staying at one of his mates or has had an accident."

"None of the local hospitals have admitted him and he hasn't got any friends to speak of - he always goes straight home to his parents after his shift."

"Has anyone spoken to Dixon yet?"

"Not yet; it's a bit too early for that... but we will."

&&&

Leonard Dixon watched the patrol car as it pulled into his yard. It stopped short of where he stood and Police Officer Ballack stepped out; he was accompanied by a young WPC, Belinda Watson. Dixon was washing one of his vans and he was holding a high-pressure hose.

"Mr. Dixon?"

"You know who I am, fat man."

Alec ignored the insult. "We've come to talk to you about the disappearance of a young van driver, Kevin Kerr, he worked... he works for the Green Shift Company."

Dixon sprayed water over the van. "So what's that got to do with me?" he replied with indifference.

"You were heard threatening him by one of our officers and by a café full of witnesses... you're getting quite good at threatening people of late aren't you."

Dixon shrugged his shoulders. "How is Sergeant Dalton? After the attack I mean."

"He's on the mend thank you Mr. Dixon," returned Alec with the same indifference.

"Pity."

"Do you mind if we have a look around," said Alec as his eyes scanned the premises. The small yard was totally surrounded by fencing with thick coils of barbed wire fixed to the top. A small office building stood near the gate and a couple of export containers stood at the far side.

"Have you got a search warrant?"

"No but I could get one. You'd probably have to come down to the station with me if I had to go and get a warrant... a bit inconvenient I know but... well that's how it is... we like people to cooperate with us."

Dixon smirked and cast his eyes over the young WPC; she dropped her eyes and Dixon let out a guffaw. "You'd better make it snappy then, I'm due on a pickup in ten minutes."

"You can't afford to miss out on a pickup, Mr. Dixon... I hear business is tough since the Green Shift Company started up."

Dixon dropped his guard for the first time and showed some emotion. "Fuck you, Ballack." With that he threw the hose down and stormed off towards his office. Alec laughed as he disappeared inside.

"There's not much to look at, Alec," said Belinda as she looked around.

"You never know, Belinda, there might be some evidence knocking about; one never knows."

They searched everywhere but there was nothing to be found. They even checked inside the export containers, which drew a definite blank. They thanked the disgruntled Dixon and left.

&&&

Two weeks later and Bert returned to work, much had happened in his absence; he sat down at his desk and started to look through the mountain of paperwork in his in tray. He could hear raised voices coming from the Super's office. Suddenly the door burst open and out stormed Detective Clarke; his face was like thunder.

"And close the door behind you, Clarke," called out the Super.

"Yes ma'am," he raged as he slammed the door heavily into the jamb. He stuck his middle finger up towards it to further his contempt for her.

"The Super been chewing your balls, Ed?" quipped the Sergeant.

"Tell me about it," he replied as he shoved his hand across his shaven head. "Things are all going to shit, Bert and your useless lot aren't helping matters either."

"Don't blame the uniform, Ed."

Ed sighed mournfully. "We can usually rely on your guys to unearth things but it isn't happening this time."

"I'm sure everyone is doing their best."

"I know they are; but we're all under a lot of pressure with the Green Shift thing; everyone, especially the press, are asking questions and we have no answers to give them... it's bollocks but you can't blame them for asking. We know that

Dixon is at the bottom of it all but we can't make anything stick to him; we've tried all ways... legal ways that is."

"You know how tightly packed the Redford Raiders are; they stick together and make sure nothing comes back to haunt any of them," said Bert as he received a cup of tea from a young police constable. He asked of the constable's health. "How are you, Kelvin? Still doing karate?" he said as he raised his hand in a karate fashion.

"If you were any good at it you wouldn't have been laid on your back for a fortnight, Sarge," said Kelvin with a swagger.

"Very good, Kelvin; fancy some unpaid overtime?"

The constable made his way out hastily.

"As I see it, Bert, Dixon's sure to make a slip up soon," continued Ed Clarke after the brief interruption.

"I'm sure he will and we'll be there when he does," said the sergeant thoughtfully.

"I hope so," replied the harassed detective as he made for the door. He turned before exiting. "I've got to go to a fucking press conference now... would you credit it when I should be out working."

"Good luck."

Since Kevin Kerr had gone missing over two weeks ago there had been massive developments with the Green Shift Company. One of their drivers had been run off the road and severely injured whilst driving up a country lane early one morning. The oncoming vehicle, which forced the manoeuvre, was found abandoned in a field 2 days later without even the trace of a fingerprint onboard. Another of the drivers had been attacked outside his house by an unknown assailant and was still in hospital with a fractured skull. Only last night someone had broken into the Green Shift Company yard and set fire to a couple of their vans; it was only the prompt arrival of the fire service that stopped their whole fleet from going up in flames.

Everything was well out of hand and there wasn't anything anyone could do about it. Things had to be made to happen; it was the only way forward in these types of cases.

Bert opened up his desk drawer and got out his car keys.

&&&

The caravans were still there in the corner of the Lemons car park and a pack of dogs scavenged around the toppled rubbish bins. Bare-arsed toddlers played in the dirt as their parents sat drinking beer on the steps of their caravans. Alvin stood bare-chested punching a dead hedgehog, which hung from a line he had tied to a clothesline to harden up his hands. The place was a mess and the car park was unusually quiet for Monday lunchtime. Bert got out of his car and walked straight into the café - he heard Alvin shout something but he thought it best to ignore the remark, whatever it was. Esther stood drumming her fingers on the counter as a couple of diners quietly ate their meals. Esther was pleased to see the sergeant and gave him a cup of tea. He didn't sit down but drank his beverage at the counter.

"Does Dixon still come in?" he asked the manager after enquiring after her family.

"Dixon?"

"The Raider."

"Yes he does; he is one of the few that doesn't seem to bother about that bloody lot outside," she said sadly as she indicated towards the travellers with a shake of her head.

"Comes in at the usual time does he?" asked Bert.

"Yes without fail; he was in this morning bold as brass. Is it true what they've been saying about him?"

"What have they been saying about him, Esther?"

"You know... about the murder and things."

"I've not heard of any murder," said the officer with a wry smile. "Not yet anyway," he added after a pause.

