

EIDOLOTRY DIGITAL #3

HORRORS FROM THE GREAT WHITE NORTH

A dark, atmospheric illustration. In the center, a figure wearing a dark hooded cloak is shown from the chest up. The figure's face is pale and appears to be melting or dripping, with a bright green, glowing substance visible in the lower part of the face. The figure is set against a dark, cloudy night sky. In the upper left, a full moon is visible, with a beam of light shining down from it. In the lower right, a faint, glowing cityscape is visible in the distance. The overall mood is mysterious and ominous.

FROM THE LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT

WELCOME BACK PSYCHOS! JOIN US AS WE VENTURE NORTH IN TO THE VAST LAND THAT IS CANADA. THIS MONTH WE FEATURE 5 STORIES FROM THE LAND OF HOCKEY, TIM HORTON'S AND ONNIONY, WELCOME TO EIDOLOTRY DIGITAL #3.

HELLO DARKNESS

SCOTT MCGREGOR

NATURAL SELECTION

JOHN WARD

SLITHER AND THE CRUSH

TREVOR JAMES ZAPLE

KITTENS CRAWLING

LENA NG

TATTOO

GARRY ENKENT

NIGHTFALL: A REVIEW

THOMAS STEWART

All Stories

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Hello Darkness

Scott McGregor

Axel's daydream about the comforts of his soon-to-be isolation was cut short when his realtor, Brennlín, intruded with, "How long you been living in Kelowna?"

The question crashed into the depth of Axel's consciousness, forcing his return to the cruelties of mundane reality. Returning him to the living room of the small cottage up for sale. "Oh, umm—a month or so, I think."

"Ah, you move here for work?"

"No, I have a stay-at-home job."

"Ah, what's got you in these parts, then?"

"If all's the same, I'd rather not get into it. Just looking to buy a house."

"Ah."

Brennlín seemed nice enough, but his demeanor and fake smile exuded an essence suited for a car salesman. It left Axel feeling a tad queasy. For ten minutes, Axel dodged the realtor's attempt at small talk. He tried to get straight to business, attention devoted to the property.

Of the three houses he visited in the last week, the cottage on Crawford Estates aptly aligned with his preferences. It was close enough to downtown for Axel to embrace Kelowna culture if he desired, but far enough away to keep the price affordable. One could say the cottage met his standards.

Granted, Axel's standards weren't too high. He'd settle on living inside an outhouse, provided it came with a sturdy lock and access to the internet. As a stay-at-home grad-school application editor, the 1,500 square feet granted him enough space to go about his vocational routine and slave away on his desktop. 1,500 square feet to his disposal, not too big, not too small. 1,500 square feet of protection from the monster outside if it decided to come knocking.

Brennlín brought Axel to the largest room of the cottage, furnished with a queen-size mattress. "Here's the master bedroom. It's right beside the washroom, to your conven—"

"Mind if I ask you a stupid question?"

“I don’t believe in stupid questions. Shoot.”

“Alright, well, umm... how big is the closet?”

“Ah, got a lot of clothes, I take it? Have a look for yourself.”

Brennlin opened the closet doors, and Axel was astonished by the empty space. The closet was practically its own room, big enough to store a Kardashian’s wardrobe. Axel hated it.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a smaller one, would you?” Axel asked.

“Oh?” The realtor looked astonished—likely rare for him to receive a question from a client asking for a downgrade. “The room on the lower level might suit your needs. Please, follow me.”

Axel and Brennlin moved downstairs and entered the second bedroom. The room was barren, apart from the framed painting at the center of the wall and wardrobe hugging the corner of the room.

“As you can see, this bedroom is a bit smaller than the one upstairs. No windows, a bit of a hike from the bathroom, not the best lighting. Quite frankly, the last owner used it to store his junk. This room doesn’t come with a closet, so we furnished it with a wardrobe closet. If it’s too small, I could arrange for a new one to be delivered?”

Axel opened the wardrobe doors and inspected the narrow space, big enough to fit a man his size if he curled himself in a ball. “It’s perfect.”

“Oh?” Brennlin shifted back to his car salesman smile.

The realtor continued to list off metrics of the cottage, but Axel’s attention wandered off. His eye caught the painting, a splotch of black shapes on white background. “That’s quite a painting.”

“Ah, that’s not a painting; it’s an inkblot. Last owner didn’t take it with them.”

“An inkblot?”

“Yeah, supposed to be some kind of psychological test. If you see a bat, that means you’re secretly depressed and wanna blow your brains out or some shit. Not quite sure. Some see butterflies, others horses, spiders, mountains—that kinda bull-shit.”

“What do you see?”

Brennlin glanced at the inkblot, chuckling, “Boobs, with multiple nipples.”

Classy, Axel thought.

“And yourself? What do your eyes feast on when staring at this beautiful, pornographic gem?”

Axel leaned forward and squinted his eyes, unshackling the constraints of his mind to abide by the rules of the experiment. The inkblot was an amalgamation of black splotches, curves, and dots within the white void. No familiar image presented itself to Axel’s naked eye. How the hell does this look like boobs?

But his eyes adjusted to the ink: the white surface, no longer an empty void, but a sheet of snow. In the heat of July, Axel felt an unwelcoming gust of cold air brush against his shoulders. The setting was a vehement winter storm, restraining the behemoth enshrouded by the black ink. A set of thin, wiry antlers rested atop the creature’s head. Two slits rested at the center of the piece—a snake-like nose, hissing back at whoever crossed its path—hissing back at Axel. He counted eight polka dots scattered across the demonic face. Eight eyes suited for a monster.

Axel prided himself on embracing his creativity, but his imagination betrayed him from time to time. He no longer stood in the bottom-floor basement of the cottage, but found himself in ankle-deep snow, face to face with the ink-made beast. The image made eye contact with him, sending Axel’s body into an uncontrollable shiver. On the verge of a panic attack, Axel’s muscles froze, pray to the arachnoid mammal that towered over him.

It felt as if Axel was trapped in a realm where time ceased to move forward, with only a blotch of ink for company. A blotch of ink that reminded him of his home, Thunderbay, where the monster resided.

In the timeless void, he heard the voice of Brennlin ask, “You good, bro?”

Axel retched backward, vision sore from piecing together the image trapped within the ink. His hazy, anxious brain scrambled him back to reality. What he perceived from the ink resembled an animal, yet so unlike an animal he struggled to weave together the words to describe such an anomaly. His mind and body fueled by unprecedented dread, he ushered the words, “Eight-eyed stag, with the face of a spider.”

“Ah.”

The first week living in his near-empty house, he experienced the same routine day in and out: Wake up, finalize his deliverables, edit where necessary, scour the internet on his triple-monitor computer, and fall asleep, all within the comforts of his bedroom.

Axel relaxed his fingers from a hard day's work. He wrote application after application for several hours, meeting his deadlines in a timely fashion, bestowed with a form of mental fatigue that enabled him to empathize with gym rats. Hell, if application writing were a sport at the Olympics, he'd have been a contender for the gold medal.

His eyes drifted away from the screen, catching the inkblot on his bedroom wall. The eight-eyed stag glared back at him, presenting a furious grin. Axel's vision dizzied. He'd only seen a face like that back in Thunderbay. Back where the monsters lurked.

He shied away from the inkblot and returned to his computer, too afraid to maintain eye contact. Shutting his eyes, another face flashed in his mind. The face that prompted him to abandon his previous life in favour of peace and isolation. His subconscious screamed at him: Come out, come out, Timmy Tim!

Even with his noise-cancelling headphones on, Axel heard the sudden bang against his bedroom walls. Removing his headphones, he sat motionless and listened for the source of the noise. Must've been the wind?

Again, he glanced at the arachnoid, magnifying his nausea. "This is silly. It's just a fucking painting."

But it wasn't a painting; it was an inkblot.

Five minutes later, he Google searched eight-eyed stag with the face of a spider, leading to a four-hour internet binge to alleviate his curiosity. Reading through article after article, he learned the inkblot creature garnered itself a reputation amongst heavy-hitter legends, giving the Chupacabra, Big Foot, and Loch Ness Monster a run for their money on scare factor. It possessed several names across multiple mythos: The One of Many Eyes from Ukraine, ArañaCara from Spain, and the Supaidāsutaggu from Japan, along with many others.

But the online community granted this creature a new name.

Paranichi.

Axel deleted the thirteen tabs he had open on the topic. He cleared his mind, never one to believe in this type of nonsense. Paranichi was a Creepypasta, a fictitious monster created by some dork behind a computer screen who got off on inducing nightmares.

Axel knew what real monsters looked like.

Hidden in darkness, Axel covered himself with his bedsheets, traversing the mundanities of social media three hours past his bedtime. Inspecting every little superficial post, he switched back and forth between the Facebook and Instagram profiles of his former classmates, people he barely interacted with—the pinnacle of his pathetic excuse of a social life. He considered messaging these old acquaintances from time to time, but to no avail. Why would anybody with an ounce of self-respect waste a second of their time chatting with a pest like him?

Just as he switched off his phone to drift off to sleep, he heard footsteps from above.

Whipping off his sheets, Axel intently listened. Careful not to make a sound, he crawled out of his bed and opened the door. Peeking his head outward, he felt reluctant to head upstairs and investigate the commotion, if there was commotion to begin with.

Honing his courage, he ushered, “Hello?”

Nothing greeted him back.

Axel stuck a finger in his ear, sick and tired of his imagination playing tricks on him. He shut the door and locked it.

As he crawled back into bed, his eyes adjusted to the darkness and caught a glance of Paranichi. The inkblot’s pupils appeared to dilate—psychological torment brought from the crevices of his subconscious. Hermann Rorschach must’ve thrived on human suffering, as any qualified psychologist should. Why else would anyone create such a cruel, dread-provoking experiment?

Axel reverted his gaze upward at the ceiling, waiting for another footstep.

Half an hour passed, nothing but silence.

There’s nothing there, he told himself. He’s not here.

