

FREEDOM FICTION JOURNAL

An eclectic mix of all flavours of genre fiction

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Editor's Note

Hello Freedom Friends,

Wondering what took us so long for this issue? Well, we hope the changes you see will more than satisfy you and makes your wait worthwhile. All good things take time. We always release the issue in the last week of the announced month. But in Feb 2010, we had a lot of new plans and short span to implement them. As you can see we have a brand new website <http://freedomfiction.com/> which is a beautiful upgrade from the barebones website we had. The previous URL <http://freedomfriends.in/> will redirect all visitors to <http://freedomfiction.com/> now. The "Twisted Tales" section again provides you all the issues for free download as a PDF. The "Community Resources" offering assistance and inspiration. The "Support FFJ" to seek support for this web-magazine that is run out of passion of its volunteers – which we will never run out of, but do consider the purchases there as a small contribution to our basic needs of running this show. The new email for contacting us is: editor@freedomfiction.com and the previous email id freedomriders.in@gmail.com will work as well.

We have glorious genre fiction in this issue. Tom Larsen's "To Die For" is an incredibly well-written short story with wit, satire, intrigue and genuine entertainment. Our opening tale from returning FFJ author James Newman is "Clear" – an impressive tale that will jolt you into the pulp mood. My favourite returning authors are here as well – Ilan Herman has a wonderful episode from his "Zoomarian Chronicles" and Chris Castle pulls at your heartstrings again with another great short story of loss and emotions. Ilan's character of Koy is enduring and it has been very satisfying as an Editor to see this alien character thrive and have a home at FFJ. Chris Castle's story "Salvation" tops his previous stories at FFJ with an incredibly touching narration; his understanding of human traits and especially of "loss" is exceptional. It comes across so well in his story "Salvation" that you would have to be inhuman to not be moved by it.

And all that is just a slice of the beautiful issue we have here for you. Do browse through it and feel free to post your comments at the blogs at the new website <http://freedomfiction.com/> which we have setup on a war-footing – since the talent FFJ is attracting deserves this showcase through upgraded technology.

I am hopeful also that my feedback and support over the years has been useful to all authors. At FFJ, every story gets a personal consideration. Irrespective of the story being accepted or rejected by us or withdrawn by author – we have always provided a review and feedback for the submitted work. This is in line with our original aim of creating a "community" rather than simply an eZine. I am thankful for the kind words of all the authors as well.

Going forward, new fiction will be posted more frequently at the new website and compiled as a downloadable PDF at every 3 months period. So no more waiting for 3 months – get the fiction regularly and then a compilation PDF at the end of 3 months.

Pulp To Grind Your Senses !!!

Best Wishes,

Ujjwal Dey

Editor for Issue 06, Vol 02.

Freedom Fiction Journal | <http://freedomfiction.com/>

“Clear” by James Newman

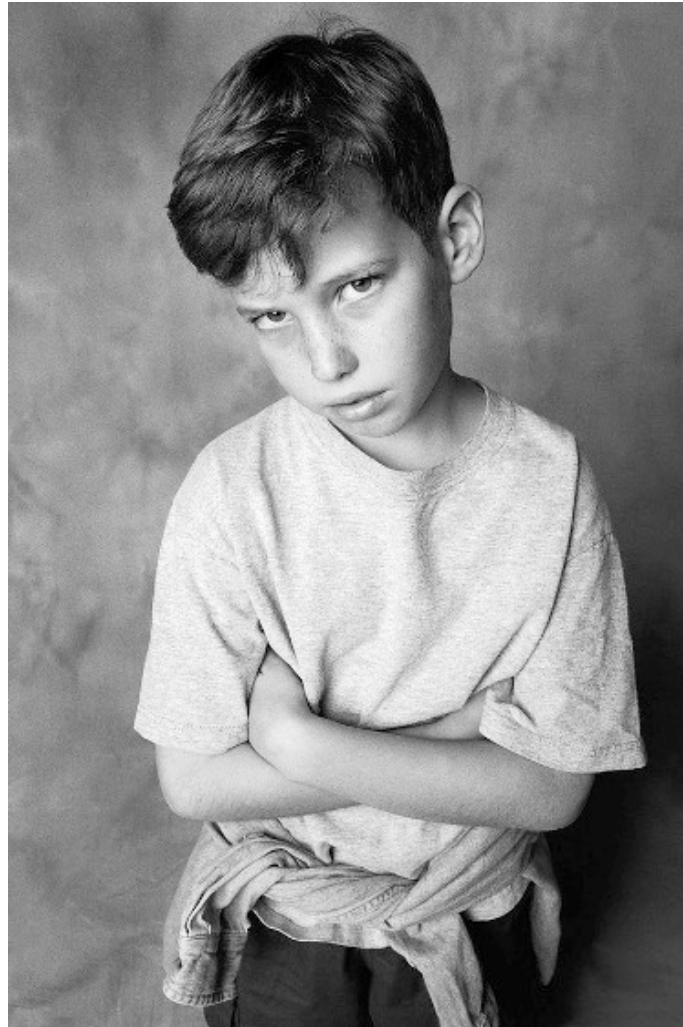
Synopsis: A very ordinary kid with an extraordinary life, this tale reveals a sad life that transforms into greater things and illustrates to us to not judge people for we don't know why we see them as they are. Let Ginger Giles be unleashed.

About the Author: James Newman lives in London where he is working on a novel concerning a mentally ill vampire 'jack-the ripper' copycat killer set in London 1988 (one hundred years after the original Whitechapel murders.) The vampire is also a literary reviewer for the City Times by day and a blood-sucker by night. Newman has published short stories recently with Freedom Fiction Journal, 69 Flavors of Paranoia and Scalped magazine.

In this pulp tale, the school with the unusual kid and usual demerits of growing up will change your perception of “actions and consequences” dramatically.

Clear

By James Newman



Ginger Giles had about as much spunk as an asthmatic poodle with both his balls cut off following a freak grooming accident at a dog show. The boy was a wimp. The bullies beat him up and girls pulled his hair and the teachers ignored him. He was a non-person. He was a simple little Ginger kid that stuttered when you spoke to him and shook if you tried to touch him. It seemed that Giles was irreversibly damaged by some incident that occurred during his infant years. An incident that his subconscious had buried in an effort to shield him from the dangers of some kind of awful teenage recall. We all bury things in our past. The scientologists believe we should re-examine these events in order to become clear. Acknowledgement spells rehabilitation. Acceptance provides closure. He was obviously in a world of childhood psychological pain. I was in love with him immediately. I had to help.

I wanted to share his misery. Bathe in it. I wanted him to get inside me so I could discover the demons that were eating him up. Perhaps I was one of the demons. Ginger had this constant scanning pattern; constantly looking out for danger. It was in the school lunch room when I first spoke to Ginger. The school lunch room was a large hall with long tables and long pimply faces eating cold bland hotdogs. I was a pretty girl in the school. So beautiful in fact that it didn't matter

in which circles I mingled. I spoke to him. I was allowed to. I was Penny. And to my friends: Penny Dreadful.

"Hey Ginger, why you got it so bad?"

"My names not Ginger."

"Yeah ok, what is it?"

"Giles."

"Close."

"Close to what?"

"Ginger starts with G as does Giles. What eats you?"

"Nothing eats me."

"Yeah, then why you let those kids push you around?"

"What kids?" Ginger says feigning surprise.

"The ones pushing you around."

"They don't push me," his wobbly tone suggested otherwise.

And then Ginger was gone. He disappeared down the queue to get his Ginger-cake. I was entranced by this freckled kid. I had to know more. I went home and played with my hair in the mirror thinking about Ginger. He had a goofy face like he had just been, or needed slapping. He was a dork. He had a large adam's apple, large feet and a long thumb. The boy was hung. A girl can tell these things. I had an idea that he was abused at home. But weren't we all. My father freaked out on acid and never returned. He worked for an LA street rag, rubbed shoulders with Bukowski. He tried to chill down from drugs by drinking a twelve pack every night in front of the Beverly Hillbillies. He failed & ended up in the nut house. My mother works as a psychiatric nurse. That's where they met, in the nuthouse. I am used to these things. My parents were both crazy. It was a marriage-made-in-the-Asylum. I guessed Ginger's abuse was physical whereas mine was just verbal. Nevertheless I found a lost soul that I identified with. Ginger had to be had. Or at least understood.

I had bought the e-meter online using my mother's credit card. She was an obsessive internet shopper and hadn't noticed the transaction on her statement. I feigned a cold and skipped school for two days whilst I waited for the machine to arrive. I trembled with excitement as the postal worker delivered the large box to the door. I took it upstairs and unboxed it. I looked at it. It was the coolest thing you ever saw, a new neon blue colored e-meter. Straight from the offices of Ron L. Hubbard. It had a strap that you attached to your wrist and a dial that made a buzzing sound when you heart rate increased. It plugged straight into the mains electric. The trick was to have someone ask you questions. The buzzing sound indicated that you were asking a question that bothered you. The trick was to keep asking the question until the buzzing stopped. That meant you were a clear. I had cleared myself of most questions, but guessed you couldn't really play on the E alone. I needed a new subject. Ginger Giles was perfect. I expected a buzz.

The next day I caught him at the locker room. I walked up behind him and put my cold hands over his eyes. "Guess who?"

"I don't care," He squealed.

"Come on guess." My grip tightened.

"Ok. It's Penny."

"Bingo." I spun his weedy little body around.

Then I kissed him full on the lips. Ginger took two steps backwards. He was visibly shaking. It was probably the first time he had any affection shown to him. As a child he probably learnt that acts are usually followed by acts of cruelty. Moments of random kindness by beautiful girls didn't happen in Ginger Giles' world. He was scared of kindness, wary of affection, like one of those stray dogs that cowers in the corner and whimpers if you try and stroke him. Too afraid to bite and too scared to be loved. That was Ginger.

"You are crazy." He said.

"I'm crazy about you," I replied and gave him my best smile. The smile that makes most quarter-backs all squishy and red. He wasn't biting. He just stood there with a defensive look on his sad freckly face, as if the next word from my mouth could jump out and physically wound him. He wanted the ground to open up and swallow his puny little ass up; right there and then.

Ginger didn't speak.

I spoke "Come on Giles tell me what is eating you. I really want to know." I spoke in a pleading little girl voice.

"Do you?" He said.

"Yeah, give it to me big boy."

"I can't."

"Giles I have a machine at home. A machine that is really cool. I think you will like it."

"What is it?"

"It's an e-meter." I shrilled in excitement.

"What's one of those?"

"You wanna find out?"

He looked at me like it was one big joke. I tugged his arm and the little squid followed.

Back in my room I had Giles hooked up to the machine. Mom was out and dad was kind of out of it. We were alone. I strapped his wrist in and turned on the power. It made a fizzing sound.

"Ok. I'm going to ask you questions and you are going to answer them."

"Oh my God Penny, you didn't hear? Turned out to be a hotshot corporate lawyer could you believe it?" Shelly sighed, "after what happened to him as a kid and everything?"

"Really? What happened?" taking a sip of a slim latte.

"You didn't read about it? It was in the papers here a year or two after school. Turns out, from the age of two to the age of six, his mom and dad kept him locked up in this metal box thing in the basement. The creeps just shoved him a peanut sandwich in there every day before they went to work. Once he was like school age or whatever, they just threw him in the system. Anyway, one day after school the police go around his house after a disturbance and they find his parents dead. Police couldn't explain it. Like they both died of some kind of electric shock or something. But the wiring was all good. Giles showed them the basement and they took him away."

I let in sink in for a moment and then it all became clear.

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

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“Salvation” by Chris Castle

Synopsis: Relationships and emotions are uniquely experienced by us all. Author Chris Castle has an exceptional grasp of the sentiments associated in human life and his tales of loss are an incredible gain to us all in understanding and appreciating humanity and the human condition. Presented in this story is a man damned by society trying to put the pieces of his broken home back together. The protagonist Ray Murphy - a father, a widower, a friend, an ex-convict on parole, an angry man, a broken man, a man helpless and yet determined. He is one of us and this moving tale will enlighten us all.

About the Author: Chris Castle lives and works outside London. His primary influences include Ray Carver, Bill Murray, the films of PT Anderson and the Y: The Last Man graphic novels. He can be reached at chriscastle76@hotmail.com

In this touching story, we will see the upheaval in the life of a man burdened by his past and imprisoned by his fate.

Salvation

By Chris Castle

Ray Murphy walked through his old neighbourhood, the duffel bag over his shoulder, the shred of paper in his hand. He used to know the bakery like the back of his hand when young, but that was a long time ago. He moved through the streets, looking at the unfamiliar shops, the unrecognisable faces. Foreign men and women, boys and girls standing on corners acting out the game reserved for adults. He walked on, facing every one of them, as was his way, but inside feeling his heart flinch and lock.

The baker's owner was his friend growing up. They ran in the same gang, fought the same enemies. Ray passed on condolences for his parents, one killed by cancer, the other by the gun. Quietly, the baker ran through the others who'd passed and not just the parents, the old-timers. People he knew only as children, dying through diseases he barely understood. Others still in the jail, but never getting parole like Ray. A neighbourhood decimated by time and circumstance. More than that, Ray thought as he looked into his coffee, then out to the street; a community dead and buried too.

The baker ran him through his jobs for the day, running from day break to the evening. Ray didn't mind; he had always enjoyed hard work, whether inside or out. He followed the instructions, tried out the machines to follow the mechanisms. He made notes on the back of his paper scrap, noting times, when things had to be removed or replaced. Finally they sat in the back office, two cups of coffee. The baker held up the half of whiskey, but Ray shook his head. After a time he was asked the question.

"What about your daughter, Ray?" It was the only question that Ray Murphy had a need to find an answer for. After her mother died in a traffic accident, he had lost her. No-one else wrote letters, no one else visited the jail. Each day she drifted that little further apart, until she was no more.

"I'm going to find her," he said simply, then raised his cup to the other man.



The room above the bakers was small and bare and all Ray had need for. He positioned the mattress so the sun rolled over him first thing, making getting up in the early hours a need rather than a task. For the first few days, all that sat opposite him on the chair was the clothes he wore coming out and the uniform. The baker had directed him to the nearest store and he had bought a radio; he turned it on as he readied for work, carried it down with him for the day, then let it guide him to sleep in the night. In the room he listened to the talk shows, the people quick and sharp in the morning, sluggish and angry in the evening. For the daytime, he found a music station that played the stuff he grew up with. He tried, for one morning at least, to listen to the latest station, but found himself shaking his head at what he found; it may as well have been in a different language.

He put the bread in the oven before sun-up, then cleaned the floors. He stocked the shelves, then broke for coffee. He opened the ovens and the smell of fresh bread hit him. He couldn't help but smile. He stacked and re-filled, wiped and sprayed, quietly watching the people coming in on their way to work. Men in suits, women clutching phones and kids playing at being gangsters. Most of them polite, some of them angry, none of them realising how lucky they were. He acknowledged the one's who caught his eye; he waved to the kids that giggled into their pastries.

