

DEAN BAKER

JUMP  
SCARE

Horror Anthology

# Jump-Scare!

Halloween Horror  
Anthology

By

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This anthology is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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## Acknowledgements:

This book is a collection of my short fiction. Some stories have previously been published online in web-zines. Others are previously unpublished. I leave it to you, the reader, to decide if they should have remained so!

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# Stuck In Traffic

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“Aw, shit,”

Stuck in traffic, the awful midtown traffic. Rachel hated it, more than anything she could think of right now, sat in her idling Chrysler at 8:35am on a grey morning in New York. She was late and this traffic was making her even later. This wasn't the impression she had wanted to make on her first day. It was all his fault.

She'd protested when he'd unilaterally invited himself into her apartment last night.

“I'm tired and drunk and have to be up early in the morning. You're taking advantage,” she'd said as he put his foot in the doorway to stop her shutting him out.

She recalled the events of last night as You're so Vain came on the radio.

*All the girls dreamed that they'd be your partner, they'd be your partner.* She'd never quite gotten Steve out of her system. It didn't matter how many times he'd cheated on her, if he snapped his fingers she came running.

*I had some dreams, they were clouds in my coffee, clouds in my coffee.* He was just so damn charming, and of course, handsome. She blushed as she thought of all the things he'd said and done the night before. But when she awoke that morning he was gone. He always was. She even wondered for a few seconds if it were a dream.

Suddenly the driver behind tooted his horn and she snapped out of her trance and moved another couple of feet forward as the traffic advanced slowly towards the bridge. Rachel looked forlornly into the rear-view mirror. I look like shit. Bags under her eyes staring back at her, she smiled sarcastically, pushing the mirror away. Enough reminders. Nervous and impatient, she tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, waiting in line with the rest of the traffic.

The move to psychiatric nursing was supposed to be part of the big change in her life.

Proof she'd moved on from being a doormat for Steve. Now one night with him had jeopardized the whole thing. She had caved in again.

“Damn you Steve!” she said and pounded the wheel with the palm of her hand.

After another twenty minutes of queuing she finally arrived at the hospital and hastily parked, racing along the corridors to make her appointment with Dr Stephenson and the rest of the inductees. She skidded along the halls, perilously close to toppling over at several stages and cursing her decision to wear the small stylish heels instead of the sensible dowdy flats her mother had bought her. She burst into the room through the large wooden doors that clattered loudly, causing

everyone to turn round and stare. She stood there, acutely embarrassed, and offered a gushing apology.

"Thank you for joining us...eventually," Dr Stephenson said, causing an eruption of laughter from the crowd.

"I'm very sorry Dr Stephenson," she blurted out, her face crimson. "I got stuck in traffic,"

"Oh yes the traffic," he said, scratching his head with a pen which he casually slipped into his jacket pocket. "The same traffic everyone else got up early to avoid?" he left the question hanging, which was received by yet more laughter.

Rachel wanted the ground to swallow her up as she took her seat at the back and the doctor resumed his lecture.

"We must try to decode the logic of insanity," the doctor said, adjusting his spectacles. "We must be able to comprehend what causes the human mind to dysfunction. I am now going to take you on a tour of the wards and show you some of the most disturbed individuals we house here. Study closely their habits and symptoms. All will be different, but I believe all have the same central cause for disturbance. Please step this way," he said leading the crowd into the hallway.

Rachel followed the group as they ambled down the brightly lit corridor, Doctor Stephenson continuing to dispense his wisdom to the captive audience.

"Now the first thing you should remember is that a psychology degree cuts no ice with me," Doctor Stephenson said sharply. "A certificate from Harvard is not knowledge. Thirty years of clinical psychiatry experience is knowledge. Now is when you start learning,"

Rachel cringed as the doctors booming, arrogant voice echoed off the walls.

"We have just about every type of psychopath here. Murderers, Schizophrenics, self-harmers..."

The group peered through the small windows of each cell, eyeing the inmates like caged animals.

"Also, as many of you will know, we have Richard Marvin, the infamous Invisible Man housed in this facility. I'm sure you'll all want to see him but at present none of you have the correct security clearance I'm afraid," the doctor said as the group let out a collective groan.

Rachel had read the paper Dr Stephenson had published on Richard Marvin. That paper had made his name in the psychiatric fraternity and Dr Stephenson treated Marvin like his own pet. Demand among the media for access to Marvin was still high and Stephenson's ego had grown fat in his position as custodian of the infamous criminal.

"Here we have a very pathetic individual. A pyromaniac by instinct..."

As the doctor gave his self-important analysis of the patient, Rachel found her mind wandering. Thoughts drifted to Steve and the night before. The way she'd felt when he called, the flush of excitement when he'd arrived at the bar. She couldn't help herself.

Rachel followed at rear of the group, almost on autopilot. And as the party reached the last cell Rachel realised that she'd made no notes. She'd been barely paying attention at all.

Damn you Steve.

"Well group, I hope you have all made copious notes on what you've seen today. These and many more cases will be presented to you each day as part of your work in clinical psychiatric nursing, if you qualify," Dr Stephenson said looking at his watch. It was now five to twelve.

"Now I guess is the time you've all been waiting for, lunch!" he said as a collective giggle rang out amongst the group. "We'll reconvene in the lecture hall at one. Don't be late," he said turning on his heels.

\*

"Jesus, can you believe the ego on that guy?" Rachel overheard the woman next to her say as she ate her lunch in the cafeteria.

"I didn't study my ass off to be told that a psychology degree is worthless," the woman added.

Suddenly Rachel's mobile phone beeped as she received a text message. I'll meet you at work at 5:30pm. We need to talk. S.

She deleted the message with a sigh but despite this she couldn't shake her thoughts off Steve. Why couldn't he just settle down and commit? I'm a damn fine catch! She thought, as her mother had told her a thousand times after Steve had cheated on her yet again. When is he going to realise that we're good together? Rachel sat, elbows on the table supporting her head in her open palms, thinking of the wedding she'd always planned on a beach in Hawaii and the beautiful white wedding dress she lusted after in the shop window at Bloomingdale's.

As Rachel daydreamed, Steve was stood at the counter of the florists just fourteen blocks away looking lost.

"Can I help you?" the assistant asked as he nervously browsed the selections of flowers.

"I need something special," he said. "Something that says I'm sorry, and will you marry me?" he added with a nervous laugh.

"Well, that's a lot so say with just flowers," the florist responded staring into his eyes. "But I think I might have just the thing," she added with a toss of her golden hair.

She was a blonde, tall too, his favourite kind. He knew he had a chance of getting her number if he tried. But now, he felt able to resist. He could only think of Rachel. Was he cured of his roving eye at last?

"Here," she said, handing him the wrapped bouquet. "These should do the trick. That's a hundred and twelve dollars,"

Steve's face dropped.

"I can see it's a while since you bought flowers," she said.

Steve just nodded and pulled out his credit card.

Rachel sat on her plastic seat, chasing her food round the plate with her fork, her mind preoccupied. Suddenly, all about her, plates were noisily picked up and placed on the long white counter. She checked her watch, it said twelve fifty-five. Lunch was over.

Back in the lecture room Rachel struggled to focus on Dr Stephenson's dull vocalizations. She stared blankly ahead, absent minded.

\*

Deep in the heart of the hospital's secure unit, Richard Marvin was pacing in his cell.

"Do it Sullivan," he hissed, as he pressed himself against the cell wall. There was no response. "Do it Sullivan, now's the time. Do it. Just like we talked about,"

A stifled moan escaped from the next cell. Albert Sullivan, a paranoid schizophrenic stood on his bed, sobbing, and reached for the mesh grill in the ceiling behind which was a single light bulb. In his left hand he held a sharpened piece of metal. He was holding it so tightly that blood was dripping from his palm. In the next cell Marvin concentrated his thoughts on the pitiful wretch next door. Sullivan could feel the thoughts pulsing in his brain, making him nauseous. Pouring sweat and using the makeshift screwdriver, he slowly removed the screws and the grill dropped to the blood speckled floor.

Richard Marvin, life inmate, gained his notorious sobriquet from a hysterical press three years earlier amidst a spree of vicious murders. Nobody had ever fully understood how he gained entrance to seven homes without signs of forced entry. Marvin had never talked, even under sodium pentothal. To the public he was an enigma, the Invisible man.

"Do it Sullivan," Marvin hissed, closing his eyes.

Sullivan slowly unscrewed the naked light bulb, dropping it to the floor with a muffled smash as it burned his fingers, blood running down his forearm.

"Do it now Sullivan!"

Sullivan was trembling. He blinked his tear-filled eyes and then plunged his fore and index fingers into the exposed socket as a thunderous crack rang out and a blinding light lit up the cell. Sullivan's body convulsed violently, and he fell to the floor. In the lecture room Rachel was suddenly roused as the lights dimmed for an instant and the group stirred.

"What was that?" a woman in front of her asked, as the group began to chatter amongst themselves.

"Quiet please," Dr Stephenson said sharply. "Nothing to worry about. Probably just a dip in the power. Let's continue,"

Sullivan lay slumped on the floor of his cell, dead. He'd played his part. Marvin quickly pushed the cell door. It opened, just like he knew it would. Sullivan's suicide had disrupted the electronic locking system just long enough to allow Marvin to slip out of his cell before the backup system took over and the lock mechanism kicked back in. It was just like he'd planned. A glint flashed in Marvin's eyes. He was free. The pillows from his bed were left stuffed under his blanket for when the warden came to check, just like he'd planned. It would be morning before they realised he'd escaped. By then it would be too late. Back in the induction room Dr Stephenson suddenly halted his pontificating as the beeper located on his hip vibrated violently.

"Ah, it appears that I'm required elsewhere for a few minutes. Feel free to talk amongst yourselves," he said before disappearing.

\*

Steve approached the hospital steps and skipped up them two at a time like an eager schoolboy. Clutching the expensive blooms tight as



he entered the lobby, he looked at his watch anxiously. It was now five fifteen. He eyed the middle-aged receptionist and as she took a phone call, he seized his chance to slip past her desk and enter the halls of the hospital. He had no idea where he was going, the corridors were like a maze. He wandered aimlessly, soon realising he was lost.

Dr Stephenson cleared the message from his beeper as he navigated the halls towards his destination. He'd been summoned by Howard Rosen, the hospital director. He knocked on the door of Rosen's office before entering. What he saw filled him with horror. There, slumped at the desk was Rosen, his throat had been cut. Before Dr Stephenson could say or do anything, the door locked behind him. He spun round instantly and was confronted with a terrifying sight.

"Hello Dr Stephenson," Marvin said coldly, before powerfully pushing the doctor backwards into the corner of the room. He felt a flush of adrenaline course through his body as he looked deep into the doctor's eyes. Dr Stephenson saw the face of a maniac, and tensing with fear, shrunk backwards feeling behind him with his trembling hands.

"What...What are you doing out of your cell Richard? ...You know this is forbidden," he barked, aggressively, trying to mask his genuine terror. It was a classic tactic that had served him well in the past, but Marvin knew who was in control.

"Shush," Marvin said, raising a thick muscular arm and gently putting a finger to his lips. He reached into his coat and pulled out a long-bladed scalpel. It shone in the dark light of the room, like a ray of moonlight. Dr Stephenson gasped for breath, unable to scream, paralysed with fear.

"You spout all kinds of garbage to the press and the trainees; you think you know what makes me tick. You think you're smarter than me. Don't you?" Marvin said in a controlled rage.

"No," the doctor spluttered. "No, please..."

"Liar!" Marvin hissed. "Pathetic, cretinous worm. At least have the courage of your convictions," he goaded the doctor.

Dr Stephenson winced.

"You want to know what makes me tick?" Marvin asked, as Dr Stephenson cowered in the far corner of the room.

"You want to know why I kill. Do you want to understand?" Marvin said.

Dr Stephenson didn't make a sound.

"Do you want to understand!" Marvin said louder this time.

Dr Stephenson was shocked into responding.

"No...no...don't kill me!" he pleaded.

Marvin straightened himself, as if preparing to address a crowd.

"Five years I reached a crucial epiphany. In that moment of divine clarity, I realized that I must give in to my primeval urges. I must not resist the urge to kill. We are all capable of murder. Even you," he said pointing a long, outstretched finger. "Though I doubt you have the courage,"

Dr Stephenson tried to avoid Marvin's gaze, but the tall muscular giant stooped and grabbed his face. Gripping with icy fingers, Marvin stared at the Doctor with steel grey eyes. Stephenson felt them burn like lasers.

"It's the will of nature. It's undeniable," he continued, Dr Stephenson struck spellbound, trapped in Marvin's cold stare.

"I saw a documentary on Chimpanzees. About their habits...Cute, little chimpanzees. They looked so...human...so familiar, like little children. Then the chimps saw a tiny monkey in the trees...They chased it, this small monkey, they were screaming and squawking. Twenty chimps, chasing this little monkey...When they caught it...when they caught it, they tore it apart. These cute...little chimps became...murderers, right in front of my eyes...and I thought my god! The beauty of it. Even the noblest of apes, docile one moment...a perfect...killing machine the next. It was suddenly clear to me. The urge, the urge to kill. Nature's command. It should be obeyed. They said I was insane. But I'm not insane. I'm enlightened. Politics, religion, society. Hiding from nature. Nature's laws. Do what thou wilt, shall be the whole of the law," Marvin said, tightening his grip on Stephenson's face and grimacing. His upper body was almost in spasm as the primeval instinct surged through his veins.

The doctor sensed what was approaching and summoned up the very last of his courage. He made a grab for Marvin's right wrist and throat. Dr Stephenson screamed as Marvin's powerful left hand peeled his fingers from his throat like they were putty. He felt the full power of Marvin's exceptional strength. His spirit collapsed totally as Marvin held his limp body like a rag doll.

Richard Marvin looked into Dr Stephenson eyes as he pushed him powerfully to the floor and towered over him, a mountain of evil.

"I must kill you. I must obey. Your death will be beautiful,"

The doctor slumped against the wall and sobbed in terror. Light glinted off the long scalpel in Marvin's hand. He looked up, putting his hands up in front of him and let out a short shrill scream.

"Now he sees," Marvin said after he had finished mutilating the body.

He wiped the blood-stained weapon on Dr Stephenson's trousers. Then, placing the scalpel on the edge of the sink, he washed his hands as the flowing water in the basin turned pink, then dark crimson. He looked deeply into the mirror, ran a hand through his black, greasy hair and then took a white coat from the coat stand, turned and left through the door, into the busy hospital hallway.

Steve was now totally lost and beginning to lose hope. To his relief as he turned the next corner he could see a figure approaching, the fabric of his white coat swishing louder as he neared.

"Excuse me, I'm lost," Steve apologised. "I'm looking for Rachel Wilson," he added, scratching his head.

"What department is she in?" Marvin enquired.

"Um...she's a psychiatric nurse, just starting today actually," Steve replied.

"Hmm...If she's being inducted, she'll be with Dr Stephenson," he added, a spark lighting up his eyes. "They won't finish until 5:30pm, there's a coffee room just through here. You can wait there if you like," he said leading the way. Steve followed.

The pair entered the waiting room. Steve felt a tap on his shoulder. Turning round, he came face to face with the killer.

"Feel free to help yourself to coffee," Marvin said, before turning on his heels and walking away.

Steve sat fiddling with the bouquet of flowers as the minutes ticked by. He checked his watch; it was twenty past five. He was bored, a dozen thoughts entered his head, each causing him greater confusion. Had he made the right decision? Could he really commit to one woman for the rest of his life? Was Rachel the right one for him? Suddenly his phone beeped, a text message received. He delved into his pocket and read the message.

Been thinking about you all afternoon can't wait to see you. Tina xx

Steve made up his mind. He stood up, dumped the bouquet in the waste bin and left.

\*

Half an hour later, Rachel checked her watch for the fifth time in ten minutes. The display read five fifty-five. Her day now finished she sat anxiously in the lobby waiting for Steve, feeling tired and emotional. The day had really been too much for her. A tear slowly began to trickle down her cheek. She put her head in her hands to stifle the sobs, unable to control her weeping.

"Can I offer you a tissue?" a deep voice said as a Kleenex was held out in front of her by a muscular arm.

"Thank you," Rachel said taking it gingerly as she looked up through her misty eyes to see the handsome doctor.

"Are you ok?" the doctor enquired.

Rachel composed herself and laughed, slightly embarrassed.

"I'm fine, it's just been a long day. It was my induction, I'm a nurse,"

"A newbie eh?" the doctor said with a broad smile. "Well welcome aboard..." he said pausing for Rachel to enlighten him with her name.

"Oh, I'm Rachel," she said gently shaking the large, outstretched hand of the doctor.

"I'm Doctor Sullivan," Marvin replied. "Are you on your way home?"

"Well I was waiting for someone, but it looks like they're not going to show,"

"Oh dear, well I'll walk you to your car. The streets aren't safe at night," he said in a soft voice.

"You're very kind," Rachel said as he held open the door for her and they disappeared into the busy New York streets.

# Immortal Danger

First published in Descending Darkness magazine 2005

The girl dances close to me, eyes locked into mine, seducing me with her stare and her movements. Slick, sensual movements meant to excite and arouse. The sharp, flickering, swooping lights in the club give subtle disguise to her actions, making her appear almost as a ghost.

She moves in closer, almost close enough for me to feel her breath on my neck, her hands rest on my hips as we embrace, and she slowly moves in for the first soft kiss. Her lips are moist and full, gentle pressure on my own as the kiss continues, sweet, soft and sensuous, her hand on the small of my back. The music and the lights no longer register, there is no sound but our heartbeats, joined as one and I see nothing but her, as if caught under a spotlight.

She pulls away and steps back, swaying narrow hips and shaking her hair. She licks her full, blood red lips and raises a curled finger beckoning me. Her lips mouth the words *I want you*. No words pass between us, only thoughts and desires. The blood is rushing through my veins like a raging river, my heartbeat, like a rapid hi-hat drum. I'm driven by desire for what's about to happen. I cannot control it.

I follow the girl through the crowd, the faces around me all melting away until they are just one featureless crowd, the light bouncing off heads and backs and shiny dresses. Away from the dance floor the air is fresher and cooler, like crossing a threshold. No turning back. She turns her head and looks over her shoulder at me. Still leading me by my hand she bites her bottom lip, eyeing me with desire.

We fall into the stall in the men's room, the door bolted securely behind us. She grabs me the instant the bolt shuts and pins me to the wall with a fierce, strong, powerful kiss. She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a small piece of folded paper. On the porcelain lid of the cistern she arranges two lines of powder and snorts one through a rolled up \$20 bill. She rubs her nose, the nostrils red and slightly inflamed, then holds out the bill to me. I snort the second line and my nose feels like ice and my brain suddenly registers the rush.