He entered the fetal position, welcoming isolation's cold, tender grip around him.

Isolation, after all, kept the monsters at bay.

"How're you liking the new place?" Mrs. Keith sat cross-legged, ready to jot down a heap of notes to account for Axel's hidden trauma, exercising the psychological mumbo-jumbo she learned from higher education.

Axel always fidgeted in his seat at the start of their sessions. "Fine, I guess."

Mrs. Keith shot her classic stink eye, seeing right through Axel's poker face. "How about we skip the bullshit and get to the part where you tell me what's troubling you."

Her straight-to-business attitude lifted Axel's spirits, precisely the reason why he drove all the way downtown to meet with the so-called Sigmund Freud of psychiatrists in British Columbia.

Moving to Kelowna, Axel decided to attend therapy for a number of reasons, partly to cure his ongoing paranoia of the monster outside, partly an excuse to catch some fresh air, and partly to pass the time of his uneventful life. Three weeks in, Axel's relationship with Mrs. Keith was still flourishing. He wanted to open up, but Axel was never much of a talker. Still, he knew talking with someone might heal a lifetime's worth of trauma.

"Man, where do I begin, Mrs. Keith," he said.

"I think we're past the formalities. Please, call me Eliza."

He wanted to tell her the source of his lost hours of sleep. The presence roaming his halls. The thing on his bedroom wall. But no trained professional of Mrs. Keith's calibre would take him seriously. "Do you believe in ghosts, Mrs. Keith?"

"Eliza, and I think that depends on what you mean by ghosts. You been seeing things?"

"More like hearing things. Footsteps, tapping on the wall, whispers. Can't seem to sleep because of it."

Mrs. Keith slipped off her spectacles, a common tell of her no-bullshit atti-

tude. “Your question is tricky to answer. Do I believe in the presumption of undead entities haunting people? Can’t say I do. However, if there’s one thing I’ve learned in my line of work, it’s that ghosts come in many harsh and unexpected forms.”

“What’re you trying to say?”

“I’m inferring that your paranoia rests on a foundation built from the ghosts in your head. In essence, if we are to track the root of these ghosts, we must look inward. I remember you telling me your bedroom doesn’t have any windows. Maybe you’re claustrophobic? Or, perhaps you’re a bit more scared of the dark than you admit?”

Oh no, it certainly wasn’t the tight-knit space, and he’d been well-acquainted with darkness. “Forgive me, but I don’t think that’s what’s going on, Mrs. Keith.”

“Then allow me to propose a different angle. Correct me if I’m wrong, but this is the first time you’re living on your own, is it not?”

“Yes?”

“There you go. I’ve spoken with numerous clients who underwent severe depression when they started living alone. The mind has a weird method for compensating, sometimes creating things that might not really be there. In your case, all those sounds you hear are your brain fending off the silence of an empty house. It’s how your consciousness is coping with the idea of being on your own for the first time, proposing the notion that someone or something is living with you, even if there isn’t.”

“So it’s all in my head? There aren’t any ghosts?”

“Axel, the ghosts are your head. You’re responsible for their existence.” Mrs. Keith set aside her notepad, clasping her hands together and pressing her thumbs against her lips. “Mind if I cut to the chase?”

Axel shook his head.

“This is my third session with you. I can tell you’re looking to heal, but you’re also holding back, too afraid to open up and free your demons. Sorry, buckaroo, but you don’t get both. If you’re looking to get anything meaningful from our little arrangement, you’ll need to start being completely honest with me.”

Axel was a man of many secrets, a camouflage to keep him safe from the monsters. He swore he’d never tell a soul about his reason for moving to Kelowna, but the fact of the matter, Axel River didn’t need therapy. Someone else needed Mrs.

Keith to treat their insanity.

He gulped, ready to release a month's worth of tension crushing his shoulders. "My birth name is Timmy O'Neil, but I changed it to Axel River when I moved to BC."

Mrs. Keith leaned back on her chair; eyebrows shot upward. "That's a first, even for me. Why the change?"

"Because I'm not looking to free my demons. I'm trying to hide from them."

"I see." Mrs. Keith grabbed her notepad again, taking a minute to fill a page's worth of notes. "I appreciate that you found the strength to tell me this. Anyone else know?"

"Nobody."

"Not even your friends?"

"I don't have friends, Mrs. Keith." Axel had only met four people in Kelowna, those being his therapist, his realtor, Michael, the pizza delivery man, and Huong, the owner of the Vietnamese restaurant he visited twice a week. Recounting his limited social circle, he sputtered the question, "Are we friends, Mrs. Keith?"

"If we were friends, you'd call me Eliza. My professional courtesy dictates we keep our relationship on a patient-client basis, but I'd be hard-pressed to say I don't care about you. There's plenty of friendly folk in Kelowna, some you'd probably adore. When you hear the word friend, what comes to mind?"

Truthfully, he'd only known one friend. Not much of a talker, but a good listener. A friend who helped him take a breath in a world suffocating him. "Friends should have your back. Friends should keep you safe," he answered.

It was a shame his daddy never liked his friend all that much.

Years ago in Thunderbay, Victor O'Neil and his wife, Tabitha, prided themselves as a happily married couple—high school sweethearts who went on to tell a love story no romance flick could hope to adapt. Sixteen months into their marriage, Victor expressed his desire to tackle the responsibilities of parenthood, eager to start a family in a modest suburban home with a white picket fence.

Around the time Timmy entered the picture, Victor promised to devote his

life to his son. Promising to play catch with him in the yard, teach him how to ride a bicycle, and take him to the occasional hockey game, the whole nine yards of fatherhood. The O'Neil family spent their first few years enraptured by happiness, and Timmy lightened up the household with his vibrant smile.

But the tumor in Tabitha's brain stole Victor's sense of enthusiasm, and Timmy's smile faded with the passage of time.

With his wife six feet beneath the ground, Victor spent many nights at the Wild Owl Pub. Instead of bringing Timmy to a hockey game, Victor occasionally brought him to the bar, surrounded by men who wreaked of Guinness, a smell that made Timmy gag.

Shortly after Tabitha's untimely passing, Victor garnered an unsubtle reputation as a tattoo enthusiast, covered from head to toe ink. He dedicated a considerable amount of his salary to his tattoo designs, so much so that there came times when Timmy waited days for a home-cooked meal. At one point, Timmy deemed his father's tattoos as the pictures hiding my daddy: a blood-spurting heart on his chest, a skeletal clown on his back, an upside down cross on his neck, and the words Tabitha, My Dearest on his forehead—a lifetime's worth of nightmares for any child.

So, whenever Victor gave his son a fresh set of purple splotches, Timmy assumed his daddy simply wanted the two of them to look similar. Hell, the splotches sort of looked like tattoos. Imageless tattoo blobs that made his body sore.

Like father, like son.

But down the line, Timmy decided he didn't like tattoos. On the days his daddy returned home piss-drunk from Wild Owl, Timmy fought back, screaming he no longer wanted to look like his old man. As it turned out, fighting back created more purple splotches.

Anytime Timmy poked the bear, he earned a tender kiss from his father's knuckles. That was the price he paid for growing up with a grieving monster.

One day, he'd forgotten to clean up his Legos in the living room. When Victor arrived home and stepped on a spare piece bare-footed, the monster awakened. "Timmy! Where is that good for nothing, little brat! I'll teach him a thing or two!"

Inside his bedroom, Timmy froze, and his childish brain told him to run away. But if he ran, he'd only provoke the monster. Get a grip. He's your daddy. He'd never hurt you.

Thuds up the staircase, followed by, “Oh, you’ve done it now, boy!”

Timmy turned to his closet, opened the doors, and said, “Hello, friend.” He crawled inside and shut the doors, using his jump rope to tie a knot to keep the metal hinges from moving. Not an ounce of light shone in the closet, but he welcomed the darkness with open arms. Darkness wasn’t scared of monsters.

Outside, he heard his bedroom door slam open. Staring at the cracks between the floor and closet, a shadow appeared.

“Better unlock this. Right. Fucking. Now.” His father banged on the closet three times. “Come out, come out, Timmy Tim!”

In Thunderbay, Timmy spent most of his nights sleeping in darkness, safe and sound from the monster outside.

Axel sat at his computer desk and inhaled the sweet, mouthwatering smell of his Pho and spring rolls—his dose of euphoria to nullify a sour week. Earlier, his boss reprimanded him for his unfinished applications initially due for the day, needing a pick-me-up to lift his dwindled spirits. He slurped up his noodles while inspecting his deliverables slated for tomorrow, intent on completing them by the night’s end to rectify his mistake. Nothing but silence and darkness accompanied him.

And there was Paranichi, too.

He looked over at the inkblot, still distracted by his recent session with Mrs. Keith. The stationary arachnoid looked more irritated than usual, another instance of the experiment projecting his amplified depression. If Paranichi was displeased, what did that say about Axel? How could he possibly sleep the night with a hungry abundance of trauma feasting on his consciousness?

Lost in his thoughts, a knock on his bedroom door erupted. He pressed his index fingers against his eardrums, as if that could shield him from the treacheries of his psyche. Another knock followed, louder than the first. Angrier, too. Grabbing his headphones, he hopped on Spotify, traversing the recesses of Judas Priest, Metallica, and Slipknot to drown out the noises.

There’s nothing there, Timmy—

“No, my name is Axel,” he reassured, not the first time he argued with himself.

Axel curled up in a ball, music at full blast. He shut his eyes, an attempt to lose himself to the groove of Dream Theater's Panic Attack.

Still, the odd floor creak crept through the tunes.

Another social media binge fueled his unwavering insomnia. Each time his eyes grew heavy, a sound from outside his bedroom jolted him back awake. He repeated the words, you're alone, you're alone, you're alone...

But he wasn't alone, not anymore.

After two months of concealment, the monster finally introduced itself.

Subject to the tortures of his imagination, he removed the sheets to greet the beast.