&&&

Come the next morning, Esther was no busier. She saw Old Rex being dropped off by his daughter in her little red Fiat. She gave her a wave and the blonde waved back. Even Rex had noticed a sombre atmosphere about the place and he took his seat without slamming the door; instead he pushed it to close it quietly until he heard the sneck click into the lock. Dixon sat at his usual table reading a motorcycle magazine whilst eating scrambled egg with his fork. Esther's eyes widened when she saw a Green Shift Company van pull into the yard. The driver, a muscular lad in his early twenties, jumped down from the

vehicle. Esther willed him to get back in and drive away again but he carried on walking until he was stood at the other side of the counter facing her.

"Hello, love," he said cheerily, Dixon looked up from his magazine and stroked his black porn star moustache. "An Olympian and a coffee please," the youth said after looking up at the menu." Esther didn't reply but nodded and disappeared into the kitchen. With that he went to sit down, he said good morning to Rex and nodded towards Dixon. Dixon nodded back. He took his green jacket off and hung it on the back of his chair. His arms were well muscled and his bicep tensed as he placed his head into his right hand. His mobile phone rang and he pulled it out of his pocket. "Hello, it's Raymond," he said quietly. He listened as the caller spoke. "Where?" he asked. He listened intently and took out a notebook. He put the phone under his chin and went to write into the book with a pencil he pulled out of the spine. "Sherwood House" he said as he wrote it. "Pick up at 10." He folded his book shut. "I've just got a drop to make at Edwinstowe village and then I'll be on my way - it's a bit out in the sticks isn't it?" He turned off his phone just as Esther returned with his Olympian breakfast.

"I thought you lads ate up at the caravan on lay-by," said Rex, who couldn't remain quiet any longer.

"Pardon?" said Raymond through a mouthful of egg.

"Your lads, the drivers, usually eat up at the lay-by café don't they."

"Do they? I don't know about that, I only started today."

"There seems to be plenty of jobs going at the Green Shift Company lately," said Rex mischievously.

Raymond laughed. "I'm not surprised, are you after what's been going on there? It doesn't bother me much, I've just come out of the army and I needed a job."

"I wondered why you had such clean boots," said Dixon sarcastically.

"Sorry," replied the youth.

"You're boots, they're very shiny."

Raymond looked down at his well-polished boots and grinned. "I suppose old habits die hard."

"I expect you're right," said Dixon as he looked down at his magazine.

Raymond finished his meal in silence. He paid Esther then left.

As soon as Raymond left Dixon took out his mobile and made a call. He spoke briefly and quietly into the mouthpiece; Old Rex nearly creaked his neck trying to listen to the hushed conversation. After the call the Raider stood up to go. "I'll be seeing you, sexy Rexy," he said animatedly as he gently slapped the old man on his cheek. He put a £5 note onto the counter and left whistling.

"Scruffy bastard," said Rex as he tried to wipe away any traces of the Raider's handprint.

&&&

Raymond wasn't a very good driver and he had difficulty manoeuvring the Green Shift van around the tight bends on the narrow country lane where there was only room for one vehicle to pass at a time. He could hear the sound of the hedgerows being swept back as he went. He was aware that another vehicle was behind him, it had been following him for a few miles, but it was too close to his tailgate to make it out via his side mirrors - not that he looked into them very often. Suddenly he braked to a halt; a broken bough had fallen across the track. He heard the screech of the brakes of the trailing vehicle behind him as it also came to an abrupt halt on the road. He took a deep breath and then jumped out of the vehicle to move the bough. He heard the doors opening on the vehicle; an old blue escort, behind him and two figures came charging towards him wearing balaclavas. Cool as a cucumber, he turned and floored the first one with a high kick under his chin; he fell to the floor like a sack of shit. The van started rocking and he could hear muffled shouts coming from the inside. The other figure thought better than to tackle the driver and he ran back towards the car. Before he could reach it, Raymond gave chase and rugby tackled him to the ground; he expertly tied some plastic tie wraps around his wrists to restrain him. He kned him in the back to knock the wind out of him and pulled off his balaclava. "Hello, Alvin," he said brightly, "fancy seeing you here." He roughly dragged his struggling prisoner to the back of the van where he could hear Sergeant Dalton shouting, "Kelvin, Kelvin, let us out." He smiled when he realized the doors had jammed shut. *Serves the big twat right for berating me*, he thought. He pulled half-heartily at the door handles but to no avail. He heard a rustling noise and turned to see the other figure pushing through the hedgerow; it would be impossible to catch him in the dense woods of Sherwood so he

let him go without a chase. He pulled out his radio and called in the incident. He banged on the side of the van.

"I've made an arrest and have called for backup... and a locksmith," he shouted with glee. "Are you all right in there, Bertie?" he added in mock concern.

An indignant reply was issued from within.

&&&

Leonard Dixon sat at one side of the table and Ed sat at the other; Sergeant Dalton stood with his back to the wall. The interview room was bare save for the table and two chairs. A tape recorder sat on the tabletop - it was switched on.

"You've been seen talking to Alvin Bryce," said the detective, "the same Alvin Bryce who attacked one of our officers today... with an accomplice... hmmm."

"Who's Alvin Bryce?" came the curt reply.

"Someone that's got your number in his mobile phone; he got a call from you earlier on this morning."

"Strange that."

"Very strange if you don't know him," uttered the detective. "Do you know what name he's logged you in his mobile as?"

"As I said before, I don't even know the guy... can I go?"

"Where were you this morning at 9.45?"

The Raider shrugged his broad shoulders. "I think I was in the yard."

"Can anyone verify that?"

"I doubt it, everyone was out driving. Are you going to arrest me?"

Ed jumped up and slammed his fist down hard on the table. "Listen to me you fucking freak..."

Dalton moved forward and switched off the tape. "Interview suspended at 12.10," he said as he grabbed hold of Ed's wrist.

Ed roughly pulled his arm away and stormed out of the room.

Dixon laughed out loud.

"I wouldn't laugh if I was you, Dixon," said Dalton with a smirk. He paused until the Raider stopped laughing.

"Why's that then, officer?"

"Because Bryce is singing like a canary presently. And, further to this, the louder he sings the more seed we sprinkle on his bird table. He's singing is so sweet we're going to release him on bail... albeit with a tag, we wouldn't want him to fly the nest would we?"