The girl then kisses me again, roughly, powerfully. That kiss lasts for what seems a thousand years. Time stands still. I'm in another place, another dimension, swept up in a swirling vortex of white light and transported somewhere else, like Dorothy. When I land, I'm back in the stall and the girl is wiping her lips and there's red on the back of her hand and on the corners of her mouth. Her eyes are locked on mine and the stare says a thousand words to me. All of them mean desire. I move forward to embrace her, but she shoves me back against the wall and puts a finger to my lips. I lean against the stall and close my eyes, the feeling rising in me to a crescendo. Still no words escape our lips, communicating through the eyes, the touch, the mind. Her thoughts transmit to me. *I want you*. Mine echo hers.

When we embrace once more and my heart is beating at an inhuman rate, I brush her hair back and the long slender neck is exposed, veins tantalisingly pronounced below the skin. My desire accelerates and exceeds her carnal yearning. Slowly with a slight tinge of remorse for the loss of another innocent soul, I feed.

It is not our choice; it is our curse. The necessity; the desire for human blood, uncontrollable, beyond compulsion. We are the damned and wretchedly so. We live in the shadows of your world, where we cannot be seen, yet you see us everywhere. In your dreams, your fantasies, your imaginations. You are afraid of us and though we pose you a mortal threat, it is us who are in immortal danger of you. One stake, in the right place, and we exist no more. We fear you more than you could ever fear us. Yet we cannot exist without you. Our destinies are tragically intertwined as we embrace and fall, twisting through time. Damned to everlasting existence, with the perpetual torment of gnawing hunger inside. We hide from you, living in fear, yet unable to run from your presence. Always there must be that closeness, that proximity for we must feast and feast often. Always feeling the fear, the immortal danger. Always knowing that this next banquet may be our last. We did not choose this existence, we did not covet it, did not wish it. Yet we are as we were made, as we were created, as we were born. We are truly damned.

# Removing The Stain

First published by New Camp Horror magazine 2005

The phone rang loudly, echoing with an irritating shrill. A hand fumbled for the receiver and the call was answered with a sleepy huff.

"Phillips, what is it?"

He struggled to listen to the voice on the other end of the line, but suddenly something jolted him to his senses. Something that was said shook his mind awake.

"Ok, I'm on the way down," he said.

At the station Louis Grant, newly transferred to homicide, was scratching his head as he stared through a two-way mirror at a young blonde woman who sat on a chair. The girl's stare was fixed to floor and she made no movement except for a slow rocking.

"Is the girl still catatonic Lou?" the night sergeant asked as he held a cup of coffee, staring through the mirror.

"Can't get nothing out of the bitch. I'm no interrogator. I only just transferred. I did the textbook stuff, but this ain't nothing like robbery. I'm used to trying to get witnesses to shut up. This one hasn't said a fucking word. I got better things to do at 4am than be ignored by a fruit loop. Dick Phillips can take over, he's the senior,"

"Dick Phillips? Man I thought he'd retired?"

"No way. His old lady cleaned him out in the divorce. That fat jerk will still be working homicide when I'm commissioner," Grant laughed.

"No doubt," the sergeant said, taking a sip of coffee and ambling back down the corridor.

Phillips got out of bed, part of him wishing he'd never answered the phone. He really needed his sleep, but something Grant had told him troubled him. Something terrible had happened. As Phillips drove the midnight streets, he wondered how much longer he could stand the job. All he dealt with, day after day, was misery, despair and horror. Phillips pulled up opposite the station with a heavy heart and tapped out a lucky strike from the carton in the glove box. He smoked it down to the filter before he flicked it out the window and resignedly crossed the street. He was greeted in the hall by his young rookie partner.

"Jesus Dick, you're wheezing like a ninety-year-old. You wanna get yourself to the gym buddy,"

The rookie was right. He was out of shape. A simple jog across the street shouldn't have made him puff like this. He was only in his early fifties.

"You are not gonna believe the shit you're about to hear," Grant laughed as the two men headed down the grungy, dimly lit corridor to the interrogation rooms.

"I know it sounds grim," said Phillips. "I gather this girl ain't no princess,"

"Not exactly mother of the year material," Grant smirked. To him it was all a game, a big joke. He never seemed to show any compassionate response to the horrific side of the job.

"Fact is we can't get squat out of her," Grant said leaning against the door to the interview room nonchalantly.

"Hmm," Phillips murmured, scratching his stubbly unshaven chin as he scanned the report.

"I mean, what makes a woman kill her own baby?" Grant asked, scratching paint from the doorframe.

"Maybe it was an accident?"

"Yeah right Dick," Grant snorted, slapping Phillips on the back in an irritating jokey fashion. "Maybe she got confused at mealtime. That's a classic old man,"

Phillips peered into the interview room through the two-way mirror and stared at the girl. She was a petite young woman in her early twenties. Beautiful, flawless skin, enormous jade green eyes, and long golden hair. She looked so fragile, like a china doll. But her natural beauty was juxtaposed by the shameless, appalling nature of the charges against her. Phillips lingered outside the room, scanning the report for any further details that caught his eye, but none of it matched up to the profile.

"I can't see any previous history in this report at all. Have you had her checked by a doctor? What about medical records? Has she been treated for Munchausen's?"

"We got nothing. She's got no file. If she ever saw a doctor it wasn't recorded. Let me know when you're ready," said Grant. "I've gotten all I can out of her, which is zip. Maybe you can work that Dick Phillips magic and I can finally get home? You might not have an old lady, but I sure as hell do,"

Phillips flipped through the pages of the report until a set of photographs tumbled out. What he saw sickened him. The corpse of a small baby, with horrific burns all over its tiny body. Phillips took a deep breath and then entered the room. The woman just sat rocking backwards and forwards on the chair as the police inspector stared at her.

"Hello. I'm detective Phillips," he smiled, sitting down and setting the file on the desk. The woman didn't change expression.

"I gather you've been speaking to my colleague Detective Grant. Can I ask your name?"

There was no response, only the sound of the chair creaking as she rocked slowly.

"Look we know what happened with your baby. What we need to know is why you did it so we can try and deal with this situation. I'm trying to help you here. So, can we start with your name?"

Phillips waited for an answer. But it never came. He switched his gaze back to the file. It was virtually bare. The only information they had was what they found at the scene. The neighbours had called the cops when the screaming was at its worst. But nobody could say anything about who the woman was or where she came from.

"Look, sooner or later you're going to have to talk to someone. If not me then the judge when they try you. Do you want to die? I don't believe that anybody in their right mind would deliberately harm their own child. If you don't help me, I can't help you,"

There was a long pause, then suddenly a whisper came from the woman's thin pursed lips. It was so quiet Phillips almost missed it.

"Baby was dirty. Boil everything, everything must be clean..."

"What?" Phillips asked, edging closer to the woman. "What did you say?"

The woman gave no response. Her mouth clamped shut, like her jaw had been wired. Her eyes were glazed over as she rocked back and forth. Then there was a knock at the door and Grant arrived with three coffees.

"Has she given her name yet?" he asked as he handed Phillips his coffee.

Phillips looked at the steam rising off the cup and imagined the screams of the baby. He put down the steaming cup, his stomach churning.

"She hasn't said a goddamned word," he said with a sigh.

"Told you she wasn't much of a talker. When I told her she had the right to remain silent I didn't think she'd take it so seriously," Grant said with an arrogant laugh.

Phillips felt the bile rise even more.

"You want this?" he asked the girl with a grin as he held the hot steaming coffee in front of her unflinching eyes before setting it down next to her.

"She's not gonna give us anything Grant. Put Grisham in records on it. Take her sheet and the mug shots," Phillips said handing over the file.

"Sure thing Dick," he said, closing the door behind him. Phillips just sat watching the woman. Why won't you talk?

\*

Grant handed over the file to Grisham who sat at his computer terminal. He was a bulky man with grey hair and a huge beard, and he wore large framed glasses which made him look like a school librarian.

"We got a real nut ball this time Grish," Grant said with a smile.

"You won't believe this. Boiled her own baby to death,"

"My god!" Grisham said, honestly shocked.

"She boiled it in a pot like Glenn Close. Unbelievable. We can't get a name out of her. I think she's mute or something. Can you run her through the system?"

"Sure thing," Grisham said, as he took the file and began running the data through the computer.

Soon he hit upon a match in the files.

"Christ," Grisham said.

"What is it?" Grant asked, intrigued.

"This girl was at Waco. She was a branch Davidian. Got out just before the place went to hell,"

\*



Outside the interview room Phillips stared at the woman through the glass unable to penetrate her silence. Unable to see the images that played in her mind. The brainwashing, the strict rules, the orgies, worst of all. Replayed over and over again. Then the nervous breakdown, the excessive washing, scrubbing. The compulsion. The shame. The desire to feel clean. To be free of the stain.

Her mind replayed them in her head over and over, the images prompted by the questioning. She couldn't stop the flow of memories. The scene slowly unfolded silently like an old home movie. The baby, crying and distressed; the stench of the unchanged diaper, the vomit over its clothes. Walking to the stove and switching on the gas underneath a large pot full of water. Slowly peeling the filth encrusted clothes from its wriggling body until it lay naked, writhing in its own dirt. Holding up the soiled clothes at arm's length, the only way to kill the germs by boiling them. Everything must be sterile. Then carefully placing the baby's clothes in a plastic bag and setting it down on the floor. The pot on the stove bubbling as the water reached boiling point, then picking up the shrieking baby with her gloved hands.

"They won't get my baby. My baby won't be dirty,"

The steam rising in wisps from the boiling pot, the baby's cries ringing louder and louder. Slowly lowering the child into the water, legs first, shrieks tearing from its tiny throat.

"All better," she says as the baby's cries cease.

Grant approached detective Phillips and handed him a computer printout whilst eating a donut.

"Anne Evans," He mumbled through a mouthful of donut. "She's one of them Waco religious freaks,"

"It doesn't surprise me," Phillips said, sipping his coffee. "God knows what she's been through. I don't think she's gonna talk to us," he added as the woman continued to rock backwards and forwards.

"Any Idea why she did it?" Grant asked.

"It beats the hell out of me. Nobody really knows what went on in that cult. Something must have driven her to boil her own baby. Whatever it was she's gonna need a shitload of shrinks to figure it out. I'm not a damn doctor, I think she needs a psychiatric ward rather than a police cell. Poor girl,"

"Screw her. I'll make the arrangements. Get this sicko off our hands," Grant said, looking at the woman with contempt, before shaking his head and heading down the hall.

Phillips just watched the woman continue to stare ahead blankly, rocking to and fro.

# Her Handwriting

First Published in Skive Magazine 2005

I never could read my wife's handwriting. It was another of her traits, her laziness.

She didn't work. She didn't clean the house. She was too lazy. Too lazy to even write legibly. A miserable lazy cow.

Nina lived off my money and my tolerance. Spent like there was no tomorrow, lived like she hoped it was true.

My mother told me never to marry just for looks. But when the dick is hard, the mind is soft. Or so they say.

At first I accepted her faults. I thought, despite it all, my Nina was a sweet girl. But over the years, the little things, the untidiness, the extravagant purchases, the cold detachment, began to outweigh the positive.

The sex had gone off the boil after the wedding night. I didn't really understand why, I just accepted it.

But now I see her for what she truly is. I see what she does.

The house was always a tip. I chanced upon the piece of paper when clearing up. The paper led me to the computer. The computer led me to the website.

[www.sluttyhousewives.com](http://www.sluttyhousewives.com)

The images I saw on that site caused a rage inside me, my trophy wife adorning someone else's mantelpiece. I guess Nina finally found her vocation.

The rage led me to look at the notepaper again. That's when I noticed the address in Barnes. Flat 7, Nelson house, Kennington Street.

The address led me to the flat, which led me to meet Ken. Meeting Ken led to Ken's death. But I don't really want to talk about that.

The flat was a hovel, full of takeaway pizza boxes and other filth. It was Nina to a T. I didn't dwell there.

As I stepped out through the door, I saw wife walking down the hall towards a door. It suddenly occurred to me. *Was that 1 or 7 on that notepaper?*

I never could read my wife's handwriting.

# The Tinderbox

First Published in Skive Magazine 2005

It was an old miner's dynamite detonator. The old wooden type with a cross handled plunger. They called it the tinderbox because when the plunger was pushed down, sparks would fly from the exposed ends of the electrodes. They would usually demonstrate this fully by bringing out the wooden box, setting it down on a table in front of you, then pulling up the plunger. They'd usually leave it there several seconds, as you sat frozen in fear. Then they'd hold the electrodes up, to eye level so you could see and then a hand would push down the plunger and the sparks would flash from the electrodes leaving you in little doubt of what was to come.

To start with they'd attach the little metal clips to your big toe. You'd tense and struggle for a second before a hard slap to the face would end your movement. Then the hand would hover over the plunger for a second, your heart pounding as you awaited its fall. Then the plunger would go down and your leg would jerk, and your foot would feel like fire and you'd jump off the chair if they hadn't strapped you in. Then everything would be silent except for your own breathing and the beat of your heart, now faster than ever.

Then after they had done this a few times they would get bored and move on. They'd clamp the clips to your chest and watch your muscles spasm as the devil hot sparks shot from the electrodes and burned your flesh. You'd jump and jolt and scream in pain but when your screams ceased there would be silence again and your eyes would settle on the hand hovering over the plunger and wish for death rather than feel the sting of the tinderbox. But the hand would push down again, and again, your body jerking as if in a seizure, your brain hazy with pain, emotion and thought. Then the tinderbox would be silent for a moment.

The owner of the hand would stop and smoke a cigarette. You'd smell the sickly tobacco smell and wish that it would last forever because you knew that when that cigarette burned all the way down to the end, it would be discarded by the hand and the hand would remember the plunger and then the pain would be back, worse than ever before.

Once the cigarette was finished, the electrodes were clipped to the ears and each pull of the plunger brought white hot bolts of lightning through the eyes and ears. There would be the feeling that the head would explode or the scalp melt or the hair catch fire, the muscles of the neck contracting, jerking the head wildly, the fear that the neck might snap, the fear, always the fear.

Then just as the searing pain in the ears and eyes and brain begins to subside, the electrodes are applied to the genitals. The eyes go wide with greater fear than previously thought possible, pleading silently as the hand grips the plunger and pulls it upwards. The hand hovers over the plunger, the head shakes, the numb, bleeding tongue inside the

gagged mouth mumbles No! No! No! Please! Then the plunger is pushed down and the sparks cascade, the legs flying out uncontrollably, the stomach and abdomen convulsing as if trying to escape the body. The searing pain in the groin, sparks burning the flesh of the thighs. The muted screams, the tense grip of the hands on the arms of the chair, the whiteness of the knuckles. The whole torso taugth, every muscle reacting. Then nothing, except the slowly diminishing pain. The removal of the clamps, the laugh of the torturer and the aggressive, forced return to the dank tiny cell.

For decades this was the ritual. The daily routine for both victims and torturer. The names of both forgotten in time. Only the tinderbox was remembered, its powers and deeds and presence forever carved into the memories of those who knew it. It sits on my writing desk, the only thing salvaged from the prison after it was burned to the ground in a riot. From time to time people will gaze upon it and ask me what it is, and I never refuse an opportunity to tell them all about the tinderbox.

# Mind Your Own Damn Business

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Tommy Walsh slowed the rig down and stopped. The brakes hissed and the engine rumbled as the young hitchhiker climbed into the passenger seat, his hair and clothes soaked from the heavy rainfall. The young man settled into the seat without a word of thanks. Slamming the door, he cast Tommy a sidelong glance. Tommy wondered if the youngster was a little nutty.

"So, where you headed?" Tommy asked.

The boy stared dead ahead, arms tightly clutching a small black rucksack.

"Don't talk much do you, kid?" Tommy said, shaking his head. He waited for a reply, keeping his gaze on the road, wishing the downpour would stop.

Trust me to pick up the only mute hitchhiker on the highway, he thought.

As he shifted the gears, the truck reached cruising speed, and Tommy sighed. He glanced at the boy's saturated rucksack. Was the bag full of money? Diamonds from a heist? He laughed inwardly. He's just a kid, probably a stoner or a runaway. Returning his attention to the road, Tommy knew he had several hours of driving before he reached his destination.

The throb of the engine and the hiss of the rain provided a monotonous background noise. Tommy couldn't keep his mind from wandering and a little seed of imagination began to grow. He glanced over at the kid, who was still clutching the bag, and Tommy's curiosity began to gnaw at him. After a moment, he asked, "So what you got in that fancy bag, kid?"

The boy remained still and silent.

Had the kid heard him, Tommy wondered? He repeated the question.

"Say kid, what you got in that bag?"

The hitchhiker looked straight ahead. Tommy could barely hear the boy's whisper above the rain drumming on the cab. "None of your damn business,"

Chuckling, Tommy said, "Touchy little prick, ain't ya?" With a shrug, he returned his gaze to the road.

"Big Tommy, this is Lovelorn Lila—over," Tommy's CB crackled, and the alluring tones of a female trucker buddy seeped from the radio.

"Hi Lila, how's tricks? Ain't heard from you in a coons age,"

"I had trouble at home. That SOB husband of mine has been fooling around again,"

"Shucks Lila, surely you're enough woman for him?"

"I swear I'll castrate that man one day. Are you headed West? I'm due a rest break soon,"

"No dice Lila, I'm going East-bound and down. See you on the highway some time. Keep on trucking. Over,"

"Over,"

The conversation refreshed Tommy as the driving rain bounced off the windshield and the wipers kept a steady comforting rhythm. But as the miles slowly passed, the boredom returned. The kid still gripped the bag tightly, his face tense. What if he's got drugs in that bag, Tommy thought. He was beginning to regret picking the kid up. Anxiety soon got the better of him, so he tried a different tactic.

"Say, you wouldn't happen to have a pack of cigarettes in that bag of yours, would you?"

No reply passed the boys grey, silent lips.

Anger stirred in Tommy's gut. His voice raising a notch. "Hey, I'm doing you a favour, kid. Now I don't mean to be nosey, but I think for my own peace of mind you should tell me what's in that sack,"

Man, I hope the boy doesn't turn out to be a damn drug mule, Tommy thought. The need to know about the bag's contents overwhelmed him. His curiosity was like an itch, and the longer he ignored that itch, the worse it grew.

Again, the boy whispered, "None of your damn business,"

Tommy slapped the wheel of the rig and stepped on the brakes, pulling over to the side of the road.

"You know, you're about the rudest most ungrateful kid I've ever picked up. I wish I'd left you on the highway a hundred miles back. In fact, I should have my head examined for picking up a damn hiker, especially a piss-crazy kid with a bag full of only God knows what,"

The hiker remained still and silent, the bag clenched in his hands.