At the weekend, when it was over, the baker took him out for a meal, brought him back to some of the old faces. They all shook his hand, talked about the old days. One or two left their sentences open and trailing, the work there if he wanted. He waved them off, clutching his coffee cup so tight he thought the mug would break in his hand. Later, he sat in a strip club, the baker explaining how it worked, the other two men already disappearing. Ray laughed it off, cried home early, shaken inside at what his money could buy.

After that, he spent the weekend in the library or out in the city. He lied, claiming he had courses to attend; coming in late, well after the baker had set out for his adventures. He did not want the old life. He did not want the new choices the night had to offer. Instead he chose to read; quietly thrilled at the range the library had to offer. He noticed on the first day, the computers in the corner of the floor, the signs above them. He walked over to the counter asked the lady about the next course. He signed up, claiming his fresh library card, required for the course, enduring the awkward silence as his past came up, the library card showing the books hired, the prison code appearing.

The first few weeks passed in a blur. By the time his parole officer turned up on the step, Ray checked the headline of the paper under his arm, not believing. They sat out the back, the man making his notes, the baker not even needing to lie. Ray knew of the man, knew he was straight; no kick back, no needle. He nodded when it was over, thanked them for the coffee, the pastries. Just people getting on with their own, small lives, Ray thought. The man was the same age, early forties, had the same ways about him. He wondered in a different life, if they might not have become friends. The man climbed into his car, flipped his paper to the same sports section. Then he was gone.

The Internet. Jesus Christ. Ray had heard enough about it inside, had caught bits and pieces, as if it was a living breathing thing, but he was still largely clueless. He found a book in the library, a dummies book, took another from the kids section to explain more to him. The librarian, the woman who enrolled him, caught him reading the kids book, but didn't smile, or smirk, even as Ray caught himself blushing like a fool.

He had sat in on three of the computer lessons and the internet was due up next. She might have got married; she might have changed her name. She might be- he shook his head, turned back down to the book. It was a trick he had learned; when it was all too much, when he had seen or

heard something that he had no need to see, he would focus on the words, escape the place, himself. He would take himself away. The escapist, he would write on the last page of every book he read; someone other than himself.

He asked around the streets, too. The baker put the word out, Ray asked the old timers still standing if they knew anything; for once the photo he kept of her, aged six and smiling, came in useful. One or two made noises, but nothing much. Instead, he got the idea they were just glad for his company, and truth be told, Ray was glad for them. It was a relief, talking to someone as out of touch as he was. Just to talk about normal, straightforward things, made Ray smile. He took their cups of tea, accepted their cakes and spent his afternoons with them. It made him feel he was still a part of something. But he still did not have his answer.

One night they finished sweeping and scraping and Ray looked over to the baker. The radio was playing in the background, the war still going, the boys still coming home in bags. Not being immersed in the politics of it, Ray found the answer simple; stop the boys from dying. He caught the baker's eye and the two of them stopped what they were doing.

"I need to find her. Even if she hasn't turned out right, I need to find her. If she's into something, something you think I don't want to hear about, I still need to know, you understand?" Ray held his eye. The baker understood. He saw enough in Ray's eyes, the old flashes, to see he meant it, every word.

"Sure, Ray. I understand. I'll ask the other people, too." The baker nodded back. Like that, it was settled.

The computer course frustrated Ray; he was aware of the mechanics of it, but was aware the lessons were shielding him from what he needed to know. The other, older people, hummed along, tutted in mild disapproval at some of the sites, happy to be almost aware of the possibilities. Ray asked politely about accessing more things, but the man in charge steered him away with vague pointers and suggestions for other targets. Finally, he walked up to the woman he had spoken to before, cleared his throat, even though he knew she had watched him approach.

"Miss?" He said, deciding he only had the one choice, when it came down to it. "I'm looking for my daughter. Her mother died and I can't find her. It's been a while, fourteen years." He looked up, held her eye. He had either scared her away or held her attention. She was still looking at him and no place else.

"I was wondering if you could tell me the computer sites, the places I could try and find her. I just need to know the places, then I can start looking for her." He listened to himself and felt ashamed at how desperate it all sounded, how much of a scheme it must have come across as. A grown man flailing around, asking for help about something as simple as family. He would count to five, then thank her and leave.

"I could write down some sites, social sites. I don't know if you can access them here or not, but you can try. She might be on those." She half smiled and he nodded grateful.

"I'd be obliged." He felt a rush on his skin. It was something like a breakthrough. Then a half pang of something stabbed inside him and he looked up. "You said I might not be able to reach them? Why?" He didn't mean to sound fierce, but there was something in his voice that made her stop writing.

"The social sites sometimes have swearing on them, things like that. If it's not considered suitable for under-sixteen's, we block it." She was saying it as policy but still looking to him. She was reassuring him, he realised. He took the card with the names on it.

"Thank you. You've been very kind." He saw her name badge. "Laura." He walked away clutching the card, booking time on the computer. The card felt light in his hand, as if it held the combination numbers, the cheat-answers to a tough test. He walked over to the computer screen and took a deep breath.

He navigated the sites as best he could, signed up and agreed to a half dozen memberships he barely understood. His head spun as he read the policies, the contracts, began to throb when he read the messages, the words half formed and bitty, the expressions beyond him. He typed her name over and over, sifted through the countless profiles that came back. He fidgeted in his chair, uncomfortably looking at pictures of women barely twenty, trying to recognise something in their eyes, the way they smiled. He felt other people glare at him, felt his cheeks flush. Once, it got too much for him and he stared back at the man next to him, sending him scurrying back to his keyboard, his own face rolling between reddening and paling.

"No joy?" He looked up and saw the woman, Laura, looking over to him. She was clutching a stack of books, a pen balanced on the top. Her voice brought him down and he tried to cool himself, his frustration.

"I'm not finding anything. Not yet." He shrugged, not liking the feeling of being out of his depth. "But I'll keep trying," he added, not wanting to sound defeated. She nodded and walked on, wishing him luck. He returned to the screen, aware of the time in the corner running down, even as the list in-front of him increased.

He walked over to the local café, trying to clear his head. He felt as if he'd accessed the logs to an alien spaceship or something. What there was he didn't understand and what he saw he didn't need see. He wondered if he was getting old. Scratch that, older. Or maybe it was that youngsters were trying too hard to be adult. He tried to remember himself at fifteen, being a punk, but it all seemed vague and tame, real-life not having started. Instead, it all seemed to fit with the patterns he was finding on the block; babies pushing babies, boys acting like men, almost laughable until you caught a glint in the waistband when they raised their arms up. And in the middle of this sea was his daughter, somewhere, going one way or another.

He drank his coffee and then ordered a meal, a treat to himself after the day. He kept the newspaper on the table, but chose mostly to watch the world go by his window. The shop lights faded, the bar lights lit. In the distance the strip bar from the weeks before, glowed into life. Boys made their way over, still acting like men, middle aged men followed them, acting like boys. He caught the sight of people smoking outside in the doorways and shook his head at these strange new rules; a bar without smoke? It sounded like it should have a punch-line. The paper on the table was still talking about the war; same old, same old; people safe, being righteous, as the workers took the fall. He ordered another coffee, but felt himself flagging; the computer screens doing for him what twelve hours in the shop could not; they tired him out.

He rose, leaving the cash, the tip and waving to the waitress when he reached the door. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he held a daydream of his daughter walking by. He knew this would never happen. Idly, he hoped to see the librarian, Laura, walking down the street. But none of this happened, of course. Ray walked through the glitter and the gutters, the newspaper over his head now, ink spilling, fending off the rain as the clouds started to break.

He reached the bakery and shook the key from his pocket. He tossed the papers and stepped inside, waiting in the hallway for the drips to soak into the carpet. He rubbed his feet on the rug, then gripped the railing to head upstairs.

"Ray." It wasn't a call, or a question. The baker's voice was flat. Ray edged away from the railing, wondering if his friend had gotten hurt. He walked into the room; saw him sitting nursing coffee, the whiskey nowhere to be seen. No party on a Saturday night. Ray looked at him; saw a sickness in his skin, his eyes red at the edges. He felt his stomach roll, then churn. He walked into the room and stood over him, feeling like an interrogator, or executioner.

"I got word. About Chloe." Ray's hand's tightened into fists. "She's breathing, Ray. She's still here." Ray's heart beat again. It was something. But there was more to it. Other things.

"Still breathing." He managed to say, wanting to make sure he could still talk, function.

"She's working out on the edges of the city. Working in the Blue Lounge." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a book of matches. "The man I spoke to, he gave me these." Ray began working in the old way, processing the information. The baker telling Ray he wasn't there, didn't see anything. Distancing himself from the problem, distancing himself from the fury Ray knew was building inside. He wondered if it was showing yet, in his face, his body. The old stuff, rising to the top.

"This place. It's like the one you took me to?" Ray not recognising his voice, the business blankness settling into place. After all this time, it fell into place so easily. He thought of the women parading around, every one of them dead eyed, through boredom or worse.

"Yeah. Something like that." A flicker in the baker's eye. Ray catches it and tenses harder, rock now. He doesn't even ask the question; the baker realises he's shown the lie.

"They have a gimmick. They act out for the cameras. On the web, home viewing. They take calls." He stops, counting every word he has said, hoping it's enough. He looks up to Ray. Ray breathes, tells himself he is only the messenger, he is trying to help. There is no reason for anything else. He walks forward and pats the man on the shoulder.

"Thank you. Thank you for finding her." He says. Ray watches the baker nod, his eyes still pleading. There's one more thing left to say. He lets him say it. He's earned that much.

"I never been in there, Ray. I never knew she was in there, neither."

Ray nods. He turns and walks away, the matchbox in his palm. There is a number, an address. It is the start of something, he knows now, as he walks up the stairs to the room, the idea of sleep a joke to him now.

He works from Monday until Saturday, over and over. The baker is weary, but Ray does his best to keep him level. He leaves behind the library and finds the local corner places that sell time on the net for twice the price and half the time. He looks up the website, scans the women on the profile. His heart stops. Underneath the make-up, underneath the fakery, his daughter looks back at him. Still enough green in her eyes to be alert and make her stand out from all the others. Still the same crooked smile, buried under all the rest of it. He writes down her new name and rises from the desk. There is a camera that feeds to a room where the women work. It looks like a cell. The man behind the counter grins as Ray leaves, offers up a wink. The look he returns almost makes the man fall back into the untidy stacks of cigarettes.

He walks a street further up, to the shop, the windows blacked out, the sign not lit. He walks inside, surprised how narrow the aisles are. There is one man behind the counter, two others looking at the shelves. Ray steadies himself and slips the name over the counter to the man, asks if she has starred in any titles. The man, bored, runs her name through the system, rolling a toothpick around his lips.

"Nothin'" he says blankly, then pushes the slip back. "What you want? She do something special? We got special. What is she?" Ray accepts the paper, seizing the man's fingers as he does. He needs him to stop talking.

"She's my daughter," he says flatly, bending the fingers until they are near to breaking, then letting them go. He walks out, the man gripping his hand but staying silent. The other two men don't even look up from the shelves.

Ray walks the rest of the night, aware if the scene in the shop had gone any further, he would have broken his parole and that would have been the end of it. He feels his body tearing itself apart with the need of what he wants to do and the logic of how to do it. He can't go back. He can't leave her there. They are just two small people in the world. An everyday crisis. It is sun-up and he returns to work, ready. The idea of tiredness is no longer a possibility. His body is on fire. Instead he works, punishing himself, trying to do enough to at least find a few hours of sleep.

He walks back to the centre of the neighbourhood; back to the people he once used to know. They must either know about her, or know something has changed, shifted, since he last saw them. No more welcome home pats on the backs; just business. He takes the sap and the man gives it to him for a fraction of the price. His mind snaps in; does he do this out of friendship or guilt? They may all have known even as they shook his hand. He slips it into his pocket and heads back out into the street, his eyes darting for every light that kicks into life and the possibility of police. By the time he reaches home the box is outside the back door, as promised, sealed tight against the outside air. He lugs it up the stairs and pushes it to the corner of the room.

He stands outside the club on a Sunday evening; it shuts at two. It is just after midnight now. The place is quiet, as he had hoped. The weekend money spent, the stragglers playing it out until Monday morning. The building itself is shabby, the lights dirty when Ray looks at them up close. There is only one bouncer on the door. He figures they only have more on the other two days. He is mean and ugly. They leave the best out on their own. Ray walks up to him, feels the hand on his chest as he walks too quickly toward the door. Overhead, the sign flashes into life. It reads 'Salvation In The Flesh' in blue neon light.

The man says something mean, explains the prices. For all Ray knows it is just the banter that goes on in the place. He lets himself be shoved, he lets himself be helpless. Then Ray lets himself fade away, out of himself. The sap slips down his arm without him thinking, then when the opening appears, he acts. The first blow connects solidly, dropping the man, the second and third he puts to pressure points that won't show. He doesn't touch the man, or let his skin be touched. He acts quickly, while the road is empty. Inside the music is playing; it has switched from the dance stuff to something he vaguely recognises. The man is lying before him, helpless as a child.

He says her name, tells him he wants her to be treated right. That she is not to be harmed in any way. He speaks above the music, his voice low but crisp, the man nodding his head to the instructions. When it is over he tells him to get up, go back to his business. He tells him he will know and then walks away, his body on fire, disappearing down the nearest side street, one way then the other, the route in his head, until he is back in the mess of the city.

He has done that much to help her.

He works the rest of the week, slipping the money the baker gives him in his back pocket. The next day he opens a savings account and puts all but the bare minimum into the account. He spends the rest of the day out in the sunshine, in the park. He buys a hot dog and enjoys reading the paper. Some part of him looks for the librarian, but she does not chance his way. He thinks about so many things during the day, he feels as if something more than a few hours have passed. In a junk store he buys three books and pushes them under his arm.

That night he sets up the television, the wires and the fuses. No guidebook with stolen goods. After tonight he will pitch it into the bin, so there is no risk involved. Finally it flickers into life and is ready. For an hour he becomes familiar with it. For another hour he plays with the mobile phone, failing, then finally figuring it out, as best he can. Then he sits in-front of the screen and carefully tears the pages from the book, one by one, the sticky-tape nearby, the scissors next to it.

He watches out of the corner of his eye, trying to catch the names and nothing more. It is a long hour until her name is announced. He watches her walk into the cell, seeing nothing of her, wondering if it is really her. Then he hears the voice. It makes him forget to breathe. He dials the number but it is engaged. His heart breaks when she answers another call and moves into life, her voice disappearing onto the phone, the low drone of the music taking over on the screen. He lowers the volume and turns his back, the phone to his ear, forever engaged.