Dixon looked shaken but forced a smile onto his grim unshaven face. "Are you going to release me as well?" he asked calmly.

"Of course, Mr. Dixon, you aren't under arrest; you are just helping us with our enquiries and you are free to go whenever you wish to. Allow me to see you out, sir."

&&&

Rex stepped out of the Fiat and started to make his way towards the café. He cast a glance over at the caravans; there wasn't much movement from within this early in the morning. His daughter waved him away before dabbing at her face with a compact as she looked in the rearview mirror. As she drove away the vehicle stalled and she ended up flooding the engine as she tried to restart it. Rex made his way back to the car to help but the engine kicked in before he could issue any unwanted advice. He sighed and turned to go back towards the café. However, just before he reached the café a white Mercedes came flying into the car park at high speed. It was headed straight for him and he stood like a rabbit startled by car headlights on a dark night. The car skidded as the driver wrestled with the wheel. However, just before contact was made, Rex's daughter came charging out of her Fiat and flung herself towards her father. She managed to push him out of the way of the vehicle, which had swerved to the side to avoid him. She fell across her frail father; knocking the breath out of both of them.

The Merc stopped abruptly and 3 figures jumped out. They were wearing navy boiler suits and their faces were covered with knitted balaclavas. They all held lighted Molotov cocktails and they ran towards the caravans whilst the driver pulled the car around for their escape.

BANG

A loud gunshot sounded out and one of the figures fell to the floor to be engulfed by flames as the bottle broke pouring

petrol all over his twitching form. Alvin came running out of one of the caravans and fired a second shot, which flew over the heads of the remaining pair.



"Stop, armed Police," was shouted out from a hailer.

The cocktails were thrown and two of the caravans soon caught to flames. The arsonists turned to flee but were quickly pursued and caught by police officers who broke cover from behind the outside toilet block and a low hedge that ran the length of the car park.

BANG

Alvin hit the floor just as he brought the rifle up to his shoulder to fire another shot. No sooner had he fell an arresting officer was upon him to pull the gun from his failing grip. He was quickly turned onto his stomach and handcuffed - blood oozed heavily from a shoulder wound. The leaping flames from the caravans lit up the car park with an eerie orange glow. Dark screaming figures, who seconds before had been sleeping, scrambled out from the caravans and to safety. The sound of sirens resounded out and a fleet of emergency vehicles pulled into the car park - their warning lights flickering blue as they went. The fire fighters went to the blaze and the paramedics went to the wounded as police officers scattered about making the area secure.

"I'm knackered after all that," said Alec as he wiped at his brow with his handkerchief.

Dalton ignored him as he walked over towards Rex who was sitting on the floor being examined by a paramedic; his daughter sat on the ground also with her back to the officer.

"Are you all right, love?" he asked as he approached.

From inside the café Dave's eyes widened in disbelief. "Why is Sergeant Dalton beating the shit out of Rex's daughter?" he asked in shock. He saw Alec run over and pull his colleague away from her. As he did so, Rex's daughter fetched Bert a punch so hard he was only prevented from falling to the floor by the tubby officer's arms as he caught him. They watched on in bewilderment as the blonde bombshell dropped another officer with a similar haymaker, as he went to help. Another officer, Kelvin the karate kid, was more successful coming from behind and he put a strangle hold on the harpy.

"Hold on, Kelvin," shouted Alec as he avoided a kick aimed at his groin area; a stiletto-heeled shoe flew dangerously over his head like a ground to air missile.

Bert recovered enough to help Kelvin, who was being bucked about like a rodeo rider on a frisky mare.

"Calm down, Brian," he shouted as he grabbed hold of the mare's hair to end up grasping a blonde wig.

"Fuck off, Dalton," screamed Brian as he tried to bite the arresting arm that was wrapped around his throat. "I should have made a better job of you the last time."

"One of your old girlfriends, Bert?" said Kelvin gleefully despite the exertions of trying to hold the struggling man steady.

"Why don't you leave him alone, Dalton you bully," shouted Old Rex as he struggled to his feet to defend Brian. "It's not the first time you've bothered him."

Ignoring the old man, the sergeant smashed his ham fist into the jaw of the struggling figure. The punch was solid, enough to pacify Brian, and he was quickly handcuffed before being bundled into the back of a police car; Bert jumped in beside him. He smelt the familiar smell of his wife's perfume emanating from his prisoner. "I must say, you've got a good taste in perfume, Brian," he said sarcastically, "but you might have made an effort and plucked your eyebrows before coming out."

The raven haired man looked at him blankly - the sarcasm was well over his head. He inhaled deeply and rested back into the seat as the grinning sergeant read him his rights.

It looked like Beirut in the car park; a forlorn figure lay smouldering at the feet of a paramedic. Unlike the bacon from the Lemon Café, Dixon was burnt to a crisp; he wouldn't be bothering the Green Shift drivers anymore. That was too late, however, for Kevin; his body would not be found until a few months later when Dixon's yard was cleared for building work. His rotting corpse was found flattened underneath one of the export containers.

&&&

Dalton sat at his desk sipping his tea when the Super's door flew open. The battleaxe emerged spitting venom.

"People aren't happy about all this, Dalton," she said unhappily, "questions have to be asked."

"I don't know what you mean, ma'am," he said animatedly. "Everything seems to have been cleared up and the right people have been banged to rights."

"Not everybody it seems... what about Dixon?"

"Very unfortunate that ma'am."

"How did you know that Dixon was going to attack Bryce?"

The sergeant tapped the side of his nose. "I keep this to the ground ma'am."

In temper she turned back into her office and slammed the door violently into the jamb; such was the force her nameplate became dislodged and fell to the floor with a metallic clink.

***** The End ******

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A Boy and a Bird

By Rick McQuiston

Synopsis: The world exists and persists with or without our intervention. The possibilities and probabilities of what may be or what can be are forever entwined with forces beyond our command.

About the Author: Rick McQuiston has been writing horror fiction for a dozen years, and has had 170 publications so far. Currently, he is finishing his fourth anthology book, "As mean as the night", which will be available on Lulu.com and Amazon.com along with his other three books. He's also the editor of his own horror fiction ezine, www.geocities.com/many_midnights, and a guest author at Memphis Junior High School each year.