"Listen, kid, either you tell me what you got in that bag or you can get out of the cab. I ain't having no dope runners in my rig,"

Suddenly the boy's face softened, his ice rigid posture melting. Softly, he said, "It wasn't my fault..."

"What wasn't your fault?"

"Please mister, please just forget it!" the kid shouted.

"Hey, wait!" Tommy called as the hitcher jumped from the cab into the torrential rain. A truck horn ripped through the dark, a bright pool of light enveloping the youngster. An instant later, the boy disappeared under the wheels of a Peterbilt.

Tommy's heart leapt into his throat as the rig skidded to a halt and swerved onto the dark verge of the highway, the brakes screeching. He looked through the open door into the mist where the boy had disappeared. There was nothing left but a pool of blood and guts, like a road-kill coyote. The kid was human hamburger.

Tommy snapped to action. The engine roared as he shifted the truck into gear, booted the accelerator, and in a blind panic swung back onto the highway, past the stationary Peterbilt as its driver climbed down from the cab.

Tommy's mind raced. He couldn't believe how fast it had all happened. One minute he was talking to the kid, the next he was gone. Tommy winced at the thought. The cops would be involved, and they'd be bound to ask questions, so he kept on driving. Guilt reared its ugly head.

If only I hadn't spooked the kid, if I'd been more understanding... but he kept on driving, that vision of the kid branded on his mind. He looked at his hands on the wheel; his knuckles white, fingers gripping like vices. When he relaxed his grasp, he glanced down. Look at me, I'm shaking. He saw his reflection in the rear-view mirror; his own eyes looked back at him with guilty accusation. You killed him.

The light from Tommy's headlights swept left to right across the rain-soaked road, the truck swerving wildly as his mind churned over and over.

The miles passed Tommy by like a fleeting dream, hardly registering. He drove on autopilot, sweeping into the truck stop at high speed, nearly clipping the back of another big rig as he slammed on the brakes, bringing the truck to a juddering halt. He slumped forward over the wheel and let out a huge breath, the engine throbbing in time with his beating heart. Calm down Tommy boy, he thought. It's over. It's over.

He then looked down and saw the rucksack. No...It can't be! The bag sat on the passenger seat as the rain tapped on the windshield. Tommy shuddered. It lay still, an uninteresting lump of dark material, but Tommy was struck by a feeling that evil lived inside of it. He felt truly terrified, but he had to know about its contents; some intangible force compelled him to look. His shaking hands reached forward. Pausing, his tendons jerked spasmodically as he grasped the bag. Sharp, quick breaths misted the cab windows and Tommy's heartbeats quickened pace. With a last deep breath, Tommy peered inside. He gasped, retching, eyes bulging, and snapped the bag shut. He flung the cab door open, leapt from the rig and ran, feet pounding across the wet asphalt. The lights of the truck stop bar were reflected in the mirrored pools of rainwater as Tommy stumbled towards sanctuary. He made for the bar as if the Hounds of Hell snapped at his heels, almost falling through the door. As Tommy burst into the bar bringing in a draught of rain-fresh air, one of his drinking buddies looked up from his stool.

Tommy's friend, Herb, a forty-six-year-old encyclopaedia salesman, sat knocking back his fourth beer of the evening.

"You ok buddy?" Herb asked as Tommy slumped at the counter, his breathing heavy.

"Just... get me... a drink," he said in a whisper.

"Gloria? Two bourbons with ice," Herb called, scratching his crotch. Looking back at Tommy, he said, "You look like you had a hell of a day," The barmaid rubbed a hand over her tired face and pulled down a glass, filling it with bourbon. She placed it on the bar next to Tommy with the slight trace of a smile. She shrugged before turning and fixing Herb's drink. Tommy said nothing, knocking back his bourbon and grimacing at the bitter taste before signalling for another. His hands shook as he took the second glass.

"Whoa, take it easy old man," Herb said, taking a small sip from his own glass. "What's got you in such a state?"

"H...hitch-hiker..." Tommy stuttered.

"Shit Tom, what he do? Rob you? I thought you knew better than to pick up hikers?"

"He...he... was just a kid. He...he had a bag..."

"Just take it easy Tommy. Tell me what happened,"

Tommy's face contorted with horror as he reluctantly recalled the events on the road. The images replaying in his head like a home movie or a dreaded nightmare. He stuttered and grimaced as he explained the details.

"Poor little bastard," Herb said, his voice full of genuine sympathy. "But what can you do with these kids when they're dope fiends?"

Gloria leaned against the bar-top, chin resting in her open palms, openly listening to the conversation. However, her attention was drawn away when someone called to her from across the room.

"Gloria? The damn TV keeps switching channels. It won't stay on the ball game,"

She sighed and lethargically moved to answer the complaint, moving out of earshot of Tommy's unsteady voice.

"I didn't... want to be dealing with the cops..." he explained. "So I high-tailed it out of there...and I'm just driving like a mad man... I didn't have a clue where I was going. So I start to come to my senses... and I stopped here..."

"Well I can see how that could spook a guy seeing something like that. It's a shitty thing Tom," Herb said. "All you can do is get steaming and try and forget it buddy,"

"But Herb... it ain't through," Tommy said, downing another bourbon.

"What?" Herb's drink halted half to his lips. He paused, setting the shot glass onto the bar top.

"The... kid left the bag on the seat of the cab, I don't... know what to do with it. I can't go... to the cops," Tommy heard the slur in his voice, feeling the sway of the bourbon.

"Shit," Herb said. "No bag in the world is worth getting killed for. What was in it?"

"You...you don't want to know, it's...Christ..." Tommy said trailing off, head swimming with fright, shock and guilt barely numbed by the whiskey.

"Jesus, Tommy, what was in that bag? A Severed head?" Herb joked.

"You don't want to know... You really don't,"

"What was in the bag Tommy? Shit, you can't tell a story like that and not finish it," Herb said, his voice full of frustration.

"It ain't no story, Herb! Haven't you heard a damn word I've been telling you?" Tommy felt his anger surface. "The bag is evil,"

"Aw shucks, Tommy, it can't be that bad. Come on, let's you and me go on out and you can show me,"

"I can't do it... I can't. Please I'm begging you... as a friend,"

"Come on, don't be a pussy. You're drunk. You've had a rough day. We'll settle this," Herb's mind was already playing out the possible scenarios.

"I gotta get out of here," Tommy whispered as he got to his feet, his face a mask of confusion.

"Hey, Tommy. Wait!"

Gloria, approached Herb. She threw a beer towel over her shoulder, and asked, "What the hell's gotten into him?"



"Don't ask," Herb said, getting down from his stool. He stubbed out his cigarette and made for the door.

He emerged into the dark lot, the rain still falling like lead. Tommy was nowhere to be seen but his truck wasn't difficult to find. The interior light glowed like a beacon from the open cab door.

"Jesus, Tommy, you want your rig ripped off?" Herb muttered as he screwed up his eyes against the stinging downpour.

He approached the rig with determined steps. Surely, the old trucker had finally gone round the bend, he thought. He climbed into the cab, wiping the rain from his face and scanned the cab for the hiker's bag.

"Aw, Christ Tom," he cursed, noticing the keys still in the ignition. He removed them and retrieved the rucksack, which sat still sodden in the foot-well. Herb then jumped down from the cab and locked the door before putting the keys behind the left front tire and returning to the bar.

Inside, he shook himself off and dried his face with a beer towel.

"What the hell's going on with you and Tom Walsh?" Gloria asked. "He took off in a big hurry and you're soaked like a drowned puppy,"

"Nothing Gloria, just get me a bourbon, would you?"

Gloria sighed and poured the drink.

Herb took his stool. The bag sat on his knees, feeling like a lump of ice. Jesus, what's in this? The thing almost seemed to be pulsing and Herb began to experience a feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach. Slowly, he opened the bag. As he did so, there was a sense of stepping over a threshold into the unknown. He peered inside. His stomach convulsed and Herb shut the bag, struggling for breath, his heart beating ten to the dozen. He raced from the bar in a big hurry, the bag tumbling to the bar-room floor.

"Hey Herb, what's up? You didn't finish your drink," Gloria called after him as he crashed out through the door without answering.

"Hey, Gloria? The damn TV's on the Fritz again," came the call from the end of the bar.

"Be there in a minute, Harry," Gloria sighed and walked around to the other side of the bar. "God forbid you might miss a home run," she muttered under her breath.

The rucksack lay on the floor, the top half open, tantalisingly close to revealing its contents. She bent down and curiously opened the bag...

## The Return To Rooks Hall

I did not want to come here. I have no plainer way of expressing my reluctance, my dread at the prospect of being transported back to this place. The mere thought of this monstrous grey bricked, soulless, yet somehow possessed, sinister building, causes my mind untold suffering. My constitution is affected to the degree of nausea and sweating, and a pounding in my heart and brain. I was without thought but one. I must never come back to this place.

My first episode of fear and anxiety had been activated by the receipt of a note. I had opened its pale white envelope with trepidation and examined the message closely. The paper had been heavy bonded and thick with visible ridges, expensive in its production. The words were written in a light blue ink, in a very flowery hand. The tails of the letters showed a flourish and character. The message was addressed to Jonathan Meeks, I, but the identity of its author was not determinable. It was to all intents and purposes, a wholly anonymous communication. But there was no confusion in the message it contained. There could be no misunderstanding. This place wanted me back.

I am unable to explain exactly the sensation of dread this place causes in me or its origin, except to say that when in its proximity the house seems to exude an atmosphere of evil. Some ungodly force surrounds this residence and manifests itself in an unquantifiable sensation coupled with a barely audible, high pitched screeching, like a locomotive braking on steel tracks. My nerves become tormented, my skin prickly, my hands frantic in their scratching about my arms and neck and face, my breathing laboured, forcing me to my knees.

It was my firm resolution never to live again within these walls once I had consent to leave. As far as my acquaintances, associates and colleagues were concerned, my life did not begin until after I departed this place. Any details of my time before that joyous day were buried deep in the dark recesses of history. I had been robbed of my childhood, my physical health, my mind, even my own identity. My future wellbeing depended on remaining far from this place.

A good many years it had taken to recover my mind, nerve and composure and to return to normality or some semblance of it. A charitable foundation had sponsored my education and I found myself through luck and hard work, a partner of an established law firm. Yet now I was to be called back, back here, to this place, this place of dread, terror and fear. The note had awakened in my mind terrible memories of the past, the noises, the smells, the sensations of my torment. Even casting my eyes upon the paper had caused me distress.

The house calls you. Return at once. Only through repentance can salvation be granted.

Why now? This was the prime question I had in my mind. Why would the house want me back after all these years full of vibrant life and

productive existence? My mind had been restored and surely my redemption could be gained by good deed and pious existence? But the note rebuked this notion. The note commanded, taunted and mocked me. Why now?

Unable to sleep that first night, my mind was awash with thoughts. I excused myself from my workplace that next morning, so tired and distressed was I by the feelings of dread the note had solicited from me. Unable to compose myself I suffered another sleepless night. The note remained on my bedside cabinet, mocking me, accusing me, the high-pitched whine of the house ringing in my ears. I screamed for it to stop but it would not cease. It was during that second troubled night that I began to write a journal. An attempt to exorcise the thoughts doubts and fears that raced in my head: an effort to stave off the madness.

This ancient house of Rooks Hall was always steeped in myth, legend and mystery. Many knew the tales that were told of the place and the orphanage that was founded here many years ago. Yet few know the full extent of the history of suffering this place owns. Few can contemplate or even begin to grasp the depth of its evil, the power of its force. How many wretched beings have lived within these walls? Suffered? Perished? How many tormented souls haunt the place? Where does this evil come from? What is the source? Why does it want me back? Am I part of the evil? Or am I merely an agent of the wickedness?

I have never spoken of these things to any living soul. Nobody of close acquaintance to me has knowledge of my past, of my illness, of my madness. Nobody knows of what happened in the grounds of this evil place.

It was, until the receipt of the note, my firm belief that those days were behind me. For many a year those dark, terror filled days seemed like a lifetime ago; an eon away; a different era altogether. Yet on some nights, seeming to come out of the blue, out of the deepest recesses of my consciousness, the dreams would come; transporting me back to the house. My nostrils filled with the familiar odour, the musty, sterile, nauseating odour. The odour of damp, of cold stone, rotting timber, mold and decay. My ears filled with the screeching, the sound stabbing at my brain, and I would spring awake, perspiring, shivering in frightened terror, and only then would the fear release its grip from my throat.

But the house had wanted me back. It had brought me back. It had called me, drawn me with some strange, dark, irresistible force, against my will, against all reason. I was compelled by some indescribable unseen, mysterious power.

On this, the third morning after the arrival of the note I rose and dressed nervously and feebly. Upon examining my reflection in my dressing mirror, I observed a quite marked and rapid deterioration in my appearance.

Now cadaverously pale of complexion, my eyes were diminished in colour and bloodshot, lips somewhat thinner than before and devoid of shade. My cheeks were sunken slightly, the cheekbones now more

prominent and my hair softer and noticeably thinner. About the temple, a distended vein throbbed visibly, blue beneath the pale flesh. My reflection did not resemble the image I had admired just days beforehand, before the arrival of the note. So much of a change, in fact, that I doubted for a second the reflection was my own. I indeed was drawn to feel that the reflection owned me rather than the opposite. There was but one course of action open to me now.

Once dressed, I took to my carriage and began the journey to Rooks Hall with great reluctance and foreboding. The morning was bleak and sunless with a fair wind and a fine, warm rain that has continued unabated. The countryside seemed to get darker and bleaker the further I travelled from my lodgings, the nearer I drew to this cursed place.

As the journey proceeded, I began to feel the madness creeping up on me, returning, gaining control once more, by degree. The treatment with laudanum had helped alleviate the symptoms of my illness, but had it ever completely cured it? Or just suppressed it enough to allow my mind to function? Had the madness been locked away in some subconscious limbo? Awaiting its chance to return and seize control of my body once more?

Driving the horses through the open gates of the grounds and along the extensive driveway the devilish spectre of Rooks Hall loomed in the distance, filling me with despair and dread. The horses began to slow as we approached; the high-pitched whine now audible, then they halted and reared up, nearly upturning the carriage. I did my best to settle them and then un-tethered them from the carriage and let them trot away to a more bearable distance. My heart wished the same option were available to me, my skin was beginning to itch.

As I made my reluctant approach to the main doors the whine increased in volume. The old building looked just as grey as it had all those years before when I was trapped within its walls. Clearly uninhabited now, the main doors were half open like a shallow frown. As I crossed the threshold and stepped into the hall, trembling, the light cascaded into the ancient hallway, illuminating the great room. All was still, save for the dust particles that hung in the air, revealed by the light from their prolonged slumber in the darkness. All was silent, except for the slow, rhythmic ticking of the large clock that stood ominously at the far end of the great hall.

*Tick, tock, tick, tock.*

My eyes fixed on the clock, its round face, static hands, and its oak cabinet reverberating with the ticking: time marching, unstoppable.

*Tick, tock, tick, tock.*

It was as if I were looking down a dark tunnel, all light in my periphery vision had vanished, all that remained, all that dominated my sight was the menacing towering clock and the eerie, unsettling ticking.

*Tick, tock, tick, tock.*

Each tick was like a needle to my brain, a stabbing, irksome, maddening malady of my senses. The itching returned to my body and struck me down like a thunderbolt from the gods, my hands crawling over my

body, unable to relieve the intense irritation. I staggered to my feet, urged on by some force, compelled to advance within the house.

Approaching the large thick beamed staircase, I froze at the base of its steps. There on the balcony was Beaufort, blonde hair, laughing, laughing. Laughing as he always did before his death; before his body was broken by the fall. Broken by the fall from the balcony, pushed, yes, pushed by me.

I turned my head, the laughter still ringing in my ears. I turned back, and the boy was gone. Yet the laughter remained, it echoed from the bowels of the house. Slowly, against all will and reason, I ascended the stairs, my legs moving without my consent. As I reached the dormitory I paused beside the door, hand resting on the handle, resisting. But the house commanded, and I obeyed. I entered to see the bare room; walls covered with mold and flaking plaster. Then the images flashed, the bodies, the faces of the slain looked at me with unnerving accusation. The children, bodies twisted, disordered, the Abbess, bloodied and bowed. Still the laughter, mixed with the whine and the creak, the itching and the pounding of heart and head. I could remain no more and fled the room, rushing down the hall and the stairs and past the ticking clock and bursting through the doors into what was now bright sunshine. Gathering my breath for an instant, I paused before hearing the call of the lake. The whine had returned, paining my ears and brain. I approached as if in a trance as the blue waters of the lake shimmered like a sea of diamonds. Baliss stood, by the shores of the lake, paddling in the water, just as he did the day he drowned. Held headfirst under the gloomy water by my hands. He smiled and waved and then was gone.

Broken, disoriented, and paralysed of will, I sit by the shores of the lake. I Search in my waistcoat pocket and I retrieve the message. I hold it to view and examine it once more. It is blank, the words gone. Those flowery, delicately crafted characters gone. Had they ever existed?

Sudden clarity of mind descends on me and I now know why the house has called me. Why I have returned to Rooks Hall. I reach for my journal book, this journal book you hold in your hands, and allow my pencil to exorcise the evil in this place, the evil in me.

I hope that this testament will go some way to explain the grounds for my actions, for I do not seek forgiveness or redemption, I know I am beyond that prospect now. I believe myself not evil, but an agent of evil. And if this house itself is not evil, it too is an agent of it. I have seen many terrible things in my short, tormented, years, and the undoubted source of those evils I have witnessed and facilitated, is this house.

I wish the house unmade, wish that it had never existed. I wish to see every stone removed from its walls and scattered to the ends of the earth, yet the house lives on, breathes new evil with every new dawn. No fire has ever destroyed it, nor ever could. The house will live forever. So my only achievable course of action is to wish myself unmade. To remove my tortured soul from the power of the evil force of this house and to attempt to find peace and forgiveness in the eternal afterlife of heaven or to burn in the eternal suffering of hell. For to remain on this

earth, a murderous, medium for wickedness is offence to nature. I pray that whosoever finds this journal shall understand my motive and explain my intentions to others. And in finality, I ask but one thing, that my body, once discovered, be removed from the lake and given a Christian burial in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ, whose forgiveness is all I seek.

*Jonathan Meeks April 12th 1827*

## Last Confession

A tall yet shabbily dressed figure sat alone in a booth in a New York Diner. He wore a grey trench-coat, dirty and creased, under which was a sweat soiled shirt. He was pouring sugar from the sugar dispenser into a cold cup of coffee, which had stood un-drunk for forty minutes. It was a cup of coffee destined to remain un-drunk.

Debbie noticed the strange character but paid him little attention as she folded her morning paper and concentrated on a style column. This was her routine each day, up at 6:30am, breakfast at the diner in her favourite booth, then the metro to the office. She dreaded it. She hated her job but always seemed to find a reason not to just quit and take up something new. Something more fulfilling.