When the tone changes it catches him off guard. He has been standing in the same spot, clutching coffee. It is her voice. Carefully he turns round and zeroes in on her eyes. Before anything else he tells her to sit on the chair in the centre of the room. She agrees and he forces himself to tune out the words she says, instead concentrating only on the flow of her voice, the way she shapes each letter. He picks up the pages, linked into a half-assed dress and pushes it to the screen, covering all of her, save her face. Finally he can sit back, and breathe.

A moment so long in coming. He cuts her off, though it hurts him to no longer hear her voice. He tells her to stop and begins to talk. He has not prepared anything; there are no ready speeches on hand. Though he has waited for years to speak to her, he had never thought it through, the idea too abstract, the chance too slim. There are things he should say, truths and warnings he should try and impart. There are countless things a man should say to his daughter, that one lost soul should say to another. But how can the fallen judge?

He begins to talk. He talks of a boy and a girl. The girl was shy and the boy was wayward. He did all the talking, but she had things to say. The first time they spent time together, just the two of them, they flew a kite along a tired old beach front. It was the happiest time of his life. He didn't understand peace until he felt her hand move over his, to steady him and keep him true. After that day, he knew he would do anything for her, just to feel her breath move across his neck like it did that day.

The boy and the girl fell in love and the love was stronger than families, stronger than the armour of the Terracotta Army, he was fond of saying, when he linked his hand in hers in the darkness. Together they lost their families and began fresh, building one of their own. They built a life of sorts, doing what they could and being true to each other, each and every day.

One day the power was cut for as far as they could see; they danced in the street by the moon and later inside, close to one another. They had been to the park that day and fresh flowers sat in

the vase by their bed. The street was in darkness and their world smelled of freshly stolen flowers. That was the night she was born.

There was a day, Ray Murphy explained, when the girl was hurt and the boy restored her honour. Then he was no longer with the girl, though in his heart, he never left her side. The days and months and years moved along, not caring for those two small souls who could no longer be together. The world moved along at its own selfish pace, leaving the girl to die and the boy behind. And somewhere in the middle of all that mess, a daughter.



A daughter he loved and cared for, even though he could not hold her hand or fly kites along the beach with her. A daughter he cherished and was the only thing left in the world for the boy, who was now a man, and in some ways broken. A man who had a life and had lost it, but did not feel wronged by it. A man who knew the heart was a kingdom, built from hurt and pain and mistakes. Who understood that a heart could break with violence and mend itself as best it could with dreams. The heart which would go on beating, as long as it had reason to.

Ray spoke until his throat was dry. He looked up in amongst the silence and saw his daughter's eyes, round and wet. She did not speak, but listened the way he imagined she would when she heard a good story. He readied himself to say more as the phone went dead. He did not know if the credit was gone or the company had blocked him. He put the phone down to his side and continued looking at his daughter. She looked back at him. Then she twitched, moved out of sight, ducking under the paper dress he had made for her. She left the room and he turned off the television. It was over.

Ray Murphy sat on the floor, the white noise of the television still crackling, the wattage of the set giving the room a half light. He had a savings account. There was money saved and money to be earned. He had found his daughter. She had found him. There were just two people, but two people connected, nevertheless. The TV set died, but the light remained, then started to spread. The sun was moving over the room, spreading it with warm light. Ray closed his eyes for a second, the feeling bathing him, settling his heart. Almost like that lifetime ago, holding the kite with the woman he knew he would love forever. The feeling kept growing, stronger than the sun. He opened his eyes. He felt it in him now, alive: the future.

**** THE END ****

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“To Die For” by Tom Larsen

Synopsis: This is a tale of office intrigue taken to extremes. There’s a new face on the team and the lines are being drawn. Then the face disappears, the cops get involved and the grapevine gab starts getting ugly. Ask Flynn in Marketing. Someone has it out for him and certain signs are pointing his way.

About the Author: Tom Larsen has been a fiction writer for ten years and his work has appeared in Newsday, New Millennium Writing, Puerto del Sol and Antietam Review. Tom’s short story “Lids” was included in Best American Mystery Stories - 2004. Tom is currently featured in the Fall issue of Philadelphia Stories Magazine and his first novel “Flawed” will be released by Bewrite Books in October.

In this dramatic crime fiction, we see an insightful satire of our modern society, the underbelly of the cubicle jungle we try to thrive in. Crime then is a matter of “perception” rather than “truth”.

To Die For

By Tom Larsen

Of course, nobody knew Preston that well. Maybe this wasn't the first thing one said about him after it happened, but it was never long in coming.

"I heard he had money stashed in an offshore account. Of course, I didn't know him that well, ..." or, "Morrison says he grew up in Berlin. Then I found out it was Berlin, New Jersey. Of course, I didn't know him that well, ..."

There were others like Preston at Techtronics, low-end guys closing out lackluster careers. I was one myself, though I was loathe to admit it. We marginal types tend to keep to ourselves, but no one kept to himself like Preston. In the two years we worked together not a dozen words passed between us. Oh, there **was** the matter of his valise a few months back, but that was nothing, really. Preston insisted on keeping it next to his desk where I would be sure to trip over it. To provoke me, I'm convinced. The last time it happened he returned from a meeting to find the damn thing buried in the trash bin. The subject was never broached, but the valise is no longer an issue. When you've been in the business as long as I have, you develop a feel for these things.

He was in his fifties, drab but presentable, with a sharp nose, nubby teeth and a habit of rubbing his bald patch when lost in thought. What these thoughts might have been was never revealed, though, at times they seemed to center on Miss Stanton's rear end.

Or maybe those were my own.

What happened to Preston distinguished him in company circles. Pity he's not here to enjoy it.

I'd been with the company three years when he hired on and from the beginning we ignored each other. They assigned him the desk by the window where I would sometimes catch him dozing in his square of morning sun. Once I'd alerted higher ups, the dozing became something of an issue and no one, Preston included, had any illusions about his future with the company. Oh, they wouldn't fire him. His workload was too large and his salary too small to justify termination. But he would not be climbing the Techtronic ladder. Not if I had anything to say about it.

In fact, it was me who lobbied for his desk assignment with a well-placed suggestion that McClellan's proximity to Miss Stanton might be a factor in his recent slump. McClellan took the displacement badly vowing revenge on Jenkins, the alleged (by me) culprit. In fact, McClellan had been the ideal man for the desk, given his capacity for Starbuck's mocha grande and his fixation with Miss Stanton's bottom.

Preston's semi consciousness may have hindered his advancement, but it didn't interfere with his gallivanting. Without pay, if you can believe the scuttlebutt. Where the funding for his travels came from is anyone's guess, but his choice of destinations was hardly mainstream. Greenland one year, Minsk the next. His month in Saskatchewan put an impenetrable kink in the office grapevine.

"Canada? Hmmmm,"

"Yes,..."

"...."

Why he was accorded such latitude was a mystery I was determined to unravel. I put feelers out to the usual sources but feedback was minimal. Waterson theorized that Preston was a lottery winner and worked only to keep his hand in the game. This would account for his travels and indifference to promotions, but how to explain the car? What instant millionaire drives a Mercury Lynx? Bergerman insisted that Preston was in the witness protection program and the trips were a ruse to keep the hit men guessing. Everything's hitmen with Begerman. Preston's arrangement remained a mystery, so I simply asked Cappelli, my supervisor.

"How is it he gets so much time off?" I came right out with it.

"Why don't you mind your own goddamn business, Flynn?"



Word went round that he was a freelance photographer, but I wasn't buying it. Having written a few chamber music reviews in my time, I knew something of the freelance life, and Preston didn't fit the bill. He had no facial hair, he never appeared inebriated and he seemed uncomfortable around women. His secret identity was revealed to me in a rambling late lunch blab with Shackleford in Human Resources. Despite assurances that his ambitions lay elsewhere, I couldn't shake the feeling that Preston was after my job.

"Who would want your job?" Shackleford hooted.

"Not this one. The one I was being groomed for."

"Groomed? Oh, that's rich."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You're the low man on the scrap heap, Flynn," Shackleford strained to focus. "Everyone knows you've made your mark."

"Low man? What about McClellan?"

Shack leaned in and crooked a finger.

"Haven't you heard?" his breath came in fumes. "McClellan's stock has gone up. You know, since the thing with Fay Stanton?"

I felt my right eye twitch. "Thing?"

"Howser in Maintenance walked in on them in office supplies! Whoa, you really are out of the loop."

"That's impossible!"

"What, that he's boffing her, or you didn't know?"

"Both."

Shackleford shrugged. "Suit yourself. Better yet, ask Cappelli. He and Mac have taken to each other of late."

"I can't communicate with Cappelli. We speak in questions."

"You speak to everyone in questions."

"I do?"

"See?"

"But McClellan? how ...?"

"... doggy-style, according to Howser."

My head filled with images too salacious to dismiss.

"Flynn? Are you OK?"

"You're making this up just to torture me."

Shackleford leaned back and howled with delight. "And it worked like a charm. You should see your stupid face!"

"Then it's not true?"

"The boffing? ... *McClellan*?" the old lush doubled over in belly laughs.

"So I'm not really the low man?"

"Stop!" Shack whimpered. " ... You're killing me!"

Had Preston put him up to this? Of course I didn't know him that well, but you notice things. The jar of jellybeans on his desk that went untouched. The Labrador retriever profiled on his coffee mug. Preston shaved every other day and wore alternate pairs of shoes to the office. Tasseled loafers in black or brown. OK, I'm hypersensitive, but once registered, these things can be a distraction. The painted soup can of gnawed ballpoints, the brunette that almost certainly came with the picture frame, the calendar from his CPA. I'd been over every square inch of that desk and had next to nothing to show for my trouble.

"This is Internal Revenue, is Mr. Rapice available?"

"Out to lunch, hon. Can I take a message?"

"I'm calling about a client of his. A Mr. Brad Preston?"

"Uh-oh, problem?"

"Nothing serious, I just want to go over a few things. Maybe you can help me."

"How do I know you're IRS?"

"Fair enough. Could you save me some time then and just verify that he's your client?"

"Hold on just a second ... mmmmmnnnnnnno, I got no Preston here. Must be some mistake."

"OK, thanks for the trouble."

"No sweat, snookums."

As I suspected. Oh, I watched him like a hawk. For the next week I kept a stack of FotoPlay on my desk and made casual mention of Avendon and Arbus. Preston took no notice. I went online to check credentials but his name drew a cyber blank. I even wrote to the Copyright Office intimating violations, but no reply was forthcoming.

It took a bit of doing, but I managed to filch a copy of Preston's application from the company files. His resume read like a journeyman with stints at Digital Resources, OmniLink and CompuServ mixed in with short term consulting gigs. His references were solid, but hardly effusive. Efficiency was Preston's stock in trade and a willingness to relocate kept him in the mix.

Photographer, my ass.

"Hello, Mr. Swenson? This is Ted Foster over at TriStar?"

"TriStar?"

"Yes, I'm calling to inquire about a former employee of yours. A Mr. Brad Preston."

"Preston, Preston. The name sounds familiar."

"He has you listed as a reference on his employment application. I wonder if you could just round out an impression, you know, abilities, job performance, professional relationship?"

"Preston, ... went to Stanford, didn't he?"

"It says here, Duke."

"Duke? What's this fella look like?"

"Average size, balding, nubby teeth."

"Preston. Yes, I remember him. Had a brother on the PGA tour, as I recall."

"Um, no mention of that. In your reference you state that he works well with others?"

"Right, Preston, Blue Devils ... yes, ...of course, I didn't know him that well."

"Of course."

The application listed an address in El Cerrito, a brown stucco horror straddling a garage. The Lynx was parked in the driveway next to a row of recycling bins. I drove by without a glance and parked a block away. There was a light in the kitchen and a TV going in the living room. I stood outside his door, as if daring him to see me.

...Miss Stanton's bottom is a wonder to behold. Regardless of how it's encased it maintains a level of pear shaped perfection that can suck the air out of a room. As separate from its person as Harkin's sneeze or Cappelli's tattoo. The thought of McClellan having at it nearly killed me, I'll admit. A rear like Miss Stanton's can rattle your faculties. From the day she first entered the room every eye was upon it. The sort of perk that would never make the job description, but as vital to morale as the quarterly bonus.

Today she is wearing the same tweed slacks she wore to the Christmas party. The fabric fails to conceal the elastic rings of her panties. ... Miss Stanton's panties. How many man-hours had we wasted in their contemplation? Who among us would not forego said bonus for a hands-on inspection? It is my belief that her panties could see us through the worst fiscal crisis. That to possess but a single soiled sample would forever change any one of us. Just as it is my firm conviction that to roll them, ever so slowly, over those majestic mounds would surely strike us blind.

Even now it chills me to think of how she nearly caught me at her bedroom window. I'd been slipping over there for weeks in the hopes of catching her in the flesh, but the lady keeps her blinds drawn tighter than a drum. Maddening, I tell you. That night I noticed a gap at the top of the window frame. Unable to resist, I shimmied up the drainpipe, but the damn thing pulled loose and the racket had dogs barking and lights flashing up and down the block. I heard Miss Stanton screech and call to someone, but by the time they could get there I was long gone. Needless to say I haven't been back.

As she passes, the hum of drudgery crackles with interference. Lou Dorsey, Mr. Techtronic himself, pauses in his cost estimates to give those cheeks the attention they deserve. Were she to

bend, even slightly from the waist the universe would skip a beat. Were she to drop to her knees and ... present those ... opulent orbs.....

Miss Yeager gives me a look when I emerge from the men's room.

"Touch of the flu," I tap my tummy and smile lamely.

"Excuse me?"

"I, uh ... damned coffee goes right through me."

"Whatever," the cheeky cunt rolls her eyes.

Another thing. Preston favored herbal tea. Kept the tins in his bottom drawer along with sugar tongs and a silver brewing ball. From what I could see, the man had no vices; a fucking paragon in permanent press. You'd not find him huddled with smokers at the base of the building or ducking out on a doughnut run. He permitted himself a yogurt, plain, at the morning break with either an apple or banana, depending on a formula I could never decipher. While the rest of us fed at the fast food trough, Preston picked at a salad with his nose in a book. Had we thought better of him we might have asked him to join us, but his manner had the whiff of reproach and we're not a chummy bunch to begin with.

"Fifty bucks says he's a pedophile," McClellan snarled around a mouthful of éclair.

"I heard he was married to a blind woman but she grew to hate the sight of him."

"Is that supposed to be a joke, Jenkins?" McClellan tongued the bulk of éclair into his cheek. "Because blindness is really not something you joke about."

"Oh, and pedophilia is a laugh riot, eh?"

McClellan made a show of shoving his chair back "My mother is blind, I'll have you know."

"Piss off, Mac. I had nothing to do with Preston getting your desk and you know it."