In this bizarre horror fiction, a boy named Glenn will ponder his fate and that of his surroundings.

A Boy and a Bird

By Rick McQuiston

The sun peeked through the clouds, streaming warm rays of light into Glenn's bedroom. The digital alarm clock displayed 7:42 a.m., far too early for a twelve year-old boy to be awake on a Saturday morning.

Glenn sat up in his bed and pushed the covers off. The ballgame the day before had taken a toll on him, and even though he had hit a homerun in the game he still regretted playing in it.

He rubbed his thin fingers through his jet-black hair. It was difficult for a young man like himself to clear his head; so many things were on his mind. School, problems relating to his parents, the trouble he was having with his batting stance, and of course, Cindy Parcilis.

Cindy was so pretty, and smart too. Glenn sighed as he thought about her big blue eyes and delicate smile, which was always framed perfectly by her flowing locks of shiny brown hair. He winced when he remembered how foolishly he acted whenever she was near him. He could hardly get a complete sentence out.

A noise startled Glenn from his thoughts. Something had smacked into his bedroom window. He crawled out of bed and slipped on a t-shirt and socks, all the while keeping his eyes on the window hidden behind the blinds. With caution ruling his movements he slowly made his way to the source of the noise.

When Glenn leaned forward and parted the blinds with his shaking hands, he wasn't sure what to expect. A small voice inside of him told him to be wary, that any noise could be something to worry about; but his common sense won out and was justified when he saw the clear, sunny day outside.

On the ground outside the window, a small bird, no bigger than a golf ball, was fluttering its wings. It arched its tiny head up and focused its glossy black eyes on Glenn. It was light blue in color with thin black streaks running along the sides of its small body. A dot of red blood stained its underside, dispelling its image of health. Glenn felt bad for the little creature, and pulling the blinds up, reached for the window latch.

Then a feeling hit suddenly and refused to relinquish its hold on Glenn's mind.

Don't open the window. You don't know what's out there.

Glenn's reasonable side countered.

What are you talking about? It's only an injured little bird. If you don't do something it could die.



Erring on the side of caution Glenn pulled his hand back and cuddled it to his chest. The bird continued looking up at him, its tiny head bobbing back and forth. It flapped its wings a few times and struggled to fly up to the windowsill.

Glenn paused for a moment as he watched the helpless little bird nudge its beak up to the glass. He felt bad for it, but what could he do?

"Sorry little guy. Go find some food or something." He then closed the blinds and sauntered over to his dresser.

As Glenn was slipping on a pair of jeans he heard a tapping noise on the window. Two or three voices accompanied the noise, voices he immediately recognized. He walked back over to the window and parted the blinds. His two best friends, Todd and Eric, smiled at him through the glass.

"Glenn buddy. Come on, let's go," Todd said through a large grin. "We can still get in nine innings before we get kicked off the field." Eric stood directly behind Todd. He was also smiling.

Although Glenn did feel like playing some ball, he was anxious to try out the batting stance adjustments his dad was helping him with; his head reminded him that it might not be a good idea.

"Sorry guys," he said. "I have a headache that won't leave me alone. Maybe..." The words stuck in his throat when it caught his attention. Normally he wouldn't have even noticed, but not this time. This time he saw it clearly.

On both Todd and Eric were small red blotches, which looked like blood. On Todd it was on his chest, near his right shoulder, and Eric had it dead center on his stomach. Both seemed unaware of the spots.

"What's wrong with you guys," Glenn asked. "Are you guys hurt or something?"

Todd looked over at Eric and smiled even wider. "No," he shrugged. "Just a little cut, that's all. We've already been playing some ball. Must've gotten scraped up or something."

The fact that neither of them was sweaty, much less dirty, was not lost on Glenn.

"I'll catch up with you guys later," he stated in his best acting voice. "Maybe later, when I feel better."

Eric and Todd's smiles quickly disappeared.

"Whatever," they said in unison and promptly walked away through the bushes.

By now Glenn was frightened. Not scared in a sense of fearing for his life, just uneasy, disturbed, a sixth sense type of feeling. He closed the blinds, walked back to his bed, and fell into it, his mind trying to sort out the strange occurrences of the morning.

What would have happened if he had left with Todd and Eric? Or if he had let the injured little bird into his room?

The scraping on his window jolted him away from his thoughts. It was different this time, more pronounced, more determined than before. With great reluctance he slowly walked over to the window and parted the blinds.

Tiny red blotches. Hundreds of them swarmed over the glass like miniature red mice; a constant flow of movement with each part blind and careless of another.

Glenn backed away from the window, the blinds sliding back into place. His ears hurt from the scratching, which echoed throughout the room, and he also noticed the noises coming from behind his bedroom door as well.

He grabbed his baseball bat and whirled around to face the window.

The noises were louder than ever. Glenn guessed there were thousands of the red things outside the window by then, a thought he didn't care to envision. With only his bat and his instinct to survive, he approached the window. With one quick motion he pulled the blinds up and stared into the face of madness.

The red blotches squirmed in all directions. Virtually no glass was visible as the things swarmed in thick clumps resembling rotting seaweed, pale red slime coating their pulsating bodies.

But what really made Glenn fear for his life was what he noticed outside the window.

It was Eric and Todd!

His friends were standing in the bushes. Although mostly obscured by the foliage Glenn could still make out their facial expressions.

Pain. Blind, mind-numbing pain punctuated their faces.

And overhead, fluttering wildly above his friends was the same tiny bird, its glossy eyes glaring down at him reflecting a blend of pity and contempt. Its underside bristled with red.

Glenn gripped his bat tightly. He turned around and faced his bedroom door, the only viable escape route. He knew there were more of the things behind it, and it might be impossible to make it through, but it was his only option. With his makeshift weapon held out in front of him, he approached the door, and in one swift motion, swung it open.

His parents were standing in the middle of the hallway.

"Glenn," his father cried. "Quick, let's go." His face was pallid. He nervously looked at the red blotches, which were slithering across the walls and floor. "Glenn! We have to go now!"

Glenn's mother was cowering at his father's side.

With his bat readied in front of him Glenn took a step towards his parents.

"That's right big guy," his father slurred through his drooling mouth. "Come closer."

