

FREEDOM FICTION JOURNAL

An eclectic mix of all flavours of genre fiction

Journal Issue 12; Volume 04
March 2012

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Editor's Note

Hello Freedom Friends,

Welcome to Twenty-Twelve! Hope all of you are seated 'cause we are blasting off this year's first issue. An awesome collection of fiction that takes you all around the globe and then into outer space too. Many new authors, many new adventures. This year's first is one issue to reckon with.

We open this edition with an "adults only" story. Why? Because it is easily the best of the lot. An amazing pulp story that will give you the jitters and make you rethink your opinions on relations and friendships. It's from an amazing new talent – author Nicomedes Austin Suárez. Other true pulp tales in here are from John Medaille, Steve Prusky and Jeff Poole. Real hardcore action and entertainment. Feel the filth of the urbane creep up on you. These new FFJ authors will take you to places that will change your view of the world. Give rise to emotions inside you that will make you shiver at your own mindset.

And that's just half the "story". Yeah! Science Fiction! Amazing spectacular adventures. We have a brilliant scifi tale from Anna Sykora. Casey Murphy and T.L. Bodine give us Superhero adventures. If you thought that was it, well it isn't. Who is Alan Dawson? Yes, the rural Sergeant Bert Dalton author is back with yet another investigation into local extraordinary crime. We even investigate the supernatural and not just through Sergeant Dalton, but also in a horror story by Monika Ragland.

So what are you waiting for, dig in. Be sure to check out our new look website. It has been a big upgrade since the last time you visited the site. We completely rebuilt the website on Feb 2012. There will be some dead links for your old bookmarks but all stories are saved and archived in free downloadable PDF formats at <http://freedomfiction.com/twisted-tales/>

Pulp To Grind Your Senses !!!

Best Wishes,

Ujjwal Dey

Editor for Issue 12, Vol 04.

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“Dangerous” by Nicomedes Austin Suárez

Editor’s Note: This fiction story contains adult content and is rated “for adults only”. It contains strong adult language and violence that may be unacceptable to some sensibilities and especially those under 18 years of age.

Synopsis: A pleasant neighbourly visit turns into a horrible living nightmare for a couple yet to discover the nature of crime and criminals.

About the Author: Nicomedes Austin Suarez is a writer spending time in the Third World. He lives with his peach of a wife, Erica, and their magical infant son, Bjorn.

In this psychological thriller, an ordinary sin turns into a terrible horror of violence, vengeance and lust.

Dangerous

By Nicomedes Austin Suárez



When they moved in we thought they were a more or less normal couple, a little unusual maybe because she was a black chick and he was a white guy, but they were young, and that was cool. I remember we felt good about having a mixed couple as neighbors. We were just a couple of working class white kids scraping our way up, getting into open-mindedness and all that shit, and it made us feel good. My dad, he died years ago, he used to say, people should stick to their own kind, and I always hated him for saying shit like that, so I guess when the mixed couple moved in I thought, well all right, here's my chance to prove I'm nothing like the old man, good riddance to the son of a bitch.

And it wasn't hard to like the two of them, not at first. The black chick, Siena, was really pretty, cut-angled face, great hair, a million of those tight little braids that look like beads, a flat belly, slender hips, and she moved fast and slow like a housecat. And the guy, Frank, he had a good look too, kind of rednecky, but in a tasteful, country way.

The house Maura and me were living in back then was one of those old New England farmhouse things, with the uneven wooden floors, but not in bad shape. At some point someone had cut it in half to make two, independent, two-story apartments with a shared wall and a shared front porch. The other thing the two houses shared, for sure, was noise. From our bedroom upstairs we could hear most of what was going on in the upstairs bedroom of the other place, and vice-verca, I guess.

One night a few days after the couple moved in someone knocked on our door. It was kind of late, maybe around eleven, but we were still in school back then, and I was working the bar at the Mexican place, so we were still up, but not dressed, and Maura said she'd go downstairs and and

see who it was. I was sitting up, reading, and I listened to the voices, Maura's, nasal, pinched, Jewish -- I could picture my girlfriend, the prominent nose, in the black pants and shirt I knew she wore because it made her feel less bad about her straight-up-and-down figure -- and the other voice, smooth, easy, almost like a person singing, and I sat up more because I knew the voice, it would come to me, and it did. It was the voice of the black chick, the pretty one. Earlier in the day, coming back from class, I'd met her.

She was waiting on the porch for her boyfriend to come back with the truck, she said, there was still another load. And I asked her if it was far away they were moving from, and she said, sort of, about an hour away, and I thought to ask why they didn't rent a bigger truck, but didn't. Afterwards, through the door, I cursed myself for not asking her that simple question. The reason I'd stopped short, I thought, was because of something else my old man used to say about minding your own business so other people won't mind yours. So I went back out on the porch and the black chick, Siena, was still there, still pretty in cutoff jean shorts, frayed and short enough to show the curve of her ass if you had a mind to look, and I asked her the question and all at once I wished I hadn't. There was this weird look in her eyes, a startled look, a quick hard squint that almost pushed me back through the door. But then she smiled easily and said, in her nice smooth voice, yeah, we've been having some money troubles so we couldn't afford to rent a truck, but it's cool because we borrowed Frank's brother's pickup, just going to take a little longer, that's all. I knew I was sweating like an idiot and blushing probably too when I said, well, if there's anything we can do to help, and the chick said, "Would you mind lending me ten bucks? I saw this cool looking pizza joint on the corner and Frank, he was all hurried and shit, he forgot to leave me money." I was so relieved, basically, I said, "I'll do you one better, I haven't eaten lunch either so what if the two of us walk over and it's my treat. Would that be cool?" And she put her thin, smooth, brown arm through mine and smiled and said, "Well aren't you a sweet thing?" And right then, heading off for the place on the corner, I started thinking to ask her why Frank had left her if he had to be gone for that long. But I didn't. I don't know if it would have made any difference, but it might have.

The funny thing was, the thing that made me sit up real straight in bed when I heard Siena at the door, was that somehow it had escaped my mind to tell Maura about my lunch. I kept meaning to, you know, but then something else would come up and I would forget about it, and that happened long enough that I ended up feeling that too much time had gone by for me to bring it up without it seeming like a big deal, like I had some reason for not mentioning it, which of course totally wasn't true. Have you ever had that happen? Sure, who hasn't?

So there I was, kind of holding my breath, pretending to read, when Maura came back in and said, hey, the neighbors want to know if we'd like to come over for a drink.

I put the book down, real calm, real patiently, like I was being interrupted in a really good part, and said, "What? Now?"

Maura looked at me funny and said, "Yeah, *now*. Jesus, John, it's eleven-thirty, not three in the morning. You want me to get you a pair of white shoes and a little golf cap?"

I can't stand it when someone calls me out -- another thing my old man always said would get me in trouble -- so I got out of bed and started dressing before she could say anything else. Dressed now, I said: "You know I'm a white man." This was an ongoing joke we had. I'd read this book that took place in America in the 60s and in the book everybody in the world could be divided up into two kinds of people.

Still looking at me funny, Maura said, "Oh, good, because I was starting to think you were a weak sister."

"Fuck you."

"Jesus, John. What's the matter with you?"

It had come out harsher than I meant. Then again, I didn't even really mean to say it. I don't know why I was mad at her, or if I was mad at her, but I was. I felt like breaking something, nothing big, just a picture frame or something, like in the movies. But then I thought, this is stupid, calm down, so I kissed her and said:

"Jesus, hon. I'm sorry. I'm just a cranky old man."

She smiled and put her arms around me, her sharp hips jabbing me in the pelvis. "But you're my cranky old man, and I love you."

"I love you too."

"Now let's go be nice and neighborly for a change."

"Yeah, sure, why not."

Heading downstairs, I thought again of mentioning my lunch with Siena, but didn't. We were just out the door so fast, you know? But man, if I could do it again.

We'd never been next door since we started living there. The neighbors before had been really weird. I think they were goth, or whatever. But they were fine and never had parties or made any real noise. You know how it is when you've got a dividing wall between you and somebody else's life. There's overlap, right?

It was the guy, Frank, who opened the door. He was a big guy, I can't remember if I mentioned that, but he was. Not just tall, but thick, the kind of guy you see at the supermarket holding a twelve-pack in one hand like it's a bag of popcorn. He had these big, thick forearms, like you get from working construction -- that's what he did -- but also the kind you've got to be born with. I remember watching him make drinks and feeling mild awe. He just squeezed the limes one at a time in his hands like it was nothing, like they were cooked plums. When he was done, they were nothing but limp peels, little bits of dry pulp sticking to his hands. And he had this tattoo from time in the Navy.

But I'm kind of jumping around. What was I saying? Right, so he opened the door, there was music on behind him -- some kind of rap, real aggressive, pretty loud -- and he was smiling. He shook my hand, kind of crushing it, his eyes never leaving Maura, and then, instead of shaking her hand like I thought he would, he just leaned in and kissed her, not on the mouth, but close -- that place right between your cheek and your lips where your grandmother kisses you and it makes you kind of squirm? -- and she laughed and took a little step back and I laughed too not knowing what else to do but having a warm, not pleasant feeling spreading up from my stomach to my head. And he was looking at me now, laughing real easy, a baseball hat on backwards and to one side a little, and I couldn't be sure, maybe I didn't want to be, but I know now, with no doubt that what he meant was, watcha' gonna do about it, bitch? But what he said was:

"Shit, I'm sorry. We been having a couple drinks. Don't know what I was thinking," he said, and stood aside, unblocking the doorway, letting us know we should come in, and we did. He took us into the living room that looked just like our living room in reverse, and we sat down on a big, black

leather couch, the kind that's got like a thousand rivets in the cushions? The place was actually pretty nicely decorated. I remember thinking, you've got to be a pretty alright kind of guy to live in a place that's this nice. Of course now I know why it was they had a lot more nice shit than we did. But anyway, we sat down, Maura and me on the couch and him on a leather chair -- I think you'd call it a wing chair. I remember he didn't offer to give us the usual grand tour of his place, which seemed a little weird, but what are you going to say? We just sat there looking dumb, I guess. We could hear Siena moving around in the kitchen.

"Hey, hon," Frank said, kind of pretending to shout it, "why don't you come in here with Maura while me and Jim make some drinks?"

"It's John," I said.

"What's that?"

"It's John, not Jim."

"What did I say?"

"You said Jim."

"I don't think I did."

It was weird, that moment, because I remember feeling like I was watching myself, trying to stop, but not being able to. I thought of this time when I was eight. Our neighbor back then was one of those sweet guys who puts a chain link fence around his yard and lets a rottweiler run around all day, barking its damn head off. I was terrified of that stupid dog, so what I liked to do, when no one was watching, was go over to the gate on the street side and put my fingers up to that nasty snarling face, the dog frothing and throwing itself against the chainlink, being sure to keep just out of range. This one time, when I was doing that, I noticed that the gate's hinges were coming off, the little screws slipping out. The weird thing was, I kept on fucking with the dog, watching the door coming off a little more every time he lunged. The gate didn't pop, but I wonder what I would have done if it had.

Frank was looking at me now, his head cocked to one side, waiting for me to say something. I was relieved when Maura said:

"You did say Jim."

Frank looked at her for a second, real still, and then smiled, shrugged it off. "Truth is, when I drink I actually have no idea what I'm doing."

The three of us laughed and it felt like a charge went out of the air.

"I know what you mean, man," I said.

He stopped laughing. "Do you?"

"I'm sorry?" I said.

"Why're you sorry?"

"I meant I didn't understand."

He smiled, got up, put a big hand on my shoulder. "I'm just fucking with you. Let's go make some drinks and let the ladies chat about lady shit."

Siena walked in and said hi. She was wearing the same mini she had on when we went to lunch, and when she sat down on the wood floor and crossed her legs, Indian style, the little thing slid up her thighs and her panties flashed. They were lacy, pink, and I could make out the shape of her lips through the thin material. I tried to look away in time, but couldn't. I had the feeling that Frank was noticing me seeing, and when I looked up, I saw I was right.

"Come on, Johnny," he said, and I followed him through two doors and into the kitchen, not once seriously considering telling him I hated being called Johnny. It's what my old man used to call me when he really wanted to piss me off.

"You dig on daiquiris?" Frank said, leaning over a marble counter now, cutting limes in half with a huge knife, the kind you see on *Iron Chef* that looks more like a damn samurai sword.

"Yeah, sure."

Their bar was really well stocked. While Frank made the drinks I leaned against a counter and admired the unbelievable tequilas. I knew from my years behind the bar at the Mexican joint that three of the ten or so tequilas went for over two hundred bucks a pop. Same for the scotches, though I'm not such an expert there. One bottle in particular, though, caught my attention.

"Holy shit," I said, picking it up, turning it, checking out the way it glowed amber in the low light. "Is this what I think it is?"

Frank looked up. "You know it."

"Man, I have never even *seen* this shit in person."

He was squeezing the limes into a pitcher now. "Help yourself."

The seal wasn't broken. I put the bottle down. "No way. This bottle's worth, like, four hundred bucks." I did the math. A shot would run about seventy bucks anywhere that would actually stock it.

Frank reached over and took the bottle out of my hands, cut off the seal, popped the cork top, and poured a double into a highball. Then he handed it to me.

"Jesus, I don't know what to say."

He smiled, wiping sweat from his brow with his knife hand. "It's all about being a good neighbor."

"Thanks."

"Go ahead and try it."

I did. "Christ, Mary, Jesus, and Joseph."

"That's the real shit." He was pouring rum onto the ice now, mixing it with a wooden dowel.

Something occurred to me, something I read, or maybe a friend told me about it, I can't remember. "I thought you couldn't even get this stuff in the States."

"Normally, you can't."

Looking at the bar again, I did a rough calculation. I put the total worth between seven and ten grand. That sounds like bull, I know, but I'm serious. My old man was a betting junkie and I practically spent my childhood in an OTB. Seven to ten. It didn't gel. I reckoned they were paying the same rent we were since the landlord owned the whole building. Who the hell lives in a \$700 a month pad and stocks a ten grand bar?

"So, then how did you get it?"

Glasses and pitcher in hand, Frank said, "All about who you know."

"I guess."

I started to follow him back into the living room when he turned to face me again. "Say, what do you reckon the value of a human being is?"

"I don't know. Is this some kind of philosophical thing?"

"Not at all. Everything's got financial worth, even people."

He didn't say anything else, just stood there, so I said, "You mean, how much to buy a person?"

"Yeah."

"I guess it depends on what you want them for. Do you mean, like, a hooker?"

"That's one way to buy a person."

"But not all people are hookers." This was, without any doubt, one of the weirdest fucking conversations I've ever had, in a hallway or anyplace else.

"Don't be fucking *naive*, Johnny. Everyone has a price. But what I really meant was, what do you reckon is the value of a human life?"

"Jesus, Frank. Who can say?"

"Could you say it was more than the value of the scotch in your glass?"

"Well, of course."

"See? Now you're getting there." He walked away and I was obliged to follow.

We found the girls having a nice time in the relaxed kind of way that's typical of girls, the two of them sitting on the floor, at the coffee table. Maura was talking when we walked in, her hands coming out in the sharp little jabs she uses when she's excited about something, and Siena was chilling, sitting back against the foot of the couch and looking at Maura calmly, one elbow propped

up. The contrast between the two girls was more apparent than ever: Siena, calm, hard-bodied in a full way, and Maura, awkward, gangly, thin, but not trim. Despite my best efforts, I could feel a fresh wave of shame spreading over me, not for my own sake, this time, but for Maura. I was totally aware from the first second I met Frank of my inadequacy compared to him; how could Maura not be aware of her's? Or maybe she was aware, and just over-acting to compensate.

I sat down and she looked at me, our eyes met, and I had the feeling it was the latter. And there was something else in her eyes, a kind of raw panic I'd never seen there before, or maybe it was just me putting my shit on her. Of course, I'll never know the answer now.

Siena got up and moved to sit on the wing chair Maura was sitting in front of, her feet almost resting on Maura's hips, straddling her from behind. "Maura was just telling me how much she likes my braids," she said. "And I told her that if she wants, I'd be happy to do her hair the same way."

"It would look silly," Maura said. "I mean, it looks great on you, but I don't think I could pull it off."

Siena took hold of Maura's hair, a little too hard I thought, and Maura must have too, because she flinched. "Let me show you." To me, she said, "As long as you don't mind, John."

I started to say something, I don't even know what it was going to be, but Frank cut me off.

"Go ahead," he said, lying down on the couch, spreading out, leaving me nowhere to sit but the floor. "It'll look hot."

Siena took a hold of Maura's lank, black hair.

Maura said, "John, do you mind?"

I could feel Frank looking at me. "He doesn't mind, do you John?"

It was just like being a ventriloquist's dummy. I said, "I don't mind."

Siena hummed a tune while she braided, something jazzy that I couldn't quite place. Frank looked at the ceiling, sipped his drink, and pretty much acted like he was alone. Sitting on the floor now, my lips started to feel numb, which happens when I drink, and happens faster than it should, I guess. I've always been a cheap drunk.

Then, after a while, Frank was humming along with his girlfriend, the two of them harmonizing, and Maura just sat there, looking straight ahead, having her hair done, the roots straining, and it made her look surprised, like a kid who's just touched a garden snake with her bare foot.

I bolted my drink, forgetting completely what it was. The whole scene was really freaking me out. I remember perfectly, I had this thought, an actual voice in my head talking. It said: Run. Just run like hell. Get up, run to the door, run out the door, and keep running. I didn't, though, I just sat there.

&&&

So me and Siena walked to the place on the corner, the pizza joint that's been there for, like, thirty years, or whatever. We walked there all arm in arm like we were old buddies, and I thought, man, this is weird, but I thought it was nice, too, this cool ass black chick with a killer body cozying up to

me. I read once that if a girl initiates physical contact, it means she likes you, and I guess I liked the idea that maybe a chick like Siena might like me. Look, I'm not an idiot, I know girls do all kinds of shit just to get attention and it doesn't really mean anything and you can't read too much into it, or whatever. But still, it was cool to pretend for just a little bit that what I read in that article was gospel, that Siena dug me. What's it like to be with a girl like that, you know?

So we got to the place and sat in a booth. The place is called *Jim's Pizza* and it's one of those places where the walls are so old you can't tell if they're dirty or not, and the booths are red and comfy, and the food's not bad and not good, but it's cheap and comes out hot.

Also, old Jim's got a good bar for a divey place. Siena picked up on that right away. First thing she did when the hostess sat us was to order a daiquiri.

"Fresh, limes, none of that shitty mix stuff. You got Mount Gay?" she said. They did and she was pleased. "What are you having, John?"

"It's a little early for me."

She put a hand on my arm and got this real earnest look. "Gee, I'm sorry, I didn't know you were gay. That must be hard."

I laughed, looking at her hand on my arm. "All right, all right. I'll have a Rusty Nail." I knew that was an old man drink, not gay at all, and she seemed to know it too, because she sat back with her elbows on the booth, her tits pushed out -- on purpose, it seemed to me -- and nodded approvingly.

We chatted about bullshit for a while, you know, the usual stuff you use to fill in the gaps when you don't know someone real well, where did you grow up, are you in school, and all that. I told her I grew up in New York State, in a little town nobody's ever heard of, and she said she grew up in Detroit. I said I was finishing my degree at UMass in Hotel and Restaurant Management and she ordered another drink and made me feel like a total pussy again so I ordered a Jack on the rocks even though I was already really feeling kind of buzzed.

After the food arrived, we had our first really awkward moment. I asked her why she and her boyfriend decided to move from their last place and she shrugged and said: "Oh, the usual reasons."

I used a paper napkin to mop some of the serious grease off a slice and she watched me with a little smirk that made me feel like a pussy all over again. What can I say? The men in my family have a problem with fucking cholesterol. My old man kicked it at fifty-seven, one more shitty move of his I'd sure as shit like to avoid. When I looked up she glanced away, like she was all of a sudden really interested in the retired jukebox in the corner. Some part of me knew I shouldn't press her, everything about her body language was saying no, but I was a little buzzed, like I said, and I wanted to get back at her for making me feel like a little girl, so I said, all innocent: "No, I don't know. What *are* the usual reasons for moving? I mean, it's the middle of the month, so it's kind of weird. Most people move on the first, unless they've got a good reason."