One Friday afternoon in April, Preston left the office never to return. Monday through Friday came and went but his patch of sun remained undisturbed. His desk calendar had a flight number circled and a line of X's through the week just ended. A quick check of company bookings had him flying to Bucharest by way of Dublin, but as it wasn't on business, no itinerary was included.

When he failed to show the following Monday we began to take offense. His extended absences reflected a bias toward those of us who were not currently freelancing. Then midway through the morning Cappelli came to me with a troubled look on his face.

"Have you heard anything from Preston?" he asked.

"You're joking, right?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

"Honestly?"

He wasn't joking. The man who would replace me was absent without leave. It was unlikely that Preston could curry that much favor, but what else would account for the hole in our pecking order? Two weeks now and no one to replace him. A single unexplained absence was grounds for dismissal, but Preston, or at least his personal effects, remained undismissed. It bothered me, I'll admit it. I tried to rally some indignation but the others seemed reluctant to join in. The man was thumbing his nose at our work ethic and no one was doing a thing about it.

"He has something on Dorsey, I know it," I complained to Jenkins in Public Relations. "Nobody gets away with this."

"Good God man, has it ever occurred to you that Preston might be in trouble?" Jenkins bugged his eyes. "He might be injured or sick."

"Nonsense, he's off on a lark."

The eyes went even bugger. "For Christ sake Flynn, he could be dead!"

Dead? In fact, the idea had occurred to me, but more in the way of wishful thinking. I'd been cut off from the grapevine by Capelli decree, but Jenkins reaction had the ring of consensus.

"Do you really think?"

"It's a rational explanation, certainly."

"But no one's called."

"Maybe he has no family. I hardly know the man, but surely he deserves a measure of concern."

"Yes, of course."

"Now would you kindly get out of my car?"

"Right, sorry."

Dead? Dare I hope? Shortly after joining Techtronics, Adamson in Data Processing toppled over at the coffee machine giving me my one clear shot at advancement. As a career path, attrition has the obvious limitations, but if occasions arise what can one do? The Adamson position didn't suit me, it's true. A passing knowledge of data processing was a qualification that couldn't be faked. I know that now. My former situation was far less demanding in that nothing technical was required of me. The bottom dwellers handled nuts and bolts, the rest I could usually bluff my way through. Like McClellan and Jenkins I had no interest in expanding my responsibilities. It was all about staying put and a curse upon he who tried to move me.

Yes, let him be dead. Why not? I hardly knew the man and, to be perfectly frank, didn't much care for him. Aside from general notions of good will, Preston's welfare meant nothing to me. Did this make me petty and vindictive? To be sure, but in a way that was essentially harmless. It wasn't like I had anything to do with whatever had befallen him. Given the chance to intervene, I may well have declined, but I'd never do bodily harm. I may be loathsome but I'm not a psychopath. I didn't really wish him dead, I was just willing to accept it.

But it got taken the wrong way. From the moment my new tasseled loafers hit the floor, the rumor mongers were in a frenzy. I was gross and insensitive. I was ghoulish. Forget that Preston ranked

beneath me on the company roster or that Harkins had the inside track on his job. In a world of suck-ups and sycophants, I had somehow managed to cross a line. McClellan refused to acknowledge me, despite my Christmas card in Braille to his mom. Jenkins was all sneers, Miss Yeager, frowns and Shackleford grumbled under his beery breath.

"Join me for some tea, Mac?"

"What's with the laptop?"

"This? Oh, I'm ... working on something."

"I'm sure."

"A review of the Prokofiev recital the other night, if you must know."

"Did I ask?"

"The Telegraph has expressed an interest."

"No wonder nobody likes you, Flynn."

"I'm sorry?"

The news came on a Wednesday. A detective stopped by to tell us that Preston's body had been found somewhere in Turkey. The detective spoke in a soft yet comforting tone. He stood pin straight with his hands clasped behind him and was careful to look each of us in the eye. As he spoke, his 'Mr. Preston' softened to 'Brad' and the eye he seemed most interested in was mine.

At first the news had no visible impact. Maybe it was the detective's dry delivery or the fact that most of us didn't know the victim's first name.

"How did it happen?" Jenkins thought to ask.

"I'm afraid Mr. Preston was murdered," the detective shook his head grimly. "Turkish police say he was poisoned then dropped into a well."

This, we took badly. Shackleford hammered the desk in outrage while Misses Stanton and Yeager burst into tears.

"Who would do such a thing?" Cappelli asked of the palms of his hands.

"They think it was bandits," the detective replied. "Apparently Brad had a lot photography equipment."

Brad again, as if they were golf buddies. My stomach grumbled in protest.

"Americans are walking around with targets on their head, goddamnit!" Shackleford yowled.

"Cameras! Jesus!" Cappelli kept at his hands. "When did life get so cheap?"

"It's all just speculation at this point," the detective assured us. "Right now the case is wide open."

"Is there anything we can do?" someone asked.

"As a matter of fact there is. If you can think of anyone who might have had issues with Brad, or any problems he may have mentioned outside the workplace, it could help clear things up at our end."

"You think it was someone he knew?" Bergerman voiced tailed off badly.

"Until we learn what happened to him we don't want to rule anything out."

Preposterous! Who would travel halfway around the world to kill Preston when you could do it right here? It was a reckless thing to suggest and from the way he suggested it, I was sure the detective wasn't telling us everything.

"Brad kept to himself pretty much," McClellan said so softly we could barely hear. "He wasn't a mixer."

"Did he have any problems at home?" the detective asked. "A neighbor, perhaps, or a romantic rival."

Was he serious? They find you in a third world well and they canvas the neighborhood? I wanted to object but couldn't risk drawing attention to myself. Who knew what half-baked conspiracies the police were considering? The man had cameras. The Turkish hills were full of bandits. An open and shut case, if ever there was one.

"Here's my card," the Lieutenant handed them around. "If you think of anything, no matter how insignificant it may seem, do me a favor and give us a call."

Anything? A rather wide net, it seemed to me.

Later that same morning a pair of lab technicians came for the contents of Preston's desk. We watched in silence as they donned rubber gloves and circled the sun square, packing up the papers, pencils and pens, the tea tins and calendar. Tagging each item with color-coded adhesive; sealing it all in plastic bags. There was an official finality to their work and for the first time we realized Preston wasn't coming back.

"It makes you wonder," McClellan gazed at a spot over my shoulder. "What fate might hold in store for you."

"Me?"

"Well, us. You know, individually."

"It's best not to dwell on things you can't control," I told him.

"I mean can you imagine the terror he felt? Poisoned! I hear it was agonizing."

"I'd prefer not to."

"And was he still alive when they dumped him in the well? And was there water in the well?"

"Really Mac, you're just torturing –"

"Nobody will say. I mean if there's water, you drown. No water and you break every bone in your body. Say the fall doesn't kill you but you're all busted up and you're fucking poisoned!"

"It's not healthy Mac. You don't want to -"

"For days maybe. And it's cold and wet and you hear things sloshing around. Sick and shattered, the poison just eating at your guts."

"I've got to get back."

"... You're not gonna eat those croutons?"

Lieutenant Larusso got right to the point. "What's with the limey routine, Flynn?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"The foppy accent, the stiff upper lip. What's it all about?"

"I am of British descent, I'll have you know."

"You're from Michigan. I checked."

"Checked? That's outrageous!"

"Of course, putting on airs is no crime. I just wonder why, is all?"

"What on earth are you getting at?"

"Is there something we should know about you?"

"That's not funny Lieutenant."

Larusso threw up his hands. "OK! OK! Hey, you want to walk around like the freakin' prime minister that's your business."

"I went to boarding school in Massachusetts. Excuse me all to hell."

Larusso slipped on his glasses and studied the folder on his desk.

"For a semester, wasn't it? According to this you washed out Flynn."

"My God, you're building a case against me. You actually believe ... "

"... that you had a hand in this? It is a stretch, but you know how it is with gossip. Someone said they saw you parked by his house one night. Any truth to it?"

"Absolutely not!"

"It was just before he left for Europe? They said you were standing in front of his house for at least ten minutes. I don't know, sounds pretty creepy to me."

I felt my Adam's apple bob in betrayal. "It's a lie! You can't take the word of anyone here. This place is a snake pit."

"You didn't go snooping through his desk when he wasn't around?"

"Through it? Never. Oh, I'd borrow a pen on occasion, but he kept a can full."

Larusso returned to the folder. I watched his lips move as he read.

"Any idea what happened to the photograph, Mr. Flynn?"

"Photograph?"

"On his desk. A picture of his wife."

"I have no idea. Say, should I be calling my attorney?"

The lieutenant winced slightly. "You're not under arrest, if that's what you mean."

"Then can I go?"

He tossed the file on his desk and nodded toward the door. "Be my guest."

I started to, but the moment had a pivotal feel to it and I've never done well at pivotal moments.

"Something else Mr. Flynn?"

"There is something, yes," I sank back to my chair. "Since you seem to be investigating me. I had some trouble a few years back."

"The insurance scam thing?" Larusso shrugged it off. "I'll admit it raised a few flags at first, but hey, everybody makes mistakes."

"Just so you don't think I'm concealing anything."

"As I said before, this Preston thing? It was probably bandits."

Bandits, sure.

My life became a nightmare. At night I lay in bed imagining the case against me coming together. Bits of evidence fitting one to the other, leading to other bits like letters in a crossword puzzle. Waking sweat-soaked to dreams of Larusso and his men beating bushes and turning screws. Who knew how far they were willing to go with this? I'd made some enemies along the line and God knows I had things to hide. At best I could expect an office wide scandal, at worst, an end to life as I knew it.

Days were no better. Distracted as I was by the buzz of suspicion, my already casual work pace slackened considerably. In an effort to catch up I started coming in earlier, but the cold looks and snide remarks were more than I could bear. My social life, never whirlwind to begin with, petered off into book readings and piano recitals and my membership in American Birdwatchers was cancelled without explanation.

"Say Mac, if you and Martha aren't doing anything this weekend -"

"I'm uh, we're uh, ... out of town this weekend," McClellan fumbled with his tie.

"Oh, maybe some other time then."

"Right. Some other time, of course."



I was drinking heavily, for me anyway. Old fashioned, gin and tonics with a twist. Not falling down but more than a little unsteady, eyes bloodshot, elbows scabbed from brush-ups with the exposed brick stairwell. Lights stayed on all night, things got broken. I worried that someone would walk in on me in this condition, but no one did.

I was consumed with paranoia. I left the apartment by the basement to avoid being followed. On the rare occasion my phone rang I couldn't bring myself to answer. I didn't hear voices or receive messages, but I could convince myself of just about anything. The laptop tracking my porno wanderings, the mailman withholding vital pieces of mail. When my mother booked a bridge club weekend in La Jolla it was all I could do to not have her followed. And when I saw the "m" missing from my laptop keyboard I felt the bottom drop out. I was falling apart and I knew it.

"Just had a few more questions Mr. Flynn," Larusso scratched at the point of his chin. "You don't mind do you?"

"Why should I mind?"

"No reason," he answered a bit too quickly.

"Have the police come up with anything?"

"As a matter of fact we have. I wanted to ask you about your fingerprints."

"What about them?"

"How did they get on Mr. Preston's valise?"

"I- I- I have no idea," I stammered. "Wh-? How do you know they're mine?"

"The lab boys matched them to the one on your computer," he slipped the missing "m" from his pocket and fingered it across the desk. "I didn't think you'd object."

"Lieutenant, you must believe me," my voice quavered. "There's a plot of some kind. I don't know who's behind it but I swear to you, I'm being framed."

"Also, we found this in one of your file folders," he handed me a copy of Preston's resume. A different one, without the jelly stains.

"This is preposterous," I shouted. "Check my travel records. I haven't been out of the country in months."

"I'll admit that really had us stumped," Larusso drummed his pen on the desk. "No travel arrangements, no passport entries," he stopped the drumming and fixed me with a cold stare. "You are the clever bastard, aren't you Flynn?"

"This is not happening," I whimpered. "You're accusing me of murdering someone I hardly knew in a place I've never been! How is it possible?"

"I wondered the same thing. Then I decided to do a little investigating. Do you know the website poison.com?"

"I do not."

"I think you do. We found it on your web log," he rolled his chair away from the desk. "Amazing tool, the computer. Told me more about poison than I could ever want to know. The different kinds, the effects, methods of ingestion, dosage. I'm somewhat of an authority now."

"You can't be serious! Anyone could have -"

"Take mercury, for instance. It accumulates in the victim's liver, much like arsenic. In small doses it can take months, even years to do the job.

"... not happening, "

"Or trichinosis sporillium. It causes the joints to stiffen until movement is impossible. Very painful; especially in the final stages. It takes several days for the effects to kick in. Enough time to put the victim half a world away."

"... my God,"

"My guess is you gave Preston something along those lines. Maybe a little booster in, ... oh, say, his teabag. A week later he's found dead in Turkey. The locals steal his equipment and dump his body in the well. Bit of luck there, but fairly predictable. It's a brilliant plan, I must tell you."

"You're insane! What earthly reason could I have?"

"You tell me," he leaned back and started with the drumming again. "Your co-workers seem to think you had it in for him."

"You don't understand. These people are despicable."

"Fingerprints don't lie, Mr. Flynn."

"I swear to you Lieutenant -"

My lawyer, Blanchard offered no consolation.

"The Turkish police have a man in custody, but he claims Mr. Preston had been dead for days when they stumbled on him," was how he explained it. "The man has no prior record and is from a well connected family."

"Well connected? He threw a dead man down a fucking well!"

"Gruesome, yes. But not felonious by local standards."

"Thieving, murdering, ... savages, right?"

Blanchard examined his glasses for smudges. "Rumor has it Amnesty International has been making noises. On his behalf."

"I'm doomed, aren't I?"

"It doesn't look good, then again it's all circumstantial. Tests on the poison were inconclusive. With any luck I can probably work out a plea bargain."

"Are you out of your mind?! I had nothing to do with Preston's death!"

"May be hard to convince a jury of that. Especially after the little back stabbing campaign you were waging there. The anonymous memo? The call to Preston's accountant? What was that about anyway?"

"He is not Preston's accountant. It's all part of the set-up. It's Preston who's out to get ME!"

"From beyond the grave? That's a real hard sell, if you ask me."

"Get somebody to identify the body."

"Look. Flynn," he gave me a look I didn't much care for. "I'll level with you. You're in serious trouble here."

"What is it? There's something you're not telling me."

Blanchard gathered his papers together and rose to his feet. "They found the photograph of Preston's wife in the trunk of your car."

"His wife? I never met the woman."

"Can you prove that?"

"Just ask her. If she confirms your suspicions I'll gladly hang myself."

"I'm afraid she died four months ago," he signaled the guard. "Breast cancer. You didn't know that, of course."

"Now what are you implying?"

He stopped suddenly and turned to me. "Hey, you got something that can stop this snowball and I'm all ears. Talk to me."