A jolt of alarm suddenly surged through Glenn's brain. His dad had never called him 'big guy' before.

"That's it big guy. Come closer."

Glenn's mother was by then sporting a large, artificial grin. Glenn leaned forward and noticed tiny red blotches dribbling out of her mouth and nose. With what little will power he had left Glenn stopped where he was, and holding his bat out in front of him, began to step back towards his bedroom.

"What's the matter big guy?" his father asked through an impossibly wide smile. "Where ya going?"

"Y...you're not my parents," Glenn mumbled. "You're controlled by those red things. Get away from me."

His parents then began to walk towards him, arms outstretched, red blotches staining their faces.

Glenn stepped back into his bedroom and immediately slammed the door shut and locked it. He could still hear the things that had masqueraded as his parents behind the door, groaning and pushing up against it in vain attempts to gain access.

Realizing that his options were quickly dwindling, Glenn scanned his room for possible escape routes. He obviously couldn't use the door or the window, and staying put was a thought he couldn't even consider. And then he noticed the attic access door in his closet. He pushed his dresser into the closet and crawled up on top of it. The access cover resisted a little, but he managed to move it out of the way.

Glenn had never been in the attic before. Cobwebs drifted into his face, and a musty aroma stung his nose and eyes. He hoisted himself up into the space and quickly slid the cover back into place just as his bedroom door burst open and his parents sauntered in.

"Glenn? Are you in here?" his father called out in a sarcastic tone. "Where are you son?"

Glenn shuddered when he heard the red things scrambling around his room. It sounded like someone had dumped a bag full of marbles on a sidewalk. He wanted to lift the cover and peek out of morbid curiosity, but fear prevented him from doing so.

"Glenn, your mother is worried about you. She wants to make sure you're alright."

Glenn bit his lip. He wanted to answer, but knew he couldn't. With a heavy heart he perched himself on top of the access cover and waited.

&&&

The spider crawled across Glenn's face, leaving a trail of cobweb behind it. The tickling sensation woke him up, and he instantly brushed the tiny creature aside.

He listened closely for any sound coming from his bedroom below, but heard nothing.

Were they gone? And if so, where to? And why?

Why.

That simple three-letter word pretty much summed up everything in Glenn's mind. If only there was an answer to it.

After working up some courage, Glenn called out to his parents, both out of concern for them and to make sure they were gone.

"M...mom? Dad? Are you guys still there?"

No answer.

With great reluctance he carefully scooted off the access cover and pried it up a few inches, just enough to survey his room.

Except for a few things that were knocked over, everything looked normal. Stillness blanketed the room like a thick coat of smog, touching every corner, every object. Glenn was relieved somewhat, but also saddened. His parents were gone, both in body and in mind. They had been taken over by strange little red creatures, which manipulated them like human marionettes.

He replaced the access cover and began to crawl towards the far end of the attic, where daylight streamed through a small ventilation window. He just couldn't muster up the courage to go back into his bedroom. The thought that Eric and Todd could be waiting outside occurred to him, but he managed to push the thought aside.

Glenn finally reached the window and immediately yanked the screen cover off of it. The wooden slats behind the screen were very close together and slanted down at steep angles, making it difficult to see through. All he could make out were thin lines of horizontal daylight.

Without wasting a minute, Glenn clenched one of the slats as tight as he could and pulled with all his strength. And to his great relief the board snapped easily in two. A few more yanks and he was looking down the side of the house.

It was a clear day, blue sky punctuated only by a few stray clouds.

Glenn let the sunshine warm his face and inhaled the fresh air deeply. It felt good, so much so that he nearly forgot about his situation. But his empty stomach and dry throat brought him back to his harsh reality very quickly.

And then his heart froze solid in his chest.

The words drifted up into the attic from outside, words whose politeness were betrayed by who they came from.

"Glenn? Is that you up there son?"

It was his dad!

He was standing on the side of the house looking up at Glenn. Apparently he had been doing some yard work and heard his son in the attic.

Glenn didn't know whether or not he should answer. It was obvious his dad knew he was there, but he couldn't be sure if it was really safe yet. His father sounded normal, but it was almost normal when Glenn had encountered him in the hallway. With hesitation, he leaned forward and peeked through the opening in the window.

His dad's smiling face was the first thing he saw.

"Hello Glenn," his dad called up to him. "What are you doing up there?" A slight trace of irritation crossed his face. "I want you down right now young man. Do I make myself clear?"

Glenn felt so relieved. He knew it was his real father.

"B...but I was just looking for s...something," he stuttered. "But I'll get out right now."

"Good," his dad snapped back. "I don't want you getting any insulation in your eyes, so be careful."

It was his dad all right.

When Glenn climbed back down into his bedroom everything seemed normal. Nothing was knocked over or damaged, and everything was right where it should be. After he brushed himself off and checked the window, he walked into the kitchen. His mother sat quietly at the table reading a magazine, humming softly to herself.

"Hello honey," she chirped in a pleasant tone. "I'm going to make chicken for dinner if that's alright."

Glenn was stunned at the normalcy of the situation. It was as if nothing had ever happened.

"Sure mom, chicken will be fine."

"Why don't you go outside and see if your father needs any help?"

Glenn smiled and nodded.

His mom then went back to her magazine.

The relief Glenn felt was matched only by his worry.

Had he imagined everything? Was it all just a dream? He couldn't be sure. All he could do was go about his life with an open eye and an open mind.

He walked outside, feeling the sun on his face and the wind in his hair. His father was on his hands and knees on the side of the house pulling weeds, and Glenn walked up to him cautiously, slowly, being sure not to take his eyes off of him.

"There you are son," his dad said while squinting at the sun. "What are you up to today big guy?"

Big guy? His dad never called him that.

Glenn felt his stomach tighten. If there were something still wrong he would have to deal with it right then and there. This time he wouldn't be able to hide in the attic.

"J...just hanging around," he said through a forced smile.

His dad smiled back at him and returned to his work.

"Well have fun then big guy."

Glenn hardly noticed it at first, a small movement high above the treetops, gliding gracefully in the clear morning sky. He squinted and raised his hand to his forehead to shield his eyes from the sun.

It was a bird. A tiny, bright blue bird with black streaks running along the sides of its small body.