She looked right at me and I was sorry for pushing. "Well, maybe we had a good fucking reason," she said.

Just like that, emphasis on *fucking*, cold as ice. I didn't know what to say, and she didn't say anything either, she just sat there in the booth looking at me like she could rip my fucking head off

and then have another drink, maybe order dessert. I got real interested in my food, you know? Finally, I couldn't take it anymore, her staring at me with that look on her pretty face, so I said, "Sorry, I guess I'm kind of buzzed. It's not any of my business." And right then I thought of my goddamn old man saying, mind your own business.

Siena smiled, relaxed again, like it had never happened. "Don't worry about it. It's no big thing, just kind of embarrassing."

I downed the rest of my drink, not feeling even slightly buzzed anymore. "I'm really sorry. Let's just start over, okay?"

She glanced around like she didn't want anyone else to hear, then leaned forward on her elbows so her face was just about right up against mine -- Jim's got these small-ass, ghetto booths -- and said, "Look, you just caught me off guard. I don't mind telling you about it, I just don't want to do it here where somebody could hear us."

I looked around. We were the only people in the place. Our waiter had been MIA for about ten minutes, probably playing cards or *Scrabble* in back, a slow weekday lunch and all.

Still leaning forward, Siena said, "I can tell you, but I have to tell you in the bathroom."

I was sure I hadn't heard right. "In the bathroom?"

"Yeah," she said, and she slid out of the booth, taking my hand as she rose.

&&&

Siena braided Maura's hair while Frank chilled on the couch, looking at the ceiling, sipping his drink from time to time, setting it on a little silver coaster on the floor between pulls. At one point he went to the kitchen for a refill. He didn't ask me if I wanted another drink and I didn't ask for one. Siena went on humming the little jazzy tune I couldn't place and I sat there, pretending there was a little scotch left in my glass.

"You're really good at this," Maura said. Siena was really quick, dexterous, her nice hands gliding through Maura's hair, twisting, moving, folding. It was kind of hypnotizing. She didn't braid Maura's whole head, but in a few minutes she had one side done. Frank sat up, put his hands on his knees, leaned forward.

"See, now that looks nice," he said.

There was a full length mirror on the wall. Maura rose and walked over to it. She stood face on, then turned so she could see the side of her head with the rows of tight little braids.

"Wow. I didn't think I'd like it. It actually looks totally cool."

"I can do the rest if you want," Siena said.

"I would," Maura said.

Frank put a hand on his girlfriend's shoulder. To Maura he said, "Now hang on a second. That seems like an awfully nice thing to do for a girl, braiding her hair and all."

Maura sat down in front of Siena. Now she looked at Frank. "I don't understand."

"What I mean is," he said, leaning back, putting his hands behind his head, his arms bulging, "what are you gonna do for us?"

Maura laughed. She was a little tipsy. "I can do a pretty good impression of Diane Keaton. Anyway, people say it's pretty good."

"Not what I had in mind," Frank said.

Maura's face changed. I felt frozen, unable to do a damn thing, like I was watching a horror flick, tied to a chair or something, like at the end of *A Clockwork Orange*. In a little voice Maura said, "What do you mean?"

Frank said, "Kind of thing you might see happen when a guy and a girl go to lunch all by their lonesome."

&&&

I stumbled a little on the way to the bathroom. It felt like I was falling, like I had no choice. All I could do was take in the scenery during the plunge. And also, I was pretty drunk, you know? But that's bullshit. There's no point in lying anymore, if there ever was. I mean, look where lies get you, right? The truth is I wanted whatever it was that hot black chick was offering, and I didn't give a shit what that might mean after.

The bathrooms at Jim's are in a little hallway. I think the restaurant probably used to be a house, because the men's room looks like the kind of bathroom you'd see in a house, a little room, just a toilet, a sink, no stalls, no urinal. And a lock on the door.

Siena pulled me by the hand into the men's and locked the door behind her. She did it like people do it in the movies, with two hands behind her back, and a look on her face that was all innocent, like, *oops*.

"What did you want to tell me?" I said, feeling like an idiot.

"I didn't really want to tell you anything," she said, smiling.

Now she was taking off her shirt, her flat, brown belly flashing in the flickering fluorescent light. Her bra was purple, lacy. It pushed her breasts up and out. I felt dizzy, dry-mouthed. I had a flash of Maura undressing, the jutting little points of her lower ribs, her small, flat breasts. I pushed the image away.

"But, why me?" I said. My tongue felt thick.

She slipped off the bra, then the shorts, the purple lacey underwear. "I'm really horny," she said. "I get really horny when I drink, especially during the day."

I'd never seen a black pussy before, except in porn. It was shaved clean, the lips glistening with wetness. And the lips were thick, much thicker than Maura's.

"Jesus H. Christ," I said. I was having trouble focusing. "I hope you like chubby guys."

She stood right in front of me now, her face tilted up, her dark nipples brushing the fabric of my shirt, and touched the front of my pants with one hand. "I'm sure you're not all soft."

&&&

Maura looked at me, her head cocked. "What's he talking about?"

I stood up on wobbly legs. "Hon, I think we should go now. It's late, and I've got class first thing."

"No," she said, "I want to know what's going on."

"Nothing's going on just now," Frank said. "It's about what went on earlier on."

"*What* is he talking about?"

Her voice broke, just a little, but I knew she knew. She's always had this amazing intuition, it was practically fucking mystical, you know?

"We need to talk," I said. "But let's not do it here. Let's go home."

She shook her head. "Tell me right now."

I tried to talk, but my mouth wouldn't move.

Frank said, "I'll tell you, girlie, if you really want to know."

"Tell me, god damn it."

Frank smiled, shrugged. "But there's a price for knowing."

"Tell me."

"Don't you wanna know the price?"

"Shut the fuck up. Just tell me what the fuck is going on."

"Have it your way." He pointed at me. "Your boy there went and had lunch with my girlfriend this afternoon."

To me, Maura said, "You did? Why didn't you tell me?"

I tried to speak, but again, no words came out.

Frank said, "He didn't tell you because he fucked my girl in the bathroom."

Maura just looked at me. "What is he saying?"

"Let's just leave. We should leave right now. We can talk about this later."

She stood up. She was yelling now. "No, damn you, John, you're going to tell me right now if this is true."

I could feel the sweat running down the back of my neck. I felt sick. "Let's leave. I'll tell you anything you want, but let's go."

"Tell me!"

I think the neighbors across the street must have heard her that time. If only somebody had called the cops, you know? I said, "It's true."

"Jesus Christ," she said, and sat back down on the ground in front of Siena.

Frank stood up, his arms raised like a Baptist preacher or whatever, and yelled, "And the truth shall set you free!"

It was such a damn cliché it would have been funny if I could have laughed. But I knew right then that Maura wasn't going to leave, not even if she wanted to. And then I remembered something else my old man used to say. He would say, when it comes down to it, you've gotta look out for number one. I always thought he was a selfish piece of shit, and he sure proved that a number of times, but maybe he was also right in a way, you know?

To Maura, Frank said. "You ready to pay up?"

Maura looked shocked, hunched down on the ground, her hands lying limp at her sides. Finally, she said, "What?"

"It's time to pay up, girlie."

Still looking straight ahead, she said, "I think I just want to leave."

Frank smiled at Siena. "I'm afraid that's not going to happen."

Now Maura looked at Frank, realizing the thing I'd known for a few minutes. "What do you mean?"

"Open your mouth," Siena said, and Maura just about jumped out of her skin. It was the first time in minutes that Siena had said anything. Maura knew then that this wasn't just some shit that a drunk redneck dude was trying to pull, but that both of them, Frank and Siena, were like a two-headed snake that had been coiling itself around us all night.

"Open your damn mouth," Frank said, fidgeting with his belt.

"No," Maura said, but only a whisper came out.

Siena took her by the hair with one hand. I moved forward to do something, I have no idea what, since Frank could have swatted me away like a fucking insect, but quick like a damn cat Siena had a gun in her free hand and she was pointing it at me. It must have been in the seat cushion. The things you wish you'd known, know what I mean? With the gun on me and a nasty little smile on her face, she said, "Bet you're not too hard now, John."

"Jesus, Frank, come on," I said.

"Shut the fuck up," Frank said. To Maura he said, "Open your mouth or I'll have my girl shoot your boy in the nuts."

Siena lowered her gun, pointing it at my crotch. She pulled Maura's hair, hard this time. "Do it, you little bitch."

Maura was crying. I'm pretty sure I was too. Frank reached into his zipper and pulled out his dick and stuck in Maura's mouth. He fucked her face, hard. Her eyes bulged, looking at me, terrified, not understanding, while he blew his load.

"What the fuck," I said. "What the fuck." I sat down on the floor.

The next part I think I knew was coming, but until it did, I was trying to believe I was wrong. I'm sorry, it's just really hard to talk about, you know? Jesus. You know what happens next, I'm sure you read it in the papers.

I thought Frank was putting his belt back on, but instead he pulled something off the belt. I saw the gleam of the steel and knew what it was. The police report says it was a four-inch buck knife. That sounds about right. Well, he took the knife and jammed it straight into Maura's throat. It was horrible. I've only ever seen that kind of thing in the movies, and I always thought that the blood spray and all that shit was totally exaggerated, but that's about what happens when you slice an artery, it just lets loose like water bursting through a dam. There was blood everywhere. I like to think that Maura was dead before she hit the ground, but I know better. You know, I can still hear her gasping for air, every fucking night, in my nightmares.

And in my nightmares I remember the look on their faces, Siena's and Frank's. Siena was totally covered in blood. Her teeth shone extra white in all the red. They just looked so fucking pleased with themselves, the sick motherfuckers. Frank was looking at me, and I don't know if you can *swagger* when you're just standing still, but if you can, then that's what he was doing. I think I screamed something as I ran at him, but I'm not really sure, the screaming could have just been in my head.

I never got to him, never made it further than the coffee table, because Siena shot me, twice from where she was sitting. Once in the head, you can feel the scar where the bullet went in. The ER doc said it was a fucking miracle I lived. I'll tell you what the damn miracle is: how much the headaches still hurt, two years later. The second bullet went right through me and stuck in my spine, and you know what? I'm glad. If I wasn't at least stuck in this fucking chair the rest of my life, I'm pretty sure I would have killed myself.

The whole thing's so fucked, right? You've got to be thankful for small things. I've always hated not knowing certain things, like the answer to a riddle, or whatever. I did find out where that son of a bitch got his liquor. According to the cops, and the stories that came out after, those fuckers used to live in the city and they were neighbors with this guy who imported rare liquors. The cops found the guy stabbed and shot in his apartment, his girlfriend too. It's horrible, you know, but it feels kind of good to tie up the loose ends. It's something, anyway.

Sometimes, at night, when I can't sleep, I sit in bed and remember Maura. I don't even know anymore if I was in love with her. I don't really know what happened, or what it means. My shrink -- boy, my old man would have a fit if he knew I was seeing a shrink -- tells me that I shouldn't look for meaning in it, that some stuff just happens. What's the old bumper sticker say? *Shit happens*. Just don't let it happen to you. What the fuck. But I'll tell you one thing it all means, and it makes me sick to my stomach every time I think of it: my old man was right about just about every damn thing.

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

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“The Flight of the Medusa” by Anna Sykora

Synopsis: In space, your spaceship is your best friend, especially if you are the sole soul onboard.

About the Author: Anna Sykora has been an attorney in New York and teacher of English in Germany, where she resides with her patient husband and three enormous cats. To date she has placed 101 stories in the small press or on the web, and 197 poems. Writing is her joy...

In this SciFi thriller, a woman fights dark evil in the deep darkness of space.

The Flight of the Medusa

By Anna Sykora



Sleek and black like a huge, wet beast under the floodlights, the Medusa filled the Veracruz Space Station's largest bay. Ava's heart beat harder as she stepped towards the freighter, boot heels ringing on the steel-plate floor. *Ready for another passage through the rings? Mother, you won't believe our cargo.*

The young woman stepped onto a platform that raised her smoothly to the open hatch. When she waved to the yellow bots below they rolled away in single file. Stepping inside the softly-lit pilot pod, she checked its glowing, concentric circles and leaned back into the full-body interface, whose mesh rose to fit her like a skin.

"Good morning, Ava." Speaking from the nearest of a hundred ports, the Medusa's built-in bot sounded husky, like an old-fashioned smoker from Terra.

"Hi, Mother. Are we ready?"

"Sure. Why are we so heavy, dear? Doesn't feel like a load of protein bars."

"Our cargo today is classified. I can't tell you what it is till we reach Alhambra."

"Oh a secret. I love secrets."

With her foot Ava opened a channel: "Veracruz 1, we're ready for flight." A green light pulsed above the bay's outer doors, which started sliding open. Ava took a deep breath, willing her muscles to relax... With Mother's help she'd make this passage. Fingertips quivering, mind serene, she shut her eyes and reached for the ignition—

A siren shrilled outside: launch interrupted. *Why?* Steel gates quivered shut on starry space.

"Hey, Erwin, what's the problem?"

“You’ve got a last-minute passenger for Alhambra, Ava: a VIP.”

“Great. President Pond’s planet-trotting nephew?”

“No, Ambassador Troll.”

She groaned. “You know I can’t handle protocol.”

“Just get him safely to the capital. He’s negotiating with the Luddite fanatics, who took 100 hostages. I’m sending him aboard with his bot assistants.”

“But we’re not configured for passengers. They’ll have to sit in the bio-pod.”

“He knows and it doesn’t matter, Ava. Please try to hold your famous temper.”

“OK,” she said glumly. “I’m opening hatch 3.”

After ten minutes she got fresh approval to launch, and smiled as the gates slid open on the clean blackness of outer space, lit by near planets like swirl-patterned jewels. The Medusa’s engines rumbled and roared, and away the big ship bounded like a predator chasing prey.

Pressed back into the full-body interface, Ava felt like a goddess on a magic steed; she felt ready to face the universe, even the Rings of Stone, whose unpredictable asteroid collisions had killed 40 pilots of the fleet--men who flew by logic alone. Their mile-high obelisk towered next to the Congress Palace in the heart of Alhambra City...

Already Veracruz Station looked like a minor moon circling tawny Steinmetz. The mining planet’s surface, almost waterless, looked drab beneath pale swirls of clouds. Its precious ores sustained the Union, though, which had long since abandoned paper money...

Ava touched open the channel to Mother again and left it open: “Confirm: 32 minutes till we enter the first ring?”

“That’s correct. Time for a courtesy call on our passengers.”

“Well please scan the web for Ambassador Troll. Why did the Union choose him to talk to the Luddites, who want to turn us all back into drudging farmers?”

“A universal scan will take me 20 minutes.”

“You can report when I get back.”

&&&

Down in the bio-pod, Troll’s bots flanked him like guards, twin golden frameworks with eye-buds on jointed, silver stems. The ambassador, wearing long, purple robes, reclined on a mobile passenger berth, his face concealed by a golden mask, his small eyes green as bile. His thin lips twitched when Ava introduced herself, and he didn’t stand up.

She felt a shudder down her spine. His mean mouth reminded her of somebody. *Who?*

"Pilot Steele, I trust that conditions look good for our passage through the Rings today."

Why did his voice sound so familiar? "I'm not concerned, Ambassador. I've been making this crossing for almost two years."

"You're supposed to be one of our fastest pilots."

"I've trained hard to reach my astro-rating."

"I see you grew up on Steinmetz though. You've got that physique: short and thick."

Yes, she'd grown up battling the mining planet's gravity. She'd never have the grace of a native Alhambran. "The Fleet chose me from an orphanage on Steinmetz when I was six."

"Who was your trainer?" Troll asked abruptly.

"Ray Nero," she said bitterly. "Maybe you've heard of the man: a great pilot, later a traitor to the Fleet." Troll chuckled unpleasantly, and his gold-plated bots made tut-tut noises. "Please excuse my plain speech. I need to get back to the pilot pod. If you'd like anything to make your trip pleasant, please ask our shipbot, Mother, using any of her ports. We stock a full range of pharmaceuticals." Ava pointed at a white wall cabinet adorned with a red cross.

"Thank you." Troll's thin lips twitched. "But I'd rather stay sober on this flight."

"As you wish." She spun on her heel and stalked away, feeling his green gaze probe her back.

&&&

Halfway up to the flight deck, she doubled over breathless; her head felt squeezed in a giant vice. A harsh voice warned, "Pay attention, girl--or I'll make you wish you still lived in a public hut on Steinmetz." *Ray Nero's voice?*

Gasping, Ava clutched at a bulkhead's grip, and the awful pain passed like a dream. *How could this happen?* She stumbled forwards. She'd just passed her annual medical exam in perfect health, the doctors said.

Reaching the pilot pod, she sank back into the interface, trembling. Entry to the first ring, minus 12 minutes... She needed to prepare herself; Mother's report on Troll would have to wait.

Already in her mind Ava saw a 3D image of this sector of the first ring. The bald stones hurtled themselves at each other, smashing with the force of ancient wars. No computer, working alone, could figure the trajectories of wreckage spewed by these collisions, and that's where her long-practiced art came in: the art to which she'd devoted her life.

Passage through the rings was like a dance of life and death, with partners ranging in size from tall buildings to dwarf worlds. You had to anticipate their every move, and then glide the Medusa safely away; you couldn't cramp up, which would slow your responses, risking your ship, your cargo, your life.

Suddenly Ava felt a qualm, as if she were a raw trainee again. The concentric circles of the indicator lights swam before her eyes.

Post traumatic-stress syndrome? How could the Fleet doctors miss this problem? Why was it cropping up today? What was special about this passage?

Entry minus 6 minutes. "Hey Mother," she called out, sounding calm. "You find anything on Ambassador Troll?"

"I note one discrepancy," the shipbot replied right away. "He's supposed to be human, born on Terra, but his brain waves look terribly distorted--almost like those of some pre-human beast."

"Maybe he's just having a bad day in outer space, like me."

"I'm monitoring your heart rate and your breathing. You are feeling uncommon stress, and we haven't reached the first ring. Ava, what is provoking you?"

"I don't know. Please keep a few sensors trained on our passengers though."

&&&

Inside the first ring, a small, egg-shaped asteroid hurtled towards them. Several seconds before impact--and using low energy, to save costly fuel--Ava nudged the Medusa out of the way. She took a few, deep breaths then and settled down, relaxing into the all-absorbing work of navigation. Breathing rhythmically, after a while she felt calm and clear again; running the obstacle course in space she'd trained for all her life.

Now she focused on Q62, a crater-faced asteroid the size of Alhambra City. Mapped, its trajectory well known, in a minute it would slam the Medusa. As seconds ticked away though, Ava froze, and simply watched the jagged block veer nearer.

"What is the matter?" Mother demanded. "Shall I override you?"

"No." At the last millisecond, Ava dove the sleek ship under the asteroid, like a swimmer diving beneath a wave. The Medusa shuddered from head to tail.

"Ava," cried Mother irritably. "Would you like to tell me what happened just now? It felt like you were playing with doom. What's the basis of your self-destructive compulsion?"

"That wasn't me." Her eyes filled with tears. "It felt like someone fighting for control. Someone with telepathic powers."

"How is that possible, Ava? With nobody aboard but Troll and his bots."

"And you. Has somebody sabotaged *you*?"

"My functions are normal," Mother said tartly. "Yours are not, my dear. Go ahead and run a thorough check on me."

"We'll hit the second ring in 17 minutes."

"Then trust me to fly this ship alone. I need to check your nervous system."

"OK," Ava groaned, and stuck her head into a hanging helmet like an old-time dryer of hair. She heard a buzzing, and then loud clicking, and in a minute Mother said smugly:

"I found an anomaly under the skin of your neck, just above the bone of your right shoulder."