The overly bright halogen lighting of the diner created a sterile atmosphere, like a hospital theatre. There was little chatter amongst the customers, most sat alone, eating, drinking, and staring at newspapers to mask their depressed moods.

The shabbily dressed man was now stirring the cold cup of coffee rhythmically. He didn't appear to have any agenda for being there, his hollow grey eyes fixed on a distant object.

Debbie suddenly started to feel a strange feeling, like she was being watched. She looked up from her paper and realised that the man was staring at her. She noticed his lifeless yet bloodshot grey eyes that looked like they hadn't seen sleep in a long time, and his pale white hands stirring, his fingers thin and elegant, almost feminine. Flustered by the unwanted gaze she ruffled her newspaper and pretended not to notice the man's stare.

Suddenly the rhythmic stirring ceased, and the long thin fingers put down the plastic spoon on the pristine white tabletop, staining it with a drip of black coffee. The man got up, edged out of the seat, and approached Debbie's booth.

"Can I sit here?" the man asked in a low almost robotic voice, a voice that didn't seem to come from a living, breathing human.

Debbie looked up from her paper at the man. He looked very creepy, like a vagrant.

"It's ok," she said, gathering up her bag and paper. "I'm leaving."

The man moved quickly, like a draft of cold air and was suddenly sat right next to Debbie, forcing her into the corner of the booth, behind the pillar, out of the line of sight of the counter. She felt something prodding her in her side.

"You're not going anywhere." the voice whispered.

Debbie froze in terror, a million thoughts rushing through her head at once.

"Don't scream, don't move or I'll kill you." he said calmly, no hint of emotion.

Debbie was terrified. She stared ahead at the pillar, scared to move, almost too scared to breathe.

Both sat at the table, looking directly ahead, no eye contact, no sound. Finally, Debbie's captor broke the Ice.

"I suppose you're wondering what this is all about aren't you." the man stated, rather than asked.

Debbie said nothing, still staring blankly ahead, trying to figure out how she had managed to find herself in this situation. There were hardly any people in the diner now, most having left to begin the daily commute. Nobody to help.

After a few seconds silence the man resumed his speech.

"Well I'll tell you. You can probably guess that I've killed people, lots of people. I'm not sure exactly how many, but it's a lot. Lots of faces, but I can't really remember them clearly." he said.

Debbie was still frozen with fear, too scared to move an inch. Maybe someone will come in she thought, or rather hoped. Maybe the waitress will ask us if we want more coffee. But it was hopeless. Teresa was waitressing. Debbie could see her reflection in the plastic-coated menu, slouching at the counter, reading a magazine. Debbie had been eating in this diner three years and Teresa was the laziest she'd ever come across. A man in a check shirt came in and sat at the counter and Debbie contemplated screaming.

"I know what you're thinking," her captor said, a chill running up Debbie's spine. "You think I'm crazy," he added, a wave of relief washing over Debbie's fraught nerves. "Maybe I am. But then again, this world is enough to drive anyone crazy. Anyway, were getting off the point." he continued, like he was anchoring a news programme.

Debbie noticed that despite his scruffy appearance he was well spoken and articulate.

"Ironically, the reason I'm holding a switchblade to your ribs is that I'm done killing. I'm wishing to make a confession."

Debbie swallowed hard.

"I wanted to confess to someone, not the police, not a priest. I'm not seeking to turn myself in or gain forgiveness from god. I just want someone to know what I did. Do you understand?" he said again in his soft, yet emotionless manner.

"Yes." Debbie said in a whisper, lying through her teeth. Debbie just wanted it over. She just wanted this psycho out of her life, forever.

"Good. Because I'm going to give you a list of names. The ones I remember."

Debbie was filled with a feeling of dread.

"I'm telling you all this because soon I will be dead. I want you to remember my name. It's Anthony Capuzzo. C-A-P-U-Z-Z-O."

Debbie swallowed.

"I have killed a lot of people. I'm a very sick man. Totally beyond help. I know the only way to stop is to kill myself. But if I do that no-one will know what I did. No-one will know who I killed. But I must die. Do you understand?" he said coldly.

"Yes." Debbie said without moving, still completely terrified.

"I picked you totally at random, I'm sorry it had to be you but there it is.



But take comfort from the fact that if we'd met under different circumstances it would have been much worse."

Debbie felt a twisting in her guts as she imagined the horror.

The man reached into his pocket and casually pulled out a folded piece of notepaper. He unfolded it and set it down on the white table in front of Debbie.

"Tell the Police to search apartment 34B, West Fiftieth Street. Look directly ahead, close your eyes and count to one hundred. Move before that and you will die."

With that he got up and after placing a five-dollar bill on the counter next to Teresa, calmly walked out of the Diner.

Debbie sat terrified, staring straight ahead at the pillar.

*Ninety-seven, Ninety-eight, Ninety-nine, One Hundred.* Debbie paused for a further few seconds before reluctantly and tentatively opening her eyes. Total relief washed over her as she realised he was gone. She couldn't believe what had happened to her. The note lay there on the tabletop, staring at her, the names crying out to her from the page. She felt sick, her heart still racing, scared, confused, violated. She just wanted to forget all about it, but she knew she never could. Not now, not now she was involved. She silently cursed the name Anthony Capuzzo. She knew her life was changed forever.

Debbie was now on autopilot, getting up from her seat, reaching for her purse, she picked up the list and Capuzzo's five-dollar bill. She could almost feel it radiating evil.

"You ok Debbie?" said Teresa, still leaning lazily against the counter.

Debbie didn't reply, she just put the five-dollar bill on the counter and left the diner. She knew what she had to do.

At first the cops had thought she was crazy, a crank. But the Terror she'd felt in the presence of Anthony Capuzzo made her story compelling to the Lieutenant and finally, she'd been taken seriously. A police search of apartment 34B, West Fiftieth Street had confirmed the story. It had then taken over two hours to finish her statement, after which she was seen by a doctor, prescribed some sedatives and driven home in a squad car.

"You don't have to worry about a thing Miss. Capuzzo is dead. He can't hurt anyone anymore. You'll be safe. We'll need to talk to you again in the morning. Try to get some rest,"

Inside her apartment, Debbie was sat on her sofa, covered in a blanket, watching the news.

"Today the body of Anthony Capuzzo was found in an apartment in West Fiftieth Street, an apparent suicide. He was believed to be an undiagnosed psychotic who's killing spree went undetected for over a decade.

He has so far been linked with murders dating back to 1989. The final number of victims remains unknown at this time, but all appear to be of Hispanic descent. Police records reveal that Capuzzo served three years in a correctional facility for theft before being released in July 2000. An un-named female is believed to be helping the police with their investigation."

Debbie switched off the TV, opened the box of sedatives and swallowed two pills. She knew that as soon as she closed her eyes, she would be hearing the names of all those people, killed in horrible, horrible ways. The thoughts and images of their terrifying deaths would haunt her dreams. As she slowly drifted off to sleep, she cursed the name Anthony Capuzzo.

# The Peephole

The moaning was getting louder and louder and Greg was pressed right up to the peephole, squinting one eye to focus. The chick was taking a real pounding as she crouched on all fours, a big hairy-backed guy pumping her from behind. Todd, the new guy, stood next to Greg, pressed just as tightly to the wall.

"Man, this is hot!" he whispered, stifling a laugh.

The peephole was less than half an inch wide but through that hole god knows how many hours of pleasure Greg had witnessed. It was the only perk of a shitty minimum wage cleaning job. The hooker always used the same motel room; the management knew what she did. But as long as she paid for the room they didn't care and anyway, she was never there for more than an hour at a time. Just long enough to earn enough dough for a fix.

The girls' sound show was getting more and more elaborate as her tits jiggled and bobbed as the guy's weighty thrusts bounced her back and forth, her eyes tight shut as he gripped her firmly by the hips, sweat pouring from his reddened face, and slapped her ass hard. Todd stood transfixed, Greg took a long toke on his reefer and handed it to his friend.

"Pretty wild huh?" he nodded.

The hooker, then scrabbled from the big guys clutches, pushed him onto his back and began riding the guy like a Rodeo bull.

"Oh yeah, that's the shit baby!"

He moaned louder and louder as she frantically humped the guy's hairy, hulking body, increasing her activity to induce an accelerated climax.

"Oh! Oh-yeah, Oh-yeahhh!" The guy gasped in a noisy culmination.

The hooker slumped onto her side, panting. She'd earned every penny. Todd gave Greg a silent high five and exhaled a huge cloud of smoke.

"Damn," he whispered, eyebrows raised.

Both returned their eyes to the peepholes as the girl scooted off the bed and scrabbled on the ground for her clothes, bent over, giving the duo a perfect view. Each looked on lustfully as she stepped into her panties and hooked on her bra. Each stood stock still in horror as the hairy guy reached from behind her and cut her throat.

## The Nail Biter

Dr Stevens was late for work. He'd recently relocated to the area to take up a new position in the practice and was now becoming acquainted with the daily traffic grind. Queuing in the jam, his fingers drummed on the steering wheel with acute impatience. As his Buick crawled at an excruciating pace Dr Stephenson he began to perspire. He felt his irritation rise, and a prickly sensation at the back of his neck. In his rush to get to work he'd forgotten to take his medication. Glancing to his left he noticed a woman sat in an idling Chevy in the next lane filing her nails. His teeth itched. God-damn it! he thought, slapping the wheel with the flat of his hand.

He finally arrived at the surgery fifteen minutes late, briefcase flapping wildly as he hurried through the door past his receptionist, the middle-aged Patty Reynolds.

"Good morning Dr Stevens," she said in her sickly-sweet New Hampshire drawl. He hated that accent. "You have two patients waiting, your eight o'clock and your eight fifteen,"

The doctor poked his head into the waiting room and saw little Jack Thomas, sat impatiently fidgeting, while his mother read an out of date copy of the New Hampshire Review. The boy sat there swinging his legs and looking at the old filled in crossword puzzle on the back page of his mother's paper. Instinctively the boy's hand moved to his mouth.

"Jack," Mrs Thomas said curtly, registering the child's habitual transgression.

"Sorry mom," Jack muttered, clenching his hand into a fist and resting it on his lap. Dr Stevens felt the prickles return to his neck.

"Dr Stevens?" Patty called, snapping him back to his senses.

"Just give me a few minutes," he answered briskly, as he disappeared into his office, shutting the door, not before noticing Patty's manicure.

His was a large office, well lit by the huge window which gave an excellent view of the town. He was flushed and sweating as he leaned against the door and drew a deep breath. His hands fumbled in his jacket pockets for the pills and opened the box, letting two red capsules tumble into the palm of his right hand. Going over to the sink, he filled a glass and threw back both pills and the water in one. Letting out a relieved sigh, he then slumped into his chair, touching his brow and feeling the dampness.

\*

"So, what can we do for you Mrs Hamilton?" Dr Stevens enquired of his first patient, a middle-aged woman, her nails clean, unvarnished, un-manicured but well looked after.

"Well I'm afraid I'm having my old trouble again Dr," she whispered in a hushed tone, clearly embarrassed.

But the doctor wasn't listening, his eyes were fixed on the old lady's hands.

"My haemorrhoids Doctor, it causes me such pain," the woman continued.

But Doctor Stevens was barely registering her words.

"So, if you could prescribe me some more of those suppositories, I'd be mighty appreciative," she asked, raising her voice slightly, jolting the doctor back to cognisance.

"Certainly, Mrs Hamilton, certainly," the Doctor said, scribbling swiftly on his medical pad. "Hemoxitol wasn't it?"

"I think that's it," Mrs Hamilton affirmed.

"That should help things," the doctor mumbled handing her the prescription.

"Thank you so much," Mrs Hamilton smiled, taking the prescription and leaving the room.

As the door clicked shut behind her, Doctor Stevens slumped in his seat, sweaty and disturbed. He flinched when Patty Reynolds entered clutching the notes of his next patient.

"Can't you knock?" he snapped.

"I'm sorry Dr Stevens, Mrs Thomas and the Thomas boy," she said, handing him the file.

The doctor stared at her red polished nails and felt a pang. Maybe the medication had stopped working? Was he slipping again? He felt the want and need growing in him. His shirt felt damp with sweat and he felt his heart beating rapidly as his panic began to rise. In the grip of anxiety, he took several deep breaths to try to calm down. Get a handle on yourself.

Mrs Thomas knocked and entered the room, Jack holding her hand as the pair took a seat in front of the doctor's desk.

"So, what seems to be the trouble Mrs Thomas?" the doctor enquired in the most focused and professional manner he could muster.

"Well it's nothing serious, at least I hope it isn't, I mean, I feel a little bit foolish. There's nothing wrong with him physically, it's just..."

"Just what, Mrs Thomas?"

"Well, Jack bites his nails,"

"Bites his... nails," Dr Stevens repeated, his mouth suddenly dry.

"Yes. Not just a bit or now and again, he does it all the time,"

Doctor Stephenson's stomach churned, his mind turning summersaults.

"Have you... tried the normal remedies?" he began, stumbling over his words. "Chemical... sprays etc etc?" he asked, feeling increasingly uncomfortable.

"Yes, I've tried everything I can think of but nothing seems to work. I don't want him to grow up a nail biter,"

The word rang like a gong in Dr Stevens head. *Nail biter.*

"Well... it's quite normal in youngsters. In fact... I used to bite my own nails as a child. Mother cured me though," he said, scratching at his neck which now itched like crazy. "She'd make me dip... my fingers in vinegar each morning. The kids at school started calling me Vinegar Joe, I reeked...of the stuff. I quit biting my nails just to escape the bullying," the deeply buried memories scalded his mind.

"My, that's awful, I'm so sorry," Mrs Thomas empathised.

"Don't be. Sometimes... the harshest way is the best for us. Thankfully today there are more... scientific methods to control habits Mrs Thomas. So, don't you worry young Jack," he said, addressing the boy with a weak half smile and letting his eyes drop to Jacks clasped hands.

Cheeks flushed, Dr Stevens mopped beads of sweat from his forehead, his stomach like a tightly bound ball of wet string, churning over and over. He began to salivate as he stared at the two little fists which rested on the boy's lap. He scratched at his neck again, unable to resist the impulse. *Open your god-damned hands you little bastard!* he thought, but was suddenly seized by panic. *Did I say that out loud?*

"Are you ok Doctor Stevens?" Mrs Thomas asked.

"Why of course... I've just had a little cold recently that's all,"

"I see,"

The doctors' mouth felt like cotton wool, his tongue like a swollen football. He took a deep breath.

"Mrs Thomas, may I... have a moment alone with Jack?"

"Alone?" she responded a little taken aback.

"Yes, I'd like to talk to him alone... Just for a minute. Sometimes these problems can be... how can I put this? Psychological,"

"Well if you think it will help," she shrugged, getting up to leave.

Jack sat on the seat, his legs swaying to and fro, his hands in tight fists on his lap, eyes looking down at the floor.

"So... you bite your nails huh?" the doctor enquired as he rose from his chair, mopping his brow, neck on fire.

"Uh huh," Jack said quietly, looking up at the doctor with innocent young eyes.

"Let's look... at those nails then young Jack," the doctor said approaching slowly, his, palms sweaty, fingers trembling with anticipation, entire soul hungering for even just a tiny glimpse.

Dr Stevens took Jack's hands in his, breaths becoming more and more rapid. The boy was a little surprised when the doctor touched his hands with trembling fingers. At first he flinched, but then tentatively relaxed in the doctor's grip. Jack looked up, slightly worried, sensing something wasn't right. He could see the strange look in the doctor's eyes. Doctor Stevens just stared at the child's finger nails. There was hardly anything left. He'd chewed them down near enough to the quick. The Doctor's mouth was awash with saliva. Time stood still...

Shock was the only word to describe what Jack felt when the doctor started to lick his fingers, so shocked that he couldn't even scream. He just froze, in terrified bewilderment. Then the doctor started to bite the stubs of Jacks nails, the drool flowing freely and running warmly down the boy's wrist. Jack's fingers were sore and it hurt him. But still he didn't scream, not until the doctor fumbled in his briefcase and pulled out the scalpel. Then he screamed the loudest, most piercing scream he could, louder than anything he ever thought possible.

Everyone in the waiting room was jolted by the shriek. His mother hesitated for a split second before the feeling of dread had attacked her like a sucker punch to the stomach. Her little Jack was in danger. She

jumped from her seat and rushed past the patients who looked around at each other, visibly disturbed. Patty Reynolds too had raced from her desk to Doctor Stevens office. Inside Jack struggled with the doctor who was trying to pin him down and secure his left arm.

"Stop struggling you snivelling little shit!" he shouted at Jack.

The doctor had slowly gained control and now had the limb nicely pinned to the desk and was pressing Jack's palm down firmly, his small fingers splaying out in a star-burst shape. With the knife poised to cut, and Jack looking directly into his bloodshot eyes, pleading for mercy, Patty Reynolds burst through the door, quickly followed by Mrs Thomas.

"Doctor? What in god's name..."

The doctor looked up and Patty caught the full power of his demented stare. Mrs Thomas screamed. As the doctor hesitated, Jack twisted and struggled to escape. Dr Stevens felt his grasp slipping. He grabbed at Jack's right arm; he couldn't be without those fingers, those beautiful, ragged nails and sank his teeth into Jack's right hand. The boy screamed in pain as the doctor bit down hard, teeth ripping through his flesh, crunching the bones and severing three of his fingers.

Patty Reynolds grabbed the doctor's shoulder, attempting to pull him off the boy. The doctor staggered backwards as he struggled with her, knocking over his chair. Freeing his wrist from Patty's hand, Dr Stevens slashed at her with the scalpel, and she fell backwards, hands in front of her face. He stepped toward Jack who cowered on the floor, his mangled hand bleeding heavily. The doctor wanted Jack's nails and he screamed and shrieked, mouth dripping with blood.

"Come here you little bastard!"

Dr Stevens approached slowly, scalpel raised, looming over the terrified boy, poised to strike, when a blood-stained hand grabbed his ankle. It all happened in a flash but to Jack it was like a super bowl slow motion replay. The boy watched the doctor's arms claw back against gravity, flapping like a bird, but it was useless; he toppled like a felled tree, making a sound almost like wood creaking, as he crashed to the floor, directly onto the legs of his upturned chair. The doctor issued an unearthly scream as two shafts of wood pierced his chest and abdomen and he lay motionless, impaled.

Margaret Thomas was in a blind panic as she scooped up the lifeless body of her only son. The boy had lapsed into shock. At first she thought him dead as she quietly cradled and consoled him.