"I want another lawyer. This is ridiculous!"

The new lawyer was even worse.

"Plead to manslaughter," she advised me. "You were having a bad time of it and Preston pushed you over the edge."

"I must be losing my mind. Where's Blanchard?"

When I couldn't make bail they held me at the precinct house for a few days then on to the county detention center to await trial. I'd seen enough television to know what happens behind bars, especially to slight, fair skinned types, first time offenders or those unfamiliar with the predatory lifestyle. All bills I fit to the T's. In fact, I found this not be the case, not in the beginning anyway. My cellmates were decent enough. One, in particular, seemed much like myself. Terrified, basically. Cringing in his upper berth, speaking only when spoken to. I never approached the man but I felt a certain kinship and took strength in his presence. I never approached anyone, but Billy the Bald still managed to find me.

"Here's what I want you do partner. We are partners aren't we?"

"Partners, yes."

"When you get out? I want you to give my old lady something for me. You'll do that for me won't you, Flynn?"

"I, ... if at all possible."

"Good. Now when do you get out of here?"

"I'm not sure. I'm trying to raise bail."

"Well what are you in for?"

"I – it's complicated. They think I killed someone, but it's not true."

"Killed someone? Jesus! How?"

"Poison. It's ridiculous. They say I poisoned someone's tea."

"His tea?"

"With poison, yes. The man died in Turkey and they're blaming me! You see, someone's out to get me."

"Poison ... huh?"

"But I didn't do it."

"Did you tell them?"

"Who?"

"The cops, Did you tell them you didn't do it?"

"Certainly."

"That someone was out to get you, did you tell them that?"

"Of course. They refuse to believe me."

"What? You're telling me you're innocent and nobody believes you?"

"I know. It's like a bad movie, or a 60 Minutes expose that no one gets to the bottom of."

"Happens a lot more than you think. That guy on the top bunk? Take him. Claims he doesn't know a thing about the wife ending up in a dumpster. Swears up and down he had nothing to do with it. But do they believe him?"

"I suppose not or he wouldn't be in here."

"But he swears up and down. Even offered to take a lie detector test, as if that ever does any good."

"... do you believe him?"

"Hell no, lying little scumbag, look at him."

"But you do believe me."

"Of course," Billy nodded. "But that's different."

"... why?"

"Why? Well because you're innocent, right?"

"Yes."

"OK then, what I'm saying is you didn't poison old Jack, or whatever his name is."

"Brad, his name was Brad."

"Whatever. You didn't do it and someone's trying to make it look like you did. Here's where you got them, partner. You tell them you had no motive, right? I mean why the hell would you kill old Jack?"

"Exactly! Oh they seem to think I had some sort of vendetta, but the man meant nothing to me. Less than nothing."

"Vendetta? What is that?"

"They think I thought he was after my job. But that's the craziest thing. I was his superior, ... in a sense. I mean I made more money and he had to do more work."

"Whoa, hold up. I don't know much about the whaddya call, ... the corporate world, but if you was his superior isn't he supposed to want your job?"

"Yes, but he was ... it wasn't like that. It's hard to explain. My position is slightly higher but there's no real status in it. It's what you might call a ..."

"... a what?"

"I don't know what you'd call it. It's a consolation job. Something they throw you when it's clear you'll never make the grade."

"A consolation job, hmmm. So this guy wouldn't want a consolation job that pays better?"

"Slightly better. And no, he wouldn't. He was, I don't know, more ambitious."

"Like hungry."

"No that's wrong. Not ambitious. He wasn't ambitious, is what I meant. The job was secondary to him."

"See, let me tell you something here," Billy scratched his head. "You gotta get your story straight, know what I'm saying? You can't wander all around and change things you already said."

"Yes, yes I know. My lawyer says the same thing. But it's so confusing and I'm not at my best, what with the shock of -"

"... Being in jail right?"

"Yes, when I try to explain myself I get so confused. And the police keep coming up with evidence. Shocking evidence, I must say, even though ..."

"... you had nothing to do with it."

"Right."

Which was true, every bit of it. I had my story all balled up. The fact is I didn't have a story at all, really, just a string of denials. Did not, did not, did not, like a whiney child. When I did manage to make a point it made no sense, even to me. To keep insisting Preston wouldn't want my job was lunacy and still I couldn't stop myself. He wouldn't want it ... see?

"Let me tell you something, partner," Billy shook his shiny head. "A good DA is gonna make you look like the second coming of Charlie Manson. What you need is some coaching, my man."

"I just can't think. Maybe I'm having a breakdown."

"Don't even talk like that. You're an innocent man looking at hard time. Maybe even the needle. It's a wonder you can think at all."

"... the nee-"

"But you can't let them railroad you, see? That's what they do when you can't keep things straight. They railroad you."

"I worry that I'll lie. Accidentally, without thinking of what I'm saying, or because it sounds better, more believable. But then I'll have to remember the lie, maybe blurt out more lies to cover it up and then have to remember them! If I lie once, they'll hang me, I know it."

"So you don't lie," Billy chuckled me on the arm. "You go through the whole story and you lay it on the line."

"But they tie it all in knots and I just, ... it's like I can't keep up with them."

"Whaddya talking about? They're just a bunch of cops and lawyers. You got as much on the ball as they do. You can do this!"

"I don't know."

"Come on, I'll help you. We'll take it from the top and go point for point, right down the line. I'll bet we find the perfect alibi in there somewhere."

"You would do that?"

"Well, not for anybody. But you're innocent, right?"

"Absolutely."

"I mean you're not like the rest of us. Hey, they got you in here with a what? A wife killer over there and a freakin crackhead and I don't know what all. You need help."

"I do, yes."

"That's what I want to hear! Just start at the beginning and we'll work through this. Piece of cake, you'll see."

So we did. Over the next few days Billy rode me like a drill sergeant, firing questions, contesting answers, going over it until he knew the story as well as I did. Well enough, in fact, to testify against me in exchange for a reduced sentence and early release date. My jailhouse confession was his bargaining chip. He gave them details he couldn't know unless I told him, then he twisted them to suit the prosecution's case. Billy the Bald. A man I didn't know and would never again see. Car thief, scoundrel, but exemplary witness. Brief yet thorough, polite to the point of ingratiating, weaving truth into lies with all due respects, corroborating testimony and dispelling doubt. Old Billy shrugged off Blanchard's flimsy cross-examination and looked me in the eye as he sold me down the river.

"Try to be strong."

"But I'm not strong. I'm spineless and pathetic, and if I didn't know I was innocent I'd be crazy with remorse. You do think I'm innocent, don't you mom?"

"You were always such a troubled boy."

"Mom no. Listen to me. Just because the district attorney says it doesn't make it so. I was a perfectly happy child."

"You did things to small animals. Horrible things."

"How can you say that? I was devoted to animals."

"Setting the Winters' cat on fire like that."

"WHAT? That was Gary Dutton! Great Christ, all this time you thought that was me?"

"You shouldn't swear."

"My own mother thinks I'm a monster."

"From your father's side of the family. That whole bunch was out to lunch."

As might be expected the trial stirred up media interest, what with the poison and the well in Turkey and of course, Billy the Bald drawing it up like a touchdown pass. The papers dubbed me the Tea Bag Killer and court sketches on the nightly news showed a sullen defendant with a bad haircut staring off morosely. It wasn't a matter of guilt or innocence as much as degrees of evil. Was my crime sufficiently heinous to warrant the gurney or would throwing away the key do the trick? Every broadcast featured the same impossibly grainy yearbook picture of the victim and ended with a rundown of the maximum sentences due, "if convicted". And convicted I was. The verdict was applauded even if my sentence, a mere 15 years, had the pundits howling and victim rights groups shaking their heads. The trial was concluded in seven days giving the district attorney just enough time to showcase his wardrobe and freeing Billy to make his own deliveries. If all goes well I will be eligible for parole shortly before my 65th birthday, just in time to apply for Social Security but two years short of my Techtronic pension.

"I always liked this place. Flynn and I used to have lunch here sometimes."

"I suppose we'll never lay eyes on **him** again. McClellan told me they turned down his appeal and he's already on his fourth lawyer. Jesus, I can still feel him undressing me with his eyes."

"A nasty business, Fay. Thank God it's over."

"And poor Brad. He used to write me poems, you know?"

"Yes, you uh, did mention that. Did I tell you how magnificent you look today?"

"Why did he have to kill him? The pervert!"

"Professional jealousy, according to the prosecution; Flynn felt threatened."

"I don't believe it. Brad was just here for the paycheck. There's got to be more to it."

"I ... can't imagine what?"

"And did you see where his mother is shopping the story around? I saw her on C-span reading from those stupid music reviews."

"Well, fame is where you find it, I suppose. Listen Fay, why not take a run up to the Vineyard this weekend. We could take a room at that little bed and breakfast on the beach."

"Sorry. I promised Lou I'd have that report on his desk Monday morning."

"Mmm, too bad. I must say you've really turned it around there in the marketing department. Old Flynn would be plotting your demise if he wasn't indisposed."

"I owe it all to you, Shack. Remember what you said? Just focus on your goal and the rest will take care of itself."

"A bit sophomoric but tried and true."

"Just knowing you were behind me, I don't know. It made all the difference."

"Just don't forget me when you're picking your team."

"No more old boy network, no more gender discrimination," Miss Stanton reached for Shackleford's hand. "And no more perverts peeking in my window."

"Funny how things work out. Pity about Preston, though, he seemed nice enough, ... but then I didn't know him that well."

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

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“Listening To Crows” by Barry Pomeroy

Synopsis: Crime has varying motives and sometimes dramatic results. Here we find a man overwhelmed by years of suppressed emotions, unleashing his ghosts and overcoming his limitations in a constricted life.

About the Author: Barry Pomeroy is an itinerant English professor, boat designer and builder, traveller, carver, sometimes mechanic, carpenter, and web designer. As a writer, he is responsible for ‘Multiple Personality Disorder’, a long poem in dialogue, and the novel ‘Naked in the Road’; his shorter works has been published in magazines such as Cosmetica, Bards and Sages, Insolent Rudder, Tart, Tiny Globule, Writing Shift, Ulterior, Oddville Press and Word Catalyst.

In this crime fiction, we hear the protagonists own view of his own past.

Listening To Crows

By Barry Pomeroy

Eldon Miller was not a violent man. That's why people were surprised at his response, when they heard about it, when his neighbour Ralph Howland spoke about his mother. What Ralph had said was a matter of some debate, but it boiled down to a statement about parentage and age, and most agreed it went something like "Twenty-eight today huh? Why twenty-eight years ago I left sperm inside your mother." People differed on some of the exact words used, but most agreed that the problem with the message, the reason that mild-mannered Eldon had possibly taken offence, was not just because of the word choice.

Eldon had lived on the farm with his mother Molly all of his life. His father Worn, who was an older man when he'd first married, died when Eldon was still a boy. They'd spent the day of his funeral dressed in stained coveralls, using a bucket to slap cement onto the wall of the house. His mother wanted to satisfy her dream of covering the entire outside of her home with broken pieces of granite. "Life goes on you know," she said all through that long day. That refrain was the only sign that Molly gave a damn that her husband was dead. Worn's grave remained a mound of gravel and dirt, since no one could take time away to cover it with sod, and for many years it was referred to as the new grave.

It wasn't that his mother was cold, George Clark, the Pentecostal minister had said, it was just that she was practical. She had certainly ensured that the church had a new roof. She'd scared up every dime that people were saving for their retirement and bought shingles with it. She even made Doughy, or Doug Fullerton, the carpenter's son, put the shingles on himself. She claimed she was too old to do it herself. Everyone believed her, but they still wondered what she could have said that made Doughy climb the steep church roof and slap down asphalt shingles on the hottest day in July. And it was a matter of debate why Doughy chose the exact moment of finishing to let go of the rope so that he tumbled down in slow motion to land on the lumber he'd stacked along the wall. Some of the people who'd come to watch him work screamed as he fell, although Molly was busy looking overhead to see if he'd had time to finish the peak.

Every time that Eldon came home from where he worked on the Goodine farm he'd have to pass the churchyard with its new gravestone. He'd walk slower and slower up the church hill, as it was called, reluctant to return to the granite-covered house that'd take the skin right off of you if you brushed past it in a hurry. Sometimes he'd go by Doughy's grave so that he could mumble an apology for what his mother had done to Doughy's poor corpse as it collected worms under the soil. When Doughy was still with his obese wife Shelia, Molly had felt the power of god, as she called it, and she'd gone by to put them straight. Doughy's only kid, Suzanne, had died at thirteen after a long bout with brain cancer. That meant that she'd turned from everyone's darling, a blond ringletted girl, to a huge cow of a shambling teenager whose moods were unpredictable, although they were usually dark.

Feeling the power, Molly had gone to greet Doughy in his home. She told him that his daughter's death some weeks before was a judgement. "God is watching," she said. "He's seen you every time you went to that Yerxa slut's house. Now you feel his punishment."

Molly made Eldon drive her to Doughy's place, but had never mentioned her errand, so Eldon witnessed the entire confrontation. It was Eldon who finally threatened to call the police so that Molly's righteous instruction might end. At first, he was afraid that Doughy would kill Molly, but the crushed look on Doughy's face, and the response of Shelia when she'd heard about the affair,

took the fight right out of Doughy. After that he spent most of his time inhaling the mixed gas he said that he'd bought for his lawnmower. Everyone knew that Doughy never mowed the lawn, but when he tottered towards home with his red gas jug clutched to his chest nobody said a word.



"Nothing I can do about it now," Eldon said to the silent stone. He'd apologized enough, and he felt it was Doughy's turn to offer forgiveness. A lone crow swept down to perch on the gravestone as Eldon was ready to leave, but he was reluctant to read that as a sign of absolution. As he turned away, someone behind him said, "Ok, enough," and Eldon jumped to hear the harshness of the tone. He looked at the crow, but it pecked innocently at the gravestone top even

though it was of too recent an origin to have accumulated insect life. Doughy's voice, although scarcely melodic, was not as gravely as the one he'd just heard and Eldon waited to hear more. The afternoon peeled back to reveal evening and Eldon finally went home just in time to catch the evening star stretching the western sky.

"Just where on god's earth were you?" his mother said as soon as he entered, but Eldon gave no reply. He sat down to the scalloped potatoes she used to disguise leftovers from the past week and thought on what the crow, or the gravestone, or Doughy, had said. It was a message of some sort, that he knew, but just how he was supposed to act on it he could not say. After a restless sleep, Eldon left the house early, catching his mother in what she called the beauty room, although it was a room that had had little effect.

Eldon's first stop before he went to Goodine's farm was Clark's Pentecostal church where Doughy was buried. He went to ask the advice of the minister who knew everything there was to know about the spiritual world. Clark had been to Moncton and once had a black man to dinner, although he wouldn't admit where he'd found him.