Probing with her fingers, Ava felt the pellet, small and round as a Terran pea. "An implant? I got my physical Tuesday. Somebody could have placed it then."

"Well I suggest we pull it out, right now. Would you like a pain killer, dear?" And the door of the red-crossed cabinet in the pilot pod popped open.

"No thanks, Mother."

"Well, can you reach it all by yourself?"

"If you hold a mirror for me." A stem of light emerged from one of Mother's ports, plucked a small, square mirror from the cabinet and held it up.

Using an all-file, quickly Ava picked open her own neck. She ripped out the implant with its wires, and slapped a no-bleed patch over the wound. She'd stitch it up later--after clearing the last ring.

Already the Medusa was dodging and weaving, piloted expertly by Mother.

"You're doing fine," said Ava softly.

"We share a common vision. Take a little rest, dear, before the third ring. It's the hardest one, you know."

Ava settled back into the interface and slowed her breathing, trying to compose herself. Though her neck ached from the crude incision, already her mind felt clear and calmer.

Why would somebody try to tap into her mind? Who would have the technical ability? Did somebody want to hijack the Medusa, with its heavy load of pure gold ingots? The ransom for the hostages the Luddites would surely massacre, if she failed to reach Alhambra...

She'd take no chances; she'd face Troll. Somehow she didn't trust this man.

&&&

"Ambassador, I'm confiscating your bot assistants on my own authority. I need to disable them both until we land safely in Alhambra City."

"You have no right." His snake-like eyes narrowed behind his mask of polished gold. "We've got full immunity. We're on a diplomatic mission for the Union."

"But I'm responsible for your security, and someone's interfering with my steering. I'm not accusing you, but maybe someone has tampered with your bots."

"Pilot, that's ridiculous."

"Then will you permit me to search them now?"

"No."

"Then I'll have to use force. I'm sorry."

Eying Ava uneasily, the gold-plated bots had shifted apart. When one turned suddenly as if to flee, Mother shot a magnetic beam from a port, immobilizing the bot. When its twin tried to pull it free, she blurted them both out a hatch, into space.

"How dare you?" shouted Troll. "Those were custom models, programmed to my specifications. I'm going to seek damages from the Fleet."

"That's your right," said Ava hotly. Cursing, he plucked up an oxygen pack and smashed it to pieces on the deck, and his mask slipped, baring his bloated face and bulbous nose.

"Ray Nero," she gasped, "in green eye-lenses. What have you done with Ambassador Troll?"

"We buried him down a mine on Steinmetz." He pulled a blaster from under his robes and aimed it at her heart. "My triad needs this vessel's cargo."

"Trainer, are you threatening me? I'm the only pilot who can fly this freighter. We still have to transit the third ring."

"I want you to divert to Ferris 2. You should have ample fuel."

"I'm not going to fly my ship to that nest of pirates."

"Ava, you'll do what I say. I'm your *trainer*."

"Not anymore. I'm free." She kicked the blaster out of his hand, and wheeling he ran towards the propulsion chamber, smashing out the Medusa's panels and lighting as he ran.

"What's going on?" cried Mother anxiously.

"We've got a traitor to the Fleet on board: my ex-trainer, Ray Nero. He joined the criminal triads from sheer greed."

"He's shutting down all our communica--" Mother's voice broke off.

"At least I know my enemy," Ava muttered. "And I'm not crazy."

"You're weak and inadequate," Ray's voice boomed. "You're the worst pilot I ever trained." Amplified down the long passageway, he sounded like an angry god.

"And you're a disgusting traitor and swindler! I'll throw you into deep space, like your bots."

"No, I'm gonna fly this ship to Ferris 2. I don't need *your* help to truck a load of gold."

"You're not taking over *my* ship, Ray!"

"I helped design it. I can fly it."

Then he'd have to bypass the main controls and steer from the ES interface... Ava raced down the darkened corridor, feeling her way towards the emergency station. How crippled was Mother? Could they still make contact, before they reached the third ring?

Never had she felt so alone, not since her childhood at Ray's mercy, crying out her eyes in her bare niche in the basement of his hidden training barracks, the barracks surrounded on all sides by the thick, grey slag of Steinmetz.

No, she wouldn't let him destroy the new life she'd made. *She wouldn't let him hijack the Medusa.* Reaching a storeroom, she grabbed a pair of restraints and a heavy wrench, and groped on towards the emergency station...

Tripping over a cable spanned in the dark, she fell flat and split her lip. She spat out the rusty-tasting blood. Had she forgotten Ray's cruelty? Warily now she inched towards the ES.

The pale glow of a flashlamp lit the emergency station like a lantern down a mine. With quick, deft motions Ray was splicing chips in a panel hanging loose from the wall.

Creeping up, Ava slammed the wrench down on his skull--and the heavy tool passed through his body. "A hologram," she groaned as the image faded.

"Hands up." He poked her in the back with his blaster's muzzle. "It's still so easy to trick you, Ava. Didn't I train you better as a girl?"

Her cheeks were burning, her ears buzzing with fury. How dare he humiliate her. *I'm a top-rated pilot of the Fleet.*

"Now I'm going to tie you up," he was saying, "for the rest of our journey--little Ava."

She took a deep breath, focused her mind. "There's no need, master," she said softly. "I see that you have beaten me."

Hugging her tightly from behind, he cupped her small breasts in his hands. Skin crawling, she felt like vomiting, and voices in her head cried, *"Kill him, or die! You can't live, if he does what he wants to you, again."*

"Sit there now, like a good little girl." He folded down a seat from the wall for her. "While I divert our ship to Ferris 2. It's not as bad there as people say. I'm sure you can get used to the life."

She forced herself to say evenly: "Whatever you wish for me, Trainer Nero."

When he turned away, she flew at him again, chopping the back of his neck with her hand. He crumpled to the deck and then grabbed her knees, pulled her down and rolled on top of her.

"You're hurting me."

"I'll show you who's boss," he growled as she breathed in his sour breath. "Just like I did when you were a snotty, disobedient brat."

She punched him in the crotch and he roared; she grabbed his head and tried to bang it on the bulkhead.

"Now I'm going to have to hurt you."

“Ray, you’ve hurt me enough.” In a flash she clicked plastic cuffs around his wrists. As he gaped she secured his ankles too, and his bloated, once-handsome face split into a demonic snarl:

“Honey, you’re making a big mistake.” She tugged his blaster from the under-arm holster. “Like when you walked out of my training early.”

“It wasn’t enough for you to abuse me. You boasted about it to your friends.”

“You loved it, Ava; you wanted it! Such a *precocious* little girl.”

“You’re less than an animal, man.”

“But / chose you from that orphanage on Steinmetz. I chose you for your toughness--little Ava.”

“Don’t tempt me to kill you,” she hissed in his face. “You’ve been my bad dream since I was six. Wherever I fly, wherever I go, I’m burning my rage at you as fuel.”

With a piece of cable she secured his cuffed hands to a steel handgrip on the bulkhead. Snatching up the flashlamp, she left him alone in the darkness and rushed back towards the main pilot pod, hoarse laughter ringing in her ears.

&&&

It took her an hour to bring the Medusa back on course and navigate the third ring alone. Then she worked on restoring communications with the ship-bot. Poor Mother needed an overhaul. It would have to wait until they landed.

Exhausted, Ava sank into the interface and let herself take a healing rest, and when she awoke, the golden capital planet loomed in the distance like a full moon. Soon Alhambra filled her entire vision.

“Hey Mother,” she said hopefully, “if you can hear me now--”

A hairy hand clamped over Ava’s mouth, and a foldable bot, spider-shaped, went capering over the ceiling.

“You should have searched me,” Ray Nero leered. “I kept him in my robe, just in case.”

“The thought of touching your body makes me sick.”

“But you can’t escape, you know.” He tugged her out of the interface and pushed her down on the deck, on her knees. “Stay like that now, or I’ll have my friend here paralyze you with his toxic sting.”

Ray shoved himself into the interface. The Medusa shuddered and accelerated.

“What are you doing?” Ava cried.

“Crashing us into the Congress Palace.” His bloated, yellow-tinged features seemed to sag. “I’m dying of cancer anyhow.”

“And what will you gain by crashing this ship?”

"I'll be famous down the centuries, and you will be famous--as my victim."

Ava saw the Pilot Obelisk on the horizon, the many-spired Congress Palace beside it.

"I won't let you." She lunged at him and forced him from the interface, and the ship veered sideways like a bucking horse. Thrusting her aside, he tried to push back in--but lighting flashed from the interface mesh, writhing around him like thick snakes while Mother cried like a spiteful little girl:

"Oh no you don't."

He sagged to the floor, shocked, eyes still open.

"Mother, stabilize us," Ava pleaded. The spiderbot cowered in a corner. Grimacing Ava stomped it to pieces, under her steel-soled boots. The hot desire to kill her abuser raged in her heart like a poison storm.

She stooped over Ray Nero on the deck, his bulbous nose seeming to dissolve in his flaccid cheeks, his face already rotten as a corpse in the ground, rotten from his long life of evil.

"I'm not going to give in to you, Ray," she hissed. "I'm better than you. *I have to be.*"

She wound his hands and feet with several lengths of cable, and then pushed his head under an oxygen hood so she didn't have to see his face.

Now she almost felt a touch of pity: this broken-down monster had no future.

She sank back into the cool, soft interface and steadied the Medusa's controls. *Thank you, Mother, for being here for me when I needed you.*

&&&

Below, the golden capital of the Union spread to Alhambra's far horizons, spire upon delicate spire, more beautiful than any passing dream; and she, Ava Steele, was bringing in more gold from Steinmetz, gold to redeem 100 innocent lives.

"Han 1, can you give me clearance to land," she asked Alhambra Flight Control.

"You've got it, Ava of Steinmetz," a strong, young voice sang back.

"Please have some wardens waiting at the spaceport. I've got a dangerous prisoner--Ray Nero, who plotted to hijack my ship. I've stowed him in fuel tank number 3. Please don't let him escape again."

"We'll be standing by--with a max-mobile prison."

The long landing strip unrolled before her like a ribbon of satin. She steadied the huge ship, dipping low, till with a gentle bump, like a lover's tap, the Medusa touched down at last.

**** THE END ****

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“El Diablo Warhola” by John Medaille

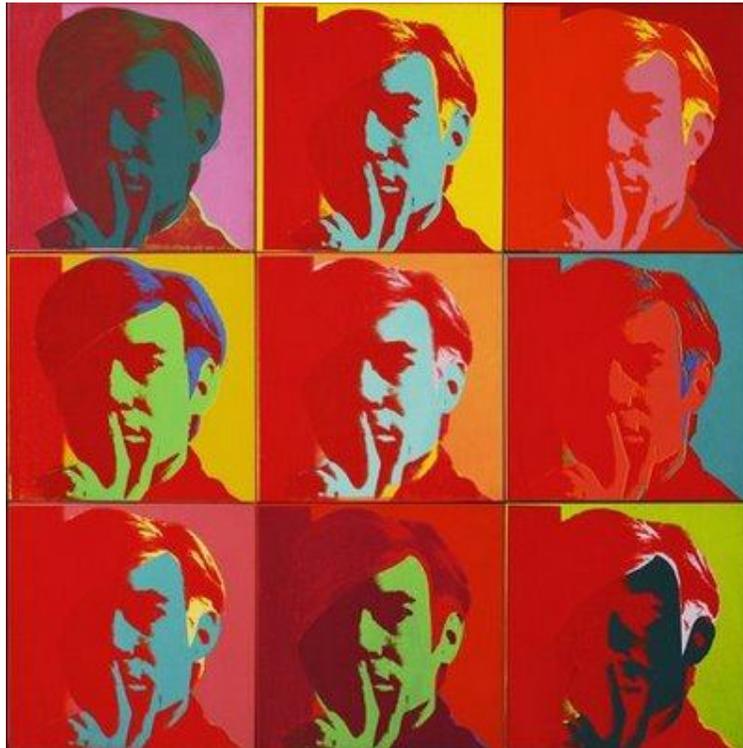
Synopsis: Another tale about art and artistry? You won't get enough of it yet!

About the Author: John Medaille has been published on Pseudopod, Escape Pod, Dunesteef and Lacuna Magazine and is working on a short story collection called: Hideous Tales of Doomed Spacemen, Demonic Cameras, Protoplasmic Flesh-Eaters, The Supernatural, U.F.O.'s, Interdimensional Beasts, Evil Children, Misunderstood Robots, Telephone Calls from Beyond the Grave, Mayhem, Murder AND THE MACABRE!

In this bizarre tale, a new cult rises among the decadents.

El Diablo Warhola

By John Medaille



Ciudad Juarez, Mexico - The evening is hellishly hot and the light is tinged an antic orange with the dust that hangs over the city, as my guide, let's call him Eludio, leads me into the mercado. We pass stalls selling tamales, wafts of hot grease and garlands of dry, fingerlike chilies. Further on there were plywood botanicos framed in Christmas lights, at which merchants hawk enchanted soaps and candles, guaranteed to bring luck in the lottery or ensure the fidelity of a lover or inflict inscrutable stomach pains on an enemy. Under a broken, strobing streetlight, a guitarist tries to sing an old love ballad, something about *amantes* and *corazons*, but it is drowned out by the thumping rumbas of electronica that blares from the boomboxes at every shop and pushcart and he soon gives up, packs his instrument in its case and wanders off into the night. Far away in the depths of the city I hear the perforating punctuations of 'goat horns,' as AK-47's are called here, rattling away.

Eludio takes me to the outskirts of the market where we come across the elaborate, crude and lovingly-built shrines of the Narco Saints. These are what we came to see. They are the patron saints of the drug world, the criminal gods and goddesses who are worshipped and honored and sacrificed to by everyone from the foot soldiers of the drug wars to the cocaine barons. Here is the icon of the ever popular Saint Jude, he of the lost causes, encased in a plexiglass box and surrounded by a fiery moat of votive candles. Beyond him is the mustachioed Jesus Malverde, the bandit hero and folk saint of the Sinoloan cartels, unrecognized by the Catholic church, whose plaster bust beams like a movie star from its pedestal, a silver screen swashbuckler. Highest and most feared in the menagerie of the Narco Saints is La Santa Muerte, Holy Death, also known as La Santisima and the Little Skinny One. She is fashioned from a full size human skeleton, real or artificial I can't tell. Dressed in a white bridal gown, she holds a scythe in her hands, and the scythe *is* real, insanely sharp, insanely old, all grayed wood and pockmarked iron. At La Santa Muerte's feet lie bouquets of dollar bills and pesos folded into flowers, which not even the most desperate beggar would dare to steal, and little skulls made of sugar with lemon drop eyes or

sculpted out of paper mache, still wet and baking in the night heat.

It is to these Narco Saints that the petitioners come, they crawl here by the thousands on their hands and knees or squirm here, snakelike in the dust, for miles. They fill their shoes with broken glass and totter, wincing all the way, in pain-pilgrimages to the shrines. Some are flagellants, flailing their own backs with knotted whips and electrical cords. The pavement here is polka dotted with brown oxidized drops of old blood among the darker wads of flattened bubble gum and the flitting poltergeists of candy wrappers. At the end of their journeys, they kneel faithfully before the Drug Gods and pray for them to intervene on one side or the other of the gruesome narco wars and gang violence that afflict modern Mexico. They pray for money, for revenge, for power or protection or peace, for everything that everyone has ever prayed for. There are at least fifty worshippers arranged in front of La Santisima tonight. There are rosaries and Hail Mary's and a metallic smell. We stand on the fringes of their ranks and observe.

Finally Eludio leads me away and brings me to the particular Narco Saint he wanted to show me tonight, the new one. The saint's shrine is the furthest away from all the rest, the least weather worn, and it has the smallest congregation although Eludio assures me that this is the fastest growing drug cult. They are young toughs, mostly, heavily tattooed and pierced and chained and blinged. They stand or sit torpidly on the concrete, smoking a lot, and they do not smile. They don't make jokes, and this is disturbing and perverted in the young. I wind my way through them and examine the icon, and I know that I have never seen this saint despite three years of covering the Mexican *narcotrafico*. It is, like Le Santa Muerte, a pale figure, life sized, but male and dressed in a dark suit of shimmering velour. His plaster images wears sunglasses and on his head is a bushy platinum fright-wig. At first I wonder if this is a personification of governmental corruption or the blank epitomization of callous indifference to the undervaluation and meaninglessness of human life in the face of the overwhelming bloodletting of the war. Or is it, conversely, a modernization of some old, Aztec, heart-feasting Blood God?

And then I think I recognize him, and I've met him before.

I find my contact, Eludio, in the throng, and I ask him, "Is that...isn't it...?"

"It's Andy Warhol," Eludio says.

He has no idea how the Cult of Warhol started, and it is doubtful that anyone truly does. It is not even known where it started, although some will swear up and down that it was right here in Ciudad Juarez. Others contend that it was imported from Mexico City or Los Angeles or Tamaulipas, all anyone seems to know is that it has been gaining in popularity, almost epidemically, over the past several weeks.

Eludio tells me that the followers of San Warhol call themselves Los Boyz Plasticos and they are gaining themselves a reputation by hiring out as affordable, efficient street level enforcers. They perform grudge killings and intimidations with a brutality that is shocking even here, where mutilations, beheadings and mass femicides are considered commonplace. Their signature is the artful arrangement of body parts: cadavers laid out just so on the curb, five left hands woven into identical positions in a chain link fence, a well-lit torso. Already their numbers are thought to rival the Zacamale Syndicate. They are renowned for their emotionless and automated style. They strive to be poet-robots. They never, ever remove their sunglasses.

"What does it mean?" I ask Eludio. Does Warhol have some connection to Mexico that I've missed? Wasn't he of Slovakian extraction? Maybe Hungarian? Sure, he was a creature of drugs and money, salesmanship and surfaces, but still, pop art? I am baffled. What does it have to do

with this? What does it have to do with anything? And is it art?

"I don't know," says Eludio. "It's *estupido*."

I take a closer look at the tattoos of the black clad Warholians. They are in unornamented script, sans serif, and they say Spanish translations of Warhol's inanities and quotations. They say:

'I love plastic'

'I want to be a machine'

'I like boring things'

'All the cokes are the same and all the cokes are good'

That, and, of course, tomato soup inked swastikawise into biceps.

As the evening plummets into night, the ritual begins. Los Boyz Plasticos turn on Nico and The Velvet Underground. Portable televisions play fuzzy, twenty five hour loops of Warhol's movies, *Sleep* and *Blow Job* and *Kiss*. And over the unconcerned beat of recorded drums and the awful-bad songs, nothingness happens.

The worshippers crawl to San Warhol's beetle booted feet and grovel there and, horribly, they make sacrifices. I already know what the offerings will be before they are placed, and they make me sick. There is rising a growing heap of offerings. There is Campbell's soup, of course, idiotically, all kinds; Bean and Bacon, Chicken and Stars, Cream of Mushroom. There are Brillo boxes and Coca-Cola bottles. There is exactly everything that you think there would be. Sugar skulls and severed human ears would be more wholesome.

Eludio is talking by my side, "They think the Warhol will give them all their wishes, and take all the revenges asked of it. But it has to be paid for. The right price," he smiles and shakes his head. "Always the correct price and no less. The price has to be equal to the miracle it is asked to perform. If the Warhol doesn't get paid, well, he gets mad easy and the petitioners will die. They'll die of gunshot, AIDS, staph infection, machete, whatever. He's not a love god, not the forgiving kind. But you can get anything you want as long as it's paid for. It's a transaction."

"That's a lot of soup," I say.

An hour later, I am in my hotel room. As always, there is a paid mercenary patrolling the hall on the floor of the reporter's rooms. I hear him clomping around in his black plastic streamlined soldier-of-fortune boots and I can't sleep. It is a fad, I think. It will burn itself out in a month or a year, and the plaster Warhol and his infinite, identical reproductions in every warring border state will be abandoned and disintegrate into frosting by the rain and dust. It is a pop-cultural footnote, and only semi-interesting, and nothing more, and good only for a byline blurb, and then it's over.