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*New Hampshire Chronicle July 12th 1979*

*A child was savagely attacked by a reportedly schizophrenic local doctor today. The child was named as Jack Thomas, seven. It is believed that the doctor suffered a severe mental episode before attacking the child. The boy is thought to be in a stable condition at the county hospital. His assailant, Dr Elliot Stevens (alias Dr Steven Dines) who was pronounced dead at the scene, had been struck from the medical register in Maryland in 1976 for attacking Kelly Napier, a nine-year-old girl. He was*

*given probation and treatment in a psychiatric ward before being released in December of last year. It is understood that he attained the position as general practitioner through false documents. The county sheriff's office has launched a full investigation.*

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Now a grown man, Jack Thomas has worked very hard to forget about the events of July 12th 1979. He still suffers occasional nightmares, and the mental scars seem to hamper his life much more than the physical wounds that were inflicted. But as he sits on the bench in the waiting room of the antenatal clinic of the local hospital, thoughts of Dr Elliot Stevens are banished from his mind. He is waiting as his pregnant wife undergoes her routine four-month scan. Jack and Kelly have been married two years now. As Jack sits on that bench, he couldn't be happier.

Down the hall a woman is telling her child not to bite his nails. It reminds him of his own mother, not the voice, just the tone she uses, motherly and authoritative. *Don't bite your nails dear, it's an awful habit.* He's waiting for Kelly to come out of the antenatal clinic. She understands him and what he went through. As she emerges, smiling, she holds up the baby scan with the remaining three fingers of her left hand.

*Our baby boy.* Jack thinks happily. *Our child will be strong, healthy, and vibrant and we won't give a hoot in hell if he bites his nails.*



# The Introduction

Maurice Bender was a desperate and homeless drunk. He'd been on the streets a long time and had seen a lot of people come and go, but Maurice was a survivor. After the takings from begging began to tail off he discovered another way of making a few dollars. Twice a week he would donate blood.

Selling his blood was not entirely without its drawbacks, dizziness, fatigue, even nausea. But the rewards were higher than begging and a lot less demeaning to the soul. He looked back fondly to the day he struck up a conversation with the Salvation Army officer at the homeless shelter. It was he who had introduced him to the doctor who ran the urban blood bank outreach program. He'd taken his blood, given him twenty dollars and his card and told him to tell all his friends. He even offered him a commission for every new donor he found. He couldn't believe his luck. These days he was never short of money for booze.

So, when the new kid, asked him how to make a few extra bucks Maurice took him under his wing.

"So why you on the street kid? Surely you got some place else to be?" The cold windy streets were near deserted as a light snow dusted the pavements and clung to the frosty shop windows.

"No sir, uh,uh. No place for me but on the street. My old man been beating on me since I can remember. My mom as long as she's been married to him. She won't leave, but I couldn't take any more. Better to freeze to death out here than be beat to death back there," the kid said, blowing onto his hands and thrusting them into the pockets of his thin shabby coat.

"That's rough kid. But you got no family to take you in? Aunts? Uncles?"

"No sir. Not out this way. My mom has some folks in Baltimore, but I never seen e'm. Wouldn't know where to start and my pop's folks are all dead. So, you were saying, there was a way to make a few bucks. It ain't nothing bad is it?"

"No way, do I look like I can handle danger at my age? Gimme a break kid. No, this is strictly legit,"

"So, what is it?"

"You give blood,"

"Blood?"

"Yeah to the blood bank. They take some of your blood and they give it to sick people in the hospital,"

"Does it hurt?"

"Hardly at all, bit of a scratch when the needle goes in but it's over before you know it,"

"I don't know, I mean I never liked needles mister. I screamed the place down when the doc gave me my shots as a kid,"

"They pay twenty bucks a pop,"

"Twenty bucks?"

"Straight up,"

"Ok, I'm in. Gees, twenty bucks!"

Charlie shivered in his thin coat; he couldn't wait to get out of the cold. The mobile blood donation centre was a small port-a-cabin and the regulars were already there. Joe, Hubert and Chuck were sat on a bench, by the counter stood two young nurses. The old men liked the company of the young flirtatious girls. The nurses looked up from their paperwork as Maurice and Charlie entered.

"Another new donor Maurice? That's three this month. You are a little trooper, aren't you?" the brunette nurse said as she greeted Charlie and his sponsor.

"We'll be with you in a second. Just take a seat," she added.

"Good luck kid. See you back at the shelter," Maurice waved as he stepped back out into the chilly morning air.

Charlie sat down on a plastic chair, relieved to be out of the cold. After a minute the young blonde-haired nurse came over and took Charlie to a desk and explained that, being a new donor, he would be paid twenty dollars for his first donation. She looked very young, nearly as young as Charlie himself, not what he expected at all. She was very slim with definite yet delicate looking features. Her uniform clung to her feminine curves. Her name badge read Elena. She was the kind of nurse fantasies were made of.

"You need to fill out this form," she said softly as she handed him the paperwork. Charlie had gotten a fake ID with the bunkhouse's address on it and used it to fill out the form. She then produced a small device. Charlie's eyes widened.

"Don't worry. It just gives a little click and takes a tiny drop of blood from your fingertip. This allows us to check your haemoglobin levels - to ensure that giving blood won't make you anaemic,"

Charlie winced as she clicked the device and he felt a stab of pain in his fingertip. She held his finger up to the light and a drip of crimson blood formed. She paused for a second, before wiping a small strip of plastic across the finger and smearing it with Charlie's blood.

"All done," she said. "Now we'll just get the doctor to look you over and then we can get down to business,"

Elena took him to a small office and knocked before entering.

"New donor doctor," she said, shepherding Charlie inside.

"Doctor Ceausescu," he said introducing himself as he shook Charlie's hand. The hand was cold as stone. "Please take a seat,"

The doctor had a strange accent; Charlie struggled to place it as he took his seat. It sounded like Russian or east European. He was tall, thin with grey hair and pale skin. His eyes were a dull light green and sunken with dark shadows under them, the product of too many late-night calls, so the doctor said. Maurice told Charlie the doctor had been running the blood bank as a volunteer for some years now.

"How is your health young man?" the doctor enquired.

He looked intently at Charlie, sizing him up before asking him to lift his arms and stick out his tongue. Satisfied, he motioned to Charlie to rest his arms.

"Have you eaten anything today?" the doctor asked him.

"Yes," Charlie lied. He had eaten nothing since the day before. He hadn't been able to hold anything down after downing half a bottle of wild turkey last night with Maurice and a group of drunks. He had eaten some breath mints while filling out the paperwork to keep his mind off his empty stomach.

"This being your first time in, you'll be given saline. But from now on try to eat something sweet before you come in," the doctor said as he led Charlie back to the waiting room.

Charlie found a seat in the small room. He was naturally apprehensive about giving blood. Most of the donors seemed to be nursing colds, coughing noisily at intervals. Charlie sat nervously chewing his nails as the TV played loudly. It was tuned to a talk show, the guests screaming and fighting with each other onstage, egged on by an eager crowd. The show was titled *Daddy, I ain't your baby*. The people sitting around Charlie were absorbed in the show, commenting and laughing, at times, becoming nearly as excited as the people on TV. These local junkies and juiceheads had obviously had their fixes this morning. It was a sight that reminded Charlie of rehab clinics and men's groups, or even the food stamp office. Other people went outside to smoke while they waited to be called. The door constantly opened and shut creating an annoying draught.

After a few minutes the tall brunette nurse appeared with a clipboard and called Charlie's name. As he got to his feet, he saw the smiles and nods of approval from his fellow donors.

"Break him in gentle Misha," said an old black man with a laugh.

The nurse was very young and pretty with full lips and heavy eye shadow. She led Charlie to a back room which contained four beds and the blood collection apparatus. Every bed was occupied with someone hooked up to a machine.

"First time?" the pretty nurse asked him.

She had her hair pulled neatly back and wore a white medical coat. Taking Charlie's chart, she looked it over.

"Who referred you?"

"Maurice Bender,"

"Oh, I know Maurice. He's a regular,"

"Yeah, he told me. It's a nice place here. Warm,"

"Yeah it's not so bad. Okay, well I'll make sure you get stuck right. You just sit back and let me take care of it,"

Charlie was put at ease by the motherly tone. It reminded him of his own mother when she would tend his bruises after another of his father's drunken rages. But her hands felt cool to him as she took his arm and prepared a swab.

"You have good veins," she said, after swabbing the spot in the crook of his arm with alcohol. There was something about the way she looked at him he just couldn't place.

Misha prepared to hook Charlie up to a machine with digital meter and buttons. Charlie was as nervous as most people when getting stuck for the first time; he hadn't even gotten allergy shots in his teens. He had to

admit this was a much bigger needle than he expected. But it wasn't as painful as it looked like being, and after taping the needle to his arm, Misha gave him a rubber ball to squeeze in his hand. "That'll help you flow faster," she said, her big eyes almost hypnotic.

Charlie began to feel lightheaded as she went off to attend to someone else, but at intervals she would look over at him. Charlie imagined she must be what Angels looked like in heaven.

Charlie relaxed, thinking how pleased he was he'd found the plasma centre. It was much easier work than handing out flyers, and it was definitely preferable to hanging around the men's room. He hadn't sunk to that level yet and hoped he never would. He could quite happily make his way down to the blood centre and spend his time with Misha a couple of times a week. Maurice had explained it all. He would walk out of this place with twenty bucks in about half an hour's time and all he'd had to do was give a little blood. No sweat. He saw himself going right over to the coffee shop just down the street. A large Moccachino in the warm cafe would provide the recommended sugar for his plasma-drained blood. And then he'd get a cheeseburger and fries. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a cheeseburger.

There was no TV in the back room, but Misha hummed as she worked, her slim hips swaying seductively as she walked, earning her appreciative comments from the red-eyed drunks and bums who were her charges for the time being.

"Misha, when you gonna let me take you out, girl?" one old toothless guy, in the bed across from Charlie, asked.

He had a bald head and a weathered looking face. His sweatshirt had the Boston Celtic logo on it, but it looked like he'd fished it out of a dumpster.

"Sorry Ben, but you know the rules, I can't date the patients," she replied, with a little smile.

"Misha, you been teasin' me too long. I see the way you look at me, don't fight it,"

Misha let out a little laugh, and some of the other guys around chuckled and nodded their heads. "Where you gonna take me then? I'm no cheap date,"

"Anywhere you want baby," he smiled toothlessly.

"Misha, you never mind him," a black man in his middle years said.

"Sucker ain't gonna have no money five minutes after he get out of here. You know that,"

"Hey!" the bald-headed man said. "I can treat a lady when I need to. You know where to come if you want that good time now. I'm right here baby," said Ben.

"You guys are too much," said Misha. "I'm taking my break,"

"I know you'll miss me girl," said Ben.

Misha laughed and left the room, leaving Charlie a last lingering glance as she was replaced by Elena who busied herself checking charts and meters. Charlie kept pumping the ball and watching the digital read-out. The volume number kept going up, with stops every so often, and it happened that Charlie's blood, thin from lack of food, was flowing easily.

When the machine finally shut itself off, Elena smiled and pulled the needle out of him. She wrote something on his plasma bottle, and something on his chart, and then moved on to someone else. Charlie followed another man and took his bottle to a counter out front. As he walked to the office, Charlie began to feel a little light-headed. He put it down to the fact that it was his first time donating. He just needed to get some sugar in him.

Misha stood behind the counter checked his chart, had Charlie initial it, and paid him his twenty dollars with an intense smile. Charlie returned it, he really liked Misha. Money in his pocket, he took two steps, and then leaned against a wall. Misha's eyes never left him. He felt giddy, everything went white in his head, and he went down. Misha and two of the waiting donors rushed to his side.

"He must have fainted. Can you take him to the doctor's office please?" Misha requested seductively and the dead-beats complied. He barely weighed more than an infant. Then he was in the doctor's office, and Misha told the two men to put Charlie on the examining table. A few moments later, the doctor returned.

"What is this?" he enquired of Misha who stood over the unconscious boy, stroking his hair.

"He just collapsed,"

"Did you give him saline?" the doctor asked.

"No, I went on my break. Elena was supposed to do it," Misha was still observing the boy. "I didn't know he was a first timer," Misha lied.

"That's what that chart is for," the doctor said. "Luckily he went down inside,"

\*

By now Maurice had arrived back to the homeless shelter. Charlie was nowhere to be seen and nobody could say they'd seen him return from the blood bank. He was worried for the boy. With a sense of urgency, he headed out on the streets to look for him, taking in the obvious places, outside the electrical stores, the cafes. He was nowhere. Reluctantly Maurice returned to the blood bank.

"I want to see the doctor," Maurice whispered grabbing Elena's arm.

"Are you sick Maurice?" she said.

"You know what I'm talking about. Where's the boy?" he said, a little too loudly for Elena's liking as she nervously glanced around the room at the waiting dead-beats. Not that any of them were listening as they were all glued to Jerry Springer.

"The doctor will see you now," she said sternly, eyes narrowed.

Maurice was taken to the back-room office of Dr Ceausescu who greeted him warmly. On the table was a tall glass which contained a ruby red liquid. It was ice cold and a bead of condensation dripped down its side.

"Where is the boy?"

"Please, sit down Maurice," the doctor motioned with one hand and took a seat before picking up the glass and taking a large gulp.

"Where's the boy?" Maurice repeated.

"Unfortunately, Misha...took a shine to him. I'm sorry but there it is,"

"You said you wouldn't do that anymore,"

"What can I say? Sometimes she cannot help herself. Sometimes we like flesh too. We will hold him for a few days and then we shall feast on him,"

"But..."

"But...what? What would you have me do? We can hardly release him now. Besides, nobody will come looking for him. You know who we are and what we do. You are well paid for your services Maurice,"

"He was an innocent kid,"

"It is a little late for morals Mr Bender, don't you think? I administrate this bank for my organisation, and they have a great thirst. Would you rather they lurked in the shadows? Preying on random quarry? As things are the bank balance is very healthy and it always pays you with interest for every soul you deliver. How long has it been since we made our deal?"

Maurice remained silent, looking at the floor. He felt guilty. He never intended for the boy to be harmed. He felt sorry for the kid and thought he could help him make a few extra bucks. But if he was honest, his greed had motivated Charlie's introduction to the blood bank. As Maurice got up to put his coat on, a can of beer fell out of his pocket, hitting the floor with a smack. The doctor looked down at it. Maurice scowled at him while the doctor raised his glass sarcastically.

"You have your favourite drink, and I have mine,"

Maurice stooped to pick up the can and then flounced from the office. Dr Ceausescu took another large thirsty gulp from the glass and smiled, his now protruding fangs stained with freshly donated blood.

\*

Charlie awoke in a dark dank cell. The boy had no idea where he was. He could see very little and only a very small amount of light chinked under the door. He was cold, naked and alone. He tensed. Something was coming. As the creaking door opened, slowly spilling light into the room, he shrank back into the far corner of the room. He saw the red eyes glowing and the light glint off the exposed fangs. Slowly the dark figure advanced and Charlie held his breath. He felt the cold hands on his shoulders and the cool of Misha's breath on his ear. As he felt the fangs incise, he screamed and then fell limp in her arms.

# Time Waits For No Man

*Time waits for no man*, his father had always said when he was alive. And it was all too true. In a week, Charles 'Chuck' O'Bannion was to be married to a dowdy Irish Catholic girl chosen by his mother. His principle hobbies were those perennial corruptors of men, alcohol and women, hookers in particular. He had decided to celebrate his impending marriage with a full throttle, balls-out, final hurrah of debauched drinking, smoking and whoring (Though he had no intention of giving these things up in marriage).

On the night of his bachelor party, Chuck and his buddies first hit the bars. Then they descended on the night clubs. Then the strip bars, and when these avenues of fun had been exhausted, they finally hit the bordellos and speakeasies and brothels. Fuelled by excess of booze, Chuck selected the youngest, prettiest girl, with the biggest boobs on offer. Led to a private room, his eyes glazed with wanton lust, his hands groping and squeezing the hooker's rear as he staggered up the stairs after her.

"Cut that out!" the girl said, slapping his hand away. "Your time ain't started yet mister,"

Soon they were inside the room and Chuck was pawing the girl whilst she tried to undress, struggling to stop him ripping her blouse.

Once they were both naked, Chuck instructed her to get down on all fours. He immediately took up a position behind her.

"So, you wanna do it doggy-style?" she asked looking back over her shoulder.

Chuck leant towards her and whispered something in her ear.

"No way, uh huh, I don't do that stuff mister,"

"Come on baby, you know you want to,"

"I said no!" she announced firmly.

"Don't fuckin' tease me bitch!" Chuck cursed, slapping her hard across the face and then pinning her down under his superior body weight.

The girl screamed and struggled under him as Chuck attempted to force himself on her. He pushed her head down into the pillow to muffle her cries as she thrashed her arms and legs to escape. The girl was beginning to suffocate and her struggles began to lessen. She flicked out a leg in a last desperate attempt and the blow connected between Chuck's legs. He was neutralised for several seconds whilst the girl clutched at her throat and regained her breath. But Chuck soon recovered his composure, grabbing the girl by her wrist as she tried to run.

"You're gonna regret that you little bitch,"

He pulled her close and she screamed loudly, then he slapped her again. Then there was a voice from the hallway.

"Fuck off!" shouted Chuck. "I ain't finished with her yet,"

There was a loud knock at the door before the voice called again.

"Misty?"

Knuckles rapped the door once again. The girl attempted to wrench

herself free from Chuck's grasp but he stopped her in her tracks with a hard smack to the face and she fell to the floor with a whimper. The next moment the door was kicked in.

"What the..." was as far as the naked Chuck got before he felt a heavy blow to the back of his head.

He came round sometime later, with no immediate recall of what had happened. Then suddenly he jolted as realisation dawned on him. Some bastard had knocked him out.

"Oh, you're awake now?" a voice said as Chuck's eyes slowly managed to focus on his surroundings. Blurred images slowly became clear and he could see he was in a storeroom, lit by a single bright bulb. A shift of his leg revealed that he was chained by the ankle to a radiator. A man sat a few feet away on wooden chair. The man was talking to him.

"I would have given you a wakeup call but you looked so peaceful down there,"

He was skinny as a rake and Chuck was slightly embarrassed to have been caught unawares by someone so slight. He was dressed in an expensive suit, immaculately pressed and spotless. He wore an expensive watch and was well groomed. Chuck surmised him to be a local hood. He hated Italians.

"You gonna get me my breakfast?" Chuck said with arrogance, still groggy and leaning on one elbow as he attempted to get up. His natural tendency was to front up tough and intimidate. It usually worked. Usually, but not this time. The hood rose to his feet and kicked Chuck in the ribs. He clamped his arms to his side and gasped, the wind knocked out of him.

"What can we get you sir? Maybe some Eggs? How about some OJ? Lots of vitamin C. It's the best cure for a hangover," the hood said, placing another kick to Chuck's ribs.