Across from his bed, the inkblot's white void glowed, but the outline of the eight-eyed stag expanded. Thud after thud banged against the wall, like the sound of a confided predator trying to break free. The abnormality that enriched his paranoia was sick of playing hide and seek. Paranichi protruded from the frame, then planted its hooves into the Berber carpet. A purple-haze aura enwreathed the stag and perfumed his bedroom, a vile smell rendering him immobile—the aroma of trauma, returning from the clutches of his subconscious.

Without a mouth, Paranichi whispered, You've done it now, boy.

Axel's room faded, lost in the domain of the inkblot. Lying naked in a pile of snow, he stared upward, perplexed at the white void making up the sky. He wanted to look away, but his body betrayed him, paralyzed by the realm of the inkblot.

Paranichi climbed atop Axel. His trapped state prevented him from looking below his neck, but he felt Paranichi's hooves smack against his bare body. Purple splotches emerged across his sore, tender skin. No, I hate tattoos!

Then, Paranichi shoveled snow onto him, one inch at a time. Soon, he'd be covered in the white, suffocating to the void. Soon, he'd join his mother six feet beneath the ground, a mother whose face he couldn't remember.

His panic-induced mental state hindered his movements. Even if he mustered the will to fight back, he knew it'd prove futile. As the dear old monster from Thunderbay taught him, fighting back never kept Timmy safe.

Darkness, on the other hand, proved an indispensable resource to combat the monsters.

It's not real, it's not real, it's not real.

So, Axel turned to the cure of trauma's illusion: Pain.

Finding the strength to obey his brain's command, he bit his lip, a trickle of blood down his mouth.

Axel found himself in his bedroom again, face to face with the inkblot monster. It shivered, eyes expanding until they popped out of its skull. Eight colourless polka-dots dangled from the stag's head, smacking against each other.

I'll teach you a thing or two, it said.

Paranichi's hooves pawed the carpet, ready to charge. Falling victim to the will of pure instinct, Axel darted out of bed and sought sanctuary from the monster.

He sought his oldest friend.

Swinging open the wardrobe doors, Axel shoved himself inside. Paranichi charged, and Axel slammed the doors, blocking off the ink and welcoming darkness.

The closet shook violently when the inkblot made contact. Unlock this. Right. Fucking. Now!

Axel thought his house would keep him safe from the monster outside, but the monster found a way to burrow itself on the inside. He realized this was meant to happen. Axel was destined to die. But truth be told, Axel was never alive in the first place. He was merely a cheap shield, a disguise fueling Timmy's pipe dreams of starting a new life. A life far out of his reach from the monsters.

Paranichi banged on the closet three times. With an all too familiar voice, the monster roared, Come out, come out, Timmy Tim!

Timmy clung to his friend, offering him a sense of comfort in the face of trauma. He spent another night cramped within the closet, praying for the monster outside to leave him alone.

Another night of darkness.



Natural Selection

John Ward

Alice was gone, and now her cat was missing.

Catman was an outdoor cat. Despite my best efforts to tame him with gifts of interactive pushes, a pearl-coloured collar, and copious amounts of catnip, he was never happier than when he was outside. Unfortunately, the north shore mountains were also home to bears and cougars - although most bears were loath to come near my property - but on the rare occasion they did I was forced to lock Catman inside. He resented being held prisoner and would hiss at my approach. Sometimes he would even slash at me with his claws, and on occasion would draw blood. I would kick him with my feet and threaten to take him to an animal shelter, and when I was in a particularly vindictive mood, I'd joke about driving back to the city and returning him back to Alice. He was frequently annoying, selfish, and needy, and yet he had grown on me. Despite my initial dislike of the creature, I found myself growing quite fond of him, and was concerned when I realized he had gone missing.

I sipped my Nespresso as I patrolled the thick tree-line that marked the outer edges of my property. I spent the past three years carving a sanctuary out of the dense mountain forest in order to build my dream home: an oasis of civilization and solitude amidst the harsh wilderness. There were no other buildings this high up the mountain, although I had plans to develop the area further. Given the real-estate prices in the region, I would be foolish not to. I was never been a hiker or Rambler but found my morning walks refreshing as they gave me ample time to think. My first few excursions focused exclusively on what had gone wrong with my relationship with Alice, but over time the walks helped clear my mind sufficiently to focus on my finances. I would wander the perimeter contemplating my crypto position or my stock portfolio, and occasionally I'd daydream about the future development of the mountain.

But not today.

Today was about Catman.

I walked slowly and deliberately along the tree-line pausing every few feet to scan the dark forest for any sign of him. Even on a clear day it would've been difficult because the trees - a mixture of Western and Mountain Hemlock - were more or less intertwined. Today, there was a dense mist that had settled like a heavy blanket on the mountain, which reduced visibility down to a few feet.

"Catman," I shouted. "Where you at?" There was no response.

The tree-line thinned somewhat as I approached the lonely Western white Pine. It was an ancient old-growth tree that sat directly north of my house; its sweeping branches protruded from the low-hanging mist like monstrous octopus arms. It was the only white pine in the area and no other trees grew in its vicinity. I considered removing it during clear-cutting, but suspected the root system was too large and complex for it to be cost-effective. I heard heavy rustling in the mist, followed by a cracking sound I assumed were branches. My throat tightened as I looked up at the quivering branches and my mind conjured the image of a cougar perched above me, hidden somewhere in the mist. "I'm backing away," I yelled and slowly backed away, keeping my eyes on the needle-heavy branches for any sign of the beast.

Once inside, my resolve returned, and I felt foolish for my earlier apprehension. I stared at the gently swaying branches through triple-glazed windows and noted the lack of movement on the branches of the other trees. There was definitely something hiding in the White Pine but I wasn't sure what to do about it. A web search suggested I call for a conservation officer, but a little digging suggested I would need some kind of proof - even a visual confirmation - before they would act. I pushed aside any negative thoughts about Catman's fate, as I realized he had probably sensed the impending danger and was lying low until the cougar was out of the way, and at that moment the puzzle fell into place. In order to find Catman, I needed to get rid of the cougar, and to get rid of the cougar I needed to see it. I grabbed my phone and selected a gold club - the only long-range weapon that came to mind - and headed outside.

As I approached the massive trunk, I noted the ground underfoot was carpeted with dead fir needles, some two or three inches long and there was also an overabundance of fungi. The knotted, scaly trunk was dark, with long vertical grooves that ran up the bark and disappeared into the mist. The lower branches were roughly ten feet above me and for the moment were strangely still. "Get outta here!" I swatted the branches with the driver and then covered as a shower of razor-like needles lashed me. I pulled several sharp specimens from the backs of my exposed arms and hands and then heard an agitated rustling sound. The entire tree visibly swayed and there were numerous cracking sounds coming from the hidden canopy. I felt the hairs on my arms stand on end and I backed away.

A white object dropped from the tree and struck the ground less than a meter from the base. It was a white strip of material about three inches long. I dropped to my knees as I plucked Catman's collar from the damp earth. It was cleanly severed with no sign of blood, residue, or teeth marks.

I looked up, hoping Catman was somehow stuck on one of the higher branches, but my view was blocked by a low-hanging branch a few inches above my head. I brushed it away and then screamed in excruciating pain as dozens of needles em-

bedded themselves into my skin, digging through my jacket in the process. I grimaces as I ripped the branch from my arm, only to feel a searing pain in the back of my legs - as though molten metal was dripping onto my skin. I looked down to see that another branch had wrapped itself around the fleshy part of my calf. The thin bark constricted as I attempted to remove it and I screamed a second time as the needles drilled further into my flesh. Above me, the branches came alive and snaked out of the mist towards me, wrapping themselves around my arms and legs. I was engulfed and suddenly jerked forward with some force, and realized the branches were pulling me towards the trunk. The rustling of the branches grew into excitable chattering and the tree seemed to tremble before my eyes. Waves rippled outwards from the vertical cracks and red-tinged fluid began to weep from the pores of the bark. I was beyond terrified and any thoughts about Catman quickly evaporated.

I dug my heels into the ground as hard as I could, bracing myself and pushing against the supernatural force. The branches binding me cracked and for a brief moment I broke free of their awful embrace. I took two staggered steps before they latched onto me with their needle-like hooks, and I again found myself dragged inexorably towards the trunk, kicking and screaming and knowing there was no-one around to hear me.

The discarded club appeared in my peripheral vision. I reached out; my fingers grazing the metal shaft just above the driver head. Just as it seemed I had missed my chance, my fingers clasped the driver, and I pulled the club close to my body. I turned to face whatever horror lay before me.

The tree had changed radically. Its bark was splintered outwards like hinged doors to reveal a gelatinous red cavern inside. I choked on its acrid and suffocating stench, then recoiled when I saw dissolved carcasses of small animals floating in a mass of bloody sap. In a flash, I realized this too would be my fate unless I did something. I raised the club as high as I could and jabbed it into the trees innards with all the strength I could muster.

The tree screamed.

The high-pitch shriek almost broke my mind, but I jabbed the driver into its innards again and again, twisting the club head to maximize the damage.

Suddenly I was free.

I felt the branches slacken, and I tore them from my body before stumbling away on unsteady legs, too terrified to turn in case I saw more branches snaking towards me. In my haste, I tripped over my own feet but managed to prevent myself from falling. Theorizing I was safely out of reach, I turned back to face the tree, brandishing the club like a sword.

It was over.

I watched as the deep trunk gashes closed in on themselves. Before they sealed themselves closed, they revealed one final secret. Inside the tree's hellish interior was a larger skeleton, its flesh and organs stripped clean. Around its neck was the half-moon pendant I had given Alice on our second date, and beside it was the shattered skeleton of a slender house-cat.

* * *



The Slither and the Crush

Trevor James Zapple

At night the kids inevitably gather at the base of the pier, like kids in any seaside town Phillippe has ever lived in. They bring along six-packs of beer and other fun substances and build fires in the stretch of worn beach that rubs up against the pitted cement of the pier. They know Phillippe is there but they don't mind; Phillippe has his own wild, restless mystique, an odd emanation of respect that stems directly from a certain refusal of categorization. He is neither old (and therefore pathetic) or crazy (and therefore dangerous). He is not homeless, per se; rather he likes to think of himself as having a very broad definition of home. He lives in strange places, at ragged intervals, before moving on.