Or so I pray.

**** THE END ****

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“A New Start” by Steve Prusky

Synopsis: Are you fed up of your dreary existence? Welcome yourself to an alternate lifestyle. Let's see where it goes. Enjoy the ride.

About the Author: Steve is a native of Detroit. He has spent the last twenty-five years writing, living and working in Las Vegas. His prose and poetry have appeared in various publications including Apocrypha and Abstractions, Foundling Review, Flash Fiction Offensive, Orion headless and The Legendary. He posts all of his previously published work on <http://sprusky.blog.com/> .

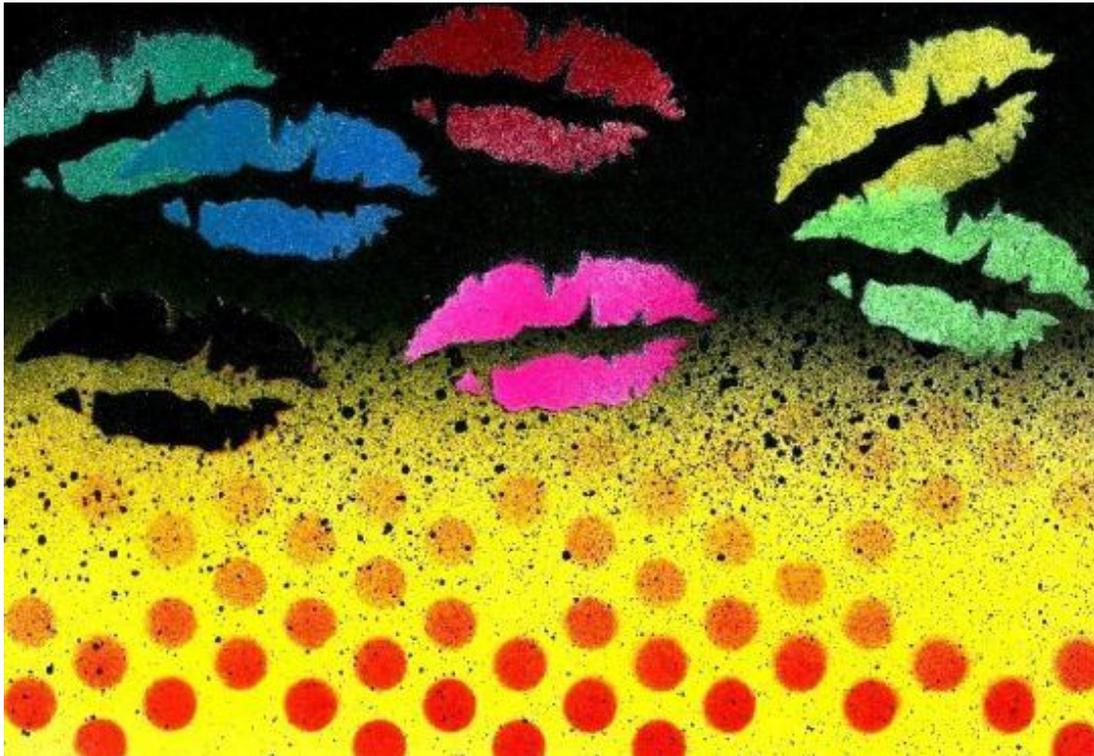
In this dark episode of gloom, a man takes a chance and lives to tell the tale. Kiss your past goodbye.

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A New Start

By Steve Prusky



Suburban life sucked Sam emotionally dry, taunted him sleepless, over-anxious, irrational. For ten years, Sam had been self-employed ten hours a day, six days a week in an effort to save his failing business. He struggled to pay an overwhelming balloon mortgage on a home that had dropped to half its original value after he bought it. A distressing family life haunted him; the too dramatic, trendy, spendy wife, three daughters, one just past the hormonal terror and confusion of puberty, two more about to dive head first into it; the banal suburban backwash of Plasma TV's, X-Box mania, cybercafés, five dollar lattes, the crushing loan against the Cadillac Biarritz... . Sam was no longer living 'The Dream.' He ran at dawn--no note, no divorce, no goodbyes. By sunset, he was two states west of Detroit. He woke up two-thousand miles later in Vegas mid-May his third morning free.

The transient nature of Vegas suited him as the likeliest atmosphere to hide in, meld with, become someone else in. Beyond that, he had no immediate plan. Sam was a naïve suburbanite, an urban bumpkin self-deceived Vegas floated ankle deep in twenty-dollar bills begging to be scooped up. He rented a pay by the week room in one of a cluster of decrepit motels on Fremont and Eastern, the premier skid row of skid rows failure in Vegas spawns. The nucleus of this crossroad was the Vegas Lounge; a black hole for the lost, the precipice of darkness Sam was about to unknowingly lend his soul to. The 'Lounge' strategically stood on the south-west corner of this junction like a cockeyed dry-rotted wood marker in a ghost town graveyard.

When Sam arrived, the blossoms of this urban landscape had long ago wilted dead as week old cut flowers. The forest of worn tattered 1950's motels, Christmassy neon lit smut stores, a narrow street nicknamed 'Crack Alley,' lingered stunted, dormant, neglected, abandoned to the criminal demography headquartered out of the Vegas Lounge. This crossroad was the pedigree of despair; a malignant black spot of melanoma on a brightly lit desert city's sun baked skin with the 'Lounge'

as its cancerous host. Sam, innocent, gullible, foolish Sam, freely enlisted in this illicit, well-stocked drug store of stepped on rock cocaine, tar heroin, degraded meth, murderers, smack-back addicts, thieves, felons, soulless crack whores. The 'Lounge' wasn't the glitzy adult amusement park Strip tourists see. It was Sam's 'fix'. It was all the Vegas he'd need.

Sam took the graveyard shift at the Vegas Lounge. The absentee owner paid him forty dollars a night plus tips, made him bar manager for an extra fifty dollars a week cash, no questions asked. Sam used a fictitious Social Security number to get the job, was issued the required state gaming card by mistake from an overworked Gaming Commission clerk down town with no time to trace Sam's past. His out-of-state driver license expired. The bank caught up with the Biarritz. All traces leading to his previous life disappeared inside two months. The illusion of a new life for Sam was about to begin. He was a freshman initiate to the dregs of Las Vegas life.

Few bartenders at the Vegas Lounge survived long on the graveyard shift. Sam fed drinks to criminals, on the take cops, whores, drug fiends and the living dead from midnight until dawn. No upstanding, decent bartenders last long with this crowd. At first, Sam enforced the peace from his side of the bar with 911 calls each night the predictable brawl occurred. He kept a baseball bat near for the drug-crazed miscreant courageous enough to hop over the bar. His over bearing size and quick temper kept him out of a fight--mostly. When a situation occurred where he couldn't back down, he'd raise his voice the ear piercing depth of a sonic boom, intimidating those less certain of their bravado. That routine usually browbeat the majority of his antagonists to back down. Sam hovered taller than most; he was a mammoth six foot four intimidating bulldozer of a man. When he scowled in anger his cherubic face glowed red, his two-hundred thirty pound frame puffed up when he had no choice but to square off with a drunkenly brave patron, a crazed addict, a brooding biker in a bad mood. That routine normally settled the less valiant ones down. Sam fought when he had to. When he did, he usually grabbed something to tip the odds in his favor. He was mostly just tough talk though--the right talk apparently. He kept to his side of the bar almost always. He acted fearless at all times. At the Vegas Lounge, how you acted was how you were judged. Tough, quiet, submissive, wise, street smart, violent; each behavioral pattern rated where you stood in the social order of the Vegas Lounge. Sam was near the top. Deep inside though, Sam's stomach churned life sucking evil lightning bolts stabbing him with fear each graveyard shift at the potentially violent atmosphere on the other side of the bar. When Chauncey showed up, Sam was to set the record for longevity as a graveyard bartender in the 'Lounge.'

Chauncey, a rock dealer, thug, thief, whoremonger, began patronizing the Vegas Lounge on Sam's shift. At first, Chauncey sat at the bar most nights, played the video slots, drank Tangueray and tonic in a tall glass with a twist of lime. He appeared to Sam, at first sight, as another lost soul with a pocket full of money and nothing else to do but gamble. Chauncey was big, not as tall as Sam, but stockier, barrel-chested, arms muscular and thick as Sam's legs. His face was a permanently molded mug of constant hatred, anger, meanness. Chauncey's mere presence radiated swift violence. Sam chanced to cultivate Chauncey as a friend, an ally, someone he'd want on his side in a fight.

"I'm Sam," he extended his hand. Chauncey looked up from his bar top video machine as if Sam was a rude intrusion. He lightly clasped Sam's hand like a limp noodle, brusquely growled, "Chauncey," after he fell a card short of a full house. "Get me another Tangueray and tonic," he gruffly demanded. Sam comped this drink. In Vegas gamblers drink free.

"I'm from Detroit," Sam continued.

"Milwaukee," Chauncey replied.

"How long've you lived here?"

"Ten years," Chauncey contained his irritation, "How 'bout you?"

"Three months," Sam didn't yet know how to cloak his over-eager bright-eyed naïveté.

"Oh yah! What do you think of this town so far?"

"Jury's still out. This town sure is different. Seems like everything normal here would be considered abnormal every place else in this world, and vis-à-vis."

"What the fuck does vis-à-vis mean?" Chauncey's vocabulary was limited to street jargon.

Almost embarrassed by Chauncey's gruff indifference, Sam replied, "Vegas is like no other place in the world."

"Welcome to Vegas," Chauncey laughed. Sam feared him. Chauncey was perceptive; he knew right off he could manipulate Sam's fear to his advantage.

After a few weeks Chauncey began discreetly dealing rocks on Sam's shift.

"I know what you're doing Chauncey," Sam complained. "You'll bring Metro down on this place like angry hornets."

"Just look the other way," Chauncey advised in a threatening tone. "I'm taking all the chances here. You're immune."

Sam silently blessed Chauncey's activities. Sam acted nerveless, brave, distant, as if he were privy to a monumental secret others only hoped to know. "There'll be no need for 911 calls any more. I'll keep security here an in house affair." Chauncey survived twenty years in Waupun State Prison (a 'silent' prison; inmates weren't allowed to talk), for Murder 2, kept a slim handled snub nose 38 in his hip pocket. He wasn't averse to grabbing a pool stick to crack a skull, wrapping his fist around a cue ball to crush a cheekbone, busting a long neck Bud bottle jagged to slash a chest open from shoulder to shoulder. To Chauncey the only fair fight was the fight *he* won. Word hit the corner of Fremont and Eastern, Chauncey enforced the peace at the 'Lounge' with ruthless brutality. From then on no more fights, no more cops. Chauncey securely promoted his trade, although he always remained alert, suspicious, untrusting. Sam fed Chauncey drinks free whether he gambled or not. Sam ran the bar--Chauncey ran the floor. The Vegas Lounge was their malevolent empire.

Sam knew all the local rock-hoes intimately. He let them ply their trade in the bar when he was on; in return, he had the privilege of fucking any one of them free. Sam set his new female friends up with 'dates.' It was a whore that got Sam sprung on rocks his first time. Sam easily fit in as pimp, whoremaster, connect, rock fiend. One foot on the curb, the other in the gutter, Sam had his new life. Chauncey watched Sam's character deteriorate to the same level as the felonious crowd on the floor. Sam matriculated for his street degree. Chauncey gladly volunteered as his tutor.

Ultimately, Chauncey slyly convinced Sam to keep the bag in the stock room behind the bar with promises Sam would get a cut of the profits and rocks at cost. Only he and Chauncey knew its location amongst the beer and liquor stocked shelves. Sam cautiously doled out the speedy, yellowish chunks to Chauncey when prompted. Chauncey slowly coaxed Sam to serve his customers across the bar when Chauncey discreetly signaled Sam with a twitching hand, a

tapping foot, a tweak on his ear. Chauncey stayed almost completely out of the criminal loop. All Chauncey did was collect payment first before he cued Sam to deliver. While Chauncey worked the floor, Sam persuaded non-slot players into drinking doubles. He rang up the price of the cocktails as comps to imaginary bar top video game gamblers, stuffed the money in his pocket to buy rocks at a cut-rate price from Chauncey after work. Chauncey never shared the money he pledged. So, secretly Sam shaved from Chauncey's bag whatever he could each night, hit the pipe in the stock room, chancing Chauncey wouldn't become suspicious he worked the bar sprung all night.

Like any other perishable product picked off the grocery shelf, Sam's time on this corner had an expiration date.

Sam mingled with the hoes, ran with them on his days off. Chauncey went on hiatus when Sam didn't work. Sam chased the elusive high of that first hit on two-day runners with his whores as if he were a Jekyll turned fiendishly Hyde. He'd return to work his first shift of the week face drooping past his chin, sleep deprived, crashing hard as a boulder rolled off a hundred foot high cliff, jonesing for the wispy smooth white cloud that passed through the transparent glass pipe.

Sam began hitting the pipe every day. The first half of each shift his craving muscles twitched in withdrawal with each drink he served until Chauncey arrived with the daily bag. Sam automatically begged Chauncey for a rock to get a grip until he made enough tips to pay Chauncey back. Chauncey knowingly obliged.

Sam began hitting off Chauncey's rocks in the back room of the bar. Chauncey knew Sam was shaving, he let it go in trade; ultimately, Chauncey had Sam do all the hands on work across the bar and pass the cash from each transaction unobtrusively to him. Sam began keeping a five shot 25 automatic in his front pocket. He wasn't sure he could ever use it. It seemed an appropriate tool for his new avocation.

Often, fake bearded undercover cops swarmed the lounge draped in phony, easy to spot longhaired wigs, tattered, soiled tee shirts and jeans. They'd watch the action behind them in the mirrored bar back wall. Sam and Chauncey spotted them... mostly. They'd lay off dealing a while. Sam warned the whores to beware. They'd do their business in one of a number of less active skid rows dotting Vegas like rampant spreading acne until Chauncey was certain Metro lost interest and left for the action further west up Fremont Street. When Chauncey was convinced it was safe, the routine crept back to normal until the next potential sting.

By late autumn, it ultimately happened....it was bound to. Sam grew sloppy, too obvious, overconfident. Chauncey spotted it, so did Metro. Chauncey gave Sam the nightly bag as quick as he could, never carried, made the deal, signaled to Sam how many rocks should be passed over the bar and to whom. Sam held the money until end of shift. Chauncey kept count of the money in his head. Chauncey stayed clean at Sam's too trusting expense.

Often Metro waltzed in, took Chauncey outside, jacked him up and searched him with no results.

The validity of Sam's illegitimate front crumbled when Chauncey told Sam not to serve a hoe on credit Sam often fucked free. As revenge, she snitched on Sam to trim her charges down on a pending case. The arrest hit like a meteor strike. Cops dressed like armored robots bashed in the door of his hotel room without warning, guns drawn, screaming intimidating threats, cuffed him and the hoe he slept with. Before they finished reading him his Miranda and the writ, his legs began cramping, twisting, gnarling in withdrawal. His body wept for that hypnotic stream of white mist he sucked into his lungs. Buckled down snug in the back seat of the black and white, hands tightly

cuffed behind his back, craving welled up in his gut. Where was Chauncey with that first rock of the day now? He needed just one more hit to take the edge off. The symptoms of his addiction were too strong. It was a long ride to processing and the holding tank. Chauncey heard about the bust and slithered off to cultivate another new bartender further up Boulder Highway in Pittman, just outside of downtown.

"Where'd you get the rocks from?" a plain-clothes detective asked.

"Fuck you! D Street and Lake Mead, how's that?" Sam wailed. He was more afraid of Chauncey's wrath than he was of the belligerent detective. The cop grabbed Sam's balls and squeezed, "Don't bullshit me, that's darkest Africa, those savages down there'll kill a fucking stupid white boy like you for a double up."

"Kiss my ass," Sam howled.

"That's it fool, don't snitch on Chauncey. Be loyal asshole. I don't see him here bailing you out. He's not your friend. Give him up. We'll forget about this and let you go. We know this bag in my hand is his rocks; there'll be no deals with you if you don't snitch." Sam stayed silent. "That's okay," the cop calmly said, "you're ours now. He's ours too, just a matter of time."

Pandering, possession of a controlled substance with intent to sell; drug trafficking, possession of an illegal firearm. At arraignment, Sam's first winter in Vegas, the public defender recommended he plea out; take the Big Bitch; the Habitual Criminal, twenty years--fifteen minimum--as opposed to the life sentence the DA wanted. Sam took the deal. He never saw Chauncey again.

Prison! Lock down alone twenty-three hours a day. The narrow wire reinforced glass slit in his cell wall faced east. He often peered past it toward the suburban world he knew before Vegas. The thick glass magnified the sane life he left behind for Vegas as if it were a telephoto lens repeating vivid, non-stop streams of his past. Memories of his former life compounded the new Vegas demons that tagged his soul black.

He'd do three nickels in Carson City. Upon release, Sam left without shaving his head bald, gangbanging up, pumping weights, marring his skin with a white supremacist thunderbolt tat under his arm. Sam found his way back to Vegas.

Years later Sam heard Chauncey got shot and could occasionally be seen navigating Vegas in a wheel chair panhandling at the corners of Charleston and Nellis, Main Street and Gasse, Sahara and Las Vegas Boulevard.

Sam worked menial construction jobs in Vegas for twenty-five years after he got out, stayed straight, behaved, read books, died. It was almost as if he could have stayed put at the Detroit suburbs and lived the same drone existence.

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

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“Vindictive” by Jeff Poole

Synopsis: Art and the Artist move independently and the spectator is caught amidst the chaos.

About the Author: Jeff Poole's stories have been published in print, and e-zines. This tale originally appeared in Downstate Story, a midwestern magazine which publishes midwestern writers. The editor liked the story, but asked if Jeff had ANY midwestern connection. He told her that he had a sister in Omaha; guess that was enough.

In this crime thriller, a regular fun shoot turns into vindictive rage and vengeance. Will our protagonist survive this artistic assault?

Vindictive

By Jeff Poole



I'm lying in a pit, inside a mine. I'm surrounded by bats and darkness with a dead guy lying on top of me. I can only see part of my surroundings, the part at the end of a thin beam of light from my pocket flashlight. I can't see the bats but this is a mine in the southwestern U.S. so I know they're here. I don't know exactly where here is, except that it's a mine somewhere outside of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

These old, abandoned mines don't even have square entrances anymore. The openings are just two or three foot wide holes on the side of a hill, usually next to some old wooden buildings. The entryways offer no clue as to what's inside: large, seemingly endless tunnels and stairways held together with old, rotting wood. I was stuck in a mine I knew nothing about with a pocket light, and a dead guy. I was in this mess because I'd pissed Morty Andrews off. I didn't steal his money or mess around with his wife. I'd told him what I thought of him and he didn't like it.

Morty was the worst kind of sensitive artist. If you've ever spent time in an artists' town like Santa Fe you know exactly what I mean. He was the kind of man who's very sensitive in regards to what's said to him, but not what comes out of his own mouth. He held everyone else to a higher

standard than himself. He could be excused for his transgressions because of his talent. It was just the price the world paid for his brilliance. Morty didn't take criticism very well.

Morty had money. Not from his art, at least initially. He'd had it when he came to Santa Fe. No one knew where he came from, just that his family hadn't been in Santa Fe the requisite four hundred years to qualify as local. I first met him at an art opening, in a gallery he owned. The first thing I noticed about Morty was his Santa Fe chic. He had his black hair slicked back, small, dark framed glasses, black jeans, a white shirt with a bolo tie, and he was wearing a black cowboy hat. He stood about five feet eight, and he had a uni-brow. If Morty's face hadn't been so fat it would have made him look sinister. As it was, he just looked like he had a giant caterpillar on his brow. His eyes were the only things menacing about him. They were golden brown, arrogant, intelligent and mean. He stared at everyone with a look of amused superiority. He reminded me of a smart pig.