Chuck glared up at his attacker who sported a satisfied grin.

"The room service sucks around here," Chuck coughed from the ground.

The hood sarcastically applauded his prone captive.

"You know, you're right, where are my manners? I'm sorry. My name is Vinny. I didn't catch yours sir," he said.

Chuck laughed.

"I say something to make you laugh?"

"Vinny the Ginny," Chuck laughed.

"Huh, you like rhymes my friend? How about kick the Mick?" Vinny said and stamped down on Chucks chest.

Chuck wished he could have just one swing at the guy. The foot rose up again and another kick from expensive leather shoes left him struggling for breath.

The hood just stood looking down at Chuck who wiped dried blood from his forehead.

"You'd better kill me... Cos there ain't no beatin you can give me I can't take... The last guy to lay a hand on me was my father... and I killed him. I'll come back. When you least expect it, I'll be there... and I'll kill you,"

"Save it tough guy, I heard it all before. Each and every one of you



Mick's always had an alcoholic wife beater for a father. No wonder you're all screwed up,"

Chuck spat at his feet.

"Nice manners, for an Irish pig," Vinny taunted.

"Cut me loose and I'll teach you some manners, on the house. My old man was at Anzio. He told me about you little ginny bastards, yellow, every last one,"

"That's very interesting," Vinny said without a hint of emotion. "I'm very interested in history myself. I like to collect antiques, clocks in particular," The hood took several steps away from Chuck and went to a small table. "I got a real beauty here buddy. Antique alarm clock. The old wind up kind, with a bell," He had to almost shout to be heard from the opposite end of the room, his words echoing off the bare walls.

When he returned, he was holding an alarm clock and a small amount of what looked like plastic explosive. He wound up the clock and set it down on the floor about five feet from Chucks reach.

"Beautiful action..."

He then attached two wires from the clock to the explosive and stepped toward Chuck. Chuck's eyes were wide with fear.

"What...what is that?" he asked as he backed himself up against the wall, shuffling on his hands.

"You tell me tough guy. Now we'll see who has the brains. You got thirty minutes to get out of here, when this clock stops ticking BOOM! It's game over pal," Vinny said with a laugh as he made for the doorway.

Chuck thrashed his legs trying to bust himself loose from the radiator.

"Hey! Hey! Come back! How the fuck can I escape? I don't got no key! You sick bastard!" he screamed at the hood as he loitered in the doorway, framed in the moonlight.

"Watch the double negatives ok. You know what? You're right. I'm sorry, I totally forgot. Let me see what I have here," Vinny sarcastically fumbled in his pockets as if looking for misplaced keys. "Here, maybe this will be useful?" he said, throwing a flick knife onto the ground near Chuck's feet. He then shut the door, locking it behind him and there was a jingle as the keys were pushed through the letterbox.

"Good luck Houdini. You got thirty minutes. Time waits for no man,"

Chuck heard the voice through the letterbox, and it sent a shiver through him. It reminded him of being locked in his room as a kid. He closed his eyes and heard Vinnie's footsteps fade into the ticking of the clock.

"Fuck you, you sick motherfucker!!" he cursed defiantly after him.

Chuck slumped back onto the ground and rubbed his face with his hands. He let out a loud sigh and then sat up and began to examine the cuffs on his left ankle. Picking up the knife, he began probing into the keyhole with its point. But the knife slipped as he pressed down, and he nearly sliced into his ankle.

*Tick-tock.*

"Mother-fucker!" he screamed, hurling the knife at the wall. It bounced off with a loud clang and skidded along the floor. Chuck searched around

him for some kind of inspiration. He glanced at the clock, twenty-five minutes left. *When I get my hands on that ginny bastard...* he vowed. He shifted to the radiator which was steaming hot. It was bolted to the wall with heavy duty masonry pins and he knew there was no way he could undo the bolts or pull it off the wall. But he tried anyway. Grabbing the chain, he pulled and pulled with all his might. He soon ceased and collapsed onto the floor, bellowing with frustration and rage.

"Argh!! Motherfucker!"

*Tick-tock.*

His eyes shifted to the clock, its ticking echoing ominously off the walls of the empty room. He then looked to the small table, but he could never reach it, even if it had something useful on it, and he hadn't a clue on how to diffuse a bomb. Chuck lay on his back, staring at the ceiling, mind racing. He could only see his father and hear the voice of chastisement. *You're a screw up Chuck, and that's all you'll ever be.* He shut his eyes and concentrated hard, trying to block out the voice. Then something came. He immediately wished he hadn't thought of it. *There's got to be another way.* Chuck looked at the clock. Twenty minutes left. He was running out of time, still the clock ticked on.

"Oh you sick bastard, you fuckin' sick bastard!" he screamed. But in his heart, he knew that in the time he had left, there was no other choice.

*Tick-tock.*

The thought that had come to Chuck was of the documentary he'd seen on the Discovery channel. A rock climber had gotten his arm trapped in a rock fall. He'd cut off his own arm to survive, like a trapped animal gnaws off its own foot. *Jesus Christ, please. Not my leg. There must be another way. Please!*

The clock now said seventeen minutes. Each tick brought Chuck nearer to death. He uttered a kind of primal scream, rallying himself and then took off his left shoe and bit down into the thick polished leather, the clock still ticking in the background. He heard the harsh voice of his father, *Come on Chuck, be a man for once in your sorry life.*

"Fuckin sick bastard sonofabitch!" Chuck screamed through gritted teeth and gripped the knife tightly, his hand tensed like a vice, as the clock ticked on.

Slowly, with tears in his eyes he rolled up his trouser leg and made the first incision. Chuck screamed as the pain seared up his leg and the blood began to trickle from the wound. Teeth clamped on the leather of his shoe, his scream of pain was stifled as he pushed the knife deeper into his leg and began to cut downwards and round. Slowly he cut through the veins and tendons and muscle of his lower calf, in utter agony, his nostrils filled with the smell of blood. Halfway through, he stopped, fighting the urge to vomit. His hands were now slick with blood, making him clumsy. He looked over at the clock, fifteen minutes left. His breathing became more and more rapid as he worked, he couldn't believe what was happening to him. But the years of wild living and rebellion against his catholic upbringing were now being revisited on him. He began to pray. *Hail Mary, full of grace, hail Mary, full of grace...*

*Tick-tock.*

The pain was not quite as intense now, as shock and adrenaline took over. The pool of blood he sat in was increasing by the second as he worked the knife around his leg. His most immediate concern was blacking out. He knew if he blacked out, he might not awake again. He had to work fast. By now he had cut completely around the circumference of his lower calf and could see bone, which made him gag. He dropped the knife and closed his eyes for a second, breathing three long breaths, resting himself slightly. He knew in his heart that his father was looking down on him and that god was punishing him. *But I only wanted you to love me pops.*

*Tick-tock.*

The ticking clock prompted Chuck back to work. *Time waits for no man son.* He picked up the bloodied knife once more and took a breath to steady himself, then attempted to saw through the exposed bone. However, after several seconds of rapid motion, he could see it was useless. The knife's blade was barely making an impression on the blood-soaked bone. Exhausted now, and growing weaker by the second, he looked around forlornly for a sawing implement. But there was none, the room, apart from the bomb, the table and radiator he was chained to, was bare. The pool of blood around him grew and grew. Time was running out. Less than ten minutes by the hands of the clock. Those evil hands counted down without mercy.

He had to get through that bone. There was only one course of action. He couldn't believe this was happening to him. In utter panic now, Chuck spat out his shoe which clattered to the wooden floor loudly, then struggled to raise his half butchered leg, trembling weak as he did so, slipping in his own blood as he shifted. *Hail Mary, full of grace.* He placed his foot between the wall and the edge of the radiator, the exposed flesh sizzling as it made contact with the red-hot metal. But Chuck could not feel the skin burn, only smell it, the rancid smell of his own cooked flesh. *Hail Mary, full of grace, hail Mary, full of grace.* Taking a large inhalation, he held his breath for a second and then jerked his leg violently. There was a very intense pain that accompanied a dull crack. He shrieked in pain and then the limb was free as he broke down into tears, the agony greater than anything he'd ever felt.

*Tick-tock.*

Slowly and feebly Chuck crawled on his hands and knees on the bare floorboards. He could see his father stood in the doorway, a leather belt in his hands. *Help me pops, please.* Chuck Slipped on the blood slicked floor as he moved, his father beckoning him. *I'm sorry pops, I'll do my chores, please pops.* Chuck babbled as he crawled towards the door keys.

*Tick-tock.*

The arduous journey took him several minutes and when he reached them, he gripped the keys like they were a commodity more precious than gold or diamonds combined. He let out two large breaths and then blacked out. The alarm clock ticked round slowly until the hands reached 12:00pm and then the bell began to ring. It rang for several seconds and then fell silent.

Vinny returned some hours later. He removed the clock from atop the lump of modelling clay and chuckled to himself as he stood over the body, careful not to step in the huge pool of blood that surrounded it.

"The dumb bastard actually did it," he said with a smile before he and three other hoods dragged Chuck to the trunk of a waiting car.

Thirty minutes later Chuck's body was dumped in the Hudson. A trawlerman spotted it a few days later and it was recovered by police divers, bloated, pale and missing its left foot. The body was identified by Paul Farrell, Chuck's best friend and a funeral service was held at St Francis's church in his hometown of Queens a week later, his fiancée in attendance.

Nobody was ever charged with the murder of Charles O'Bannion.

## The Little Red Dot

The editor sat at his plush desk in a large office on the fourth floor of the tower block that was home to Mesmerize magazine. Behind him a large wall-to-ceiling window bathed the office in light and warmth. He had settled in to read another short story submission when a red dot appeared on the screen, much to his irritation.

"Damn computer!" he cursed, rubbing the screen with his thumb. The mark refused to budge. He pressed the intercom button angrily. "Valerie?" he cried, "Get that damn little twerp from IT down here now. The computer is on the fritz again!"

"Yes Mr Kay," came the meek voice over the intercom.

The editor rubbed his temples; he was starting to get a headache again. When he returned his attention to the screen, the red dot was gone. His eyes narrowed as he noticed its absence, but he shrugged and carried on reading.

The story was good, very good. Better than any of the dross he'd read in the last few weeks. It gave him great pleasure in rejecting it. The author had submitted a number of short stories in the past, all very good, which he had also rejected with glee. You see, the editor loved his job, but sometimes tired of reading short stories all day long. What he loved about his job was the power he wielded and the only amusement he could glean from his occupation was to pick an author, usually at random, to antagonize.

One particular author had been studiously submitting for several months, always polite in his approach. The editor had been grooming him, rejecting his stories automatically in an attempt to solicit a reaction. However, after several rejections the author still remained courteous in his correspondence. Slightly disappointed, the editor escalated the condescension of his emails, suggesting the writer's stories were either too long, or too short or too outrageous or too tame, depending on the subject matter. But again, this was only greeted by more submissions, either longer or shorter depending on the editor's latest whim. He had begun to grow bored, the most appalling disaster that could befall him. The editor wanted to irritate this man, to make his blood boil, to make him doubt his abilities as a writer and he wanted the ultimate proof of his anger and frustration. He wanted an irate response. He loved to trade insults. In fact, he lived to trade insults. And so finally, he made one last attempt to provoke a reaction. To every submission by his chosen author, he would simply reply with a Haiku. The first Haiku was brushed aside, much as he expected, as was the second, third and fourth. He was beginning to lose faith, when one day after the fifth rejection Haiku, the guy finally bit!

The editor's palms were sweaty with excitement as he launched them at the keyboard in that first email orgy of filthy words, insults and abuse. His heart raced, his face sported a large grin and, for the first time in nearly a year, he had managed a slight erection. He had sighed deeply

as he hit the send button, which was like an orgasm to him. His months of hard work had finally paid off. But his pleasure was short lived. The author did not respond to his email and furthermore had not submitted any further stories for over a month. The editor was to be denied his pleasure.

The dot, however, had not disappeared, it had merely moved. Slowly it made its way around the room, unseen, until it found its resting place squarely on the back of the editor's head. Across the street, in a disused office block a lone sniper steadied his rifle, cocked it and let off the safety. He squinted down the scope and zeroed in on his target. Watching the little red dot dance lightly on the back of the editor's head like a mark of death, he slowed his breathing in preparation for the shot, his finger on the trigger. He began to apply pressure when the head moved. The sniper cursed silently.

"You called for me Mr Kay?" Danny, the IT junior asked meekly as he knocked and entered the office to the editors urgent beckoning.

"Yeah, this damn computer had a red mark on the screen a minute ago, it's gone now but I don't want it to come back,"

"Sure," Danny said nervously, as the editor rose from his seat and Danny took his place in front of the computer.

"Let's see," he mumbled with anxiety, he hated Mr Kay who was usually short tempered and rude.

"I'm going to the John to take a crap, if that heap of junk isn't fixed by the time I get back, you're fired,"

"Yes Sir Mr Kay," Danny replied.

As Danny checked the computer for a fault the red dot began to travel the room again, before settling on the back of Danny's head. The eyes peered down the scope, searching for the dot.

"C... come in?" Danny said tentatively in reply to the secretary's timid knock.

"Some letters for Mr Kay, I'll just leave them on his desk," she whispered as she placed the papers neatly on the bureau.

Danny returned to his work, searching in the root directory for corrupt files when he spotted a misplaced media document. It was a video clip. Curiously he fired it up. Just as quickly he shut it down again, gasping in shock and horror. The video clip was sick child pornography. Danny began to feel nauseous as he counted nearly a dozen more files in the directory.

"Is that computer fixed yet? It damn better be!"

Danny nearly doused his shorts as the editor burst into the room. He quickly closed the screen.

"Yes Sir Mr Kay,"

"Well then, stop gawking and get the hell out of here, I'm busy," dismissing the boy without gratitude.

The editor returned to his desk and the sniper watched him through the scope as he began to write the next rejection email. The editor was busy imagining the irritation he could cause with his words, typing away with abandon. Once finished, he hit the send button and let out a contented

sigh. It was then that he noticed the pile of letters. He picked up the first and opened it, a circular which he screwed up and threw at the bin. He missed and the screwed-up ball of paper hit the wall and bounced under the filing cabinet. He opened the second envelope which initially seemed empty. He tipped it upside down and something small fell out onto the desk. It was a small paper swan, folded origami style. The editor unfolded it and looked at it. It had some small writing on it. The editor reached into his desk drawer and took out a magnifying glass, squinting through it to make out the tiny words. It was a Haiku!

*Seven point Six Two*

*On its way to you*

*Contemplate life*

*Fucker*

*Turn around*

The editors last seconds on earth were spent pondering the meaning of the note in confusion. As the words finally sank in the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. The little red dot returned to his screen and danced about, then moved down to the desk, resting on the piece of paper he held in his trembling hands. He heard the words of the note echo in his head. *Contemplate life fucker*. Surely it was a prank? A disgruntled contributor? There were many of those. They were just trying to scare him. Slowly his emotions morphed from curiosity, to fear, to anger. *How dare they*. Then he saw the red dot dance again on the note, *Turn around*. Slowly he turned his head round to face the window behind and scrutinised the tower block opposite, searching for an open window. After a few seconds he caught sight of something, a brilliant flash. It was the last thing he ever saw as his head exploded in a mist of blood and bone fragments. The silenced, high velocity round blew his brains apart like a dropped honey-dew melon and the torso fell backwards onto the expensive bureau.

\*

Just a fortnight later, the applicant sat in an office awaiting his interview. After a short while a portly, balding office manager entered the room with two coffees.

"Thank-you," the applicant said as he took his cup.

"Well this should be short and sweet," the office manager said with a smile.

"Short and sweet? No extensive interview?"

"Certainly not. We've read your resume, very impressive. A solid portfolio of work published in respected magazines. I'm sure you're more than qualified to edit our humble zine. You know fiction,"

"Well, I guess you're right,"

"And of course, there hasn't been an overwhelming clamour of applications. Yvette tells me that you are unperturbed by the...unfortunate incident concerning your predecessor?"

"Yeah, tagged by some nut job with a grudge, tragic business," he replied, shaking his head.

"I assure you the office has been completely redecorated,"

"I see,"

"Well if there are no further questions it's my privilege to welcome you aboard as editor of Mesmerize magazine," the manager beamed, shaking the new editor's hand.

As he took his seat at his new desk he swivelled to take in the view from the large window. From this vantage point he could see the entire city. He picked up a piece of paper from the desk and with practised movements, folded it into a neat paper swan and sat it on the desk.



# The Snow Man

*I'm dreaming of a white Christmas  
Just like the ones I used to know  
Where the treetops glisten  
and children listen  
To hear sleigh bells in the snow*

Because of what happened, I can't hear that song without it sending a shiver down my spine.

Every Christmas, every winter, as soon as the first flakes begin to fall, I start to feel the fear.

Every Christmas it plays, and every time it does, I'm transported back thirty years to my childhood. To one particular Christmas when I was seven years old.

\*

"Good morning sleepy head," Mom had said as she opened my bedroom door that morning and I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. "Look out the window, see what happened last night,"

I threw back the covers, jumped out of bed and ran to the window. Pulling open the curtains, I was almost dazzled by the brilliant blanket of white on the ground. Snow was everywhere, on the trees, and on the rooftops of our neighbour's homes like white fluffy balls of cotton candy.

"Snow! Mom, can I go play?"

"After breakfast. It's cold outside, and besides, there's plenty of time. That snow's not going anywhere soon,"

At the breakfast table I began to gobble down my cereal as quickly as I could.

"Don't eat too fast," said Mom, "You'll get indigestion."

"Yes mom," I said chewing my food more slowly. "Where's dad?"

"He's outside shovelling the yard for old widow Petersen. We don't want her breaking her hip again,"

"You want a snow-ball fight squirt?" said Henry, my older brother.

"Sure!"

"You two kids go easy. I don't want any windows broken this time," said Mom.

"Yeah yeah," said Henry.

"Or bones," said mom wagging a finger at Henry. "You forget you're five years older sometimes. You play too rough,"

"I'll be gentle with you, won't I squirt?" said Henry, grabbing me in a tight bear hug and squeezing me so hard I thought my cereal and juice was going to come back up.

"Go on, scoot. But no more than thirty minutes, we're going to Grandma's today remember?" said mom, as Henry let go of me and I wheezed a few breaths and staggered after him.

Outside Henry was busy arming himself. As soon as I came through the door he was waiting and I felt a hard whack to the side of my head and a ringing in my ears as icy shards of snow fell down my collar.

"Ha! Better learn to duck squirt!" shouted Henry and picked up another snowball.

"Hey! No fair!" I said.

"You better run!"