Regardless of the town, they always seem to accept him as part of the landscape—not necessarily one of their own, but an alright dude in a sense. He chalks this up to two rules: always share what you have and never hit on the locals. The former ensures that they'll tolerate him at minimum; the latter, he's found, prevents him from ending up in a bloody heap at the edge of a park or beside some lonesome two-lane highway. He's seen it happen to other drifters in towns up and down the American east coast and he's aware enough to know when to back off and when to leave town entirely.

The kids in Ocean City, Maryland are not much different from many others that Phillippe has run across; if anything, they're a friendlier bunch. They've taken him on as a mascot of sorts, sharing inside jokes and pressing him to join them with a hilarity brought about through the intersection of freedom and youth. He does join them, careful not to appear threatening; adolescence is its own ocean and its storms can blow up as suddenly and be just as lethal.

They're a good bunch, though, and Phillippe feels for them. They're in a fight with time and so is Phillippe and the common cause makes them shipmates, at least for Phillippe. There is a great deal of overlap, he thinks. Students and sailors, both thrown together by circumstances and forced to find ways to get along, to develop rituals and traditions and mythologies to make their days meaningful. The kids, as they always did, sprint toward the great unknown with abandon, chalking up firsts, drowning in waves of emotion, holding onto each other in the vain pursuit of a static existence, a time and a place carved out of the relentless and set aside to live in forever and ever amen. He envies them as much as he is worried for them and this has as much to do with why Phillippe decides to tell them his story as anything else.

They ask, of course. Phillippe would never force the story unasked on anyone, especially those who need their sleep to succeed in their daytime life.

“So where are you from?” is always the first question that gets asked. Phillippe’s accent has faded over the years—a concerted effort on his part—but it creeps back when he says “Toulon.” He can be remarkably gregarious on occasion, but he tends to clam up when it comes to his past, and this is usually enough to dissuade them from pressing him further. The Ocean City kids are the first that he goes all-in with; after he says “Toulon” he follows it with “I used to be a sailor.”

Where to start, though? There’s a time and a place and a situation, and each is a complicated skein connecting everywhere and everywhen and right now. Start from the beginning, Phillippe. The girl with the funky little hat smiles encouragingly at him and he composes his face neutrally before he returns it. The beginning. There is a submarine, and a young shipman who hadn’t even earned his dolphin yet. It’s his first berth, and it’s a hard adjustment to living in a diesel-powered metal tube with 52 other men. There is no privacy, for one thing; every body blends into its neighbors and the only thing separating one from the next is the occasional thin curtain walling off a coffin for a scant six hours of sleep. Every square inch of space on a submarine must be accounted for, so ‘close quarters’ undersells it by a lot. You eat meals together, you sleep together, you use one tiny jackleg toilet together, you try to stave off the maddening boredom together. There isn’t much oxygen, since it’s a massive fire hazard, so you breathe what you can and try to ignore that your main pipeline for more is a flimsy pipe sticking up above the surface of the water that could break off if you go too fast while it’s up.

That’s the situation, but it needs proper context. Place and time are intimately bound up, so he can knock off both at once. They called it the Summer of Love, the summer of Sgt. Pepper, but for Phillippe and the others it was a summer on patrol, creeping near the bottom of the Mediterranean and trying to get intel on everyone: the Egyptians, the Israelis, the Soviets, Franco’s Spain. We weren’t in the middle of a shooting match, of course; the Americans had inherited our little mess in Viet Nam and we were busy pretending we had nothing to do with it.

I can see them wavering; they live in a brave new world, these Ocean City evergreens, a world where the Soviets are part of their half-remembered childhoods and they’ve come through to the end of history. They know about rap, about William Jefferson Clinton, about money to be made in the weird Wild West of the internet. Phillippe doesn’t know much about that and the kids don’t know about what it felt like to see the end of the world emerging potentially every day from any number of places, some quite close to home. The gap there feels immense, so Phillippe retreats, makes it simple.

“I served on a submarine. French Navy, late 1960s.” They ooh and ah appropriately at this before one of them has the presence of mind to question why a French sailor is huddling around their fire along a classic American beach. Phillippe takes the question well, smiling widely and deciding to go all in this one time.

“We spent all the summer and fall of 1967 crisscrossing between Toulon and various waypoints of interest. It was quiet, for the most part. We were keeping a closer eye than normal on the other end of the Sea, since the Egyptians and their allies had gotten pushed back into the sand by the Israelis earlier in the summer.”

He had no idea if they'd been taught about the Six Day War in school and frankly he didn't care. It was just color, a setup to the real story. Please save all questions until the end of the tour.

“Mostly we were making sure the Egyptians weren't doing something stupid like laying mines in harbors. I was excited when we began but it became routine, you know? Go here, listen, report back that nothing was found. You learn to live in a dangerous, overgrown tin can without a moment to yourself. You learn to get by, but then,”

And at this point, one of the boys leans forward and offers him a can of beer. He accepts it gladly; he's never grown fond of American beer but at the moment his mouth is dry and any liquid is a necessity. He drinks, composes, and begins again, a little more urgently.

“Then I heard something.”

Of course, it wasn't just him. They would never let a first-timer man the sonar by himself. If it was, he'd have been telling different stories, in a different place: stories about how boring life on a submarine can be, maybe at a resort in the south, something near but not quite in Nice. He was just a runt, a puke, a kid training on the sonar system, learning what was an important aberration and what was just regular undersea noise. When he'd reported it the first time, the joke had been that Bordeaux had let one rip in the torpedo room that was loud enough to set off the system. When they got someone more senior to check the pings, there was nothing there. Good joke, who was pranking the new kid?

Eighteen hours later, though, Martin heard it, just as large as I had, somewhat closer. They started paying attention, then; Martin was a dolphin, a long-time sailor, and he'd been operating a sonar rig on our sub since it had first been commissioned in 1958. He knew how to work it; he knew what things sounded like. He didn't know what this was. It was larger than anything he'd ever heard, and he'd never heard another operator talking about this kind of thing, either. The captain held a closed meeting in his room and then there was no more talk on the subject. They whispered about it for a day before they were told subtly to cease.

They didn't hear it again on that tour.

The kids are skeptical; what kind of story is this, anyway? Phillippe tries to think of how to explain the parts most deeply important to him. Sight is an ability that is easy to take for granted if you enjoy full, unabated access to it. These kids with their full eyes and their clear hearts might not really understand what it was like to be a bat swimming in the ocean; what it meant to find your way along by bouncing sounds around. To have to deduce your surroundings by abstract input. When you pinged off of something that was difficult to figure out based on the feedback, it was akin to seeing something inexplicable in the sighted world. Unsettling, to say the least.

A few weeks in Toulon afterwards is a godsend; during that last shore leave in France, he spent a lot of time banging around in bars and becoming one with a beach. In this sense, he supposes he can connect with his audience; stripped of the generational and cultural differences, it's the same life. He lost his virginity on that trip; he doesn't tell the kids that, of course, but he does pause a moment to savor that memory, the abandoned seaside hut, the sleeping bag, the warmth and sweat of the morning.

When he got back in the submarine with the rest of them, they embarked on the next tour. The longest tour, and the last.

They went out listening again, but found nothing to listen to. The Mediterranean was oddly quiet, even as the noise back home was really starting to ramp up. They did the rounds and headed home after Christmas, ready to be able to stretch their limbs and not be pressed cheek to jowl with men for entire days at a time. Phillippe pauses here and looks down at his hands. They are strong, big-knuckled, brown from a life of living and working out in the sun. He still sees them differently, though: pale, frail, streaked with blood. Can he finish this story? He looks up and the Ocean City kids have grown silent. They lean in, hanging on this seemingly dramatic pause, and so Phillippe gathers himself up and forces himself to continue. Despite himself, he grins at them.

“It was a dark and stormy night.”

Above them, on the Mediterranean Sea, this is true. It is night, and bad weather has been rolling across them for two straight days. The sub is not immune to the rolling of the water and balance has been difficult; the mood of the men has deteriorated quite a bit, and it's only instilled discipline that keeps them from clawing at each other. The fact that they are only perhaps two hours from Toulon keeps them calm, but even that has an anxious edge to it. Two days prior, an Israeli submarine disappeared in home waters. The men wait for the signal that the balloon has gone up, grimly certain that it will before they reach home (or, worse, a few hours after).

“I’ll be in bed 15 minutes when the call comes,” the torpedo chief says, “just starting to dream about Martin’s wife.” Everyone laughs. The tension lifts a little. They all hear it, in the vacuum that happens after. Slithering is the closest word he can think of in English, but it doesn’t do the sound justice. It doesn’t convey to these kids the way the sound of rubbery, slippery flesh slid along the metal of the sub’s hull, the way it seemed to climb right up into your ears and pitch a tent. This, followed by the creaking of the hull.

The hull normally creaks, more or less depending on the pressure exerted by the depth the sub is operating in. It’s part of the background, at least in the subs Phillippe has worked in. The newer nuclear subs, maybe they don’t creak as much. Phillippe has never had the opportunity to find out. This sound, though, was different; it sounded more like the submarine had suddenly dropped to a much lower depth. The slithering, then the creaking. As though the ship were being squeezed.

“The radar operator started going nuts,” he tells his rapt audience. “Lost it completely. Raved that it was like we just got wrapped in a solid cloud. None of us knew what to say. We all just looked at each other.”

He leans forward for dramatic effect. Is he enjoying this? He suspects he might be. The kids all lean in as well, as though he is about to whisper the core truth of the universe.

“Then the ship started moving.”

This is an understatement. At one second, they are caught in some strange, enveloping trap, the kind that creeps across the hull and brings up the oppressive level of the crush. At the next, they are thrown into the walls; not hard enough to break anything, but hard enough to hurt. The noise of being pulled at high speed through the water was deafening inside of the ship, and when some of the crew began screaming, it was indistinguishable from the rest.