Glenn froze. He knew that it was the same bird which was outside his bedroom window earlier. And he also knew what it was.

It was a manifestation of the impossible, that which could never happen, that which could never be. But as Glenn was quickly learning, just because something is impossible, doesn't mean that it can't happen. He watched in fascination as the tiny bird swept downward, and arching towards the house, flew right up to his face.

Startled, Glenn forced himself to look directly into the bird's eyes. They were glossy black orbs, void of emotion, but reflecting vast, possibly malevolent intelligence, far beyond any human's comprehension.

The bird studied Glenn, much like a curious kid watching tadpoles in a pond. And then, without warning, it flew away.

Something impossible had visited Glenn, and despite the impending nightmares, which were sure to follow, he was a better person from it. His perspective of the world was far wider than before. He was able to understand, or at least tried to understand, all aspects of the world he lived in, regardless of how fantastic they were.

Glenn's dad sauntered back over from the side of the house and looked over at his son. His head tilted in bewilderment.

"You okay there big guy?"

Glenn smiled at him. "Sure dad," he replied. "I'm fine. I think I'll be just fine."

&&&

The bird circled high above the bustling city landscape, watching, waiting, studying. People jostled back and forth by the thousands, each intent on their personal destinations, oblivious to all the true beauty, and horror, that the world offered.

The tiny red speck on the bird's underside pulsed with anticipation. The bird swung around a radio tower and began its spiral towards the crowded streets far below.

****** THE END ******

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A Push

By Arthur McMahon

Synopsis: Life teaches us the most valuable learning when we have given up on the struggle, waiting for it all to end.

About the Author: Arthur is a 22-year-old guy from Oregon, USA who is trying to figure out life one step at a time. The desire to write has been passed down to him by his father, but it is only since graduating with a degree in journalism last year that Arthur has started to take his creative writing seriously. Words have always come easier to him than numbers; this has led him to work as an editorial writer for websites and a creative writer in advertising. Arthur enjoys music with a chill vibe and the best meal you could feed him would be a burger and a brew. He loves being outdoors and is always looking forward to his next adventure or road trip. Life is sweet and he hopes to one day survive on just his stories alone.

In this gritting event, the man will resolve his fate yet again.

A Push

By Arthur McMahon



A push and I'm falling. From where I stood a moment ago I could see the city in all of its glory; the twilight reflected glowing reds and oranges off the glass buildings, enlivening the skyline with dancing flames. Now I'm falling. All of that beauty and end-of-the-work-day satisfaction has disappeared. The warm lights have been replaced by the blackness of the street and the scum and dirt all around it.

I'm falling. It's taking so long. I catch my image on the reflective building as my bloated body tumbles through the air. My hat is gone and the thin hair on my head

reaches upward, upward in desperation at the ledge I left behind. The shock in my aging, round face is punctuated by the excessive white seen in my gaping eyes. I don't scream.

Sounds are different now. The noise of the city has muffled. At the forefront I hear the voices of my loved ones - my teenage son Curtis (he tells me that he'll be in the NHL someday), my beautiful wife Shelby (she hums that song she wrote for me when we married), and a couple of my close buddies just laugh with me like we were back sharing stories at the Big Apple sports bar. And the wind...the wind is loud.

The people below are getting closer; a few have become onlookers and one of the cabbies is rubbernecking to see what they're pointing at. The streets are brimming with men and women who are stuck in rush-hour traffic and just want to be home. There's nothing they can do: they just watch. I must look like a chubby, spiraling silhouette against the fiery sky. I should be down there with them; I should be going home.

Will I feel the pain? Of course, I'm feeling it now. My body is out of its element and doesn't know what to do. My muscles, my organs ache in anticipation of the cement below. I don't know what to do. I ask God for forgiveness, just in case that whole thing has been true all along. I wish I could call my family and tell them I love them just one more time, just one more time.

Nearer and nearer they come to me, and larger do their numbers grow. There are plenty of people watching me now. I'm sure one of them is taking pictures or video; this'll be all over the Internet by the end of the week. What am I worrying about that for? Never mind it.

The ground is close now, but I see the metal outcroppings that decorate the perimeter of the building at the 25th floor. Should I even try to grab them? I won't be able to hang on. I might just wind up impaling myself or bashing my head. Doesn't matter, it's my only chance. It probably only takes me a split-second to fall far enough, but there seems to be enough time to consider all the possible approaches. I stretch out my arms and grip my hands.

I'm not moving. My whole world goes haywire and my body is pumped full of adrenaline and pain and laughter in its confusion. My body was braced for impact with the solid ground and when I stopped moving it thought I had been pulverized into a pile of goop.

But I'm hanging from this wonderful decoration, this beautiful ornament. Thank God for the architect who made this aesthetic decision. My right hand is at my side, my left is up in the air. I'm not holding on to anything. My left arm is wedged between two not quite smooth, not quite sharp pieces of black metal. I can see that the arm is dislocated from my shoulder and has been shredded to ribbons. I'm dangling 25 stories up from nothing but my elbow joint and a few scraps of ligaments or tendons or whatever they are that haven't ripped yet.

Something feels wrong. Not pain, not yet. I can just feel my injuries. The blood trickles down my side at first, then it begins to flow. My white shirt and tan pants turn a dark red. I feel a similar sensation on my leg. My left thigh, just above the knee, is bleeding and broken. I didn't even know that my leg had hit anything, but it must have slowed me down just enough so that my arm didn't sever completely.

The pain, now I feel it. The sensation hits me like a kick in the nuts. All reservations of preserving my manliness are gone. I scream, and I scream loud. If you couldn't hear me from a mile away, even over the noise of city traffic, then you are

probably deaf. Dangling from bits of my body I never thought I would see; my blood pours like a waterfall off of my brown shoe to the ground below and I'm screaming like a goddamn banshee.

My body turns away from the street and towards the glass of the building that I hang from, that I scream from. I'm right up against the building now and can see inside. There are office desks and machines everywhere, and about two dozen people that just stare. A couple of them cover their faces and run away from the horrid view that is me. I see these people through my reflection; seeing what they see isn't pretty. My eyes are even wider than before, and now I'm screaming, staring at the people inside who just watch. They see a fucking maniac before they see a man in dire straits.