I ran, trying to scrape the snow out of my collar as another snowball whacked me in the small of my back. I bent over and scooped snow and turned to throw back at Henry but as soon as I drew back my arm another snowball hit me in the chest, and I dropped the snow ball. As I bent down, I felt another whack on my leg.

"I'm not ready Henry. You're not playing fair!"

"Not playing fair!" Henry mimicked in a whiny voice and threw another.

"Henry! Stop it!" I shouted as dad walked down our driveway towards the yard.

"What's all the screaming?" yelled dad, shovel resting on his shoulder.

"Nothin dad. Just getting in a little target practice," said Henry and pitched a straight snowball at me.

I turned and it hit me on the shoulder.

"Nice action Henry," said dad. "That's some pitching arm. But your brother just stands there like a sissy. You can't miss,"

"Dad!" I said.

"Aw quit whining son,"

"Can't you boys play something a little less rough?" said mom from the doorway.

"What's wrong with playing rough?" said dad. "I don't want my kids growing up sissies,"

"Does it always have to be rough? Can't they play something gentle?"

"Dad, dad, can we build a snowman?" I said.

"Snowmen suck," said Henry.

"Henry!" said mom.

"They do. It's for babies,"

"You want to build a snowman?" said dad, looking at me.

"I guess..." I said sheepishly.

"I ain't playin no baby stuff," said Henry with a huff and ran indoors past mom.

Dad picked up the shovel and began to follow, when mom called out to him.

"Come on Stan, he's just a kid,"

"He needs to grow up,"

"He's seven years old,"

"Jesus, Ruth...Ok," said Dad wearily, resting the snow shovel against the garage. My heart leapt with joy.

"I'll show you how. You start with a tiny snowball," said dad, scooping up and handful of snow and patting it into a ball as I stood there watching him, my smile beaming.

He then dropped the ball in the snow and rolled it. As it rolled along it picked up more snow and began to grow. "You try it kid,"

I knelt down in the snow, feeling the crunch beneath my knees and pushed the ball as it grew from a baseball to a basketball to a watermelon to a Halloween pumpkin.

"Good work kid. That's the body. Now we just need a head,"

I scooped snow in my hands enthusiastically, patted it into a ball just like dad showed me and dropped it. I then rolled it in the snow and watched it grow.

"That'll do it," said dad and stooped down to pick up the head.

He placed it on top of the bigger snowball body. "Now we just need some eyes, a nose and a hat,"

Dad went inside and I stood, shivering slightly, looking at the blank white face of the snowman. Dad returned with a carrot, two stale Oreo cookies and one of Grandpa's old hats.

"Don't go catching a cold," said mom from the doorway, as I stood shivering in the snow.

"You cold kid?" said dad as he pushed two sticks into Frosty's sides for arms.

"Y...yes dad," I said, my teeth chattering.

"This ain't cold kid. In Korea we had privates die on sentry duty. Just froze to death. Froze solid. Took a week to thaw out the bodies just so's we could put e'm in a coffin," he said.

I saw a mental picture in my head of men with arms frozen solid in unnatural positions.

"Stan, what have I told you about telling the kid war stories. I don't want him having nightmares,"

"Jesus Ruth, he's gotta know some day. War's hell, and that's the truth. I been there," said dad, shaking his head. "Somebody had to go over there and put those Commie bastards in the ground where they belonged,"

"Stanley! Not in front of the children!"

"Hush your mouth woman and get back to your laundry,"

"Why you...you..."

"What? You got something to say about it Ruth?" said dad stepping forward, but mom just slammed the door and went inside.

"Damn women. What'a they know about it huh? They ain't never been knee deep in dead Gooks," he said with a huff.

The moment passed and dad busied himself decorating the snowman.

"There, that oughta do it," he said as he stuck the carrot and cookies into the snowman face and set the battered old Fedora on top. "What shall we call him?"

"Frosty!" I said with glee.

"Ok, you two, time to come in and get changed. I told Grandma we'd be there by ten,"

"Come on kid," said dad, ruffling my hair and I trotted after him into the house.

\*

We spent most of the day at Grandma's, sat in the living room, with the heat turned up full and the TV on top volume as she watched her soaps. Henry got so bored he began pinching me and wouldn't stop until mom intervened. By the time we got home it was almost dark.

"Mom can I play outside?"

"It's too dark, besides it's time for dinner,"

"But I wanna play with Frosty,"

"He's a god-damned snowman kid. He ain't goin anywhere. You can mess around in the yard tomorrow," said dad.

"Mom," I whined.

"No, and that's the end to it," she said sternly.

We ate dinner in silence. All I could think of was Frosty, as I pushed my food from one side of the plate to the other. Chicken, potato and peas. I hated peas. After, as mom washed the dishes I began to feel hungry.

"Mom, I'm hungry,"

"You just ate dinner," said mom.

"And you wasted half of it," said dad picking his teeth with a wooden toothpick.

"I don't like peas dad,"

"I don't like peas dad," mocked Henry.

"Henry don't tease your brother," said mom.

"Why not?" said Henry.

"You're molly coddling that kid Ruth," said dad, the toothpick bobbing up and down in the corner of his mouth.

"Stan!"

"It's true. When I was a kid we'd be lucky to get dinner," dad said turning his eyes on me. "Your grandpa had to work two jobs just to feed us all, and if we didn't finish what was on our plate, he'd take the strap to us. There was no I don't like peas. Kids today have it easy, get everything you want, and even then it's never enough. Do you know how hard I have to work to put food on the table?"

"But I'm hungry dad,"

"Then you shoulda eaten your peas,"

"Mom, can I have some cookies and Milk?"

"It's too late to eat," said mom. "It's almost your bed time,"

"I'm hungry,"

Mom looked at dad.

"Do what you want Ruth, but I tell ya you're ruining that kid,"

"Just some Oreos and some milk,"

"You could always eat Frosty's eyes," said Henry, pretending to scoop out his own eyeballs and eat them. "Yummy, yummy!"

"Henry," said mom and slapped his arm.

"Ow mom!"

"Come on Henry, let's watch TV," said dad, throwing the toothpick in the trash as he and Henry left the kitchen.

"Mom, can I watch TV too?"

"No dear, it's your bed time," she said handing me the glass of milk and a plate with two cookies.

"Why doesn't Henry have to go to bed?"

"He's older dear,"

"It's not fair,"

"You'll understand when you're older. Come on, eat your cookies. And then it's time to brush your teeth,"

\*

I ate the cookies and drank the milk and mom walked me to the bathroom to brush my teeth. As we passed the living room Henry was sat on the sofa next to dad watching TV, the lights flickering and sending shadows dancing across the hallway floor. More than anything I wanted to be sat next to dad. I didn't even care about the TV.

I brushed my teeth and put on my pyjamas and mom tucked me into bed.

"Can I have the night lite mom?"

"Aren't you a bit old for that now honey?"

"Please mom?"

"Ok," she said and switched on the little blue Canary night lite.

"Night night," said mom and waved as she closed the door.

"Mom?" I called as she disappeared from sight.

"Yes dear," she said poking her head back through the door.

"Can you leave the door open? Just a crack?"

"Ok, just a crack. Night night,"

"Night mom,"

I lay there in bed, unable to sleep. As I stared up at the ceiling, I thought how much it looked like the yard, blanketed in snow. I wanted to be outside, hearing it scrunch and feeling it beneath my feet, I wanted to see Frosty.

Eventually I threw back the cover and went to the window. In the yard, stood there in the snow was Frosty. The snow seemed to glisten in the moonlight and Frosty was stood there looking at me, his arms two sticks, at the jaunty angle dad had set them, his carrot nose not quite straight, the old scarf blowing in the night time breeze and the battered Fedora at his feet knocked off by the wind.

"Good night Frosty," I said as my breath condensed on the cold glass.

I went back to bed, but try as I might, I could not drift off to sleep. I was too excited. I couldn't wait for morning, to get dressed in my warmest clothes and return to the yard and see Frosty. He'd looked cold out there in the yard with the wind blowing. I imagined talking to him, laughing and sharing some milk and cookies. I wanted to see him, one more time before I went to sleep.

I got up from the bed again to check. I looked out at the snow-covered lawn and something looked different. I thought at first it was a trick of the light, I could have sworn that we put Frosty further back in the yard. I shook my head and blinked as my breath again condensed on the cold glass. In the condensation I traced with a finger; Frosty.

I rubbed the window with my hand and smeared the condensation and closed the curtain. I felt chilly and began to shiver, so I went back to bed. But I couldn't sleep. Something was bothering me. I threw back the cover and again went to the window. What I saw made me freeze in surprise. There was Frosty, no more than six feet from the window. My breath again condensed on the window, and this time, were before I'd written Frosty, were now the words; Come out to play!

Startled I ran back to my bed and dived under the covers. I shivered under my blanket. I couldn't understand why I felt so cold. I thought about getting another blanket, but then I began to feel afraid, I felt

something, some presence and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I lay statue still, trying to slow my breathing and my heart which in the still of the night, sounded as loud as a drum in my ears. I couldn't explain it, but I felt a menacing presence. My eyes were wide open with fear, searching the room for the source of the threat, flicking left and right wildly. Then I heard a low hissing sound;

Andy, come out to play...

Slowly the window began to creak open, the wind blew the curtain to one side and there framed in the moonlight was Frosty, and where the Oreos had once been, were two red burning circles that pulsed and flickered. I screamed and screamed until I was hoarse.

Mom! Mom!

"What's wrong honey?" said Mom as she threw on the light switch, wrapping her dressing gown around her.

"What's the racket?" yelled dad, tying the robe around his waist with the belt.

Mom pulled back the covers and I leapt into her arms.

"What's wrong honey? Bad dream?"

"Fr..Frosty...he...he,"

"Why is the damn window open? You know how much it costs to heat this house?" said dad as the curtain billowed in the icy wind.

"Frosty..he...he moved...he was..."

"What'd ya mean moved? He's a god-damned snow man. He can't move," said dad walking to the window and slamming it shut as I flinched. "See, he's there in the yard right where we left him,"

I was still sobbing in Mom's arms.

"I told you you're spoiling that kid Ruth. He's turning into a sissy,"

"He's a child Stan, and if you didn't tell him stories about dead soldiers he wouldn't have nightmares,"

"You're blaming me?" said dad jabbing his chest with his finger. "You're the one raising our kid as a sissy,"

At that I cried even more.

"Don't call him that. Can't you see what you're doing to him?"

"What I'm doing? Jesus, listen to yourself Ruth,"

"I'll stay with him, go to bed Stan,"

"You've been eating too late before bed. I told you it gives you nightmares," said dad with a shrug.

Mom sat with me, stroking my hair, gently rocking and singing in a low voice. After ten minutes when I had quietened down, she lay me back in my bed and tucked me under the covers.

"Mom, can I sleep with you and dad?"

"No dear, you know your father won't allow that. You're a big boy now,"

"Mom, I'm scared,"

"You don't need to be scared honey. There's nothing to be scared of. I'll leave the door open, and the night light is on. Try to get some sleep, you've got school tomorrow,"

I lay there looking at the white ceiling, and could almost see the snowflakes fall. I gave a shiver. Not through cold, but from the sheer thought of the snow. I closed my eyes and tried to think of something

else. My cars and GI Joe figures, playing stick ball in the park and baseball cards. Slowly my mind began to drift and I was approaching a peaceful slumber when I heard something.

Scrunch...

My eyes shot open and the hair on the back of my neck stood up.

Scrunch...

There is was again. I gripped the edge of my blanket tightly.

Scrunch...

Then it stopped.

I lay there, my ears straining waiting for the next crunch. Several moments passed and I began to wonder if my ears were playing tricks on me. Slowly, gently, I pulled back the blanket. I took two tentative breaths, swung my legs carefully to the ground and stood on the cold, hard wood floor. With short, hesitant steps I crept toward the window. I wanted to know for sure. To see what I expected the see, what I needed to see. The snowman stood just where we left him.

I held the edge of the curtain for a few seconds, the air cool around my feet as I started to shiver. I took a deep breath and pulled back the curtain a tiny crack and peered out of the window.

There in the yard stood Frosty, as still as could be. I was about to let go of the curtain when I suddenly noticed something. Holes in the snow, side by side. Holes that looked exactly like footprints. Then I saw a blur of movement.

Raaaaarrrrrgggghh!

I jumped back, the curtain still held tight in my hand, ripping it off the rail as I fell backwards with a high-pitched scream.

There in the window was a face, pressed against the glass, roaring at me. Raaaaarrrrrgggghh!

I heard mom shout and come running down the hall, dad following her shouting "What in the hell is going on?"

Raaaaarrrrrgggghh!

"Henry! What are you doing? Stop that!" mom yelled through the window at him as Henry still roared at the window, smearing snow into the glass.

I just sat there on the floor, frozen in fear, the curtain clutched to my chest.

"Are you ok Andy?" mom asked, but I couldn't get my breath to reply.

"Henry! Get your ass in here now!" shouted dad, angry as hell.

"Yes dad," came the muffled reply from outside.

"Jesus, what have you done to the curtain?" said dad. "This is ruined. Do you know how much this curtain pole cost? You've ripped the bolts out of the wall," he said, examining the plaster. "Damn kids and your stupid games,"

\*

Next morning, I sat at the breakfast table pushing my Cherios around the bowl. Henry was pulling faces trying to get my attention. Then finally, when that failed to work, he flicked my ear.

"Ow, cut it out Henry,"

"What's up squirt?" he said and flicked me again.

"Ow! Mom!"

"Henry, stop it will you,"

Henry pulled a face, but stopped flicking me.

"Frosty the snowman! Was a very happy soul!" Henry began to sing.

"Stop it Henry," said mom.

"Frosty the snowman, la, la, la," he continued.

"Shut your mouth Henry," I said angry, clenching my fists below the table.

"Henry that's enough,"

"Jeez mom, I'm only teasin,"

"I said that's enough Henry. Andy, hurry up and finish your breakfast honey, it's nearly time to go. You don't want to be late for the school bus,"

"Not hungry," I said.

"What's wrong? Are you still tired from last night?"

"I'm fine mom, just not hungry,"

"You need to eat to keep your strength up till lunch time. Have you got your lunch money?"

"Yes mom,"

"Ok, go brush your teeth,"

\*

I brushed my teeth listlessly. Truth be told I was dead tired. I hadn't slept a wink that night. The whole time I was terrified to close my eyes, keeping them fixed on the window. As I ran my toothbrush under the Faucet, the ice cool water brought a chill down my spine. I looked in the mirror at my reflection noticing the dark rings. I brushed up and down a couple more times and was about to spit when I noticed something move behind me in the mirror.

"Boo!" Henry shouted and jumped up behind me waving his arms.

I jumped with fright and screamed, my knee connecting heavily with the base of the sink.

"Got you!" said Henry and raced back to the hall.

"Kids, I'm leaving in five minutes. You better be ready!"

"Yes mom," whined Henry.

"Let's hope your father salted the driveway this morning so we don't break our necks on the ice,"

I finished dressing and stood on the porch, wearing my duffle coat, mittens and woolly hat.

"There's that's better," said mom as she straightened it, then spat on her hankie and rubbed my face. "You've got toothpaste on your cheek honey,"

The wind was icy cold and I looked down at the snow in the yard.

"Come on kids, we're late. Let's not miss the school bus," said mom and began walking down the freshly salted garden path dragging me along by my arm.

I limped slightly as I walked, the pain in my knee still fresh.

"What's wrong honey? Why are you limping?"

"I hurt my knee mom,"



"You boys and your rough-house games," she sighed. "Come on, we've got to get moving,"

I looked down the street, still covered in the blanket of white snow. Apart from the odd shoveled driveway and path, it was completely covered. As I walked along the sidewalk, the snow crunched under my feet, making the exact same sound I'd heard last night. I watched my feet make tracks in the snow, just like the ones I'd seen the night before.

"Come on honey, we're late we need to move faster," said mom, jerking my hand and I looked up and saw it. The hairs on my neck stood up as we passed the McGregor's yard. It was stood there tall and proud and as we passed it, I could swear it was looking right at me, right into my eyes. Two pieces of black coal instead of the red orbs of flame that Frosty had, but I still felt my stomach lurch. My legs gave way and I stumbled.

"Jesus, what's with you today?"

"Sorry mom," I said as she pulled me back on my feet.

"Henry, don't wander off too far,"

"Yes mom,"

"And watch the road,"

I got back to my feet and mom brushed the snow off me.

"Come on,"

I followed on jelly legs, looking back over my shoulder at the McGregor's snowman, still feeling the coal black eyes watching me. Before we hit the end of the street, we passed four more Snow men. I closed my eyes as we passed each one, clutching mom's hand tight and saying a silent prayer.

At the end of the street we waited on the corner of the main road for the school bus. I was shivering.

"You ok Andy? You're shivering,"

"I'm...ok mom,"

"Keep your scarf on ok, even on the bus, they drive with the windows open, so they don't steam up,"

"Y...yes mom," I stammered through a mouth of chattering teeth.

"Where's that bus?" mom said absently, looking at her watch.

"It's coming mom!" said Henry.

"Ok, have a good day honey," said Mom as she waved me and Henry onto the bus. "Look after your brother Henry,"

"Yes mom," said Henry, rolling his eyes and putting a hand on my shoulder as he waved mom goodbye through the window.

As soon as the bus pulled away from the curb he turned and hissed; "Don't even think about getting in my face squirt. You cramp my style and I'll set Frosty on you,"

A shiver ran down my spine as I gulped and nodded.

\*

"Ah, late again huh?" said Mrs Thorndyke, the Math teacher as I came into class.

"S...sorry Mrs Thorndyke," I stammered, looking past her. In the school yard, stood a huge snowman.

"Take a tardy slip and sit down," she said sternly.

"Yes Mrs Thorndyke,"

"So, as we see here," she said writing it on the board.

$$1 \times 3 = 3$$

$$2 \times 3 = 6$$

$$3 \times 3 = 9$$

$$4 \times 3 = 12$$

$$5 \times 3 = 15$$

"Can anybody pick this up from here?"

Hands were thrown up alongside multiple yelps of Me! Me! Me!"

"Robinson, please step forward to the board," said Mrs Thorndyke as Les Robinson sauntered up to the board with a beaming teacher's pet smile and took the marker pen.

Soon the pen was squealing on the white board;

$$6 \times 3 = 18$$

$$7 \times 3 = 21$$

$$8 \times 3 = 24$$

$$9 \times 3 = 27$$

$$10 \times 3 = 30$$

I had already zoned out, my eyes drawn to the snowman in the yard. I did a doubled take. I could have sworn that it was now nearer the class room. I shook my head, closed my eyes and opened them.

"Are you following the board Andy?" said Mrs Thorndyke, and my head snapped back towards the sound of her voice. "Are you with us? Sleeping is for night time, and daydreaming is forbidden within these four walls," she said as the class tittered with nervous laughter.