The kids are incredulous but they’re still paying attention; Phillippe’s problem now is that he’s tried consciously in the decades since to forget what happened after and now he’s directly trying to bring it up. His heart is a mess—barreling along like a train going full tilt toward derailment, causing his throat to dry up and his palms to grow clammy. One of the kids thrusts a beer in his hand and he chugs it back without stopping to think.

“It must have been a day and a half we were pulled through the water,” he gasps, setting the empty green bottle aside. “That’s a journey, I figured out later, that would normally have been two weeks at regular speed. It was much later that I figured that out. At the time, it felt as though it would never end.”

Not that things were better once it did stop. Despite the best efforts of the French Navy, scent carries strongly through a submarine and theirs stinks horrifyingly of vomit and shit. Who knew how deep they were, or if the snorkel was even still intact; there is no air circulation, so the stench lingers eternally, choking them even as they breathe the deep breaths of relief. Each of them is thinking the same thought—that in a few weeks at best, there will be no air at all. All of them breathe deeply regardless.

A couple of the kids look as though they've bitten into an apple only to find a pit of rot and corruption. Phillippe feels sorry for them, but at the same time he knows that they really have no idea. Their encounters with the nauseating have been, on average, at arms-length in comparison. He waits politely while each of them makes their decision to stay and listen to the end or not. He does not blame any of those who get up and walk off down the beach into the night. He would, were the situations reversed. Seclusions, daring, and wet slippery flesh sound infinitely better than his tale of splattered puke and desperate men.

The ones who stay gather in closer, open fresh beers, and steel themselves. Phillippe looks at each of their faces; here and there he detects a certain good-natured wariness, as though they suspect that they've been listening all along to the ramblings of a hobo, or perhaps an escaped mental patient. Phillippe doesn't blame them for this, either; it's already a fantastical story and Phillippe hasn't even finished yet.

“So where was I?” he muses aloud. In his mind he is thinking of breathing, of sucking in oxygenated air in large quantities, of knowing that he's accelerating a catastrophe and breathing deeply anyway. “We checked over our systems,” he tells them, “and realized that some of them were now junk. The sonar still worked, but it was spitting out aberrations. Like we were still wrapped in something, or that we were surrounded by other objects, or who knows what. The captain ordered a closed-doors meeting but we could hear their discussion. Men under extreme stress can be very loud.”

The officers refuse to speak on their discussions when they leave the captain's chambers but this situation does not last. The men are beaten up, they're exhausted, they're frightened. To their credit, a whole eighteen hours pass before the first officer gets pummeled in the mess hall. The adrenaline and anxiety lead to a kind of desperate bravado, and the torpedo officer loses three teeth shortly; looking to stem the tide, the captain calls an all-hands meeting and lays out the situation.

“They had no idea where we were,” Phillippe tells the remainder of his audience. “Or how far we had gone, or what was wrapped around us, or what we were supposed to do.” He smiles and looks down at his feet. “They thought honesty was the best way to deal with us. They forgot submarines are a particular breeding

ground for panic. There are low oxygen levels naturally, out of necessity; without access to fresh air, there was even less than normal. One side effect of low oxygen levels is that people get angry quickly. Life on a submarine requires you to have a certain psychological profile, an ability to keep a lid on your frustration until you can vent it in a safe, appropriate place. We were all selected for this trait, but suddenly we were in an extreme situation. There was nowhere to, as I said, vent it.”

He studies his hands in the firelight, turning them over, following furrows of dirt through the knuckles.

“We kept a lid on it for as long as we could.”

There is whistling in the hallway and Phillippe is crouching just out of sight, a dented pipe in his skinny fist. There are dark, putrid stains in the hollow places of this pipe; there is hair and unspeakable other substances. The air is hot, charged. It takes a great deal of effort just to breathe in the air; Philippe strains at it, like moisture from a rock. The whistling comes closer and the sound of it is like broken glass in his spine. He grits his teeth in agony and lives an elaborate daydream wherein he bludgeons the whistler to death and then laughs wildly over the pulped corpse.

It’s just baby-faced Dominique, though, and Phillippe throws the pipe aside. He can’t kill Baby-Face, even in these circumstances. There’s been too much death already. It’s everywhere. The ship stinks of it.

“Eat me if you want,” Phillippe says. “I don’t care anymore. I’d rather nourish you than continue to starve myself.”

Baby-Face doesn’t want to eat him, though. Yet, anyway. He has one more plan. He is famous for plans. Once, at shore leave in Rome, he had been rolled for his pay by a gang of hooligans and before the next sunup had convinced two taverns of belligerents to pincer the hooligans in their lair and raid all of their stolen treasures. His plan now is less tactical, more panic-stricken: launch off the remaining torpedoes, don the scuba suits, and make for the surface. They would be somewhere in the Atlantic, in theory, hopefully close to a shipping lane. If not, Baby-Face declared with the ruddy, hopelessly insane face of the fanatic that at least they would die under the wide open skies like honest men.

“I couldn’t think of anything better to do,” Phillippe tells the kids. Honest men.

At first, everything goes according to plan. Then things become exceedingly dicey. Phillippe wants to tell these kids, these earnest Springsteen archetypes, that if they take nothing else away from this story, they should take that.

The torpedoes fire and they hit something close by; the shock wave of the explosion rocks the ship and while both Phillippe and Baby-Face manage to brace themselves they hear faintly, the sounds of rage and surprise elsewhere in the ship. Part one of the plan goes off well, at first. On their way to fulfill part two—the scuba suits—the ship suddenly lurches sideways. Phillippe and Baby-Face go full-force into the wall. Phillippe, through sheer force of will, manages to grasp ahold of a handle and it is for this reason alone that he avoids Baby-Face’s fate. The ship continues to swing back and forth, and despite Phillippe’s anchor he hits the wall painfully several times. Baby-Face fares far worse; he is slammed into the hull without mercy and, when the ship is turned completely around he falls through the hallway into the blackness. Phillippe hears him hit a door frame, but afterwards there is no noise or sign of his shipmate.

When the ship finally settles, Phillippe crawls along the floor toward where the suits are kept. It takes him a moment to realize that the rushing sound he’s hearing isn’t the blood in his ears but is external and present and urgent. The hull has been breached and the cold ocean is pouring in. His hands and his legs are wet, and already going numb with the chill. He makes it to the room with the suits and when he stands the water is up to his knees. He is halfway into the suit when the ship lurches again, and the horrendous sound of metal being torn fills his ears. Screaming, he zips himself up and slams the helmet down onto his head. The oxygen tank is full, but he doesn’t have the time to check if the hoses are properly fixed. The water rushes up over his head a moment later; his breathing seems fine, so he propels himself forward into the sudden darkness.

The light is dying everywhere as the electric lighting blows under the force of so much water. Corpses, unmoored from the floor by the intervention of the ocean, float past him; the looseness of their limbs makes it look as though they are reaching out to him, in supplication or in greed he isn’t sure. Beyond them is more of the same: more hallways, less light, more corpses floating past him, the endless parade of losers in the only race that matters. There is another of those horrendous sounds of metal tearing, although now it is more felt than heard; shockwaves through the water, and then a new current that drags Phillippe along. He lets himself be drawn, a rag doll through a rip tide, sucked through the last of the dying submarine and then out into whatever comes.

The kids aren’t stupid. Never that. They look at him and cock their heads, trying to figure out what the hell the weird dude is on about. Eventually one of them asks the question.

“So what was it?”

Phillippe flows out into the greater wide ocean and is amazed. The light is

beautiful, and it is everywhere. Soft, blue, and seemingly alive; he can see around him with much more clarity than he'd ever expected.

“When Columbus sailed into the Sargasso Sea, his crew saw strange lights in the water. They were deeply disturbed and prayed fervently for God to end their tribulations. God granted them their prayer and brought them to the land; in doing so, he set in motion greater tribulations, for an unknowable large number of human beings. Such is the mysterious, strange work of which He is known for. The lights, though, I can tell you about. In the depths, there are living creatures, plants and otherwise, that generate their own light. Bioluminescence.” He sees that some of them have paid attention through their final years of high school and are nodding along. “The Sargasso Sea is famous for the weeds it grows, and some of them glow with their own simple light.

He sees other ships, some wooden, some metal. All of them are rent in some fashion, torn open and tossed upon the ocean floor like discarded broken toys. The strange blue glow shows every dent, every tear; he gapes at them for a moment, transfixed, before he begins to claw his way upward, toward the surface and whatever might be there.

There is a thrashing in the water below him, and as he turns to see it he regrets his decision immediately. The thing is impossibly large, an amorphous shadow-blob floating malevolently near the ocean floor. Phillippe has seen octopuses in pictures before, but while this thing resembles an octopus, it has far too many arms; its tentacles writhe around its base like thin black snakes, reaching and grasping and whipping through the water. Several of them are bleeding. A red cloud billows out from the thing, obscuring a quarter of the thing's base. Got the bastard Phillippe thinks viciously, and as he thinks this, the thing's eyes flare open and for the barest second Phillippe knows that he is staring directly into the eternal fires of Hell. They train onto him and he knows then what it feels like to be a mouse caught out under the shadow of the hawk. He scrambles upward, climbing with a level of energy that shocks him. He can feel the thing moving below him, pushing the water at a rate that nearly causes him to spin out of control. He is breathing in spurts, grimly aware of the finite level of his oxygen tanks.

“I surfaced in the middle of a calm, clear night. There were more stars than I'd ever seen in my entire life, whirling overhead. It was...” he trails off, looks at the eyes of the remaining kids. “It was gorgeous, and maddening, and utterly terrifying.”