I guess I took an instant disliking to the guy.

After being officially introduced I did my best to avoid him the rest of the evening. That first night Morty didn't waste too much of his valuable time on me. He took a gander at my blue jeans, lanky frame and once white tennis shoes and wrote me off as a local gallery crasher, which I was. I wasn't there to film his opening. I was just there for the free wine and cheese, and to meet pretty girls.

Eventually my line of work would throw Morty and I together. I make a living filming or photographing other people and their special moments. Need a guy with any kind of camera, Harry Carter is your man. I take moving pictures and edit those pictures into quaint vignettes. I make promotional videos for a lot of the artists in town when they have a major art opening. It can be a good living but sometimes it can be hard. Art openings are very stressful for artists. A lot of these artists have serious attitudes and a stressed artist with attitude is not a fun individual. If I feel that an artist has talent, the attitude is a lot easier to take and maybe I won't overcharge them. Some artists have talent, and sometimes he's just a guy who knows someone with money.

Morty was an artist who had money to begin with. Now the odds are probably just as good that a Rockefeller could be as good an artist as someone born poor, I won't pretend to know. The difference is, someone with money can buy or influence a lot of people, and give himself a lot of exposure at high dollar functions. Garner appreciation through the green, so to speak.

Morty Andrews painted southwestern landscapes. I thought his paintings were decent enough, but I wasn't overly impressed, certainly not as impressed as he was with himself. Morty's paintings sold, but hell, these carved, wooden coyotes people make around here sell, but they still suck. Morty didn't need the money, but he did need the praise. We all like to be appreciated for being good at something, but some people need it more than others. Morty Andrews really needed everyone to understand how important and talented he was.

I'd had contact with Morty after the night at the gallery but I avoided long conversations with him. As I've said I didn't like him, but that wasn't the reason I tried to stay away from him. I'd seen how vindictive he was. Morty Andrews didn't forget slights. He didn't write anything off, he wrote it down. Santa Fe was filled with people who'd had bad luck after crossing Morty's line of acceptable behavior. Sometimes it could have been bad luck. I suspect money and favoritism or a few choice words in special ears might have helped some of the bad luck along. Morty had money and connections; with the law, local politicians and connections with people who did bad things. I didn't want to get on his bad side. I didn't need the aggravation.

Despite my best efforts I had done some work for Morty. Hell, why not? He paid well. Morty knew I didn't like him but he liked my work.

He was under the illusion I had respect for his abilities and I never tried to alter that perception. I never bad-mouthed his work to anyone, he was a paying client and I owed him that. I paid close attention to what I said about Morty or any of my clients. I am a man in control of what I say. Even when I drink too much, I watch my mouth. Except for a few rare occasions, which have invariably come back to chew my ass like a rabid dog.

Two things happened which set events in motion that would lead me to the bottom of a mine shaft. I landed a job in Denver working for a local T.V. station, which meant I'd be leaving town, and my last gig before departing would be filming Morty trying his hand at performance art.

The "pieces" had been like most performance art: embarrassing, unpleasant or accidentally funny, especially Morty's "Waves Lapping at the Shores of Indifference" drama. It was all very difficult to watch, except for one performance. A woman named Fiona Felders had a very moving piece about domestic violence. Everyone, including yours truly was impressed, everyone except Morty. Morty couldn't stand being upstaged by some woman who worked days as a clerk in the store where he bought his bolo ties, one of the few places downtown that hadn't been turned into an art gallery. Morty pulled some strings with the owner of the store, and she lost her job.

I was pissed. So was everyone else. Morty didn't care. He didn't have to worry about those of us who lived here. People from out of state bought the art Morty sold.

A week later Santa Fe had its annual short video festival. Since I was leaving Santa Fe in a few weeks, and wouldn't have any more dealings with Morty, I took an edited version of his "performance" from the previous week to the festival. I'd had quite a few beers before I went, so I was in rare form. The projectionist claimed to have no idea how the tape had gotten in the VCR. He didn't even know where it had come from. It was the funniest thing at the festival.

Morty had sat at the front of the room looking evil, as I had announced, "This tape will become a part of Santa Fe lore! Twenty years from now, when people are stumbling across your paintings at local garage sales Morty, maybe they'll come across copies of your attempts at artistic expression on the stage as well!"

I won't go into some of the other things I said, but I spent a few days waiting for the beginnings of a lawsuit. Morty wasn't going to let me off that easily. He had been humiliated and he wanted real blood.

A week later I drove to the outskirts of town to shoot some nature video, which is where the two thugs Morty hired found me. I had noticed their car behind me as I drove out of town but I hadn't really paid much attention. They were pretty quiet. One minute I was looking through the view finder of my camera, and the next I'm waking up in the back of a four-by-four, wearing a blindfold, with my hands tied behind my back.

I couldn't see anything but I could hear traffic passing by as I tried to work the ropes loose. The cars became less frequent. Then a few minutes later I heard the familiar sound of driving on a dirt road. We came to a stop and when they opened the back I faked unconsciousness. I heard two voices. Suddenly I was covered in cold water and spluttering.

"Wake up!" A voice said.

"He is." replied another voice.

Voice number one said, "Morty wanted us to make sure you were conscious when we did our thing to you video boy."

Adrenaline roared through me. If you've ever hit your brakes and nothing happened, you know what I mean, right up from the feet, through the yawning pit of my stomach to the tip of my scared-shitless nose.

Voice number two said. "Yep. I saw ya tense up there partner. You should be tense. If you knew what we were going to do, you'd be crapping in your pants."

Strong hands grabbed my coiled and panicked body and dragged me out. A fist hit me in the gut. I never saw it coming because of the blindfold. I'm in good condition, and I was pretty hopped up on adrenalin, so it hurt but it didn't knock the wind out of me. The fist to my mouth, however, split my lip and broke my bridgework. Then someone smacked me in the eye knocking the blindfold down.

"You're in good shape dude." Voice number two said, "That just means we'll have to beat on you a little longer."

They hadn't tied my feet, so I tried to stand up. I could see voice number two, a wiry short little guy, and he kicked my feet out from under me. I would have landed on my knees but he made sure I landed on my back instead. While I was lying on the ground wiry guy grabbed the blindfold which was now hanging around my neck, and dragged me around. I gagged and they snickered but I'd kept working on the ropes binding my hands. It had been late afternoon when I'd driven out to the countryside, and now it was dark. I looked up at the clear night sky and the endless stars and tried to think clearly. I could hear but not see voice number one until he came around in front of me and kicked me in the cujones.

As I squirmed around on the ground in pain, voice number one, a big guy with bad teeth and a nose ring moved into my range of vision. I thought, "What a stupid thing to have in your nose if you're someone who gets in a lot of fights," of course I didn't voice the thought.

I was lying on my back gasping. The smaller man started dragging me by the scarf around my neck again. I was on my back dragging my hands and it helped to pull the bindings off. I held on to the ropes so neither would realize my hands weren't tied any longer. The big guy told the little guy to go get a stick; they were going to poke me with it he said. The little guy dropped me in the dirt. When he moved away, I jumped up and ran like hell.

I could hear one of them cussing, and I chanced a look back. I saw the little dude coming on strong and the larger man laying down holding his leg. He'd tripped on something and was in serious pain. The wiry guy didn't seem to know it. I stopped when he got close and drove my foot into his knee. He went down and I stomped on his neck in fear and rage. He wasn't going anywhere for a while. Then a bullet hit the tree I was standing next to. What a drag, the larger fellow had a gun. I was off and running again. As I came out of some brush I saw buildings in the partial moonlight. I ran for them but as I got close I realized they were empty. Of course, these yahoos wouldn't take me where there were people.

I ran by a sign on an old building that said Golden. I knew where I was now; an old abandoned mining town outside of Albuquerque. I'd shot some footage here before, but I'd never entered any of the old mines, only an idiot would do that. I headed for a shaft. It was all I could think of at the moment. I saw a mine entrance and crawled through. I pulled my penlight out of my pocket and

turned it on. The entrance opened up into a large room with a tunnel running to the right. I only had a few moments to make a decision, so I ran down the tunnel. I heard someone coming to the tunnel entrance as I came up to another opening on the left side of the tunnel I was in. I turned into it, stopped moving and clicked off my penlight. It was like someone had spray painted my eyeballs black. There's no way to describe the darkness of a mine if you've never been in one. You'll find no darker place on earth, except maybe the grave.

If they didn't have flashlights they couldn't come in here. I decided I'd make my way on hands and knees in the dark. It was a dangerous move but I didn't see any alternative. I put my penlight in my pocket and started crawling.

A few feet later I realized I was on wood. I heard it creak for a moment and then I dropped into darkness. I remember hitting my head, being dazed and thinking about how much noise I must have been making as I crashed through old wood. Then I hit the ground, and the darkness enfolded my consciousness as well.

When I woke up I felt something lying on me. I didn't move. How long had I been here and where were those guys? After I'd gathered my wits I touched whatever was on top of my stomach. It was someone else's leg. I moved it aside and pulled out my penlight. I aimed it in the general direction of where I thought the rest of the body was and briefly flashed the light. No sense in notifying anyone as to my location. In the brief flicker I saw that it was the big guy. He was dead.

Taking inventory I was reasonably certain nothing was broken. How far had I dropped and where was the gun the guy lying next to me had been shooting at me? Where was the wiry dude?

I consoled myself that I was infinitely better off now than I had been a short time ago. Instead of being a tied up, blindfolded piñata, I was a dirty, dusty blind man with no real idea where I was.

Which is where we started.

These old mines are filled with a powdery dust. I felt like I'd been dipped in dirt, and dirt is all I could smell. My mouth was so dry that my tongue felt like a wooden ladle clacking around in my mouth.

I thought about my options. If I turned on my light for any length of time, maybe the other guy was up there somewhere with a gun, and he'd shoot me. Or I could crawl around in the dark until I perished of thirst or fell into another shaft?

I said the hell with it, pulled my penlight out and surveyed my immediate surroundings.

I was at the bottom of a shaft about fifteen feet deep. There was another tunnel branching off to my left and a drop off a few feet to my right. I shone my light down it, and I couldn't see the bottom. A few feet had separated me from life and death.

I double-checked to see if the big guy was dead. I wanted to find his gun, and to get his wallet. I wanted to know who he was, and if I got out of here, so would the cops.

Why had the fall killed him and not me? I could only assume he'd struck his head harder or simply landed badly. I couldn't find the gun. It must have gone over the edge. Pulling his wallet from his pocket I opened it and shown the light on his driver's license. His name was Jimmy Dalton. He didn't have his nose ring in the picture on his license, and was wearing a grateful dead T-shirt. I thought deadheads were mellow. Ol' Jimmy must have been a closet Kiss fan.

I turned the light off and listened for sounds. Hearing nothing I decided it was time to move. I couldn't climb back up the shaft so I had to go down the tunnel next to me. I got up slowly, I wanted to be sure my legs wouldn't fold, turned the penlight on, and shuffled slowly forward. I had walked for less than a minute when I came to a bend and saw light ahead of me.

I was feeling lucky. I could literally see the light at the end of the tunnel. The moon hadn't been full so I wondered why the light was so intense and as I neared the entrance I realized it was daytime.

As I approached the opening, I turned off my penlight and moved as quietly as I could. I approached the light with a weird combination of dread and elation, and peered at the landscape without sticking my head out of the entryway. No one was in sight. I could see low bushes, abandoned buildings, and what I thought was the entrance I had used last night. It was off to my left about fifty feet. No one was in sight and no cars either. The little guy must have been well enough off to drive. And to go get Morty? A small bird landed by the opening and chirped. I didn't know what kind of bird it was, it was a black thing with white markings, but at that moment I couldn't remember ever having seen a prettier bird. We looked at each other for a few moments.

A rock landed next to it and it fluttered off.

"Go away bird."

It was the little guy's voice.

If I hadn't taken time to contemplate that bird, I'd have been history.

He must have moved the truck, and then hidden next to the entrance. He wasn't out in plain site or close to the entrance or the bird wouldn't have landed there. He would have positioned himself so that he could watch both entrances. Could I peek out and see where he was? That would be too risky. I had to sit and think about what to do. I couldn't panic; I had to keep my head I told myself. Christ! Thirty seconds ago I'd been elated and ready to begin my weary trek to the highway. Now I was sitting in the dusty darkness with another desperate situation to deal with.

Then I heard the rocks sliding and I realized he was coming down to the entrance, probably to shine a light down the tunnel and see if I was in here. I'd have one chance. I couldn't see anything near the opening to pick up and hit him with so I just coiled up to spring at him as he looked in.

He came to the opening and started to shine a light into it. I launched through it right before the beam of light hit me. I hadn't planned it but my head drove right into his face. I was bigger, desperate, and had the jump on him. I hit him until he stopped moving. With last night's bruises and today's ass kicking he looked pretty bad, but I didn't bother to check if he was dead. I found his keys, took his gun and started stumbling around looking for his car.

I found it behind a bunch of piled up lumber. A yellow four-by-four, an ugly freakin' truck. Maybe I was just biased against the owners. I was happy to see my digital camera on the front seat. It seemed like a long time ago that I had been out trying to shoot nature footage.

I climbed into the cab and asked myself what the hell was I going to do? I started looking around for anything to eat or drink, and found a canteen and a cell phone. So now I could call someone. I started taking huge gulps out of the canteen. It made my mouth hurt. I looked in the rear view mirror and saw myself for the first time since this started.

Dirty, sweaty blonde hair matted and plastered to my head. I had a black eye and my mouth was a mess. Swollen lips and when I grimaced at the sight of myself, the gap where my bridge had been made me look even worse.

Then the cell phone rang.

I thought about it until the third ring, and then I picked it up. It was Morty. He said hello a few times and I listened without speaking.

“Dalton?” He said. “Answer me. Did you find Carter? Yo? Dalton? Dalton, can you hear me? Listen; if you find Carter don’t do anything. Wait till I get there!”

I could tell by the sounds in the background that he was driving. What was I going to do when he got here?

“Goddammit Dalton! I’ll be there in a few minutes. Connection must be screwed.” Then he hung up.

He was taking a chance showing up here. You’d have thought he’d be more careful but he was an arrogant guy. He probably figured he had enough money and connections to get away with anything. He probably did.

I checked the gun to see if it was loaded, it was. I could still see the little guy up on the hill. He was in the same place I’d left him. I was sitting in a dead man’s truck, maybe two. Was he dead? Should I walk up the hill and put bullet in him to make sure? Do I move him out of sight and wait for Morty? Maybe I just get the hell out of here. I’d been incredibly lucky. Then again, most of the luck I’d been having had to do with me keeping my head, and not quitting.

Even if Morty found a way out of this with his money, he’d know I might have something on him that could come back to haunt him. The next time he’d send someone good, and I’d be toast. What could I do about it? I wasn’t a killer. I could take my chances with the law getting Morty. That was the smart play. For most of us that’s our only play. Maybe being rich wouldn’t help Morty. Maybe the political ties, shady connections and large infusions of cash wouldn’t make a difference?

Yeah right.

I went up to where the little guy was lying, asking myself while I slowly walked up the hill what I was going to do if he was still breathing. He was dead. So maybe I was a killer. I moved his body into the mine entrance where Morty wouldn’t see him when he drove up, and then parked the truck near a dilapidated building. I figured Morty would pull up next to the truck and I’d come out from behind the building. After that, I had no idea what I’d do.

As I leaned against the old wood building, I realized how tired and sore I was. Everything was starting to throb. I watched the road through a split between two old boards. I stood behind the building, holding the gun in one hand, and drinking the rest of the water in the canteen with the other.

After about half an hour I saw a Mercedes come around a bend in the road. As it neared the dirt turnoff to where I was, it slowed and turned. I could see Morty in the driver’s seat. He did just what I wanted, and drove right up to the ugly yellow truck. He didn’t see me until he got out. He looked at the gun then he looked up at me.

"You look like shit." He said.

"Yeah, taking a pounding will do that to a guy. You on the other hand, came out of the womb looking like a rat's ass."

He looked at the gun again, and crossed his arms before leaning back against his car, "Where's Dalton and Fisk?"

"Fisk was the other guy's name? I hope you guys weren't close. You're not going to be seeing either of them again."

"No great loss. They were cheap hoods, low bidder and all that. In retrospect, I should have known better. I'm glad you got away."

"Uh huh. I'll bet you are."

I had to hand it to him. He was calm. Maybe he thought I didn't have the guts to shoot him. Maybe he was right.

"That's why I'm here." Morty said as he stepped away from his car. "I didn't think you had it in you. Being able to act so ruthless and all. I was on my way out here to save your ass. Looks like you did fine without me."

"I'll be even finer permanently... without you." I told him. "I'll admit it'll be a little hard to shoot you in cold blood, but I think I can manage it. You sent two guys out to kill me because I made fun of you? What the fuck is that?"

"It's what I do. I don't apologize for it. I've had to be ruthless to survive. It's become second nature for me."

"I don't want your apologies. Goodbye Mort."

He didn't even flinch. I had been steeling myself for this. It was shit or get off the pot.

"Can I show you something first?"

I was wary and impressed. Morty might be a first class asshole, but he wasn't a coward.

"It's not a trick." He said. "What I want to show you is on the front seat."

I motioned him away from his car, "Get on your knees and put your hands on your head."

Morty knelt on the ground, the distaste at getting his pants dirty showing on his face, and put his hands behind his head.

I opened the car door and saw a small gray suitcase on the seat. Keeping my eyes on him, I pulled it out of the car, and set it down in front of Morty. The suitcase had a simple latch. I flicked the latch, and then opened it towards Morty, just in case. It contained the tape I'd made of his performance.

“Some friends of mine saw it.” Morty said. “They thought it was some seriously funny shit. A lot of people are calling it brilliant. With my connections, I can turn this into something. You’re a natural at editing comedy for effect. I’ll also give you a lump sum for the small inconvenience you’ve had to suffer through. I’ll pay you one hundred thousand dollars to keep your mouth shut”

He was silent for a moment as what he’d said sank in, “And you and I work together. We’ll both make a lot of money. It’ll also help me to sell my paintings.”

We faced each other in the afternoon heat; the wind came up and blew his cowboy hat off. He didn’t seem to notice. Morty knelt in the dirt looking up at me, saying nothing, cocky and certain I wouldn’t turn him down. He was betting his life on it. This guy had tried to have me killed and I hated his guts. He was asking me to forget all the crap he’d put me through for a few lousy bucks. Ok, for thousands of lousy bucks. I have to admit, it was a tempting offer. I stood there, with the gun in my hand, wondering what to do.

It’s been a year and a half since my little episode in the mine. I live in Denver now, but I work in Santa Fe half the time. I do freelance work in Colorado and make periodic trips to Santa Fe to work for Morty. It’s a very profitable and fulfilling arrangement for us both. I shoot and edit film, and make Morty look ridiculous. It’s a labor of love.

During one of my monthly trips to Santa Fe I started up a relationship with Fiona Felders, the performance artist that Morty screwed over. She’s become quite popular and successful in her own right. Fiona can’t stand Morty. She wonders how I could work for an asshole like that. I tell her what the hell. He pays well.

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

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“Ghost Writing” by Monika Ragland

Synopsis: A professional writer has a secret that allows him to tell the most interesting, detailed stories. As with many secrets, they can twist and turn, becoming difficult and deadly. Beware of what you write, it may kill you.

About the Author: Monika Ragland is a retired educator who has had poetry published in a number of journals. Her short fiction has appeared in Voice and Creosote, Arizona publications. She lives in Safford, Arizona, a small town in southeast Arizona. She spends her time writing, reading, and hiking on nearby Mt. Graham.

In this spellbinding horror, writing makes the pen a deadly tool.

Ghost Writing

By Monika Ragland



It wasn't Barnes & Noble, but it was paying the bills. My star was rising. I met with an increasing fan base at the smaller specialty bookstores that still clung like lichen to the world of publishing. Overstuffed chairs sat in semi-circles around podiums crowded by oak bookcases. Fans relished feeling intimate and close and I liked that I didn't need a mike to read a chapter from my latest murder mystery. It was great—until he killed me.