I scream loud and kick the glass because it feels right. I'm not even thinking about how all this movement might cause the rest of my arm to give way, I just kick and scream. A young man inside gets the right idea and picks up a chair, swinging it at the glass. He gives it a couple of good swipes before the chair breaks. Someone hands him a fire extinguisher and one smack with that does the job. The kid put a little too much effort into it and nearly falls out of the hole he made, dropping the fire extinguisher to the ground below. No one is standing on the pavement directly below and the metal can lands on top of an empty car and the car's alarm now adds to the maddening din of the city.

They pull the young man back and a couple of older guys begin clearing away the glass, making the hole big enough for a man my size to fit through cleanly. I'm still screaming, but I don't think as loud anymore, it's hard to tell. Inside they realize that they won't be able to just pull me inside with my arm the way it is, so they reach out and tie a couple of cords and wires around my torso and good leg. One of them, a balding man in an expensive suit, tries to make a tourniquet around my bleeding left thigh.

The dying screams turn to cries and a couple of tears squeak out, though I think most of my moisture is escaping with the blood. My mind starts to fade in and out. A wave of warmth and blackness washes over my head a couple of times. The pain pulses and dulls until a sharp, white feeling hits my forehead and I'm out.

I wake up in a white room with a bright white light. My eyes adjust themselves and try to focus for a good ten minutes. I'm all by myself. I try to feel around my body to make sure I'm actually here, but most of me is held down and casted up. I'm here alright!

A few minutes pass and a nurse walks by. She peeks in and expresses shock and joy to see that I'm awake; she must be new to the profession. She runs off to get the doctor. The doctor tells me all the medical stuff, how they had to cut off my arm to get me down and that they're doing everything they can to save my leg. I tell her that they can cut off whatever they want as long as I'm still here with my wife and kid.

I've been out for four days. She says that my wife and son have been here every day and are out right now getting dinner; they'll catch me up on the rest.

I rest.

I wake up to warm hands on my face: Shelby. I open my eyes and she smiles. I hear Curtis jump from his seat and he gives my good hand a strong squeeze. I'm still here.

****** THE END ******

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Interview with digital artist extraordinaire: Uwe Jarling

Interviewer: Ujjwal Dey, India

Artist being interviewed: Uwe Jarling, Germany

Date: 05-March-2009

Uwe Jarling is a professional digital artist and illustrator. His artwork is brilliant and beautiful, capturing moments of fantasy, action and fiction in great visionary detail. Uwe has some incredible digital paintings on his portfolio showcased on his website.

Born in 1968, he has a diploma in graphic design. He started focusing on 'Fantasy Art' since the year 2000, and the success is visible in his range and reach of work within this genre. Since 2003 he has almost exclusively painted digitally. He lives and works from a small village in South Germany.

Official website: <http://jarling-arts.com/>

DeviantArt profile: <http://jarling-art.deviantart.com/>

MySpace profile: http://www.myspace.com/jarling_arts

At the official website and the DeviantArt gallery, you can buy prints of his artwork on various media. So you could not just hang it in your room but have a coffee mug with his "Fleshcrawl Soulskinner" print waking you up when you goof around wearing a T-shirt with his "Destitute Warrior" print on it.

Apart from the many commercial and professional appearances on Book covers, CD covers (music artists/bands), DVD covers, Video Game illustrations, etc. Uwe Jarling's paintings have also been acclaimed in various magazines and books on art.



For all his talent and accomplishments, Uwe is humble, generous and very cordial.

Some of the publications that hailed his work:

- Exposé 6 (on international collection of digital art),
- Fantasy Art Now ("the very best in contemporary fantasy art & illustration"),

- ImagineFX (in the feature "100 new ways to paint" and previously in featured art, featured artist),
- "The Art Of H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos" (book on art inspired from Lovecraft's fictional Mythology),
- Exotique 2 (on "world's most beautiful CG characters"),
- Martin McKenna's Digital Horror Painting Workshop (in a tutorial),
- Exposé 4 ("a compilation of the finest digital art in the known universe"),
- The New Masters of Fantasy 3 (a collection of fantasy art), etc.

In the following interview, you can see samples of his finest digital paintings in between the question-answer session.

Ujjwal Dey (Dey): Hello Mr. Uwe Jarling and warm greetings from India.

Do tell us something about your latest project that you have completed.



Uwe Jarling (Uwe): Greetings Ujjwal, First off, please just call me Uwe :-), the whole world just calls me Uwe so you shouldn't make an exception :-).

The latest projects I completed have been some illustrations for Spiraldirect. They will be printed on tee-shirts or other cloths. Also, I just finished some collectible card illustrations for Fantasy Flight Games.

Right now I start sketches for an album cover for an English record-label; I think this is going to be much fun.

(<http://www.spiraldirect.com/>)

(<http://www.fantasyflightgames.com/>)

Dey: How many hours/ days due you spend on an artwork on average? How does it differ from special projects on high profile assignments/ requests?

Uwe: The time I spend on artwork always differs, depending on the job itself, whether it is a book-cover or an album cover or a more simple card art piece. But usually for a more or less complex work I need one to two weeks, sometimes it even can be more.

If it's a simple piece I sometimes just need one or two days. As said it always depends on the complexity of the artwork and not the least on the money I get for it ;-).

Dey: When did you start doing digital art professionally?

Uwe: Well, I started my professional illustration career in around 1990 or 1991. In this time I did my art the traditional way, you know using real paint on real paper or canvas. In 2000, I quit freelancing and took a job offer from an advertising agency where I still work as a graphic designer. This gave me the time and freedom to paint what I always wanted, fantasy art. I also discovered the computer as a really awesome painting tool (yes you really can paint on a computer). I experimented some time just for myself to get familiar with my new tool and in around 2003 I did the first commissioned illustration digitally. More and more people recognized my work and more and more commissions followed. This led to the situation I'm in now, I now have two jobs, my job in the ad-agency and at evenings and weekends I do my fantasy illustrations.

Dey: Is your main market the book/ CD/ DVD/ games illustration for companies or individual art collectors/ commissioned artwork? Whom do you prefer to do business with among the two groups?