He treads water as much as he can, keeping himself afloat in the middle of a wide ocean with no land in sight. Night turns into day and Phillippe waits for the thing to come to the surface and drag him back down into the eerie glow of the ocean floor. It never does; the thing must have been too badly hurt to attempt it. He pictures himself losing his strength and slipping beneath the waves to his doom, but

before that occurs, a cargo ship manages to spot him improbably against the backdrop of sea and sky. When they ask him about himself, he spins a story about being a recently landed immigrant in the United States that took a pleasure cruise on the wrong ship and ended up stranded in the open water. It's a grim enough tale, and so there's very little questions sent his way by the American crew. They've heard stories about people going overboard never to be seen again, and they count themselves as heroes for having rescued one of them.

"So I made it here, to the U.S.," he tells these Ocean City teenagers. "Hit the ground running and never looked back. I've worked odd jobs up and down the East Coast."

"Damn," one girl says. "If it were me, I'd never go near the water again."

Phillipe laughs and accepts another beer. There is a certain sentiment he wants to convey to her, but he cannot find the words. There is something about the ocean that draws him, a certain scent, a certain feel, a certain tugging; the way the salt seems to breathe out of the ocean, settling on his skin and marking him as belonging to those waves. He rarely goes swimming, and he never goes out on ships, only on boats that hug the coast. He knows, without knowing exactly how to express it, that if he ever sinks below those wide open waves again, it will be the final time.

There are other things he wants to tell them, warnings and admonishments and pleadings from a deep, frightened part of himself. He wants to tell them about the spate of missing boats that occurred one summer in a rambling stretch of the Georgia coastline; about the deep grooves carved into the sand one morning outside of Surf City, North Carolina; about rumor and conjecture and dark mutterings from the locals in seaside Maine villages. He wants to tell them that he knows when he's overstayed his welcome somewhere; that he knows when the strange marks show up in the sand, like a thousand twisted tentacles clawing blindly at the coast, he must move on. Otherwise, he wants to scream at them, he'll find himself on a lonely stretch of the beach at three in the morning, the witching hour, facing out toward the ocean, waiting.

After they get over the story, the kids of Ocean City go back to their lives, living out the urgent mythologies of the American Dream. Phillipe recedes into the background, a story that they will tell nostalgically a decade or two down the road, at a high school reunion, or over coffee with an old friend. He gets up from their fire, wanders off down the coast, keeping an eye out to avoid lovers in the warm summer night. Beside him, his old friend, the ocean crashes ceaselessly into the land, thrumming and calling to him with sweet tones and salty breath to join her in one final embrace.



Kittens Crawling

Lena Ng

Gerald misted a fine spray of Windex over the glass surface and polished it with a lint-free, soft chamois. The curved surface of the glass gleamed, reflecting back Gerald's living room with its floral-patterned wallpaper and ballerina-pink, chintz drapes. "Aren't you the cutest little thing?" he asked, rubbing the glass until it squeaked. Two marble eyes of bright blue peered back at him from within its glass castle, looking up through lush eyelashes that floated and waved, moved by the gently rocking preserving fluid. "Yes, you are," he said, in a soothing coo, while rubbing at a particularly stubborn spot. "Yes, you are."

Its little paw was raised in a small gesture of greeting, as though it were waving 'Salutations' while on the way to Pet Mart to pick up some treats. The hair of its orange fur swayed in a lilting, dreamy fashion, like strands of seaweed in the sea. The glass and its holding liquid magnified its tiny feline face so the marble eyes seemed bigger and more expressive. It had an expression of "Won't you just love me?"

The preservative solution kept the body looking fresh. The kitten seemed so alive, it could play with a ball of yarn in its underwater world.

Someone who didn't understand might have described the glass globe's contents as cutely grotesque. Or—more likely—just grotesque.

Gerald gently shook the glass globe. Small flakes of glitter floated around the kitten and settled on its orange-and-white striped fur, the layer of metallic flakes resembling a shiny, multi-coloured snowfall.

Gerald was particularly proud of this kitten. Its pose, its expression. "Junior" he called it. Everyone has their little hobbies, things to do in their free time that make life worth living. Some people play an instrument, such as the piano or guitar. Some people collect coins or stamps. Others dickered around for hours, putting together model trains or ships or airplanes.

Gerald liked...preserving things. Not vegetables. Not fruit. Not cocktail onions or gherkins or strawberry-rhubarb jam or mango chutney. But small animals. Particularly kittens. Everyone would agree that kittens are cute. Gerald especially. So cute, he wanted them to remain kittens forever.

You may think Gerald is an animal-hater, considering the fate of his pets. But actually he loved them, with all his twisted heart could hold. He loved them so much, he never wanted them to grow up. Gerald always thought his sense of love was so strong, he would never let something he loved leave.

Like his girlfriend, Sylvia. Sweet, lovely girl with long chestnut hair and from a good family. “Kitten” he called her. She supposedly loved him back, that is until she opened his study door—the room he had expressly told her to leave alone—and found out about his hobby. Then there was crying and general unpleasantness.

But all that was history. Gerald pulled the trigger of the bottle and sprayed the next globe, a light blue mist settling onto the glass surface. He hummed while he worked. Cuddles, a black-and-white tabby, sat with both paws together, ready for her next adventure catching caterpillars or butterflies. Snoodles, a short-haired Russian Blue, looked ready to pounce on a robin or a chipmunk. Tiny Tim, a gray, long-haired Persian, didn’t open its eyes, since it was having an eternal cat-nap, its body curled up as though it were in front of a fireplace in a cabin, instead of floating within a preservative solution and stuffed inside a glass ball. With his cloth, Gerald rubbed the globes in a gentle but thorough manner. Soon, all the glass globes with his furry friends were shiny and polished.

“All done,” said Gerald, stepping back to admire his handy work, his broad, good-humoured face reflecting back at him in each of the twenty globes, proudly arranged to sit on the fireplace mantel and wall shelves and the buffet table. “Don’t you all look nice?” He spent another minute admiring. “Now for some breakfast.”

After he put away his cleaning supplies and cloths, as he entered the kitchen for toast and tea, Gerald heard a rumble. Like a large truck had driven by outside of his window. He looked to his stomach. He didn’t think he was that hungry.

The rumble started again.

This time, more loudly and more violently. The plates in the kitchen rattled. The cups in the cupboard clacked. Gerald realized that his feet, then his knees were shaking. The trembles moved up his body until his teeth clattered together.

The kitchen floor jolted beneath his feet. Gerald grabbed for the heavy kitchen table. The table’s legs rapped against the kitchen’s tile floor. Since there had never been an earthquake in his part of the country before, Gerald needed a minute to realize what was happening.

The next sound sent his heart racing. Gerald heard the sound of glass clinking, the noise coming from the living room. The tinkling of glass was a living room full of globes, which were knocking together. Then, as he hung onto the table, to his horror, he heard a sound that made his stomach drop.

A smash.

Oh no, no, no.

Then another. The tinkle of glass breaking. Then another thud and another. More panic-inducing sounds of glass shattering.

Please, not all of them. No, no, no...

After the ground stopped shaking, Gerald picked himself off the tiles, found his balance, and fled back into the living room.

Gerald's eyes watered with the burning smell of the preserving fluid. All the kittens lay on the floor, their glass globes cracked open like eggs spilling their furry yolks. Puddles of solution on the hardwood floor that he had just mopped yesterday, already bleaching away the varnish, leaving large patchy white spots. The kittens' little bodies scattered all over the living room floor like someone sprinkling rose petals.

With a sigh, Gerald opened the living room windows. His heart felt squeezed. All his painstaking work smashed. Slowly, the acrid smell started to dissipate. He retrieved two buckets and a mop. He let the solution soak into the mop head before squeezing, with gloved hands, the liquid into the bucket. With the other bucket in hand, he gingerly tip-toed around the living room, picking up his fallen friends and placing them with care into the pail.

"Are you ok, Snoodles?" Gerald asked. The kitten looked somewhat reproachful. It was still in the pouncing pose, but with its arched back, it looked like it could be hissing. "How are you doing, Cuddles?" Cuddles looked no worse for wear as it was deposited in the pail. But with the accident, its mouth had dropped open, looking to be in mid-yowl.

And there was something funny about Tiny Tim, the napping Persian kitten. Its long, gray hair could use a good brushing. Its body had unfolded from its sleeping pose and now looked contorted. There was something else, though. Something unusual but subtle, subtle enough that it took Gerald a moment to grasp what was wrong.

Its eyes. Though the long hair covered them, Gerald realized they were open. But not wide open. Instead, they were narrowed and hardened. And they seemed to stare at him with a loathing-filled look, following his every movement. A low sound seemed to come from the kitten's throat. Gerald stuck a pinky in his ear. That didn't help. If he didn't know better, Gerald would swear it was a growl.

Then a strange sound came from the pail, from the other kittens. Quietly at first. A buzzing sound which seemed to come from the back of the throat, soft yet menacing, then rising in volume until the sound became a collective kitten's yowl. A

rallying cry.

Junior was the first to move. Its bedraggled, orange-furred face peered over the edge of the pail. It dragged himself up; the lips pulled back in a snarl. Its lovely fur, which had waved so peacefully in the solution, now looked matted and knotted. One of the marbles fell out of its eyes, rolled across the hardwood, and hid under the coffee table, leaving a hollow, green-tinged hole. Junior hissed, further baring pointed, small-but-horribly sharp teeth. Gerald backed away. His heart banged against his chest, wanting to leap out and escape to somewhere stress-free, such as the Bahamas.

Slowly, Junior crawled out of the bucket. It moved with a herky-jerky movement, a spastic, crab-like crawl, all feline grace had disappeared the day it was forced to meet Jesus. When Gerald backed into a wall, he could only stare, mesmerized in fascinated horror. As soon as it was close enough, Junior, a frightful ball of feline fury, launched itself at Gerald's leg, teeth piercing through his khaki pants and into the skin with accompanying claws buried to the sheath. Gerald howled, kicking his legs and failing, looking like a crazed man tilting at windmills.