Not that he was personally involved, but he did it just the same. I was reading out of *Falling Leaves & Shattered Seasons*, my third *Jackson Towers* novel. Over the top of the book, I noticed two cops coming in. Thought they were fans. Stupid me.

"Jake Stower, you're under arrest for the murders of Kathleen Bailey, Jessica Andrews, and Sandra Hewitt..." It all went to, "Blah, blah blah..." after the word *murder*. Yeah, they dragged me out in cuffs, and shoved me into the backseat of a squad car. All I could think was *I hope this ups the book sales*.

Hollywood gives police interviews a dramatic grittiness. There's shouting and shoving. Steely glares and fists pounding on furniture lead to the final pathetic confession. In reality, they make it uncomfortable, but it's pretty straightforward. Not too much high tech or psychiatrists watching from the other side of the mirror in Smalltown, USA.

"We know you killed them. We just want to know why."

"I didn't kill anyone!" I put my best *innocent* emphasis on the words, but wasn't really worried too much. After all, *I hadn't killed anyone*. I recited that mantra for the first few weeks—with the

police, the arraignment judge, and the public defender. No one listened. They were all convinced that I had killed three women. I started to worry.

You know you're in trouble when you start selling everything you own, emptying your bank accounts, and borrowing from anyone you'd ever counted as a friend just to get a good lawyer. John W. Pierce was supposed to be good. By then I certainly hoped so. I was tired of Mayberry's jail and wanted bail, a decent meal, and a shower without company—in that order.

"Mr. Stower, now that we have you out of jail, shall we proceed to the gist of the matter? Did you do it?" A pinstriped suit, manicure, and framed vellum diplomas lent an air of sophistication to Pierce's questioning. On my side of the polished desk I started to feel a bit of relief. It was obvious that he was successful. I needed successful.

"Nope. I don't even know how the police connected me to this or why they seem so positive that I'm guilty. I'm a writer. I can't remember having been to the cities where these murders supposedly happened!" At this point of the game, I was having real trouble maintaining a calm certainty in the infallibility of the Justice System. My calm was definitely being damaged. And this was all before disclosure.

The interview after disclosure was a bit different.

"Mr. Stower, I don't like clients who lie to me. I don't really care if you are innocent or guilty. I *care* about doing the best job I can for you. I can't do that if you lie to me. "Shall we try again? Did you do it?"

"I don't know what you think you know, but I DID NOT KILL ANYONE!" Shouting at your lawyer is never a good idea, but frustration leads to bad judgment.

We spent the next five hours (at \$500 an hour!) going over the case against me. That's when it became clear to me *how* he'd killed me.

It doesn't matter how many "Ghost Hunters International" programs they air on SciFi or Discovery Channel; the average person still doesn't believe in ghosts. It's all lights and mirrors and spooky entertainment. Unfortunately for me, I knew they were real. I spoke to them.

It started when I was young and dumb. I'd gone out with the rest of the macho men at Creston High to tip over headstones at the local cemetery. It was the cool thing to do after midnight on a Saturday night. One time I was the last to leave (the other guys weren't interested in watching me puke my drunken guts out) and heard someone crying. A plaintive sobbing hiccupped through the night. The heartbreaking sound had me wandering among the graves lit by solar path lights.

"Who's there? Are you Okay?" I never *saw* anyone, but I did start a conversation I would never forget. I could *hear* her talking. It was like she just made the words appear in my brain. I'm sure from the outside it looked pretty weird—me sitting on an overturned grave marker talking to myself in the middle of the night.

Her name was Anna Lynne Martin. Yeah, we'd turned over her headstone. It was dawn before I left, knowing everything there was to know about Anna. I could picture the house she'd grown up in, the pets she'd had, and the strapless, silver, satin gown she'd worn to the prom. I even knew how and why she'd killed herself.

I didn't think much about it for a while. Then Ms. Howard assigned a short story. Until that moment, I had never even thought about writing. I didn't have to work on a story because I had a story to tell—Anna's. Her sorrowful life made a great story. Ms. Howard even complimented me for doing such great research on one of our town's historic tragedies.

After that, I was a natural writer. In college I published a few stories in some minor magazines and journals. Material was easy to find. I'd just hang out at a cemetery on moonless nights talking to no one. My developing, offbeat reputation didn't bother me. The effort was paying off.

When I moved from Arizona, I found bigger, older cemeteries that had even more stories to tell. For the next decade I lived life, bummed around the country, trolled cemeteries, and sold dead people's stories.

Then one night I started my conversation with Jacob Haney.

I'd been strolling around Paxtonville Cemetery in up-state New York at dusk. You know the kind...lined with oaks and maples that had seen the Revolution, manicured lawns dotted with hand-carved angels on pedestals and obelisks that mirrored Cleopatra's Needle. I'd had enough short stories published that my ego yelled that it was time to move on to writing a book.

Usually, I trolled headstones looking for someone who'd died young. Short lives—short stories. But I wanted a book this time so I expanded the age range to find a full life experience. Books were character driven. The rich complexity needed was developed over time. It was made up of dreams and disappointments, naiveté and cynicism, tears and laughter—all in equal or not so equal parts. Of course the best characters had flaws that motivated them, hindered them, made them likable or hateable but left them unforgettable.

As the sun dropped leaving the sky shades of mauve and purple, I tripped over a nondescript marker raised barely above ground level. Jacob Haney was sandblasted into its face. He'd died at 52. As I thought about his age, I realized he'd lived through some pretty interesting history—the Viet Nam war, the Civil Rights Movement, the Space program, the Iran-Contra Affair and Star Wars—both the Lucas and the Reagan versions. So I waited for Jacob. Planting myself on their headstones usually brought some kind of response from the resident ghost.

Jacob was an angry man. It took me a few nights just to get him to listen to me. We finally came to an understanding and he agreed to tell me things. Some nights he'd ramble on about inconsequential crap and disappear in a huff when I pushed for something better. Other times he'd come in furious and fast—it was all I could do to take notes and keep up. His mercurial moods kept me coming back. Besides, as a newspaper reporter, Jacob had more stories and details than an average life could have offered up.

During the months I sat there talking to Jacob, you'd have thought that I'd get in trouble with someone. A couple times I had to dodge some late-night kids, but, for the most part, cemeteries are pretty empty after midnight. I actually rented a dump in town and settled in to write. Everyone thought I had a night job because of my schedule. I'd meet with Jacob, scribbling notes furiously, and then go home and type until I had to sleep. When I woke up it started all over again.

Needless to say, Jacob had great stories that made pretty good books. It was working for me—until the trial.

Did you know that circumstance can build a pretty strong bridge to guilty? The prosecution didn't even have to work all that hard. You see, it seems I did have cops who were fans. All the evidence

they needed was right there in black and white. Three murders—three books. Every little detail—when, where, how, with what—it was all spelled out. Some details had never been released by the police. Kathleen had been killed by a knife found buried under an oak in a cemetery. A scene I had written in detail in book one. The gun that killed Jessica was found on the pages of book two. Book three vividly described the cottage on Gun Lake where Sandra died, and exactly what was used to weigh down her body in its dark waters. Only the actual killer would have known these things. And I thought Jacob was just a great reporter.

As a loner who'd spent his time in cemeteries at night, I couldn't offer up a reliable alibi for anything. I suppose I could have gone for the insanity plea by testifying that I got it from a ghost. But really, would that have cleared me? No!.

My last thought as the needle went into my arm was, "Who's gonna tell my story?"

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

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“The Warrior” by Casey Murphy

Synopsis: All Charlie ever wanted was to be a superhero and join the elite group The F.I.V.E. in fighting crime. When a want ad appears in the paper, he decides to sign up even though he is far from super.

About the Author: Casey Murphy has been writing fiction since the fifth grade. She currently has 7 short stories and 1 creative nonfiction piece published. You can find her at: www.simplydelete.wordpress.com .

In this action packed adventure, superheroes get saved by the power of human determination.

The Warrior

By Casey Murphy



Sure enough, it was happening again.

As Charlie crouched in the air vent, his cape had snagged on a screw and was tearing. "Shit!" he muttered as he tugged at the fabric, but instead of setting himself free, he was only creating a bigger hole. Finally, the fabric came loose, leaving behind a small scrap from the edge.

He wasn't exactly sure what he was doing in the air vent to begin with. He was no superhero. But even as despair clouded over him, he continued moving forward, trying to be as quiet as possible, which was a hard task for a klutz.

Charlie had seen the want ad in *The Chronicle* close to two months ago, just like everyone else who read the paper.

WANTED:

One superhero with extraordinary superpowers to join The F.I.V.E. (First-class Icons of the uniVerse Ever) in fighting crime. Must be prepared to start immediately. No previous experience required.

Well, Charlie didn't have any experience because he didn't have any superpowers. But he had worshipped the F.I.V.E ever since they had saved him from being bullied, and he was determined to show them that he was just as good as they were. Even without superpowers.

The sound of his elbows banging against the bottom of the air vent reminded him of the sound his shoes made as he walked down the linoleum hall heading toward the auditorium where his interview was being held. He remembered how he took a deep breath before pushing open the heavy metal doors.

And there they were. The four of them, waiting for him. Light seemed to shine around them as they looked over at him. Really looking at him.

He ran over to the table where they were sitting, slamming his hands down on the surface to stop himself plowing the table over. "Wowie! It's really you guys!" he screamed, his excitement getting the better of him.

"Who else would it be?" Lightning Girl asked, sounding slightly annoyed.

Inflated Muscle Man was staring at him real close. "You look familiar. Do we know—"

"It's me! Charlie Graham." His smile was growing wider by the minute.

"Wait, aren't you that kid—"

"Sure am!"

Inflated Muscle Man paused. "Don't we have a restraining order against you?"

"Not yet."

"Look, kid, what are ya doin' here?" Leprechaun Lad asked. "We're kind of waitin' for someone—"

"That's me."

The four exchanged skeptical glances. Inflated Muscle Man looked down at the sheet in front of him. "*You're the Warrior?*"

Charlie nodded enthusiastically. Lady Illusion laughed. "A warrior of what? Teen angst?"

"What Lady Illusion's trying to say is, what exactly is your superpower?" Lightning Girl asked.

"My superpower?"

"What can you *do*?"

Charlie quickly racked his brain. "I can... uh..."

"See, he can't do nothin'," Lady Illusion said, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms. "He couldn't do nothing' to save his sorry ass back then, and he can't do nothin' now."

"No! I can!" Then it hit him. "I have telekinetic powers!"

"Do ya? Show us."

The room was so quiet Charlie could hear the crinkle of Inflated Muscle Man's muscles as he leaned across the table. "You have to give us something, Charlie," he said, sincerity in his voice.

“He can’t cause he can’t do nothin’,” Lady Illusion insisted.

With the pressure on, sweat began to form at Charlie’s hair line. There was only one way he knew how to respond. “OKAY!” he shouted. “I don’t have telekinetic powers! Or any superpowers!” Lady Illusion let out a quick, harsh laugh. “I just wanna join F.I.V.E. so badly. It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do.”

“Sorry, but you need to have a superpower to be part of F.I.V.E.—“

“Now wait a minute, Lady Illusion,” Inflated Muscle Man said. “Maybe we should let him join.” The idea of Charlie getting what he wanted for the first time in his life lit up his face.

“But—” Lady Illusion tried to protest.

“He’s the only one who answered the ad anyway.”

“That doesn’t mean—“

“And it would be kinda nice not worryin’ about being impaled by some newbies uncontrolled power,” Leprechaun Lad said half to himself.

Lady Illusion opened her mouth again, but was cut off by Lightning Girl. “Not to mention we can’t *really* be F.I.V.E. without... well... five.”

Lady Illusion stared at the other three incredulously. “Fine. If all y’all wanna hire this... *kid*, then go right ahead. I’m not stoppin’ ya’ll!” She stood up quickly, almost knocking her chair over as she headed toward the doors. As she passed Charlie, she made sure to bang into him. “Welcome to the team, Warrior.” Flames trailed behind her as she left, her anger showing through her powers.

“Don’t give her any attention,” Lightning Girl advised. “She’ll grow on you.”

Charlie was still waiting for that to happen. He spent the month and a half in headquarters fulfilling the duties of sidekick apprentice, which was mostly cooking, cleaning, and taking out the trash, all things he turned out to be pretty good at. What he really wanted to do, though, was fight crime, but every time the call came in he was told to stay behind. Until today.

Charlie stopped moving and tried to wipe the sweat off his forehead, but it was hard to do in the cramped space. He could hear voices up ahead.

“Just a little further,” he whispered.

Reaching the end of the vent, he stared down into the room from behind the metal grate. Everything was dark except for the center of the room where a giant hole in the floor revealed a bright, bubbling purple mixture. Leprechaun Lad was suspended in mid air above it, his tiny body rotating in different directions. The other three were standing nearby, watching.

“This is pathetic,” a woman standing off to the side said with a laugh. “Fight back!”

“I can’t with ya tossin’ me ‘round like that!”

“No, you just can’t.”

With a small flick of her fingers, Leprechaun Lad went flying, creating a leprechaun sized hole in the far wall. At the impact of his body, a spider the size of a baseball fell from the roof of the air vent onto Charlie's head, and crawled onto his face.

With a yelp of surprise, Charlie somehow managed to break the covering of the air vent off and tumble onto the floor of the room without breaking his neck. As if a sensor detected his movements, overhead lights came flickering on. Slowly, Charlie sat up rubbing his head. For a second the room swam around him before coming into focus and he saw they were in some kind a warehouse, with large wooden crates surrounding them.

"Charlie?"

At the sound of Inflated Muscle Man's voice, Charlie was up, rushing toward them. "I came as fast as I could!" he said, his breath coming out in big gasps.

"And who is this?" the woman asked, playful curiosity in her tone. "Your rescue squad?"

Charlie puffed out his chest and pointed his thumbs at himself, like he had seen so many people do on TV. "I'm the Warrior," he said. "And I'm here to destroy you."

Silence filled the room for a split second before the woman threw her head back in laughter. "Warrior, eh? You don't look like much of a warrior to me."

"Don't be deceived."

"Well then, Warrior, welcome to Ossicles's lair. I hope you prove to be a better fighter than your... ah... friends."

"He's not my friend," Charlie heard Lady Illusion mutter under her breath.

"Now," Ossicles continued, "let's see what you've got."

Without further warning, two of the smaller crates came flying in his direction. It was one of those times where Charlie was thankful he was actually good at dodge ball. Unfortunately, the third crate thrown his way was bigger and it bowled him over.

"Too easy!" the woman laughed.

"You can do it, Charlie." From the ground, Charlie looked up at Lightning Girl, who was smiling warmly at him. "I believe in you."

"Can't you help me?"

She shook her head, a small frown on her face. "She's got our powers under lock down." Leaning her head back slightly, it was the first time Charlie noticed the silver collar that clasped her neck. Lady Illusion had one that looked similar, but Inflated Muscle Man didn't. Charlie did notice that his inflated muscles had two gashes in them, and they were slowly deflating. "It's up to you."

"But I'm not a superhero!"

"That's odd. I didn't know the F.I.V.E. took on people without powers."

He couldn't help but stare at her, confused.

"Are you done already?" Ossicles said. "That was too quick. I didn't know *warriors* gave up that easily."

Charlie stood. He opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off by another flying crate. He quickly scrambled out of the way, and it fell into a tower of crates behind him, making them rock dangerously back and forth. Ossicles was smiling. "Oh, we're playing a game now? Alright." And two more crates came his way.

Charlie kept his ears and eyes open for the sound or sight of flying crates. He ran around in circles, weaving in and out of crate towers, not exactly sure what he was doing, but knowing it was better than standing still. Finally, Ossicles made her mistake. As Charlie rounded a corner close to her, she hurled a crate toward him. Again he skillfully dodged it, and it knocked down a tower of crates right into another tower, creating a domino effect. It was then that Ossicles realized what she had done. She screamed as the crates crashed down around her, until she was no longer in sight.

As the dust and dirt settled, Charlie was glad to see the other four unharmed. With Ossicles's fall, the silver collar's around Lightning Girl and Lady Illusion's throats had come undone. From across the room they could hear Leprechaun Lad stirring.

He groaned. "What happened?"

"We were saved," Lightning Girl said with a smile.

"By this punk?" Leprechaun Lad asked in shock as he pointed to Charlie, who was sweating.

"Somehow," Lady Illusion muttered, not sounding too happy about it.

"I don't believe it," Leprechaun Lad said.

"It was one of those you-had-to-be-there moments," Inflated Muscle Man agreed.

As they all left the warehouse, Charlie helping Leprechaun Lad who had a terrible limp, Lady Illusion announced, "Don't think that one victory means you'll be joining us in fighting crime. You're still only our apprentice."

"Of course," Charlie said, nodding his head. "If I come along you won't have anyone left to save your asses."

As flames radiated off Lady Illusion, the other three laughed at Charlie's response. Secretly, though, he was thankful he would still get left behind. Maybe he wasn't cut out to be a superhero after all.

**** THE END ****

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“The Academy” by T.L. Bodine

Synopsis: Think the economy is bad? Unemployment? Here, a superhero loses privileges when replaced by superior powers.

About the Author: T.L. Bodine was born in 1986 in Durango, CO, and spent the rest of her childhood traveling with her blue-collar family and fostering a lifelong love affair with language. Ms. Bodine received her BA in English at New Mexico State University in 2007 and studied Creative Writing at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona before returning to New Mexico, where she currently resides. She lives with her boyfriend, two cats, a toothless chihuahua, and runs a small-scale rat rescue from her apartment. The rats eat better than anyone else in the house.

In this superhero fiction, superheroes will be let go to be replaced by alternative forces.

The Academy

By T.L. Bodine



The water flows into the tub, churning the soap into a seething, sudsy cloud. I peel my clothes off, and add them to the pile in the tub, press them down with my hand so they stay submerged. The soap-bubbles consume them, and I shut off the tap and climb into the tub and feel wet cotton squish up between my toes, slick with soap. I step in place, stomp, meditatively trying to recreate the agitation cycle of a washing machine. I try to imagine myself stomping grapes. I try to imagine giving up an offering to Bacchus, for love and free-flowing wine. It doesn't work.

When I looked it up on the internet, I was assured this process would be enjoyable. Green. Economical. Rewarding, even. But now, standing calf-deep in steaming suds, I can tell you honestly: this isn't enjoyable. This is shit.

Things weren't like this, at first.

I was a late bloomer. Most people, if they're going to be Supers, figure it out by puberty: you get breasts and menstruation and super-powers, like a package deal. Some even show aptitude as young children. Not me; I was eighteen when the change came over me.

The thing about super powers is they're instant. Unlike other changes in your life -- growing up, learning skills, falling in love -- the powers really do come from nowhere, like turning on a light switch. There's darkness, then there's light, and once your eyes adjust you can see everything. I fell asleep one night as nobody special, the same as I'd done every night in my not-very-special life. While I slept, I had the strangest dream. In it, I was a cat -- a powerful jungle cat, all muscle and stealth and power -- and I prowled through a drab gray cityscape, feeling as though I was the queen of everything. When I awoke, it was dark, but I could see my room in perfect detail. I could

smell the reek of sex that clung to my roommate's unwashed sheets. I smelled the stale weed from my suitemate's dorm. I could hear the dull crunch of asphalt under tires, the squeaking of brakes, the thudding of bass in car radios. I crept out of bed, curious but unafraid, and my feet were soundless on the linoleum.

I was still a human -- two hands, ten toes, bare flesh hidden under flannel pajamas -- but I was something else, too. Something more. I padded silently from my room out onto the balcony, and cleared it with an easy leap, landing in the courtyard below crouched on all fours. My body wanted to run, so I let it, and for a long time that night all I did was scale buildings and jump across rooftops. I'll always remember that night. I never had another like it.