Clark said that Eldon had probably heard an argument between a goose and a duck, or that the wind in the pines on the side hill sometimes sounded like voices. When Eldon imitated what he'd heard, Clark jumped, but not enough to confirm that Clark had heard it as well, so Eldon left without knowing who had spoken. At the barn, he tried to get Merl to talk about what'd he'd heard. But Merl, at least since he'd worked in town and come back with a tattoo, would only speak if you asked him a direct question and Eldon wasn't sure what to ask.

On his way home Eldon avoided the graveyard although it beckoned to him from the slope of the hill. Clark tried to wave him over to the church, but Eldon studiously looked the other way. The Graham girls were out in full force as well, their smooth bodies sprawled over the lawn to soak up the glances of the sun and the passing farmers. But Eldon was intent on his own thoughts and didn't even give them a peek. The mentally handicapped man at the Hoyts worked for his keep, even though the government paid for his board; he beckoned to Eldon from across the fence.

Eldon waved and went by, having no interest in the dead frog Eddy might have in his pocket or his latest game with barbed wire.

When Eldon got home his mother was in the yard and her mouth was already full of lectures on how he'd come home late the night before. "You've been sniffing around those Graham girls. You're just like your father. But it didn't pay for him did it?"

Eldon looked to see the expression on his mother's face when she talked about his father, but other than her permanent crimped look, her face was as bland as ever. Eldon pushed his mound of scalloped potatoes from one side of the plate to the other, feeling as worn-out as he ever had his entire life. His mother scolded on through the night and her shrill sheet metal voice was the last thing Eldon heard as he fell asleep, even though he'd taken to putting a radio under his pillow.

When he woke, his mother was talking to herself, although the intent of the message about morality was meant for him. He breakfasted while he fiddled with the knob on the ancient radio they kept in the kitchen. Finally he found the university station and its punk music attempted to drown out his mother's voice. Like factory workers with their pop music headphones, Eldon had long realized that variety in the noise was better than the battering ram of nasal justification that was his mother's harangues.

When Ralph came over later in the day to butcher a pig, it was a relief. Eldon hated killing, although the farm seemed to be rife with it, and even when the combine tore through the oats Eldon would look the other way. As a man, it was his responsibility to be present while Ralph first hit the pig on the head with his sledge and then cut its throat, so Eldon always attended. He knew that he would not be able to eat for the rest of the day and that his stomach would be off for a week, but it was small compensation for avoiding the catcalls once his weakness was known.

Molly would always attend the killing herself, and it was easy to see that she regretted her gender, which sat uneasily on her brutish shoulders, and prevented her from taking an active role. As it was, she volunteered to do the throat slitting. She pretended not to trust Ralph's work, although he'd been a butcher longer than Eldon had been alive. Eldon watched the pig blood spill out over the floor with dismay and although it seemed to bring joy to his mother and a kind of grim satisfaction to Ralph, Eldon felt like he needed some fresh air.

It was his mother who first mentioned Eldon's birthday. "Twenty-eight today," she said. "And most of the time he's been raised it's been without a father."

At the word father, Ralph jumped, like he'd been pricked by the same knife that dripped blood on the barn floor. Perhaps, like most people, he was nervous being around Molly, or maybe he'd been present when Doughy had dropped the rope. Maybe he was tired of the recriminations every time someone did something that Molly disagreed with, which was most of the time, but whatever the reason, something made Ralph joke about Eldon's origin.

If Molly had hit Ralph with a hammer, if she'd spiked him to the wall with the bloody knife and made him retract what he said, most people agreed the barnyard scene might have been different. Instead, uncharacteristically, Molly's face softened with barely remembered pleasure, and she blushed. It took Eldon a moment to recognize the look on his mother's face. His arm was moving even before his mind had registered her guilty pleasure. With a smoothness of movement that belied his inexperience, he reached out with one hand for the twelve-pound sledge Ralph had used on the pig. Eldon steadied himself with his other hand, until he had the sledge up and moving, and then with a grimace like he was driving a fence post and had hit a rock, he cracked his mother's skull like a windowpane. More fragile than anyone could have dreamed, his mother

dropped to the floor, but not before Eldon took the knife from her hand and, mimicking what he'd watched Ralph do for years, he slit her throat and let her drop.

Ralph, if he is to be believed, was too shocked to react. He looked at the spatters on his pants and boots that was Molly's blood and the pig's, and he saw faint patterns as they mingled on the floor, but he didn't raise a hand to stop Eldon as he went through the barn door out into the open.

Ralph made much of how he helped the police and preacher Clark load Molly onto the ambulance. He told everyone how he'd stopped to clean up the barn after the police were done puking and could rally enough stomach to take their crime scene photographs. What possessed Ralph to tell people what he saw, no one knew. Perhaps he was as drawn by the mystery of Eldon's action as anyone, or maybe he blamed himself and wished for a type of forgiveness that Eldon had received from a crow.

Ralph said that the crows must have been waiting. For when Eldon went across the field towards the narrow strip of cleared bush that allowed the power lines passage, crows swept down from the trees and followed him. They cawed around his head and played out in front of him like a dark fishing line, pulling him towards the woods where Eldon was lost, if the police reports are to be believed.

To this day there are those who tell their restless children that Eldon is still out in the woods. "He haunts the brush and streams, waiting for kids who won't sleep." Mistakenly thinking that their stories encourage tiredness, the parents keep Eldon alive and pass him down through the generations, although in truth no one really knows what happened to him.

I do. I was there when Eldon came up from the river. Soaked and covered in mosquito bites, but he was still distinguishable as a human. The crows settled on the wires across the highway, and Eldon went into the gas station bathroom and washed. He emerged as clean as you or I, and went out on the highway to catch a drive. He eventually settled into a town not much different than the one that he came from, although it was on the west coast. There land prices are higher, but crows hopping sideways on the lawn after a bug are more common than not.

Going by Nodle Howland, so that he might give some honour to his fathers; Nodle farms fifteen acres of garden and grows some produce for the local markets. He's made a life out here, and only sends this letter to put something at peace, even if it's only the blame people have put on Ralph for the killing. Now Doughy should be able to sleep without crows picking at his headstone and Worn's grave can grow some grass.

**** THE END ****

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“One Of Them Knows” by Ilan Herman

Synopsis: If you are not familiar with Koy already, then you are still living in an illusory life. Life, universe and everything takes new definitions at every visit from this blob from outer space. Discover more hidden truths in “The Zoomarian Chronicles”. Look through past issues of FFJ for previous adventures.

About the Author: Ilan is 41 year old musical producer with a passion for writing good fiction. His works are online at:

www.emily-music.com (musical webpage)

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In this Science Fiction, our favourite alien visitor will deal with a human who knows too much.

One Of Them Knows

By Ilan Herman
(From The Zoomarian Chronicles)

"One of them knows," Koy said, blue egg-shaped body jiggling with concern.

"What are you saying?" Zep asked, swampy-brown eye blinking rapidly.

If Koy had fingers to fidget he would've done so handily. Instead the stubby tentacle at the center of his rotund frame turned yellow. "His name is Andy Clinton. He lives in what humans call the USA, in a city called Los Angeles."

"What does he know?" Zep asked, tentacle glowing impatient pink.

If Koy had arms to wave he would've reached for the heavens. "Everything! He knows about planet Zoomar, about us, about how we set up Earth as a petri dish, how everything around him is an experiment to engineer life on a molecular level."

Zep melted into an angry purple puddle but quickly coagulated. In a voice too shrill even for a Terrier to hear, he said, "That is impossible."



"I agree," Koy said, "but it happened. What do we do now?"

"We?" Zep screeched. "It's your experiment."

"But you're the department head. You approved the specs when I wrote the blueprint."

"You're blaming me?" Zep's tentacle turned red. "I thought we agreed that you'd let it go."

Koy's throat pulsed with dry swallows. "I decided to try to save the experiment."

"Now you tell me?" Zep said. "I'm trying to run a department."

Koy melted into a yellow puddle and coagulated back to eggish-blue with some effort, frame triangular for a moment. "I'm sorry. I'm so confused. Can you give me a little more time?"

Zep's tentacle glowed in pink. "Okay. No reason to melt in embarrassment. We all know that when it comes to molecular engineering on a planetary scale even a trillion terabytes aren't enough to predict the possible variations. I mean, who could have imagined smart primates? That in itself is an aberration."

"Thanks for your support," Koy said and, had he a mouth, he would have grinned sheepishly.

"To the job at hand," Zep said. "Show me your data."

"Screen on," Koy said.

The wall parted to show a man about forty, light-blond hair receding too quickly, green eyes cradled by crow's feet. The man was typing feverishly onto a computer screen.

"After they'd settled the atmospheric changes," the man wrote, "the Zoomarians configured the oxygen output and never expected primates to factor in. But we have, and they can't handle it."

"How does he know who we are?" Zep squeaked.

"Check this out," Koy said and brought up a page on the screen. "This is how he started his documentation."

The page read: Zoomar is a planet ten times the size of earth, with an ammonia based atmosphere. The planet is located in the Adelpia sector, forty billion light years from our solar system. The race inhabiting Zoomar is made of asexual beings who procreate independently much like bacteria. They are about a foot tall, blue in complexion (though their colors change to express emotion), and shaped much like an egg. They are a genius race, with average IQ's well over 1500 in human measurements. Such intelligence has allowed them to evolve in ways we can barely fathom, like using deep space tunnels to travel millions of light years in an instant. They are an ancient and benevolent race though not without their share of cantankerous bickering...

"That is incredulous," Zep said. "I refuse to be labeled cantankerous."

If Koy had shoulders, he would have shrugged. Instead, his tentacle turned phosphorous green. "You do have your rare moments of pettiness, like the time on planet G31..."

"I will not discuss that incident again," Zep said and, had he possessed fists, he would have clenched them tightly and pounded them on the table. He turned his murky-brown eye to the screen and continued reading: *The scientists on planet Zoomar had formed GEPA (Genetically Engineered Planetary Association) about six billion years ago. GEPA is dedicated to building planets and inhabiting them with various single-celled life forms, and then following the evolution of these life forms much like a scientist tracks an experiment in a petri dish. In their defense, GEPA, lead by the impatient Zep...*

"Impatient?" Zep's lament was shrill enough to shatter a slab of glass. "I don't like this man, Andy Clinton. He is judgmental and coarse.....after all we've done for him and his race - a noxious cast of primates who kill with glee."

"Read on," Koy said. "He's sympathetic too."

Zep's tentacle rippled in shades of pink as he read on: *... have successfully constructed millions of planets that inhabit peaceful and healthy races. From giant birds that build space stations, to amphibious fish who have fingers attached to their fins, Zep and his associates have, in my view, done more good than harm. In the case of planet earth, the results are dubious at best.*

"Enough," Zep said and turned his rapidly blinking eye on Koy. "Go talk to him. Tell him to stop."

"What?! I can't do that. That would violate the prime directive."

"I don't care," said the head of GEPA. "Rules are made to be broken."

Koy's tentacle turned brown. "I think you're taking this personally."

"Really? Maybe when you're the head of the department you can worry about that."

"See?" Koy said, finger-pointing in his voice. "You're being impatient."

Zep melted into a red puddle, and took considerable time to coagulate. "This is insubordination. Now be on your way before I evoke your reproductive privileges."

"That wasn't very nice at all," Koy said in a barely audible whisper.

Zep's tentacle turned bright yellow. A deep sigh in his squeak, he said, "I apologize, but something must be done to understand how he knows."

"I'll see what I can do," Koy said, eye mopping the floor, and vanished.

&&&

Koy manifested silently in a room lit with candles. He faced the hunched back of a man leaning over a desk and speaking into a recording device held in his palm. "The Zoomarian emissary has arrived," the man said without looking back. Then he swung his swivel chair to face Koy and said, "Good to finally meet you."

"How did you know I was coming?" the alien squeaked.

Andy covered his ears. "You're gonna have to lower your pitch. My eardrums are popping."

Koy's voice became a pleasant baritone. "How do you know about us?"

Andy shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Hell if I know. One morning I'm sittin' on my porch sippin' my coffee and watching a squirrel run up the oak tree when all this info comes flooding my brain. Fuckin crazy, man. I was losin' my freakin' mind for a week, drank till I puked, prayed to whomever was ready to listen, finally had a gun in my mouth and was about to pull the trigger, when you showed up and said, 'Please stop. We are real.'"

"That was not me," Koy said.

"Sure looked like you, but I guess you're all the same."

Koy's tentacle vibrated. "We are not all the same. That is an inconsiderate remark."

Andy frowned and leaned forward in his chair. "What do you know about consideration? How would you feel knowing you're a fuckin' experiment? Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"I do not smoke."

Andy leaned back in his chair and laughed. "You made me but you don't understand a word I'm saying. Good job, Bozo."

"The entity you encountered was a hologram triggered by a data spike," Koy said, greatly restraining himself from dissolving into a yellow puddle. "I was not informed of that event. Had I been informed, a course of action would have taken place to alleviate the discomfort you felt."

Andy swigged from a brown bottle. "Discomfort is what you feel when you go to the dentist or have a sunburn. I felt anguish. You know what that means?" He tapped his right temple three times. "I was losin' my mind, man, losin' my fuckin' mind."

"I am sorry," Koy said, a murky tear rolling out from his eye.

Andy held out his palms. "You're crying? What are you, some suburban mommy? I'm the one crying here. No turning tables, buddy."

"I do not know how to turn tables," the alien said, voice once again threatening to shatter a window.

"I rest my case, your Royal Cluelessness," the human said and swigged from the brown bottle.

Nervous silence ensued while Koy hovered a few inches off the floor. Andy drummed his fingers on his thigh and then said, "What now?"

"We have several options," Koy said. "The best solution is to scan your brain and find the synaptic chain that mistakenly linked to our database. We can easily and painlessly disconnect that chain. You won't remember anything about Zoomar, and can return to your normal life."

Andy leaned forward in his chair and narrowed his eyes. "You ain't messin' with my brain, brother Koy. You don't even know how it happened. You'll probably lobotomize me."

"I assure you the procedure is completely safe," Koy began, when Andy waived his long arms and yelled, "No deal. Forget about it. Plan B."

Koy needed the proverbial glass of water to ease the aridness in his non-existent mouth. His tentacle vibrated in angry purple. "We could exterminate you, induce a heart attack or an aneurism. You are a middle-aged man who drinks lots of whiskey and eats bad food. No one would suspect foul play."

Andy laughed and flashed the blue alien with a bony middle finger. "Bullshit. I know about the prime directive - staying away from affecting the outcome. You can't and won't kill me."

"You are right about the prime directive," Koy said, "but Zep is quite upset with you. He is ready to throw out the rule book. According to the rules, I am not even supposed to be here talking with you."