"Robinson, you may continue with seven times table," she said with a nod as the pen resumed its squealing.

$$1 \times 7 = 7$$

$$2 \times 7 = 14$$

$$3 \times 7 = 21$$

$$4 \times 7 = 28$$

$$5 \times 7 = 35$$

$$6 \times 7 = 42$$

$$7 \times 7 = 49$$

$$8 \times 7 = 56$$

$$9 \times 7 = 63$$

$$10 \times 7 = 70$$

But like a magnet my eyes were drawn back to the figure in the yard. As they focused on it again, it seemed to have appeared at least ten feet nearer the class. Then the head seemed to tilt upwards slightly, and the red eyes flashed like fire.

Andy, come out to play...

I flinched and knocked my metal pencil case to the ground which clattered on the solid floor with an indecent clang. Everybody looked round at me.

"S...sorry," I said.

"Would you like to finish the exercise?" said Mrs Thorndyke.

"No mam," I said, and Robinson's pen resumed squealing.

1 × 9 = 9  
2 × 9 = 18  
3 × 9 = 27  
4 × 9 = 36  
5 × 9 = 45  
6 × 9 = 54  
7 × 9 = 63  
8 × 9 = 72  
9 × 9 = 81  
10 × 9 = 90

"Thank you, Robinson,"

\*

That night I lay awake, too scared to sleep. Every shadow, every movement, my ears were primed for every sound, every creak of a floorboard, every noise outside the window. Every nerve was on edge.

It's an old saying, but the quickest way to fall asleep is to try and stay awake. Now I know how interstate truck drivers and travelling salesmen fall asleep at the wheel. Somehow I fell asleep. The next thing I knew, I heard the scrunching of the snow. I wasn't sure if I was awake or dreaming, but I heard that sound and my blood froze. I lay there shivering, statue still, my eyes fixed on the window. The sound stopped, but I couldn't take my eyes off the window. I lay there, gripping the edge of the blanket in silent terror for several minutes. Then I heard footsteps and my muscles tensed even further, I saw the flicker of light emerge under the door and to my relief heard the noise of the toilet seat being lifted and the watery trickle as dad peed, then the flush of the toilet, the washbasin taps, and finally the click of the light switch as dad's footsteps retreated. Somehow the distraction had eased my mind slightly. Somehow, I fell asleep again, until I woke once more with a start.

Scrunch...

Scrunch...

Scrunch...

My eyes leapt to the window and I froze again. Behind the curtain, outside the window, I could see a shadowy outline...and two glowing red eyes.

Slowly the window opened and an icy cold gust of wind blew the curtain open. My eyes went wide in shock and I opened my mouth to scream but I couldn't make any sound come out.

Frosty climbed over the window sill as the wind howled past, freezing me to the bone. I shivered, clutching the blanket as the slow scrunching footsteps carried Frosty towards me, the Demon red evil eyes burning like fire. He crept towards my bed, his feet leaving wet marks on the floor and his mouth yawning open to reveal rows of razor sharp teeth. The mouth opened wider and hissed;

Andy...

Come out to play...

He crept further towards the bed and the breath stopped in my lungs as he reached up for the blanket, with clawed icy hands and lifted it up. The

eyes burned hotter and redder as they focused on me and again it hissed;

Andy...Come out to play...

And the icy clawed hand reached out for me and gripped my pyjamas. Suddenly I screamed...

"Andy...Andy!"

The next thing I knew, I was awake and mom was shaking me as Dad emerged through the door way.

"What's the commotion?"

"It's Andy," said mom, worry in her voice.

"Frosty! Frosty!" I mumbled as mom threw back my blanket and I threw my arms around her.

"Oh Andy, you're all wet. What happened?"

"Jesus Andy," said Dad, disgust in his voice. "You're way too old to be pissing the bed. What in the hell's the matter with you,"

"Frosty!" I cried.

"Aw Christ Ruth, he must be sleep walking. He's pissed all over the floor too," said dad, noticing several wet pools. "That's it, we're taking him to a doctor,"

"He's scared; he's just a child,"

"He's a goddamned sissy, Ruth, you've made him a sissy with all your molly coddling,"

"How dare you!" hissed mom. "How can you say that about your own child?"

"It's true, even if you're too blind to see it,"

"If you'd let me go to Harry when he screamed that night, he might-" Mom stopped herself mid-sentence.

"Might what Ruth? Go on, say it. Finish your sentence," said Dad, standing over mom goading her. "Say it, Ruth," he hissed, prodding her with his finger.

"Stan, you're scaring Andy," she said, hugging me tighter. "Henry, go back to your room honey, it's all right," she said, noticing Henry in the doorway.

"You heard your mom Henry, get back to your damn room,"

"Y..yes Pa," Henry stammered.

"You'll take the kid to the doctor Ruth. Tomorrow, first thing. No kid of mine is going to be a bed-wetting sissy," he said and stomped back to bed.

Mum just held me and rocked me until I fell asleep.

\*

In the doctor's office, mom flicked through a home decor magazine, as I sat on the chair swinging my legs. But I could tell it was just a prop to mask her nervousness. Her eyes were glazed over; so much so that the receptionist had to call our name twice.

"Mrs Petersen?"

"Huh?" said mom, finally snapping to.

"Mrs Petersen? You can go through now. The doctor will see you,"

Mom put down the magazine and picked up her purse. We knocked on the door and walked into the doctor's office.

"Mrs Petersen, please sit down," the doctor said, gesturing to a chair.

"What can we do for you today?"

"It's my son,"

"Yes,"

"Well, it's...delicate,"

"I can assure you mam, in my long experience, I've seen and heard almost everything,"

"Well, he's been having...nightmares and well...well...just recently you see...he's...begun...wetting the bed," she finally got the words out and went a deep shade of red at the confession. Seeing her embarrassment, made me feel all the more embarrassed and I kicked my legs wildly as I sat on the Edge of the seat, looking at the floor.

"I see," said the doctor clearing his throat. "Perfectly normal Mrs Petersen. Many children have temporary episodes of infantile incontinence. They tend to grow out of it very quickly. Exactly the same as they do with nightmares. It's extremely common, nothing to be ashamed of, I assure you,"

"Well, it's just, he seems so terrified. Beyond what you'd expect from a bad dream,"

"There is something called night terrors Mrs Petersen. Extremely vivid dreams that can seem as real as real can be. Truly terrifying. But again, they tend to pass quickly. Has young Andy suffered any kind of trauma recently? Any kind of emotional trigger you can think of? Sometimes these episodes can be triggered by even the most trivial of events,"

"He wakes up screaming, and he's...wet the bed...I'm terrified because...You see...We had a child...he died,"

"I'm sorry Mrs Petersen,"

"It was...infant death Syndrome...because of that..."

"I can understand your anxiety Mrs Petersen, but IDS is an extremely rare condition. There's nothing in your son's sleep problem that could cause that kind of issue, especially at such a mature age,"

I noted the words the doctor used to describe what was happening to me. Sleep problem sounded so trivial.

"Is there anything you can do for Andy?" she asked, stroking my head as I looked at the floor, swinging my legs.

"Psychotherapy or counselling can be helpful in many cases. It can be helpful to improve the amount and quality of sleep which the child is getting. In some cases we may prescribe benzodiazepines or tricyclic antidepressants,"

"Could you do that?"

"Well Mrs Petersen, medication is only recommended in extreme cases."

"I just don't know what to do with him Doctor. It's getting worse,"

\*

That night as mom began to clear the plates after dinner, I was dreading my bed time. I could see Frosty outside in the yard, from the kitchen window, watching me.

"Can't I watch TV with Dad and Henry?"

"No you can't," said dad. "It's your bed time,"

"But Dad. You keep telling me to be a man. I should have a later bed

time if I'm a man,"

"Don't smart mouth me kid, unless you want my belt across your ass," dad said with a menacing look.

"Come on Andy," said mom pulling out my chair. "Time for bed. We're all very tired," she said with glance in dad's direction.

Dad didn't acknowledge her, he just kept chewing his food.

I washed and brushed my teeth as mom turned down my bed. My eyes were locked on the mirror, so I could see anything that might try and sneak up on me from behind. I brushed and spat without looking down, too afraid to look away from the mirror.

"Oh Andy, you've got toothpaste all over the floor," said mom, noticing the small puddle of toothpaste spit by my feet.

She cleaned it up with some kitchen towel as I rinsed and dried my face.

"I don't know what's gotten into you lately young man," she said, the familiar tinge of disappointment in her voice.

She tucked me in, but I didn't want her to leave.

"Mom, I need the nite-lite,"

"Ok," she said, and turned on the little blue bird night lite.

"Good night sweetheart," she said planting a kiss on my forehead and turned to leave.

"Mom?"

"Yes honey?"

"Can you read me a story?" I said as I heard dad's footsteps bound up the hall.

"Andy, I--"

"A story?" dad said poking his head through the door. "Are you some kind of god-damned baby? And what the hell is this nite-lite doing in here? I thought I told you he was too old for it Ruth," dad said turning on mom.

"Stan, he's only seven,"

"Only seven? I was running three paper rounds when I was seven. One before school and two after. Don't give me that he's a baby crap Ruth,"

"Stan!"

"Stan nothing. You treat him like baby, he'll stay a baby his whole damn life Ruth," said dad, ripping the nite lite out of the wall socket and flouncing back down the hall. "Leave the kid to sleep," he said, over his shoulder.

Mum turned and left wordlessly.

I turned over and sobbed into my pillow. I cried for nearly ten minutes until the pillow was soaked and my eyes stung with the tears and an empty loneliness filled my chest. Then suddenly I remembered where I was. Alone, in my room. The curtains were drawn, and the door was closed but a small light from out in the hall way seeped beneath the door.

I lay looking at the white ceiling and immediately I was thinking of Frosty. I tried to block the image of his demonic face from my mind, the horrific red glowing eyes that burned like the fires of hell. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep, but as soon as I closed my eyes the fear

increased. What if I opened my eyes and Frosty was stood there, looking at me? Maybe he was already in the room? I started to shallow breathe, too scared to make even the slightest of noise. My mouth was dry, and I started to feel cold, unnaturally cold. I was scared to open my eyes but also scared to keep them shut. Slowly I opened them...

I scanned the room, my eyes adjusting to the low light. The room was empty except for my chest of drawers, my toys on top, the chair and desk by the wall and my closet. I peered around the room, my eyes scanning left to right, then something caught my attention and they flicked back to the right. My closet door. It was open, just a crack, but it was open. I racked my brain to remember when I'd last opened it. Had I closed it properly? Had mom opened it to check for blankets? Was it a draught? Then I saw what I thought was a shadow. My breathing stopped and my pulse drummed in my ears. The shadow seemed to be moving...then I realised it was coming through the gap in the curtains. It was only the tree branches swaying in the moonlight breeze. I took a deep breath and lay back on my pillow, exhausted. Then I started to drift off to sleep.

Scrunch...

My eyes shot open and the hair on the back of my neck stood up.

Scrunch...

There is was again. I gripped the edge of my blanket tightly.

Scrunch...

The noise stopped just outside the window, then after what felt like an eternity, came the slow screech of the window being opened. The curtain billowed in the gust of wind that rushed into the room and even despite my every muscle being set like stone, I couldn't help but shiver.

The curtains were parted by a white, snowy clawed hand and I saw the legs come over the windowsill and step onto the floor.

Andy... hissed the voice, and the red eyes flickered.

Andy...Come out to play...

Frosty took a step, then another, then another. He came nearer and nearer the bed. I tried to scream, but no sound would come, I'd lost all control of my voice, paralysed in fear.

The distance closed to almost nothing and the mouth opened, the moist fangs glistened in the half light and the clawed hand reached out for me.

Andy... Come out to play...

Suddenly it was if a dam broke, and my throat gave a piercing scream and the claws touched my skin and I thrashed on the bed, screaming.

Suddenly the door burst open and the light flew on. Mom was kneeling by my bedside, shaking me and screaming; "Andy! Andy! Stan! Please help me! God! "

I was barely conscious as dad thundered into the room.

"What in hell?"

"Stan he's having some kind of fit! Help me,"

I felt Dad's powerful hands around my arms pinning me down.

"Jesus," said dad, the familiar sound of disgust in his voice. "He's pissed himself again,"

"Fr...Frosty," I groaned I was looking up at dad, still unsure if I was dreaming or not.

"I told you Ruth, I told you a thousand times, you molly-coddle the kid, he becomes a bed-wetting sissy. What did I tell you?"

"Stan, look at him. This is our child,"

"He's play acting,"

"He's not, he's scared stiff, look at him,"

"Because of you Ruth. You made the kid a Mommy's boy sissy,"

He turned and stomped down the hall.

"Stan? Where are you going?"

"I'm gonna deal with that damn snowman once and for all," he said.

Mom just sat there with me on her lap, hugging me and rocking as I shivered.

Outside we heard the shed door open and the clang of metal on concrete as dad took out his snow shovel, then the shed door slammed shut.

"Scared of a god-damned snowman," I heard dad muttering and then his scrunching footsteps in the snow.

Then I heard a grunt and a clang, and then a cry and a thump.

"Stan?" mom called.

No answer came.

"Stan?" she said louder. "Stan? Are you ok?...Stan..."

I looked at mom and mom looked at me, eyes wide. Suddenly the room had become icy cold and we both began to shiver. After several seconds Mom lay me down on the bed.

"Stay here Andy," she said and moved slowly toward the window. With a sweep she pulled back the curtain and cried out; "Stan!" and rushed from the room. As she raced down the hallway, her bare feet thudding on the wooden floor, she kept screaming Stanley! Stanley!

I got up from the bed, shivering and my eyes misted with tears. Gingerly, I moved to the window, the curtain still half open. I heard a voice behind me;

"Andy? What is it?" said Henry, as he came to the window. "Dad!"

I saw mom race across the snow on bare feet and rush to my father's side as he lay flat on the icy ground, his snow shovel buried in Frosty's head.

"Stan! Talk to me Stan!" she shouted, then leaned her head against his chest for a second. Then came a blood curdling scream. "Somebody help me! Please!"

The paramedics arrived in less than fifteen minutes. In less than twenty they'd taken my father away. Heart attack they'd said. Nothin anybody could've done.

\*

At the wake mom just sat and rocked. Henry cried. I couldn't cry. The huge lump of grief just sat in my stomach like ice cold lead.

When we returned home, mom went straight to bed. Henry took off on his bike and I stood at the kitchen window looking out into the yard.

There stood Frosty, dad's snow shovel still embedded in his head. I looked at Frosty, still and frozen in the yard, exactly where dad and I



had made him just a few days before; just a few days before when dad had still been alive. I could still see the impression of dad's prone body, and the footprints of the paramedics in the snow. I began to cry, just a few sobs at first, but then the tears flowed freely. I wiped my eyes with the backs of my hands and looked up at the snowman again, the carrot nose missing and the two Oreo eyes divided by the blade of dad's snow shovel. I stood there looking, through tear misted eyes and then suddenly my heart froze as Frosty's two eyes glowed red. I jumped with a fright and ran for my bed and jumped under the covers, not emerging for hours.

That night I put myself to bed, mom still hadn't emerged. I lay awake as long as I could with the light on until, exhausted, I fell asleep. Suddenly I awoke with a start. The room was pitch black, even though I had fallen asleep with the light on. In my head I heard the words of the song:

Frosty the Snowman, is a fairytale, they say.

He was made of snow, but the children know he came to life one day.

Then I heard the noise again, as sure as anything.

Crunch...

I froze and the hair on the back of my neck stood up.

Crunch...

There it was again. I gripped the edge of my blanket tightly.

Crunch...

Andy...

I felt the warm wetness in my pyjamas and I turned and sobbed into my pillow.

\*

After several days the snow began to melt and Frosty ended up a small muddy puddle, surrounded by Grandpa's old hat, the ragged scarf, moldy carrot and Dad's snow shovel. We never cleared the yard. Within a month the house had been sold and mom had movers pack all our stuff and ship it to our new home in Milwaukee.

The years passed by. School, college, work. Mom died five years back, cancer. Henry moved to Oregon and only stayed in contact by Christmas card. The same message every year. To him it was just a joke.

Merry Christmas squirt.

Don't let Frosty get ya! Ha Ha!

Henry

\*

*Frosty the Snowman, is a fairytale, they say.*

*He was made of snow, but the children know he came to life one day.*

It's Christmas again and I'm with my wife shopping. She points to a store, we walk in and the heat hits me immediately, like walking into an oven. They always rack the heating up to eleven during Christmas. And of course, the music is playing. Jingle Bells, morphs into Old King Wenceslas. Already I'm sweating, and the back of my neck is becoming itchy. I'm becoming anxious and irritable, and barely paying attention to the items my wife is pointing out to me.

"Are you ok?" she asks.

"I'm fine," I reply, tugging at the roll-neck sweater.

Old King Wenceslas morphs into Deck the Halls and I'm becoming claustrophobic from the heat, the swarms of people and the noise. Deck the halls begins to fade into Let it Snow and I start to feel the bile rise in my stomach.

My wife is showing me a perfume gift selection and I'm nodding as she shakes her head. Then I hear the first bars of White Christmas and I feel the panic grow in me. I need to get out. I drop my coat and race for the exit. Outside I double over and dry heave by the store exit. I look up to see a security guard looking at me closely, probably suspecting me of being a shop lifter. But he sees me doubled over and shakes his head and walks away, as suddenly my wife appears by my side.

"Are you ok? What happened?"

"I'm fine...I just...needed some air,"

"Drink some water," she said and began fishing in her purse.

"Thanks," I said as she took the top off the bottle and handed it to me.

I took a large gulp.

"It's probably the heat. I've seen women pass out in Christmas sales," she said.

I drove us home and as we unloaded the car it began snowing again. In the street a group of kids were throwing snowballs. Then, I heard those dreaded words once again.

*Let's build a snowman...*

### **About the Author:**

Dean Baker is an award-winning writer, who holds a degree in Political science, English literature and is currently the Men's Olympic 100m champion. He's also an extremely gifted liar, which helps him write incredible fiction.

Having escaped a life of grinding affluence, via careers as a spy, parking attendant, carpet Salesman, air-traffic controller and street-sweeper he attained a position of subsistence level mediocrity in the IT industry. He then decided that the world of fiction would be his new domain and immediately began to unleash his works of brilliance.

The first, **The Big R**, is a hilarious romantic comedy, released to critical acclaim by select members of his family and friends.

Other books by Dean Baker

If you enjoyed Eat My Shorts, you may love other works from my trusty word processor:

**The Big R**  
**Losing The Plot**  
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Free samples and more info at: <https://www.zer0-talent.weebly.com>

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I really appreciate you reading my book! To learn more about me and my writing, visit my website: **[www.zero-talent.co.uk](http://www.zero-talent.co.uk)**  
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