You've only got two choices, once the powers appear: train for work at the Academy...or hide and hope to god they never find you. The latter option doesn't really work out. The Academy has a special force that keep tabs on Super activity all over the world; they catch a whiff of Power and they'll be on you in a second. If, somehow, you manage not to get caught, the powers themselves will slowly consume you. Unless they're trained properly, focused and directed, the powers will eat away at your mind and body and soon enough you'll go insane. It's for your own good, the controls they put in place. For your good, and the safety of everyone. That's what the Academy is about -- the safety of everyone.

So when the agents came for me, from the Academy, I went with them.

I stare down into the tub. My clothes float around my feet like flaccid eels. The bubbles are gone, and the water is tepid and gray. I open the drain with my toes, balancing for a moment on one foot on slippery soap-lubricated porcelain. The superior balance is good for something, I think.

Now, if only the powers enabled me to find some goddamn quarters.

I turn the tap again, refilling the tub. First rinse cycle. More stomping. The clothes bleed gray-blue into the water and the chemicals in the soap sting the soles of my feet.

The old apartment was better. It had a washing machine of its own, tucked into the hall closet, and a garbage disposal, and a gate that locked at night. Not that I ever feared for my safety; lightning-fast reflexes and supreme night vision kind of negate the threat of petty criminals in the night. I miss the washing machine, though. Here I have to turn out my pockets for quarters and stand under the flickering sick-yellow fluorescent lights in the laundry room, smelling stale nicotine and discarded diapers.

Now, in the bathroom, I kind of miss the laundromat.

&&&

"We are gifted with the duty to protect mankind. We are granted the sacred birthright to work in service of the weak. Our humility is our strength."

They taught us a lot of things at the Academy. How to focus and refine our power. How to utilize technology to complement our abilities. And how to submit to the authority of the weak, whose protection was our ultimate purpose.

We finished our Recitation of Principle -- a superhero pledge of allegiance, essentially -- and sat down. The classroom looked the same as any other: desks, arranged in rows facing a blackboard.

On the blackboard the professor had drawn a very crude rendition of an enemy combatant. It had vacant circles for eyes and a crooked slash for a mouth.

"Ok. This is the enemy." When they taught lessons, they were always vague on who or what the enemy would be. Specifics didn't matter. The end result would always be the same. "As you all know, there are multiple ways to reach a single outcome -- namely, here, to kill."

The professor was short and fat, with almost no hair on his head but an unusual quantity on his knuckles. We didn't know what power, if any, he had. Rumor was he was a Normal. But there's no way to tell by looking -- not unless you've got the Sense, that enables you to track Super energy, and even then it only works when powers are actually being used.

"Physical attack," he continued, his beady eyes scanning over all of us to make sure we were paying attention. "Psychic. Molecular. Chemical. Stealth. Radiation. I want you to tell me how you plan to kill this individual. Five page essay, single spaced, explaining the benefits and methodology of your choice. On my desk Friday."

We uttered a collective groan.

"Yes, Jade Falcon?"

Jade Falcon -- that was her official name, but we mostly still called her Rebecca -- had her hand up in the air. It spent a lot of time there. Nobody really liked her; not because she was a know-it-all -- which she was -- but because we sensed that the faculty tended to dislike her. We avoided her the way herd animals reject their sickly members, for fear of predators. "I was just wondering," she said, her voice trembling a little -- all eyes were on her, suddenly, and the room was more tense than it should have been. "For -- for the assignment. Do we have to kill the enemy?" She blushed bright red.

"Why wouldn't you want to kill the enemy?" The professor's voice was low and cold and sounded like poison.

I felt bad for Jade Falcon, but of course I said nothing. No one did.

"I just -- I didn't mean -- " she was flustered. There were embarrassed tears in her eyes. "For the assignment. We can't stun, or in-incapacitate?"

It seemed unfair that a bald, short, fat man who was almost certainly a Normal should have so much power. But that's life. "No, Ms. Falcon." His voice was thick with irony. "Assume that if you fail to kill the enemy, that he will not hesitate to kill you instead." His words were sensible -- pragmatic -- but his eyes burned with loathing.

She said nothing further and we worked the rest of the day in uneasy silence.

&&&

I lift up a shirt and examine it. It smells like a spring breeze, but there's a white film clinging to the pores of the fabric where the soap settled in. I poke at it, with a fingernail, and it smudges, white-gray and slimy. I sigh and drop the shirt back into the pile, carefully stamping it down with the other laundry, squeezing as much water out as I can. I suppose I have to do another rinse.

I have superhuman stamina, but even I'm starting to get tired. Maybe it's just despair masquerading as fatigue.

After graduation -- an event that happened when the Academy felt you were ready, regardless of age or time spent in the program -- we were assigned to our jobs.

Mostly they used us in wars. Sometimes we fought crime -- the big stuff, the things law enforcement can't take due to danger or difficulty. Some of us aided in disasters. We worked alongside the CIA and the Black Ops and the National Guard and we were compensated well enough. Not that anybody was really working for the money. At the time, knowing you were a superhero was compensation enough.

Funny how things change.

Some of us -- the favorites, the best and the brightest -- went on to join the Special Hero Services. They're the people who control the rest of us, the Super Police as it were. If a hero decides to go rogue, or a child's talents get out of hand, or a hero needs disciplinary action, they're the ones who do it. After all, you have to fight Supers with other Supers.

There aren't any Super Villains, not really. Only those allied with the Academy, and those on the outside. The ones on the outside don't tend to live very long.

I worked for the Academy for a long time. I fought a lot of people: civilian criminals, enemy soldiers, foreign Supers. I fell in love with a scientist. His name was James and he was so smart I thought he was a Super when I met him. We were at a party. The Human Tank threw it at his place, on some pretense or another, I don't remember the details -- we partied so often, survival being excuse enough to celebrate -- and he always threw the best parties. Anti-Gravity Man was showboating, doing keg stands, and we were all drunk enough to humor him even though it wasn't really that impressive.

James leaned against the wall, sipping at his drink and looking awkward and vulnerable. I asked him to hold my drink while I danced, and when I came back there was sweat in the small of my back and my body was tingling all over and James said something -- I don't remember what, now, but at the time it had been the smartest, funniest thing I'd heard all night, maybe in my life. He told me later he'd spent all the while I was dancing trying to come up with a good line.

Somehow we got to talking, and I leaned against the wall beside him and soaked in his intelligence and his vulnerability and then he kissed me and I kissed him back and we were a tangle of bodies and hands and by the time I figured out he was a Normal it didn't matter anymore.

We got married six months later. It didn't work out.

After we made love he would lay on his back with a stony look on his face, sweat pooling on his brow and his chest, and I would curl up beside him and feel restless and unsatisfied and neither of us would speak. It wasn't just about the sex. It was about the insurmountable distance between us, the knowledge we both had that neither of us could put into words. He felt inferior. I worried constantly about hurting him. We both held back, and we both knew it but were too scared not to.

I tried to get pregnant, for awhile. I thought it might help. But the seed would never take, and whether that was my fault or his, it drove the last wedge between us. Sometimes I still think about the baby we could have had, but I try not to. It's too confusing. Too painful.

One day, years after the divorce, James pulled me aside and asked, in hushed tones, if I wanted to see something amazing. It wasn't the sort of question I could say no to, so I followed him down the hall into one of the dozen rooms they use for experiments and whatever else the scientist types do. Inside, there was a machine. It was humanoid, but just barely; it was all glinting steel and right angles and ball joints, like an overgrown action figure. "What is this?" I asked him.

James spoke with reverence and tenderness and awe, and standing beside him I could hardly remember how I'd ever loved him. "A robotic hero simulator," he said, and reached out a hand to touch it, to stroke its steel boxy biceps. The robot stayed inert and vaguely menacing in its silence. "Available in a whole array of powers -- technologically identical to any Super we want!" He turned to me, and he smiled. "Just think. War between robots alone. No more casualties -- Normal or Super."

His eyes shone with pride.

If he truly believed in it, I'll never know. But I saw the machine for what it was -- the beginning of the end.

&&&

The clothes are clean enough. They're not so slimy to the touch now, anyway, and I'm tired of looking at them. I wring them out, one at a time, and marvel at how much water a single pair of blue jeans can hold and how exhausting it is to squeeze it all out. I hang each item on the clothes line I strung up in the bathtub, and watch the slow rain of water drip down from the seams and edges into the tub.

The robots replaced the heroes.

The robots stood like titans, avatars of the geeks that stood on the sidelines and played their war games. Just like that, within a lifetime we had gone from heroes to washed-up veterans, relics of a bygone era, cursed with bodies and powers and skills we could no longer use. We were like puzzle pieces that had been warped and cut and no longer fit where they once had.

They offered me a position in Special Services when they laid me off, but I declined. I just didn't have the heart to spend my days hunting the last of a dying breed.

It didn't take long before robots were doing that job, too.

They debriefed me. I knew it all already, but I listened because that's what a soldier does. I would live my life as a civilian; I would never use my powers again, under threat of being hunted by the same task force I had refused to work for. They gave me some severance pay, and a monthly stipend -- a retirement pension -- and wished me the best of luck.

A career in professional crime-fighting didn't prepare me for the real world. I tried to go back to school, but they wouldn't take me -- they seemed to think I could cheat. I tried to explain to them that, even if I could use my powers -- which I couldn't, not without unbearable consequences -- that I wasn't psychic or anything, that I really didn't see how heightened senses and some enhanced physical ability could really give me an unfair advantage in the classroom. It didn't help.

I got a job with a supermarket, on their midnight stocking crew. My boss was a thin weaselly man with a pencil mustache and big glasses. He spoke in a high-pitched whine, like a petulant jet

engine, and when he talked to me he never looked directly at me but kept his eyes averted just a little as though he were watching a solar eclipse.

"I know you're able to work faster," he said, for the hundredth time. He had a clipboard in his hand and some form with little check boxes. "We all believe in developing the unique talents of our team members. That's one of the key foundations of ShopMart's competitive business model, that is, performing to the best of our abilities." He gave me one of his long sideways glances, and nibbled at his pen. "Do you think you're working to the best of your abilities? Hm?"

I tore off my green apron and dropped it on the floor and walked out.

Behind me, I heard him calling "You have to turn in your box cutter!" but I just kept walking.

&&&

There's a lot of distrust in the world now, about Supers. We can't use our powers anymore, but they don't seem to remember that. We also protected them from evil for centuries, but they don't seem to remember that either. One of these days the robots are going to be replaced by the next enhancement in technology, the next tool of the elite and nerdy. Then they'll be the ones trying to find a day job. Except I guess they won't care so much; they can just be powered down, go into hibernation, cease to exist.

Lucky them.

**** THE END ****

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“Sergeant Bert Dalton & the Hag” by Alan Dawson

Synopsis: Sergeant Bert Dalton deals with the paranormal in this strange case of murder and intrigue.

About the Author: ‘Bert and the Hag’ is the third Sergeant Bert Dalton tale to feature in the Freedom Fiction Journal. Bert Dalton is the creation of A D Dawson, otherwise known as the English Devil, who writes from the heart of Sherwood Forest. Dalton, an uncompromising police officer, holds firm all of the values that belong to a better age when the wicked were persecuted and the vulnerable were protected. Join Bert at FaceBook.

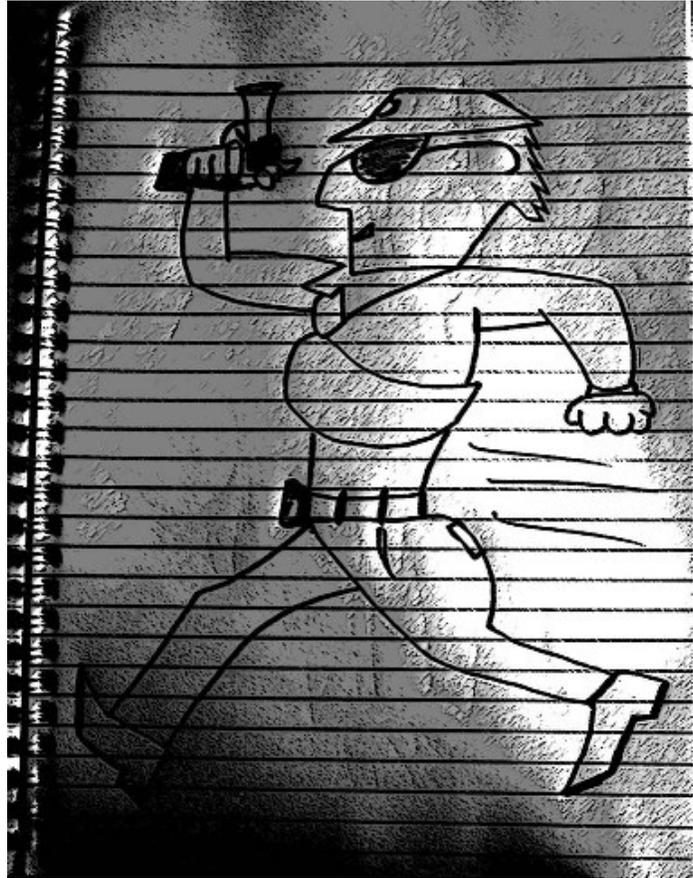
In this detective fiction, a woman seeks revenge and may just get her way.

Sergeant Bert Dalton & the Hag

By Alan Dawson

It can be daunting if you want to join a gym; especially if you have never worked out before and you want to lose a few inches from your waistline or tone up your bingo wings. Many will come to the foot of the concrete stairs of the Body Factory Gymnasium, and go no further. Others will get as far as reception and pick up a leaflet before quickly descending back down the stairs to the street...

...She stepped lightly up the stairs and opened the door that led to the reception. Reception was really a grand name for a home-made counter that ran the length of the back wall with shelves behind it holding up vast tubs of protein powder, weight gain, weight loss and other supplements; a small arch gave access to the main gym. She peeped inside only to stagger backwards nearly losing her footing to the stairs behind her. Too horrified to scream, she stumbled down the stairs and ran out into the street and straight into the arms of a bewildered shopper. Such was her anxious state; he quickly dialled for an ambulance fearing that she was suffering a paroxysm of some kind. He gasped as the full weight of her came onto him. She had fainted.



He gasped as the full weight of her came onto him. She had fainted.

“What’s going on?” asked a middle-aged lady as she helped to support the girl.

The man shrugged his shoulders and hoped that the paramedics would be along soon.

&&&

The girls giggled as the short fat man stood on a small step ladder that he had brought with him. He tightened the noose, which was tied to a sturdy bough, around his neck and ordered the girls to fasten his hands around his back with plastic tie wraps. Just before they did as he asked, he handed them some money – quite a lot of money for two common or garden prostitutes. A grey cloud blocked out the late evening sun and a chill caused him to shiver. Sherwood Forest had seen some strange things in its ancient history, but nothing as strange as this ritual. He told one of the girls, a blonde wearing tight jeans and t-shirt, to kick the step ladder from under his feet. She gave it an almighty kick and his body swung free.

&&&

The stench was unbearable coming up the stairs; some police officers struggled to continue on into the gym itself. Instead they had to run down the stairs fighting to contain the contents of their

stomach and gasp like landed fish for fresh air when they got to the bottom near the outer door. If they had stepped inside they would have been witness to the most gruesome of sights to boot. Even Sergeant Dalton, a hardened officer from the North of England, was traumatised by what he saw. Ten men and they were all dead. It wasn't the fact that they were dead that was traumatic; although that in itself is pretty disturbing. It was the fact that they had been slain; chopped to pieces like second rate actors in a budget horror flick. Their guts and entrails hung hideously from their hacked bodies and their well-developed limbs lay helplessly on the floor next to their torsos; most of the men were bodybuilders and weighed well over 18 stone a piece. Who had done this to them?

Dalton knew that the suffering was not over yet. Evil like this had to run its course and this was only the beginning; he was sure of this.

&&&

The girl sat silently in the small interview room; her fierce grey eyes stared out through a window that wasn't there. Dalton sat down opposite her and offered her a bottle of mineral water; she neither refused it nor accepted it.

"She's not said a word since we brought her in, Bert," said a young WPC who stood near the door.

"I'm Sergeant Dalton," he said softly to no return. He was just about to stand to go when the girl spoke. The language wasn't English and her voice trembled. "It's okay," said the Sergeant in the same gentle tone as before. The girl began to cry and she dropped her head onto the table top. "Look after her, Deborah, I'll get someone in to translate – she sounds Polish to me."

As he stepped outside the room, Inspector Clarke hurried by. He saw Dalton and turned to him. "Not a good day for us, is it Sergeant?" he said forlornly.

"It's been a much worse day for those body builders and the guy that stretched his neck out in Sherwood Forest."

The balding Inspector sighed. "Have you spoken to those bloody prostitutes yet?"

"Ballack's dealing with that one, Sir; I've got my hands full with this other *more* serious incident," Dalton replied incredulously

"Keep onto Ballack and make sure everything is kosher, Sergeant; the press are all over the place on this one... he *is* a member of parliament you know."

"Was a member of parliament, sir," he was reminded with impudence.

"No slip ups."

"Ballack's an experienced officer, sir."

The Inspector sighed once more. "I'm sure he is... I'm sure he is." With that he continued on his way.

Dalton was just about to continue along the corridor when a police officer called after him.

"Sergeant Dalton, I've got the gym owner in interview room five."

“Thank you officer; did you get a statement from him?”

“Not yet but he spoke to us when we brought him in. He’s very much shaken, which is very understandable, but he’s cooperative.”

“What time did he leave the gym? Did you ask him?”

The officer looked upward and drew breath through his teeth as he thought. “I think he said, 11 AM.”

“You think he said 11?”

“No it was definitely 11AM. He left at 11.”

Dalton grimaced. “Approximately the same time as the first man was killed, according to the coroner, and off the record of course.”

“He was well lucky if you ask me; another second or so before he left and he would have been killed himself.”

“Is he lucky?”

The officer shrugged.

“Never mind... Get me a Polish translator for the girl and I’ll have a word with the gym owner in the mean time.”

“Okay, Sergeant.”

“And hurry the doctor along too, please.”

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Dalton asked the gym owner, Dog Boy, as he is commonly known, to describe his movements from arriving at the gym to leaving at 11AM. Dog Boy was forthcoming.

“I lifted the shutters at 7.30AM and opened the gym. The usual big lads came in shortly afterwards – he gave their names. At about 9.30AM until another group of lads came to train – again he gave their names. By 10.30 there were nine regulars – he named them - and a tall guy who just paid for one session.”

Dalton asked who the tall guy was.

“His name was James Dawes; I’ve never seen him before today – he was all right though; he seemed friendly enough.”

“He’s a known drug dealer; do you like drug dealers in your Gym?”

Dog Boy shrugged. Dalton asked for a more detailed description and Dog Boy described the man to him. Dalton asked Dog Boy to continue.

"Nothing much happened between then and 11AM. Fid, one of the gym instructors, came in early to take me off – I had an appointment at the doctors at 11.15AM (Dalton made a mental note check this out)." With this Dog Boy got upset. "It should have been me that was dead, not poor old Fid... he was only doing me a favour... I'm going to miss him so much," he wailed as tears streamed down his face.

&&&

The CCTV cameras gave decent street-level coverage of the area but it didn't reveal anything amiss. A busy bus stop stood outside the gym and there had been plenty of people walking about hither and thither by the gym entrance that morning and everyone who actually went into the gym was accounted for... by death as it had come calling. Dalton scrutinised the tapes. A double-decker bus arrived at 10.59AM to spill its passengers onto the litter strewn streets. It didn't pull away until 11.05AM after the driver had counted his fares. The girl arrived at 11.02AM; she walked past Dog Boy without a reaction and eventually disappeared into the gym by the only entrance/exit.

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Alec Ballack sat back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. He sighed deeply before continuing. "You're asking me to believe that you thought Robin Pigg was wearing a safety harness when you kicked away the step ladder?"

The blonde girl sat across the table tearfully replied: "Yes I did. Why would I want to bloody kill him?"