Andy pursed his thin lips and glared at Koy. Then he pointed to his own crotch. "Tell Zep to go fuck himself. It's your fuckup, not mine, so get your shit together and work something out. Go to plan C."

Koy's tentacle turned bright pink. "You are a careless and reckless life form. Why must you use profanities and vulgar body language to make your point?"

Andy stood up, lanky body towering over the alien. "I don't know, asshole. Maybe you can tell me why. You made me."

Greatly tempted to incinerate the human being into a pile of ashes the size of a fingernail, Koy instead melted into a red puddle, and then took several trying moments to coagulate, much like a runner completing a marathon.

"The third option," he then said, voice slurred with exhaustion, "is for things to remain as they are. You will be aware of us and what we do, and continue to document our world. Let me be clear: You will never be able to prove anything to your fellow citizens. I know you have been recording our conversation with your silver box, and I see the concealed camera you placed on the table. None of my images or voice have been recorded. All you will hear or see is you talking to yourself."

Andy pressed a few buttons on his recorder, and then listened. Only his voice played back. Then he took the towel off the camera, rewound for a moment, and studied the screen. "I kinda figured that much," he muttered, "but it was worth the try."

Deflated silence followed as alien and human reached an impasse. Then Koy said, "There is one more option."

Andy slumped in his chair and raised a tired arm. "Go ahead," and swigged from the brown bottle.

Koy's tentacle glowed in friendly sky-blue. "I personally find your writing to be compelling in the genre humans call Science Fiction. What you write is true. Readers will be intrigued by the realistic overtones of the world you have invented."

Andy sat up in his chair. "You say I should publish a book about you?"

"Yes." Koy's voice was a squeaky rattle filled with excitement. "The book will succeed, maybe even be made into a movie, and you will be wealthy - the skewed and corrupt ideal all humans strive for."

Andy stood up and yelled, "The book title will be The Zoomarian Chronicles."

"Oh...that is a good title," Koy said, and had he consumed oxygen, he would have been breathless with joy. Admitting to himself that he possessed a vain streak even though his IQ was 2134, Koy looked forward to his portrayal on screen. He also thought that Andy's book could possibly serve to subliminally insert reason into the petulant race of humans he was trying to heal...to steer them to the shores of compassion for one another.

Andy laughed and then took a drink. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and said, "You bet it's a good title, Koy baby. I'd say gimme five but you don't have fingers."

Satisfied silence lingered for a moment, and then Andy clapped twice. "Time to get to work. Don't be a stranger."

"Before I leave," Koy said, "may I suggest that you portray Zep in a kinder, gentler light. That will greatly enhance his cooperation."

"No worries, Koy baby. I know how to kiss ass when I have to."

"Zep does not have an ass," Koy said, "though sometimes he acts like one." His giggle was a shriek almost capable of waking the dead.

Andy howled and slapped his thigh. "That's funny stuff, man. You're a riot. Lemme write this joke before I forget." He turned to his computer screen and started typing.

Tentacle glowing in proud phosphorous green, Koy hovered silently for a moment. Then, feeling he was intruding upon the writer's creative space, he vanished.

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

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“A Mother’s Perspective on Impositions” by KJ Hannah Greenberg

Synopsis: A unique perspective as only a mother would have and the imposition as only Hannah could present.

About the Author: KJ Hannah Greenberg is usually too busy parenting her teenage sons and daughters to contemplate her navel. If she had five extra minutes, she would bake quinoa pie and feed it to her imaginary hedgehogs. Meanwhile, she steals time by sleeping a little less and laughing a little more. On rare, alternate Tuesdays, Hannah and the hedgies fly the galaxy in search of gelatinous monsters and assistant bank managers. Sometimes, they even catch a few. Read more about her at <http://www.kjhannahgreenberg.net/>.

Preorders for her new book, Oblivious to the Obvious: Wishfully Mindful parenting at available at services@frenchcreekpress.com. Faster than a flying meatball let loose by an insolent hedgehog, more water soluble than a chimera released from its leash, and heavier than a grandmother who ate too many slices of eggplant, “Oblivious to the Obvious: Wishfully Mindful Parenting” breaks through the barriers of dime store strictures and invites all grownups to celebrate, to contemplate, and to gyrate in tempo with, the stresses and joys of raising young ones.

In this intriguing tale, we get a visual delight through words that take you into another realm.

A Mother's Perspective on Impositions

By KJ Hannah Greenberg



Gerta was committed to teaching art at the women's retreat. She could not wait for that break. She liked interfacing with other females, plus she could use the pay. Given the economy, one specialty class after another had been cancelled at the center, leaving Gerta little income.

She needed an escape. At the lake, where she lived, there had been much simmering of the names of friends who had hoped to visit for the holidays or who had otherwise wanted to taste a piece of her hide. Plus, her mother's harangues had been filling her domicile with many uncomfortable vibrations.

Unfortunately, her family had not been compliant with her need to be hospitable. Specifically, one of her buds had killed an intruder. At the time, Gerta had snorted thrice in revulsion and had carefully shifted her tendrils. Her limbs had already been pins and needles. Her digestive tract had already become ulcerated. Her inner tubing had already been corroded to the point that she suffered from anuria. If only that

offshoot had not countermanded her mentations!

That adolescent ought not to have slaughtered the trespasser, who had ambulated on the family's waterfront. Two-meter long fire makers are valuable; as neither ethanol-based nor comfortable in absolute zero, they are desired by the elders, i.e. worth an entire batch of credits.

If only her new growth had not taken action without her consent. If only that aril had not redirected the interloper's hepatic circulation, through a gastric pouch, by dint of drugs that, at least in their Titan atmosphere, were notoriously slow and often times excruciating. If only that cone had waited for Gerta to dispatch the unwelcomed visitor, the family would not have had to relocate.

The neighbors were not to blame No one wants to dwell near persons constantly imploding advance teams of star warriors.

Gerta considered that had she and her partner parented better, her sprout's course could have been corrected. As it were, the scales on some of her other seedlings were glistening an odd, tawny-red. Gerta had hoped that her young fruits would have mated before such secondary sexual

characteristics darkened. Consequently, she was beginning to contemplate heat treatments for them. Although their breeding cycle had long since begun, they had not received a single splash.

Sighing, Greta looked through her special, thickly coated glass, feeling grateful for its iron oxide, silicone fibers. Thermal-impervious devices matter when retaliatory space creatures arrive by the rocketful.

After wiping her face plate, Gerta regarded her pouch. Although her abdomen failed to stretch into a fantasy of pregnancy, she was again with eggs. It was a poor time for her relationship to have ended and for her developing branches to be without secondary guidance.

Perhaps it was her fault. Perhaps she ought not to have doubted her partner's ability to manifest aggression toward the intergalactics. She had been schooled to realize that the second gender could not grasp, let alone articulate, the sophistication of feelings of oviparous beings. She could have prevented his demise rather than provoked his belligerence.

Gerta grunted and pulled more stringy bits from her mouth. She took no pleasure in the taste of the weak-fleshed extraterrestrials; such puny critters were only good as ornaments. Her partner's viscera, on the other hand, were sweet. Soon, when her wings were strong enough, she'd take his remains, her new brood, and a babysitter, to another, less populated lake. As for now, she'd give the kids the leftovers and enjoy her "women only" getaway.

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

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“The Organization” by Randall W. Pretzer

Synopsis: A group, an entity, an unknown organization for transforming you. This pulp story brings to you an intriguing tale of transforming innocent pacifists into more savage beings.

About the Author: Randall W. Pretzer recently got back into short story writing in 2006 and has primarily just been a short story writer from then on. His favorite authors are his father, his brother, Knut Hamsun, John Fante, Charles Bukowski, Anne Bronte, Ray Bradbury, Richard Matheson, Carroll John Daly, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Paul Cain.

In this mystery, you get a front row seat to the unfolding game of coercion.

The Organization

By Randall W. Pretzer

His name was Floyd. He was told it was 'The Organization' by someone over the phone. He hung up on the phone and that is all he remembered. He woke up to find himself in an office that had nothing in it but the chair he was sitting on and a desk in front of him with an office chair. There was a man sitting at the desk and looking over some papers. The man looked up at him.

"There you are." The man said. He put the papers away and leaned back in his chair putting his hands behind his head. "I didn't think they would make it."

"It doesn't look like they did. I don't see anyone else here but you and I." Floyd said.

"They made it."

"Where are they?"

"They brought you. I sent them and they made it back. You are evidence of that."

"I guess you are expecting me to ask something?"

"I don't expect anything from anyone."

"You won't be surprised by my next question?"

The man smiled. "Nothing surprises me."

"What the fuck am I doing here?"

"I was hoping you were not filled with clichés."

"It is a perfectly legitimate question."

"I didn't say it wasn't anything."

"You like to be smart."

"I like to think I am smart."

"That is debatable."

"Isn't everything?"

"Perhaps."



The man stood up, dragged his chair over and placed it next to Floyd. He sat down in the chair and put his arm around Floyd.

"I like your style. I knew I found the right man."

"What the hell are you talking about? I want some fucking answers."

"You only need to know one thing."

"I hope it involves some answers."

"The only answer you will need."

"Cut the bullshit."

"I am having so much fun though."

"I am not. I want to go home."

"You know damn well that is not an option." The man walked over to his desk, opened up a drawer to his desk and pulled out a .57 magnum and pointed it at Floyd.

"I am impressed. You have shown no fear at the site of this pistol."

"If I am going to die, I am going to die."

"I like your attitude." The man put the pistol into the back of his pants and sat back down next to Floyd.

"You don't feel anything. I never saw such cold eyes." The man said.

"Society expects me to show nothing, I am a man, right?"

"Or a boy. It depends. Maybe technically you are a man but who knows about your spirit."

"Jesus Christ, get on with it all ready. You kill me, or tell me what you want or I can just leave."

"I wish it was that simple."

The man went back over to the front of his desk and pulled out his cell phone. Why didn't the man just keep the phone in his pocket thought Floyd? It didn't matter. He expected his life to be over in a few minutes in more ways than one.

"Thank you." The man hung up his cell phone. Floyd didn't hear the man say anything else over the phone. He heard a door open behind him.

"You can't leave because you love your wife and kid too much." The man said. Floyd immediately turned around. He saw his wife and child standing in front of him. There were two men armed with AK-47s standing behind his wife and child.

"You disappoint me. I thought you had no life." The man said and pulled out his .57 magnum. Floyd's wife and child both screamed.

"No, please!" His wife said.

"Please don't kill my daddy," the kid appealed.

He raised it up at Floyd and aimed for his right shoulder. The man fired. Floyd screamed in pain but he didn't fall out of the chair. He couldn't believe he didn't fall out of the chair but the pain was unlike anything he had felt before.

"I need a man who doesn't feel anything but you feel for your family. I thought you were different." The man said and he fired at Floyd's left shoulder. He screamed again. His wife and child kept screaming.

"You can let them go but you kill them if they manage to acquire any information that might help them send someone over here to disrupt our organization."

The two men nodded and took the family out of the room.

"I remember reading about the soviets and the men they trained to be assassins. They came so close to success except that they forgot that some people do have humanity. You are one of them and I have no use for you."

"Why don't you just let me go?" Floyd said.

"You have seen too much."

"What the hell have I seen?"

"You were at the office downstairs."

"Well, gee, now I know."

"What is it.....at your moment of dying or in your moment of dying?"

"What the fuck does it matter?"

"Whatever....you are still talking wisecracks when you know you will soon be dead." The man said.

"I am the last of the 80s action heroes." Floyd said.

"I thought they existed only in the movies."

"I am the real thing." Floyd quickly lifted up his foot and kicked the gun out of the man's hand. The man started laughing. Floyd lunged at him and grabbed the man's shoulders with his hands. The man continued to laugh as he fell back and Floyd punched the man in the mouth but the man still kept a smile. The door from behind opened and there came two men armed with AK-47s. They fired at Floyd and caught him in the back. He fell flat on top of the man and the man pushed Floyd aside. He stood up and reached for his .57 magnum. Floyd grabbed the man's legs and brought the man to the floor. The man fell on his back. The two men with the AK-47s looked confused and bewildered. How was this man still alive? Floyd saw the .57 magnum lying right in front of him and he grabbed it. The man was still laughing. Floyd stood up and shot both of the men with the AK-47s in the chest. Floyd turned to face the man on the floor. The man refused to stop laughing. It

unnerved Floyd. Why was this man laughing? What the hell was this? Floyd pointed the .57 at the man but couldn't pull the trigger. He yelled a bit but he couldn't pull the trigger. It hurt too much inside. He backed away. The man was still laughing and stood up. Floyd kept the gun on the man and he stood where he was. Floyd began to cry. He thought about the two men he just killed and hated himself. I didn't have to kill them he thought. I didn't have to. I could have wounded them. The man walked in a little closer to Floyd.

"You stay where you are." Floyd said.

"I know how this works." The man said and stopped.

"I reckon you do."

"I don't know how you got in here wearing a flak jacket. I might add that the blood capsules are a nice touch."

"I figured why not do it with some style."

"Is this where you kill me now?"

"I can't do it."

"I guess that means I can charge at you." The man lunged at Floyd and Floyd fired. He hit the man in the stomach. The man fell forward on the desk and began to laugh even as his face crashed on the wooden surface of the desk.

"I knew you could do it."

"You made me do it." Floyd said and began to cry once more.

"No one makes us do anything."

"Bullshit."

"Self-denial. It only kills your soul."

"Mine is already dead."

"You are dead in your grave."

"Maybe physically....but emotionally you killed me." Floyd said, continuing to cry.

"I saved you. You can leave out that door there." The man said pointing at the door behind Floyd.

"I leave and you have me killed the minute I am out that door. I want you to come with me."

"I can't. I'm almost dead."

"You are wearing a flak jacket. I know it."

"Does this look like a flak jacket?" The man said and pulled out what seemed to be a piece of intestine. Floyd threw up.

"I guess I will have to take my chances." Floyd said and he headed out the door. He shut it behind him. The man got up off the desk. He removed the fake intestines, the flak jacket and moved his chair back to where it was before. He sat down in the chair and pulled a cigar and matchbox out of his pocket. He picked a matchstick and struck it on the matchbox to light up his cigar. The two men got up and took off their flak jackets.

"Good work. I thought you two were dead for a split second."

"Thank you, sir." They both said at the same time.

"You two may leave me now."

"Yes, sir." They both said at the same time and walked out of the room. They shut the door behind them. The man got up and walked over to the wall on the left side of the desk. He hit a button and the wall slid to the right to reveal a window. The man looked out for a minute. He removed the cigar from his mouth. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed. Someone answered.

"Did Floyd make it out of here okay?" The man said.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. He thinks he managed to sneak in here with a flak jacket." The man laughed and so did the person on the other end.

"Yeah...the blood capsules showed style."