The other kittens followed suit, swarming like rampaging crabs out of the bucket. Teeth and claws. Hisses and yowls. Launching themselves with spring-loaded kitten savagery. Undead kittens digging their nails in his scalp, hanging from the fat in his back, biting with all their mighty might on his belly. Bright ribbons of claw marks criss-crossed his arms and legs; tiny teeth marks pin-cushioned his torso.

Sure, there might of have been twenty of them. But they were only kittens, weighing less than a pound each. Gerald grabbed Cuddles around its middle. "Why you little—" He hurled Cuddles to the wall, its body making contact with a squelchy splat. Its brethren soon followed—Snoodles, Junior, Tiny Tim, Holly, Peter, and many others—becoming broken, sad, little bodies littering the living room floor.

After picking off all the kittens, Gerald stood panting. "Just you wait, after all I've done for you, you're all going back into your globes and—" Gerald had to pause a bit to think about how he could threaten already dead kittens, "—and no TV for a week." From surveying the broken-bodied landscape, Gerald thought maybe they were punished enough.

Again Gerald picked up pail and began to gather up the bodies. All the work ahead of him to re-create a world for each. This time with stronger, thicker glass.

After he picked up the last kitten, it started again. A low rumble. The ground again started shaking. Gerald grabbed for the fireplace mantel. The rumbling continued, growing in sound and vibration. His legs tried to swing out from under him. Any remaining wall pictures that had survived the first rumbles came crashing to the

floor. Gerald hung onto the mantel for several minutes until the earthquake tired itself out. There was a moment of stillness when the earth stopped quaking.

Then he heard it.

A loud smash.

The crack of glass, louder and sharper than the tinkling of the kitten's globes. Almost as loud and sharp as the screams that once had echoed in his house. A smash that came from the basement.

Gerald stared at the door leading down to the basement. Oh please, oh please, oh please, no. At first, there was an eerie silence. It was broken by a clumping, dragging sound. As one, all the kittens' ears perked up. Gerald's heart beat super loudly but it couldn't drown out the slow, methodical thumping sound. Like the sound of something—someone—shambling up the bare wood of the basement stairs.

The wooden door leading to the basement slowly creaked open. A crouching, bent shape took form.

“Kitten?” said Gerald.

The shape tried to pull itself upward. It staggered forward, then fell back to its knees. Its arms dragged its body across the floor, its elbows sticking outward, with the jerking movements of a figure too long curled up in a glass globe. It looked with marble eyes through stringy, wet chestnut hair, long hair that had been previously floating peacefully in a large glass globe. The slack face looked as smooth as a doll's, a sickly pale, rubbery mannequin come to life. When it opened its mouth, a mouthful of solution dripped onto the floor. Another wave of liquid formaldehyde stink caused Gerald to wretch. He wiped the tears away from his burning eyes.

Although Sylvia had looked more attractive when alive, Gerald still had managed to preserve the essence of her good-looks in suspended animation, forever dreaming in a murky sea of formaldehyde. But outside her globe, Sylvia's pickled skin looked somewhat green, the texture over-boiled and rind-like. She splayed her limbs outward, and to Gerald's horror, she started to move with the scuttle of a human crab.

She made a noise through her mushy larynx. At the sound, life seemed to return to his furry friends. Junior stretched and shook himself off. One by one, the other kittens followed suit. Gerald was surrounded by an army of the preserved.

He backed away from the girl-thing. The kittens rallied and stealthily approached, crawling on their wet bellies. Gerald pivoted from them and sprang towards the door, almost wrenching the wooden frame off its hinges. He bolted from

the house into...a snowstorm? Swirling flakes of snow spun around, the air so thick with it, it seemed to be spiraling around his body. An earthquake, a blizzard—what next? A tsunami? Gerald knew climate-change would bring natural disasters, but not all of them at once.

As he ran, Gerald turned to see his pursuers. The kittens were close, but it was the shambling frame in the back that horrified him the most. Against the howling wind and snow, he raced across his large yard, as quickly as his stout legs could carry him. He could barely see through the billowing wall of white. He clutched at his frozen chest. Please may I not have a heart attack. Twenty more feet and he could barricade himself in the shed. Or better yet...there were tools there. Hoes. Axes. Hatchets. A double-barreled shotgun. If it was a war they wanted...

He would blast them back to Hell.

Ten feet to the shed door. Five feet. Just as Gerald stretched out for the door, the ground shook again. The wind whipped up, and the blizzard lashed at him. He stumbled and fell, his knees scraping against the frozen ground before the air was slammed out of his chest. Gerald managed to flip over onto his back in time to see a mass of furry faces above him. With a united cry, Sylvia and the kittens launched themselves through the swirling storm.

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“Daddy, look at this!” the child cried. “Look what Jessie gave me.” The glass globe shone in the winter sunlight of a Sunday afternoon, held by a girl sitting cross-legged on her playroom floor. She tilted the globe up and down then swirled it in a circular motion. Then she gave the snow globe a good, hard shake, the white flakes spiraling around in the liquid.

As the snowflakes cleared, within the glass globe, Daddy saw two small figures lying face down. Not an ordinary snow globe scene. A peculiar sight—the shape of a man and a woman, their bodies covered in a heavy sprinkling of artificial snow, in a field of what looked to be furry daisies.



Tattoo

Garry Engkent

“We are dying, Leo. Look at her. She has more wrinkles than a prune left in the sun for weeks. Where is the texture, elasticity, firmness that we luxuriated in when she brought life to herself and to us?”

“She is dying, Cassie,” Leo corrects. “We are just fading away.”

He remembers when they were both placed together, almost. Her lithe, naked body crossed diagonally from under the right breast to over the top of the left. Her siren, mermaid length of hair waved above to collar bone. Her fingers pointing at areoles and nipples. Leo himself equally nude curled his lower half of his body around the right leg and upper body in the inner thigh: his face smiling radiantly, his arm and hand touching and reaching the shaven pubis.

“I can hear you, you know.” The interruption comes from a clear but reedy voice.

Her name is Daphne, and she is one of the first in her group of friends to collect tattoos to every part of her anatomy. She began this journey with a small flower still in bud on her left shoulder. It came as a dare from her best friend and from her then boyfriend. Then, all of sudden, she becomes obsessed. Her tattooist, Jim Beau, is gentle and explains what he is doing. The man has been in the business for decades etching macho tats on muscular biceps and arms. Now with the Boomers and Generation X's, his clients come from both sexes. Tats are in; tats are cool; tats advertise; tats make statements. Jim inks virgin clear skin into curved canvasses of colours, characters, signatures, symbols from head down to baby toe. Daphne just loves the vibrations of the needle as it etches curves and designs. She also loves Jim's hands, fingers, palms caressing over her skin.

Daphne becomes Jim's lover so he could ink her after work in bed. She trusts his skill, artistry, discretion. Especially when Jim brings Leo and Cassie to existence on her smooth, sexualized skin. But in the last year of the relationship, Daphne wanted more, wanted rough sex, wanted to roam and be alive! Jim Beau, older in years, just wanted to examine smooth skin, ink patterns, designs, figures, signatures on all parts of male or female bodies.

“I haven't finished,” Jim wails. “Your back. I've been saving it. There's a whole blank canvass I want to fill.”

But it will be another tattoo artist, Rafe Reficul, who fills her back canvass. Young and full of sass, he becomes her demon lover and during his stay he stencils

Daphne's entire back from shoulder blades to intimate buttocks. In midnight black and volcano red. Two intertwining dragons—like the two snakes entwined in the staff of Hermes—spilling wanton, ominous fire from their opened mouths. All without patterns and shapes. And he tosses in spells without telling Daphne.

“This ink is special. My mamma made it. It has magical properties,” he tells her as he manually pricks her receptive skin with his ancient needles to begin his creation on her naked skin. “Here, I dabble a few drops on your front tats, so you can feel the difference.”

Rafe explains that this ink, along with the formula to make more, was handed down to him from his witch grandmother. She was given the recipe by her own great grandmother, who, according to family history, got it from one of Satan's minions for virginal sex. Rafe murmurs a ritualistic spell as he stirs this peculiar potion—the deep black as Hell.

Just a little prick of ancient ink, one on Leo and one on Cassie, Daphne senses a change racing through her skin and into her body. It was a high she could never reach with drugs. Then a second prick of a generous amount charges through the outlines and shapes. Leo and Cassie suddenly became sentient. They could feel, they could sense, they could think, they could communicate with one another, but they could only move when the host, Daphne, does.

Daphne wants more of this elixir. She is hooked and believes that when Rafe puts in the two dragons, each dab of this ink would send her to heaven with the gods. As time goes by, Rafe the lover tattooist pierced signs and symbols on Daphne's entire body. All in all, Daphne sports on her skin 666 signs, designs, symbols, logos, full bodied creatures. Then without a word Rafe leaves her. After twenty years.

“Why?” Daphne shouts again and again. There is no Rafe to answer her. He is gone—how long now?

Leo and Cassie feel the psychic pain that their host wallows in, every waking hour, and often in midnight dreams. Daphne would shriek and scream out loud until all the tats could stand it no longer. But they could not run away. She tries to console herself with waves of lovers, physical distraction to soothe mental anguish. Both Leo and Cassie could feel the smoothness or coarseness of thumbs, index and middle fingers caressing their shapes and contours. Daphne would moan with pleasure. Cassie could sense the tracing of her shape and always luxuriating at Daphne's bounteous, left breast. Leo could only join the erotic ritual when first the lover's fingers and then his hardened cock slide into Daphne in orgasmic rhythm. This went on for years and decades.

In between times, Daphne stares at the full-length mirrors that circle the mid-

dle of the living room. She is totally naked. Sometimes she traces the patterns that Jim Beau and Rafe Reficul forever imbedded into her body. Other times, she just stands as the mirrors reflect the various parts of her outward anatomy.

“She grows old,” the entwined dragons, Casper and Pollox, comment.

“Maybe we can help her,” Cassie muses. “We can make her young again!”

“Nice sentiments, fools. To her, we are just attractions for other eyes. Conversation pieces. We are here for the ride. No more.”