"Why indeed, Dawn?" retorted Ballack smugly.

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Dalton looked down from the gym onto the street below. It was just beginning to get dark and everyone was rushing for the buses to take them home after a hard day's work. A pigeon stood on the top of a bus beneath where he stood. It flew up onto the window ledge with a flurry of feathers as the bus sharply pulled away. Inside the gym there was dried blood everywhere and Dalton carefully moved about lest he should stand in it; a man in a white paper suit busied himself taking measurements from chalked lines and scratching his head with a biro.

"You shouldn't be here, Dalton," he suddenly said to the big Sergeant, "It's a crime scene you know," he added in an unpleasant tone.

"I think your wife would agree that you shouldn't have been in *The Greek Temple* last Friday," said Dalton, "It's a gay club you know?"

"How the... Fuck you, Dalton."

Dalton chuckled. "Please, Aubrey, I'm not that way inclined like the rest of your friends are."

"Very bloody funny indeed," said Aubrey as he tried to compose himself.

Dalton rubbed his hand across a freshly made groove in a wall. "I heard one of your guys talking; he said that only one of the dead men put up a fight – is that true?"

Aubrey nodded.

“What did he look like?”

Aubrey reluctantly gave a description that matched the one of James Dawes given by Dog Boy.

Dalton pointed to the groove. “This is where he smashed a dumbbell into the wall isn’t it?”

Aubrey nodded.

“That would have hurt if it connected wouldn’t it? Why do you think none of the others put up a fight?”

Aubrey shrugged his thin shoulders. “They were probably too scared to move,” he opined. “Rooted to the spot with terror,” he continued under raised eyebrows.

“You could be right, my dear, Audrey.”

“Aubrey.”

“Sorry; of course it’s Aubrey; my mistake. You will let me know when you find out what the murder weapon was won’t you? Aubrey?”

&&&

“Listen, Beverley, Dawn has told me everything; Pigg was a regular customer of yours. You both used to regularly walk up and down his naked body in stilettos when he wasn’t in the City. He always asked for you both; one blonde and one brunette. I know.”

Beverley sighed.

“Makes me wonder why a bright girl like you does that sort of thing.”

Beverley reared up. “It’s all right for the likes of you, clever bastard. What do you think there is for the likes of me here? Market Town has gone to the dogs since the fucking East Europeans moved in and everybody in it. Where the fuck would I be If it wasn’t for Agnes helping me? I would be in the gutter working syphilitic cocks for a ten pound bag like the Poles have to! She looks after us and we’d do anything for her.”

“Sorry,” said Ballack with humility, “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Beverley burst into tears and the thick-set constable handed her a tissue. “Thank you Mister Ballack; I’m sorry that I called you that horrible name.”

Ballack smiled. But his smile hid an anguish that only a father could feel. For in truth, he was the father of a lost generation – he thanked God that his very own children were happy and content. “The interview is over for now, but I’m afraid we’ll have to detain you, Beverley. Do you want to change your mind about having a solicitor?”

She shook her head. “The truth will out, Mister Ballack, it always does. You must speak to Agnes, she will verify our story... she knew well Piggs needs and devices.”

"A...gnus?" he stammered before picking up the phone to call Dalton.

&&&

Ballack pulled slowly and reluctantly up to the kerb. He switched off the engine and eventually stepped out of the vehicle and onto the path next to Dalton who was impatiently waiting for him tapping his foot. A long row of terraced houses stood before them. More than half were deserted and secured with grey metal sheeting which safeguarded the windows and doors from vandals and squatters. Thick black smoke bellowed out of a single chimney pot, it belonged to house number thirty-one. The pavements were litter strewn and graffiti ill-decorated the red-brick walls. Ballack nearly stood in some dog shit as they went. He knocked half-heartedly on the red-painted door of number thirty-one. There was no reply. Dalton went to the window of the two up-two down but couldn't see in as thick curtains had been pulled over the windows. Ballack imagined that Agnes would be staring through the peep hole at him and he stepped back with a whimper. Dalton heavily sucked in air through flared nostrils.

"For God's sake man up, Alec."

"I'm sorry, Bert; it's just that she frightens me."

"For the umpteenth time she's not a witch; witches don't exist."

"But what about..."

"...It was a coincidence," bawled Dalton, not letting the officer finish the sentence. Fired up, Dalton went to the door and banged hard against the wood. "Open the door, Agnes before I come back with a search warrant!"

As if by magic the door opened. In the doorway stood a frail old lady wearing an orange cardigan and sporting a blue rinse to her curly bonce. She smiled to reveal stumps where teeth had once been. "Mister Dalton, how are you? And you Mister Ballack... how is the..."

"...Agnes!" checked Dalton.

Agnes cackled and invited them into the dimly lit house. She led them into the kitchen and shut the door. The kitchen was smoky and a blackened kettle boiled on the open fire. The greasy room was sparsely furnished and dirty pots and pans covered the sink and draining board. "Would you both like a drink of something... tea perhaps?"

"NO!" they let out in unison.

Dalton was just about to open the conversation but Agnes interrupted him. "You could be here for two reasons, Mister Dalton. First reason, the death of Pigg; very unfortunate but you know what those political fellows are like; you only have to read the Sunday papers.

"And the second reason?" Dalton asked.

"I've nothing to say on that matter and you can leave right now if that's why you are here," she said quietly as if she didn't want to be overheard, her left eye twitched involuntarily as she did so.

Dalton smiled. "We're here on the former, Agnes. Alec wants to ask you a few questions about your girls; that's all.

Agnes perked up almost immediately. “Ask away, Mister Ballack, I won’t bite you, I promise,” she teased.

Ballack coughed and stuttered out some nigh relevant questions to the amusement of his Sergeant. Satisfied about Pigg’s ways they stood to leave.

Just before she opened the door to let the officers out after her interview of sorts, Agnes pushed a piece of paper into Dalton’s hand. He tightened his grip on it as they stepped out into the street. A sudden wind whipped up from the deserted street and blew Ballack’s cap off. A look of terror spread across his face as he retrieved it. Dalton smiled and looked towards Agnes to share the comic moment. However, the smile dropped quickly off his face as he saw that she shared Ballack’s terrified facial expression. She slammed the door shut and he heard the bolts being shot hurriedly into place.

Dalton unfolded the crumpled paper and looked down at the directions that were written on it. “Come on, Alec, we’ve got somewhere else to go before we knock off for the evening.”

“Anywhere is better than here, Bert.”

“We shall see about that my little fat friend.”

Agnes slumped back heavily into her chair as she gasped for oxygen; her heart beat like a tom-tom in her frail chest. She felt cold and she dithered uncontrollably. She could hear the police officers talking outside her door, but was too weak to call them to. It would be days before she was discovered.

&&&

The derelict office building was all that remained of the Market Town brewery. A lazy security man watched uninterested from his warm hut as the two officers pushed their way through a broken chain link fence and into the yard. They crossed the cluttered yard towards the front of the former administration block. Broken glass on the reception doors had been replaced by wood. One of the doors was slightly ajar and Dalton put his shoulder to it to open it enough to allow him and his podgy colleague entry. It was dark inside and Dalton lit up his torch. Ballack followed the Sergeant up a flight of stairs. They climbed the stairs until they came to the top floor. A steel door had been fitted into one of the office portals. Ballack tested it with the flat of his hand. “That’s not for moving,” he said. He tried his shoulder against its sturdy construction. He winced and rubbed at his shoulder as the door wouldn’t yield.

Dalton turned the handle and the door clicked open; he looked at the injured officer and smirked. They went to step inside...

“Aaaaaaaagh,” screamed out Ballack as a huge rat ran across his foot as it flew from the dark room.

“You are such a girl, Alec,” laughed Dalton as he entered.

“Did you see the size of that thing?” replied the quivering constable as he followed his sergeant inside.

Dalton's torchlight followed the walls around. They had been painted black and a set of manacles hung down from the wall next to a stained mattress. Dalton gasped as the light came against a steel cage that had been set into the corner of the room – a pathetic creature whimpered under some sacking inside the bars.

"Bloody hell," ejaculated Ballack, "it's a right torture chamber in here."

They went to the cage. "Are you all right?" Dalton asked as he slowly pulled back the sacking to reveal a teenager curled up into a foetal position. He tried the gate – it was locked. "We want to help you, lad," Dalton said softly.

"Please go away," sobbed the lad; he had a thick mop of black curly hair. "She... she got James but she won't get me," he added in near hysteria. His dark eyes were like saucers and he stared straight at Dalton. "James was my brother... he looked after me."

"Who got James, lad?" said Ballack, realising the boy had learning difficulties.

"She did... he's dead... she killed him."

"What's your name?" continued Ballack. "You can really help someone if you know their name."

"Can you?"

"Of course... what is your name? We can't continue calling you, *lad*, can we?"

"Can't you?"

"No; it's not right."

The boy sat up. He was wearing tight black jeans and a t-shirt. "My name's Michael... Michael Dawes."

Ballack smiled. "Well Michael, what are you doing in there?"

"I locked myself in so she wouldn't get me."

"Who wouldn't get you?"

"The witch... she changes shape."

"Are you going to open up so we can take a look at you; we want to see if you are all right don't we, Sergeant Dalton?"

"Yes we do; we can't have you locked up in there, Mike."

"Will you protect me from her if I come out?"

Dalton smiled. "That's what we do, protect people; we're police officers and it's our job."

The youth produced a large key from his pocket and passed it through the bars to Dalton. Dalton unlocked the gate. "Are you coming out then?" he asked as he opened up the cage.

The boy nodded. "Will you take me to the police station? I'll be safe there."

"That's a good idea, Michael. We can make sure you are fed and a doctor will check you over. How long have you been locked up in there?"

"Not too long... a day I think."

"Are you hungry?"

The boy nodded.

"First stop the canteen then; how does egg and chips sound?"

They helped the boy outside. Dalton stopped just before they left; something glittered in his torchlight. He bent down to pick up a single gold cufflink – it had R.P. inscribed on its surface.

&&&

Nature had not been kind to her; one bulbous eye looked upward to the water-stained ceiling of her squat and the other to the bare boards beneath her toes. She had the face of a hag, aged and ugly, but with the athletic body of an Olympian, toned and tight. *Put a bag on her head*, they would say, but only if she was out of earshot. She was soon at the centre of it all in Market Town after her arrival into the country from Eastern Europe. After a few months the town's drugs were her concern. She scattered a handful of local dealers, fit for revenge, when they came calling on her; they were soon away with their tails firmly between their legs... her legend grew but few knew little of her other than hearsay.

She laughed like a crone when she saw the pathetic boy, Michael, locked in the cage meant for her. She would let him be for now, let him suffer awhile to mourn his brother... She didn't like the look of the big policeman, however, he was going to be trouble and she was not referring to the officer that had cried out in fear as the rat ran across his foot.

&&&

It was late when Dalton went out to his car; he had been catching up with his paperwork at the station. He looked at his watch; his wife, Tizzy, would be cross because he was late for supper again – the third time this week. The car park was deserted and he made his way carefully past a skip that the workmen were using. They were renovating the back of the station and their scaffolding stood tall fixed to the outer wall. Red rodent eyes watched him as he stepped over some rubble; a big brown rat nibbled at a discarded kebab; the leftovers from the lunch of one of the podgy builders. Dalton spun around as he heard someone call his name.

"Bloody hell, what now," said Dalton as he made his way back to the door. There was nobody there so he turned and carried on back towards his car; *I must have imagined it*, he thought.

"Sergeant Dalton!" he heard someone shout as if in a panic. He turned to see a scaffolding pole falling towards him. He dived to the left and the pole clattered noisily to the ground. A young WPC helped him to his feet.

"That was close, Sergeant,"

Dalton let out a sigh of relief. "I'll have those bloody workmen in the morning," he raged.

&&&

He had a glass of wine waiting for him when he returned and he sat down at the dining room table whilst Tizzy brought his supper; it was his favourite, corn beef pie. Tizzy sat down next to him and began to chat. "On Saturday I'd like us..." she was cut short as Bert's mobile phone rang.

"What is it?" he asked bluntly.

He listened.

"So who is onto it?"

He listened solemnly.

"I'll be there in an hour."

He exhaled noisily and pushed away his pie. "I've got to go love; a young woman has been found dead." He didn't let on anymore to his anxious wife.

Dawn, the prostitute who had been involved with Pigg, had been found in the old brewery by a tramp seeking shelter; her neck had been snapped as if it were made of tinder. Further to this deep gorges had been made across her face, neck and chest – like a wild beast had been at her.

&&&

Michael Dawes was to be released; there was no reason to hold him because it soon became obvious he knew nothing about his brother's murder. Although he rambled incoherently about a witch and panicked like a loon whenever the door to the holding room opened, his beardy social worker and the cold-faced doctor had no qualms but to release him back into the local community.

When Dalton returned to the station at the beginning of his shift he blew a fuse. "Why have you released him?" he raged to the custody sergeant. "That boy is simple and he is in danger... anyone connected with James Dawes is in danger. You should have detained him until we were..."

The custody sergeant bravely interrupted him. "...it wasn't my decision, Dalton."

Dalton looked like his head was about to explode he was so angry. He turned away from the sergeant lest he should rag doll him. Unfortunately he came face to face with Inspector Clarke.

"Dalton, the press are..."

Dalton didn't stay to hear the end of the sentence. Such was his anger he decided to go out and get some fresh air. There had been some problems with kids throwing missiles down onto cars as they were driving into Town. He would go and investigate that himself; it would keep him out of the station for an hour or so. He was just about to leave when Aubrey came along. When he saw Dalton he scurried back in the direction he had come from. Dalton was onto him like a flash.

"Aubrey," he said as he pushed the snidely man against the wall with his shovel hand, "were you coming to see me?"

"No, why should I?"

Dalton smiled. "The murder weapon; you were going to tell me what it was when you found out."

"We don't know for definite what it is yet."

"Hmm, I see. So Aubrey, have you any theories?"

"No."

"I think you have... tell me Aubrey, what is your theory?" said Dalton as he applied pressure to Aubrey's pigeon chest.

Aubrey grimaced. "A scythe... the murder weapon could have been a scythe... Don't let on I've told you Dalton or the Super will have my guts for ruddy garters."

"What sort of scythe? One of those hand held ones I use in my garden?"

"Yeah we think so."

"Not like the one used by the Grim Reaper then?" Dalton asked with a smirk.

"No."

"Oh, Aubrey, the girl that was murdered; is it true that she looked like she had been opened up by an animal?"

Aubrey pushed Dalton's hand away so he could get clear. "You'll get yours one day Dalton, you mark my words."

&&&

Looking down from the bridge, Dalton could view the whole of the north side of Market Town; including the Body Factory Gymnasium. A double-decker bus pulled up at its last stop before it went on to the bus stop next to the gym. The stop was just to the side of the bridge. *Close enough for someone to jump down from the bridge onto the top of the bus*, thought Dalton. *It would be difficult but it could be done by someone agile enough*, he mused further.

&&&

It was a cold dark evening and Michael pulled the collar of his coat up to his throat as the bitter wind bit to the bone. He searched through his pockets; he didn't have enough money for a hit and his meal ticket was dead – the reference here is not to his brother, Dear Reader. He needed someone else to look after him and he made his way towards *The Greek Temple*. He took a short cut across the park. The fallen dried autumn leaves rustled as he trudged through them; as a younger boy he would have kicked them into the air as he went. He thought he saw someone near the bridge that crossed over the River Mourne. He was mistaken – there was no one there when he got to it. However, he got halfway across the bridge when a dark figure suddenly appeared at the other side with the light to their back. Silhouetted against the bright light Dawes couldn't make out who it was. The figure who stood to his advance, wore a long woollen coat which skirted the ankles and a hood pulled low over the brow. He stopped in his tracks and gasped like an asthmatic in fear.

"It's all right, love, an old lady can't hurt you," said the figure.

"Maybe we'll fucking hurt you," came a sudden voice to the rear of the old lady.

Before she could react she was sent sprawling with a heavy rabbit punch to the back of her head. Before she had a chance to recover from the fierce blow she was trussed up with plastic ties and a heavy man sat astride her while another pinned back her arms. She knew it was pointless to struggle so she waited; she waited like a cobra ready to strike when the opportunity arose for her.

"You thought you had seen the last of us didn't you bitch?" said a tall man, mid-twenties wearing a hood under a cap. "Thought you might be after Dawes' bro so we followed him for a while," he added as he sniffed. He looked at Michael. "You'd better fuck off gay boy if you know what's good for you."

Michael didn't need asking twice. He was gone with a whimper; like a whipped dog.

The tall man laughed. "You know what; they reckon you've got a good body for an old whore," he said with a sneer. "Pull that fucking hood further over her face, Max."

The two men knew what he meant and they intensified their grip on the old lady; she didn't struggle or utter a word in protest even when the tall man lifted up her coat and roughly ripped off her woollen tights. He began to undo his trousers to the amusement of the two men.

"I'm second," said one of them; a grinning idiot with big ears.

Just as the tall man spread her thighs open and began to lower himself down he was sent painfully to the deck as Dalton's night stick smashed into the back of his head. Using the momentum and surprise of his attack the burly Sergeant booted one of the thugs under the chin with his steel toe-capped boots. He went for the other attacker but he showed a surprising turn of speed for a man of his immensity and was off. *He won't get far*, Dalton thought as police sirens rent out in the still night air. He turned his attention to the old lady.

"Well fuck me," was all he could say. All that was near him were two figures sprawled out in unconsciousness. The old lady had gone. Dalton bent down to see plastic ties scattered on the deck of the bridge.

He had parked up at the far side of the park and he walked back to his car. He scratched his head: *where could she have gone?* Even Ballack was scornful when he mentioned the old lady – *the fat bastard that he is!*

He went to open the door of his car when he heard someone move behind a security fence of tall railings next to the DIY superstore. A high row of gorse further secured the site from his view.

"Thank you, Sergeant," he heard someone say in broken English. "You saved me from... from ... thank you."

Dalton didn't reply.

"It happened to me once before; when I was a young girl in Poland... no one stopped it then... I've hated men, and their whores, ever since," she snapped maliciously. Her voice softened. "You are different."

“You won’t get away with it; I’m putting it all together... I know how you did the poor guys at the gym...”

“...Who would believe you?” she interrupted. “There is no evidence... no camera footage, there is nothing... I’m but an old lady. How could I even get up the stairs?”

Dalton laughed nervously. “You’re a murderer. You’ve killed innocent...”

“...Innocent? None who are dead are innocent; I’m doing you a favour Dalton. Keeping scum off the street... just like you are.”

“But YOU are scum; you are a murderer AND a pusher... two of the worst.”

“You’re unkind, Dalton... and I’ve given you a nice present. Look to the roof of your car.”

Dalton saw something resting on the roof. He picked it up. It was a podgy hand-sized clay figure with a small noose tied around its fat neck. Dalton gasped out loud as he saw a cufflink set into the midriff of the figure, for he had its partner in his pocket.

“He was the worst of them all.”

“I shall have you,” said Dalton in just more than a whisper, “if it takes a hundred years I’ll have you.”

The Hag had stopped listening.

&&&

Fid always wanted to be a superhero; a Jedi Knight at least. He was far from being a legend this particular morning, however. He heard a massive thud and stepped into the main body of the gym to investigate – *one of the meat heads must have dropped a dumbbell*, he thought as he entered. He was wrong... terribly wrong and he saw the blood stained figure of James Dawes drop heavily to the floor; slain by an unseen assailant. He reacted quickly... but not quickly enough – for he was no Batman or his ilk. He ran for the door to get help but never reached it. He felt cold steel burn into his shoulder blade and the force of the thrust sent him sprawling onto the counter. The pain was mercifully short as the second thrust smashed through his rib cage and entered his heart from the back. It was fortunate he died quickly because the blade continued to repeatedly hack at his limbs and torso until he was no more than pulp; his blood flowed like a river onto the floor.

Seconds later the door to the gym opened...

**** THE END ****

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