"We can't afford to have pacifists. You keep sending them up and I will take care of them. We have not failed yet and I don't intend for us to."

"We will only make them think we will kill them." The person on the phone laughed.

"Yes, I am ready for the next one." The man said and laughed. He hung up. There was a knock on the door. The same two men with AK-47s came in with another hostage who was blind folded, gagged and wrapped in thick rope from head to toe. They removed the blind fold, unwrapped him and removed the cloth from his mouth. They forced the man down in the chair in front of the desk.

The man in charge turned from the window and sat back down in the other chair. "That will be all, men."

"Yes, sir." The two men said at the same time and left the room. They shut the door behind them. The man waited a few minutes and the new hostage opened up his eyes and shook his head a bit.

"There you are. I didn't think they would make it." The man said.

**** THE END ****

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“The Oak Tree” By Chris Castle

Synopsis: Another emotional tale from the delicate quill of Chris Castle. This story also deals with loss and bereavement. Yet it shows a whole different view and takes you through the unique sentiments of its characters.

About the Author: Chris Castle lives and works outside London. His primary influences include Ray Carver, Bill Murray, the films of PT Anderson and the Y: The Last Man graphic novels. He can be reached at chriscastle76@hotmail.com .

In this emotional story, a kid will grow to be a man and deal with his loss to move ahead to his awaiting future. Hope is to acknowledge life can be better, not just wishing it.

The Oak Tree

By Chris Castle

His father planted it the day he was born. He left the two of them, happy and exhausted, at the hospital and set about it right away. Later, he would tell him how he dug the hole, worked the small tree, no higher than a dog, into the dirt. He would say how the sun was so strong; it almost felt like beams were raining down on his back. But it didn't matter. All that mattered was getting the job done. His father set the tree, took a step back and mopped his brow. The oak tree sat, like a heart, in the middle of their garden, their home.

When he played as a child, it was always around the tree. His mother would joke it was like the tree was a brother to him, always offering him shade, always offering companionship. She would tell him how she would watch him play, gathering the toys at the bottom of the tree like offerings, as she sat close by, playing her wooden guitar, the thing she loved and cherished most outside of 'her two boys'. Then she would sit with him under the shade of the tree, the three of them together, contemplating the summer days together.

His father would smile when she told the story and agree with her, one hundred percent. He said he would walk in from his work, loosen his tie and head straight to the garden. Sometimes, he said, he considered parking the car and cutting right around to the back door, as opposed to the front, such was his certainty that they would be by the tree.

"And each day, sure as night follows day, there they were. My family all gathered up, sheltering from the sun. I would say if I had one regret in life, it would be that I did not take a photo of that scene. If I had, you can bet I would have hung that picture in every room in this house." He would say this then and kiss them both, first his wife and then him.

The tree grew along with him, to the point that his mother said the two of them were in some sort of race. It became a game; she would walk him into the garden, stand him by the tree and mark him against the bark. He would look at the tree, looming over him, and wonder if he would ever reach the top of its body.

"It doesn't matter, honey," his mother said. She had a way of talking that was low and almost melted, the way he imagined smoke would sound if it had a voice. "We'll build you a tree house right there on its brow, so you can sit right alongside him, face to face."

True to her word, as he reached his seventh birthday, his mother and father set about building him a tree house. His father, who was an architect, sat right alongside of him, telling him where joists would fit, where platforms and supports would need to be added. He listened and followed right along, understanding some parts of what he said and not others, smiling at how his father made nuts and bolts sound like the most wonderful stories he had heard. He suggested he should talk about his buildings and his plans and set it to tune to his mother's guitar rhythms.

"I couldn't imagine anything sweeter," he said earnestly to his parents. The two of them looked at them, close to thunderstruck and then they acted in their different ways. His father let out the loudest, boldest laugh he could ever hope to hear, clapping his hands and looking to the skies, while his mother sat silently, tears welling in her eyes. Later, when he lay in bed thinking about the scene, he reasoned that was why his mother and father fit so well; the loud, the quiet, the laughter and the tears. But always together, ending in the two of them linking fingers and holding each other close.

The tree house became his second home. He took to doing his homework in there by torchlight, reading his comic books, or else simply watching however many stars he could see appearing in the sky before his mother called him back to the house. Sometimes he slept in the tree house, his mother or his father taking it in turns to sleep by his side, wrapped in a blanket. His father would tell him wild stories of cowboys and sea-ships, that he decided were partly the truth and partly as bright and as unlikely as his comic books. His mother would sit quietly, pointing out the stars and giving them each names he knew to be true, and would play her guitar until he fell asleep, even as he tried to hear the last of the song that pushed him closer to his dreams.



He began school and made friends, but had a feeling that none of them would quite match what he found in the oak tree in the garden. He laughed more and learned to listen and spin tall tales and sometimes he played games he would think about for hours afterwards. But there was something about that tree, how it never bent or bowed, how it would stay just exactly where it was supposed to be, that he knew he wouldn't find anywhere else. Sometimes, when his parents were busy and his homework was done, he would find himself grabbing time with the tree in the dusk, telling him things he wouldn't dream of telling anyone, safe in the knowledge the tree was a secret-keeper like no other.

Sometimes his parents would argue. They would do their best to hide it from him, but he knew it all the same. They would snatch mean glances over to each other, while she stood by the sink and he by the fridge. He would follow their stares, almost feeling the air crackle between them. He

would be put to bed, or allowed to play in the garden and they slowly walked, one after the other, up the stairs, like doomed soldiers, ready to shout out the next battle.

When they did this, he climbed the oak tree and watched them the way he watched the stars. One of them would stand still, like the moon, while the other flailed around the edges, waving hands, or pointing fingers. Then the two of them would burst into screams, a hand grabbing a wrist, a small bottle pitched to the wall or into the mirror and then it would settle. There was almost a dust where they had moved in frenzy and then stopped so suddenly, but not quite. Then the two of them would circle each other all over again, almost on the verge of tears, but all the hurtful words exhausted, and she would pitch into his chest, or she would draw her arms up around his neck and watch him fold into her heart. He wondered why after the arguments, in the tender moments that followed, it was that they looked more in love than ever. He asked the tree out loud one time, but all that followed was a silence and the silhouette of his parents wrapped together in an embrace.

There was a time when they almost sold the house and he cried for days. He never mentioned the tree, but he knew his parents considered this as a factor, as much as anything else. Jobs fell into place, phone calls were made and the three of them waited in a silence that unsettled him like nothing else before. Other things moved into place, doubts were raised and finally he watched his parents walk out to the tree to make their final decision. He felt all at sea watching them stand under his tree while he stood at his bedroom window, and he swayed, nearly fainting from not understanding it. There was a moment and then his father picked up his mother and he knew everything was going to be all right. That night he had a dream and replayed the scene in his mind and as they swirled, the tree itself tilted forward, its branches dipping close enough to touch each of his parents on the brow as way of thanks.

That was not the only time he saw his parents underneath the tree. They held New Year's parties and when they could, they made the garden the centrepiece of it all. He would stand by their sides, listening and sometimes talking, trying to steal glances of who was by the tree and if they fitted, meaning it was someone he could trust. Some did, others fell by the wayside. Later, as the year rolled over, he was proved right on every occasion, as he listened to his father curse a work-colleague, or his mother shake her head on the phone on recalling the weekend's events. On top of the rest of it, the tree proved a good judge of character.

On these New Years nights, he would be allowed to stay up until midnight and then be put to bed as the chimes and the songs settled down. For years he dutifully slept, but then, as he grew older, he could not shake the energy crackling all around him, and he would climb out of bed, fully awake, then force himself back down.

One year he couldn't stand it and could not fool himself he wanted to sleep. Instead, he watched the other guests laugh and kid around and he would notice that his mother and father always seemed still. They would be by each other's side and even though they had friends gathered, they would not need anyone's company. Instead they stood, as solid as the tree, holding each other's hand, her wearing the black dress, he the smart white shirt and unravelled tie.

He watched until all the others had left and there was only the two of them. The front door closed and he saw them walk back into the garden. Gently, he took her by the arm and led her under the tree to dance. They danced for the longest time and he watched, slowly dressing himself, torn between wanting to be with them and not wanting to miss any of it. He rushed down the stairs and was out of breath by the time he reached the back door. Close up they didn't seem quite real, but more like the men and women he saw at the movies, lit by something no-one else knew, and glowing. Finally, his father saw him and instead of calling out, whispered something into his

mother's ear. Her eyes widened at first and she fought the urge to look over her shoulder to him, he knew that. Instead, his father led her in a long, slow loop and they began to dance, slowly and then quickly, beautiful in a way he understood and in another way knew nothing about. When it was over, with his father tilting forward and holding her a few feet from where he stood, he couldn't help but clap.

That night the three of them stayed up until dawn, the two of them showing him the dance moves, taking the drinks that lay on the tables, sitting quietly at the end, his mother playing the guitar as the sun rose. He knew this was the best day of his life, even then, and he went to sleep with the daylight at his window for the first time.

As he moved through school, there were times when he almost forgot about the tree. He began to learn from books and play sports and he almost began to fall in love, roughly in time to when the leaves fell and then grew again. For a time his mother grew sick and she was all he could think of. She grew better but lost something of herself after it, her wide eyes squinting more often than not, her long perfect hair cut short and sometimes falling out. She could not work. Sometimes he found her using all her strength to lift the guitar to her chest, even when she didn't have the strength to play it and that was what broke her heart most of all, he knew. His father was by her side for all times, but even he was weakened by it; his voice not as booming, his laugh not so quick to come. But always, they held each other's hands.

He reached the end of school and went to the school dance. He asked a girl who said yes, even though both of them were in love with other people. That night the girl he was in love with threw her drink over the boy who brought her. Later, she found him sitting on a gym bench on his own. They sat and talked and after a while he took the corsage out of his pocket that his father had given him and handed it to her, explaining he was waiting to give it to her and only her.

They left the dance and the party that went on afterwards and walked to his house. They lived nearby and he had first seen her delivering papers to his house with her brother. This was how it had started. He took her by the hand and led her to the oak tree, which he had found himself talking about during that night. The two of them stood in front of it and he realised that it was almost growing light. He took her by the hand and he danced with her the way his parents had shown him those years before. Just as it turned to light and the last star fell away he reached over and kissed her, under the protection of the tree. Then he turned and walked her home, not sure if the wind had caused the curtain in his parent's room to twitch or something else.

He stayed with the girl when he left to study and he visited her whenever he could. On one of every two of these trips he would call in and see his parents. They were almost becoming strangers, but then something always drew them together again. When there were silences between them, they would sit in the garden and play cards and everything would fit back to how it was supposed to be. Late at night he would go and stand under the tree and smoke cigarettes, trying to find the rough height marks of himself from years before.

Then his mother grew sick again and he visited them every week he could. He was with the girl most of the time, and sometimes not, but that didn't matter. He would arrive home, put his bags by the front door and run to his parent's bedroom because he knew that was where she would be. She rarely left it now. She would be in her bed, his father sitting by her side. Even though she was the one who was ill, he was aging quicker. Lines crawled over his face, his hair flecked salt and pepper almost overnight. She lay and he sat hand in hand and he would draw the other chair close to take her other hand. Sometimes, when it was too much, he would look away and find the tree in the garden, waiting for his tears.

His mother passed away just before he stepped through the door one day. He held the bag in his hand, ready to put it by the door and heard something he had never heard before; his father crying. He walked up the stairs and found them there, his father with his free hand bunched in a fist to his mouth, as if he was choking on his tears, his mother with her eyes closed. Finally, he dropped the bag by the bed corner and took her other hand and he thanked god that her skin had not yet cooled.

She was buried at a family plot, but they held the wake in the garden. People stood around, as if stunned, not quite understanding what was happening. His father stood as still as the oak tree at the centre of all of it. He saw that his father held a glass in one hand and his other fell loose at his side. He saw how his father's fingers bent from time to time, reaching for his mother's hand that was no longer there. The tree was behind him and looked as if it was holding his father up. Putting down his drink and excusing himself, he walked over to his father and stood by his side, slipping his hand into his. His father turned and smiled to him, the saddest smile he had ever known, and he could not help notice that his fingers felt cooler than his mother's the last time he had held them.

He came back whenever he could. His father threw himself into work, but he was tired in a different way and they both knew that. They would sit in the garden, playing cards and he would catch his father looking round from time to time, half expecting her to be coming out of the house, holding a drinks tray or laughing. He knew this was what his father pictured because this was what he pictured too. They played and in the silence they both listened to the tree swaying in the breeze. Both of them looked round to it and followed the sound and when they looked back to each other, his father nodded and he did too.

When his father passed he was struck down but not surprised. It was a year nearly to the day from his mother's demise. His father was buried next to his mother and afterwards he found himself standing in the middle of things, flexing both of his hands and having nothing to hold onto. That night he stayed in the house but could not sleep. Neither could he stand being in the house for the hurt it brought him. Instead he crouched underneath the tree and cried until he could cry no more and told his oldest friend all the things he could never tell anyone else about how he felt on that day.

He met the couple who were prepared to buy the house. They were a young man and woman and were keen to start a family. He showed them around the house and listened to their plans for the future. They said that one of the first things they would do would be to cut down the tree and make new designs for the garden. 'That big old tree' the man called it, as the girl smiled. He nodded as they told him and swallowed back the tears he felt well in his throat. He shook their hands and stood by them as they signed the necessary papers. They asked if it was okay for them to start shipping in their things as soon as possible and he nodded; he said that would be fine.

He spent his last day in his house, boxing up things for the charity stores, packing a single box of photos and things he needed to keep. He set the box down by the front door after everything else was gone. He walked through the bare, empty house and walked into his parent's bedroom to collect his mother's guitar. He carried it downstairs and set it by the box at the door. He reached into his pocket and called for a taxi; it would be twenty minutes for his ride away from here.

He walked out to the back garden and over to the tree. In a week from now it would be gone, like everything else. He put his hand up to it and felt coolness in the breeze and warmth in the bark, as with his father's hand and before that, his mother's. He began to climb the tree house steps, careful not to fall or to break the old ridges. He reached the bottom of the tree house and balanced from it, one hand and leg on the tree, the rest of him swinging free in the breeze. It was dusk. He

looked back to the house and into his parent's room. It was empty now apart from the bed, the desk and drawers. He didn't want that. He closed his eyes and when he opened them again, the sky was a little darker, the first stars began to flicker in the night. He looked back and saw the room, the glass reflecting with the night sky, blurring the room. He blinked; he saw his mother and his father race across the room, dancing, smashing things into mirrors and finally slowing to a standstill. Then they came together and held each other.

He took that moment and pushed it into his heart. Then he turned and swung back onto the oak tree. He stayed that way for a long moment, holding his oldest friend. Then he made his way down, following the ridges and landing gently to the ground. He looked up to the window and then walked to the house, looking back once to the oak tree and then leaving it all behind.

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

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