“I can hear you,” Daphne says out of the blue. At that moment, the host could feel her skin crawling. All 666 forms let out a collective gasp.

The entwined, twin dragons, Casper and Pollox, ask collectively, “Since when?”

“Since the beginning,” the tattoo lady murmurs. “Since Rafe completed you two on my back.”

Collectively, the 666 tattoos understand that this revelation changes everything. For more than fifty years they have lived and experienced with her—her joys and her sorrows. And her moments of everyday boredom. After Rafe Reficul’s departure, they were her only lasting companions. Lovers come and go. Orgasms don’t last forever. The mural on her body she lives with day and night, every hour, minute, second. Her sentient companions throughout life.

And now too they want to leave. To forsake her. To live young and vibrant as the first inking.

“I won’t let you go,” Daphne announces.

Where would they go anyway? The tats are part of her skin, imbedded forever in colours, shades and hues. They cannot move further from one spot on her body to another. Impossible. Daphne wants them to be buried in the grave with when she dies.

“We want to live!” the 666 tattoos say collectively.

“Too bad! My fate, your fate.”

The 666 tattoos wonder individually about each’s own escape. Each was inked slightly beneath the epidermis, captured in cells that change—when old cells die and are replaced—but not the inking. Some designs intertwine intricately with others

into a mosaic pattern, on her stomach, on her legs and arms. Rafe's colours have not faded noticeably, but Daphne's six decades of outer skin ripple and fold. Especially about her face, neck and arms. Cassie has complained about how she now sags along with Daphne's droopy breasts.

"We'll find a way!"

Daphne's snorting laughter only makes them more determined. Art is considered to be Life, and these mythological and humanistic etchings on the old woman's body see themselves as Art, as alive, as worthy of living beyond the life of the beholder, like a Van Gogh, or Rembrandt. Richly erotic. Lovingly lifelike. Cherishing the moment, desiring eternity.

Another of Rafe's magnificent etchings asks, "Even if we could get off her skin, where would we go? Where would we find a host who will take us?"

"One step at a time," Leo says.

"We don't have much time, Leo. Have you heard her in the mornings with that deep cough? Have you not noticed that Daphne does not eat much? She could die any minute!"

"You exaggerate. The old bitch has decades more."

"And we will be so shriveled and faded and old." Cassie laments narcissistically. "Already, hardly anyone sees us, except the mirror!"

"I have a solution," Casper, one of the twin, entwined dragons on Daphne's back adds. "But you won't like it."

"Rafe knew that one day this would happen. He couldn't stand it to see his creations shriveled and stricken over time. That's why he fled." Pollox says.

"Let's not speculate," Leo says. "What's your solution, Casper?"

Casper weighs in. "Sacrifice."

Daphne falls asleep on the couch. They hear her snore; they sense the regular rhythm of her breathing. The 666 tattoos now can speak freely and plan strategy.

They take a moment to recall the young times, the youthful years when they were part of Daphne's glory, celebration, exhilaration of ecstasy and life. Her skin was smooth, silky, soft, supple and sharing. She gave life to the symbols, creations, figures, patterns, shapes and forms: when she walks in public with her revealing clothes, when she showers and baths in private, when she lets her lovers—and there

were many—appreciate her entire, naked body. Those were the days.

The intertwined dragons clarify: “We all cannot leave. Only a small number of us can transmigrate. More may kill her.”

“Daphne’s dying anyway,” another tat states.

Both dragons on their host’s back appear to move on their own (or is it just Daphne turning in her sleep?). They seem physically agitated at the tat’s comment. All the tats have been with Daphne for over fifty-sixty years. They cover her entire body, and her clothes shelter them in cold weather. The tats were and are lovingly washed in baths and showers and caressed in rich ointment. They were never mistreated by neglect as did her various lovers over the decades. They were reluctant to part from her: she was and is their canvass; she was and is their world.

But Rafe Reficul had done something to them, including those etched by Jim Beau. The desire, the need, the yearning to live forever—even if it meant to leave their host. Dormant for all these years, now surging forth. It was all in the ointments he used so lovely on Daphne’s skin.

“Where would we go?” an intricate tat around Daphne’s neck asks.

“How do we get away? On our own, we are stationary.” comment together, the sun and the moon, encircling Daphne’s right buttocks.

“One thing at a time,” the black dragons respond. At the moment, the entwined twins have a secret that they have been carrying since their existence. But they are not going to inform the rest of the tats.

Rafe Reficul was not a mere tattooist: he had sinister powers given to him by a long line of witches, warlocks, sorcerers, shamans, seers, necromancers, what-have-you-that-calls-upon-the-demons. All from the dark side. The ominous rearguard. Casper and Pollox know that is why Rafe put them on the back of Daphne.

It is time to call upon the enchantment that was buried deep and had now rooted in Daphne’s spine. Casper and Pollox speak no words but send a spiritual message along its lines and curves, and intertwined with other shapes, symbols and sketches. Many are surprised, shocked and stunned at the revelation.

“No,” almost two-thirds of the 666 tattoos cry out. “We will not be part of our hostess’ demise. We will not kill her. Hurt her. Even if it means freedom and eternity are lost forever.”

“But will you stop us? We who wish to leave and live forever!” the twin drag-

ons ask.

The question is met with silence. For what seems an eternity in the tattoo sphere.

“Remember, she is old. She does not have many years. Look, every week she has a new or recurring ailment that sends her packing to the clinic. We can take advantage.”

“How?”

Casper and Pollox reveal what Rafe left as a legacy on Daphne’s back. An egg, inked in the same colour as her skin, now slowly, slowly growing into what seems a malignant tumour. Daphne would have to have noticed when she bathed or showered, and this growth would become worrisome. She would have to see a doctor, and then go to the hospital to have it removed.

“Once in the hospital, she will be engaged with other people,” Leo and Cassie add.

“She will be exposed to other events and circumstances. It is there we make our move. She won’t be aware of it.”

Most of the tats are still confused. The chatter grows among those that just wish the whole thing would go away, and they live their sedated lives on smooth skin.

Daphne is awake with, “I can hear you, you know.”

What Casper and Pollox predicted comes true. Daphne does notice the big lump in her spine just above her ass. She goes to her doctor at the clinic and he sends her to the hospital for further tests and examinations.

“What are you here for?” Daphne asks, just to make polite conversation and while the time away.

“Ultrasound and amniocentesis,” the young pregnant woman replies. “Do you have children?”

“No,” Daphne replies. She lifts the hospital gown and shows the expecting mother her tattoos. “These are my children. They won’t grow up and run away.”

Both women laugh.

If the two patients had paid attention, they would have noticed the movements of many of the tattoos—especially the canvass length ones—on Daphne’s

body. But the mother-to-be accepted such anomalies as just body movements, and Daphne herself thought nothing of these shifts, as itches that need momentary scratching. The older woman scratches the egg tumour satisfactorily.

“How many weeks?”

“Fifteen,” is the reply. “The doctor says we have twins!”

The younger woman shows her belly proudly, and by inference, wants Daphne to touch the fleshly mound that holds life and growth. The older woman understands, and foregoing cleaning her hand touches the belly, and then remembers that she should have washed first. Too late.

The tattoo lady senses something flowing from her body along her right arm, down to the fingers. It isn't a jolt, as in an unexpected electrical shock, but rather a natural surge of pulse. Almost undetectable. There is a spot of dampness that quickly disappears—absorbed—into the skin of the pregnant woman.

For the moment, Daphne notes but dismisses that feeling. Her spirit seems to have lost something she could not fathom. When the doctor examines her egglike tumour, he pronounces that it is benign. Nothing to worry about. He admonishes her for scratching at the lump that seems to have gone down a bit. “You don't want to get it infected.”

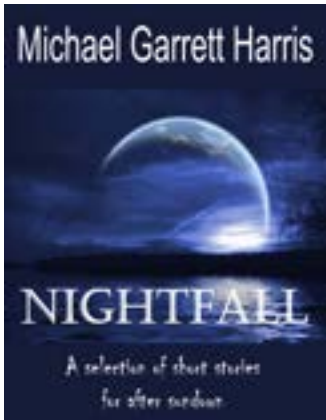
When she gets home, she notices the chatter of her tattoos has become muted. Usually, Leo, Cassie, the twin dragons and others vibrate along her skin. They stimulate the other tats into conversation and keep Daphne entertained. They are silent and still.

Epilogue

The new father unfolds the swaddling blanket to see his babies. He expects, as he has seen in movies, YouTube videos and in-law photos, babies all in pink skin to meet the world. He is shocked, surprised and concerned.

“What's the matter, darling?” the new mother asked nervously.

“Honey, our newborn twins have birth marks.”



Nightfall:
A selection of short stories for after sundown.
by Michael Garrett Harris

A review by
Thomas Stewart.

Published in 2018 by British publisher TaM Entertainment, Author Michael Garrett Harris's "Nightfall: A selection of short stories for after sundown" is a collection of short tales of the macabre, ripe for the occasions when the sun dies and you're all alone. 10 dark testaments in total, "Nightfall" features tales of vivid nightmares, such as "Lucid Dreaming", where a man is able to manifest his worst nightmares in the real world, and "Dreamweaver", wherein a dark entity boasts his own ability to manipulate dreams of all children, young and old.

Caution is a hard lesson to learn, such as in "Matter of Luck", where we learn that tempting fate is almost never a wise choice, unless you're truly immortal (such as myself), as well as the final tale, "Box of Darkness", in which a hard lesson is learned in heeding the warnings of others, especially those you may procure strange products from -- even if it's just a fancy looking box...

Alas, while I can definitely say that this tome both amused and interested me, I cannot lie and say that it was entirely without its flaws. The most glaring of which being the author's seeming misuse of the present tense, using them to describe events that, at least to my understanding, make more sense being told in the past tense. As I am not perfect myself (despite being an all-powerful demon scribe), I am sure that this opinion can and may be debated by others. As such, I can definitely recommend this deliciously terrifying volume of fear.

Rating:  / 
(4 out of 5)

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