Uwe: I seldom do private commissions for collectors; I usually just work for my own fun and do free paintings, if time allows it. But most of the time I work for companies, be it in the book-/ CD-/ DVD- and game industry.

Dey: Growing up did you ever envision yourself as a professional artist? What occupation did you, as a child, favoured?

Uwe: Now, I really always wanted to become an artist, as a child I read lots and lots of comics, I loved the drawings in the comic books.

I really never thought I ever will be that good some day to work for a comic publisher or do some book covers or something like that. But as said, I always wanted to do that someday so I

just worked on it and as you can see, sometimes your dreams of your childhood come true :-).
I'm really happy to be there where I'm now.

Dey: What is your preferred technology (application/software/hardware/art instruments) for creating your artwork?

Uwe: I always loved to experiment, even in the time I used traditional paint I always experimented with new techniques. Today working digitally, this has not changed, I love to experiment with as much tools as I can get my hands on. Currently I'm in love with ZBrush for example, an awesome 3d modeling tool. But for the jobs it still comes down to painting things, therefore I mainly use Painter and lately more and more Photoshop.

As for the hardware I really need my Wacom tablet (a pressure sensitive graphic tablet for computers). With the help of my Wacom I can paint on the computer the same way as I would paint with traditional color.



Dey: What tools did you use when you first attempted artwork (artwork could have been digital or canvas/paper in childhood or as an adult)?

Uwe: I started with normal traditional paint on paper.

Dey: Did you train professionally? If yes, with whom?

Uwe: Well I studied Graphic design and there we had some drawing courses. But the courses haven't been very useful, so most things are self taught. The rest came with the years and with the practice. I still need to learn so many things, but I think that's the exiting thing about my job, you are never finished, you have to learn new things every day, and this makes the whole thing that interesting and keeps you in the job so long. It just never gets boring.

Dey: How do you keep up with digital art market news and market changes? Is it difficult to keep up with changing preferences in style or technology?

Uwe: To be honest I just do my thing and don't care much about market changes and stuff.

As already said I still have a job as graphic designer which pays the bills, so I don't have much stress to be informed about every market change in the illustration industry. I only take the jobs I really want to do anyway ;-).

Dey: How would you suggest an amateur hone his/her craft? Is formal training/ apprenticeship necessary/ recommended?

Uwe: It definitely is recommended, try to get a really good art education and you have half of the bill. I didn't have a good art education, as said my art courses haven't been really good, but at least they taught me a few essential things like color theory and things like that, but didn't go really deep. So I had to learn most things myself, and that's definitely the hard and more complicated way. And it sure takes longer to come to a result.

So yes, try to get a GOOD art education and your start in the illustration industry will be much easier.

Dey: What do you do in your spare time for recreation? Any hobbies that you find relaxing?

Uwe: Honestly, I don't have spare time, but as painting is not only my job, it is my hobby I always have recreation when I paint ;-).

Maybe some day I will quit my job as a graphic designer and do my illustration business fulltime freelance again, than I will have more time for other things.

Right now I just need the money from both jobs, so spare time is something I just don't have. But that's not really a problem to me I love to work hard and long.



Dey: Obviously many people admire your skilled artwork. Have you considered hosting a "workshop" similar to how authors hold workshops for aspiring writers?

Uwe: Honestly I just don't think I'm a good teacher, I have to learn so much myself how could I teach other people?



Dey: Does animation attract you or do you prefer digital paintings only?

Uwe: I'm always blown away when I see computer animations and I sure would love to learn more about it, but currently I don't have the time to learn such complex things, so I think I'll stay with digital painting for a while ;-).

Dey: How useful do you find connecting to people through your MySpace and DeviantArt profiles?

Uwe: I think without those online communities and galleries, still no one would know me. I started to post in some galleries the time I started my digital paintings and I was impressed how much response I got. I have to say thank you to each and every community I participated.

I still try to upload new art in the galleries but sadly time to do so gets less and less. So I'm currently not really active in the online communities, hope that will change some day as I meet so many fabulous people there.

Dey: Are the deadlines given by your clients reasonable or do you believe you could do even better with a flexible deadline?

Uwe: Before I take a job I always see if I can hold the deadline. If I think I could get in trouble with the deadline I just don't take the job.

To hold the deadlines is most important! To get there and don't miss deadlines you really have to arrange your work schedule very, very carefully.

Dey: How important is a client's vision in your creative output?

Uwe: Well I'm an illustrator, so it's my job to bring the clients vision to life. But mostly the art descriptions are very vague and you bring lots of your own in every painting.

Dey: Is it difficult to be on call any day of the week or do you set your own working days/ holidays?

Uwe: As already said I love my work so it's no problem to me. Sometimes if the work just got too much and I'm really worked out, I just take a little break with commissions and soon I'm fit for service again.

Dey: Which is your favourite city/ village in the world from among the places you have been to? Why?

Uwe: To be honest I haven't been much around yet :-(. I was in England and France and that's about it. But we are often in Berlin as we have lots of relations there, and if I had to choose a city right now it probably would be Berlin. But well, I live in a little village in the south of Germany and I'm happy there as well :-).

Dey: Which artist do you most admire and why?

Uwe: I really can't answer this question as there are just too many and I sure would miss some. I don't just do art I love to see art from other artists as well and there are so many awesome artists out there it just wouldn't be fair to name just a few.

Dey: From the many wonderful artwork you have created, which is your favourite and why? (is it viewable on your website - <http://jarling-arts.com/> ?)

Uwe: Honestly I always like the one I'm working at the moment the most. Once an artwork is done it is done, I don't have any favorite piece.

Dey: Lastly, do you have any "words of wisdom" for aspiring digital artists of the world?

Uwe: You want to get rich without working much?
Don't become an artist!
You want to become an artist no matter how hard you have to work for your goal?
Go for it! You will succeed!



**** THE END ****

Images Copyright Uwe Jarling 2009
Text Copyright Ujjwal Dey 2009

* Check out the "Blog Section" of <http://freedomfriends.in/> for a step-by-step progress of a digital painting by Uwe Jarling.

Artwork Acknowledgements

Digital Art contributions by Uwe Jarling:

- ✓ OldManTrustyFriend.jpg on page 104
- ✓ Demonic_Evocation.jpg on page 106
- ✓ Destitute_Warrior.jpg on page 109
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