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Walking Dead Man's Blog & Halloween Tales

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Intro: Blood Voices

The Demon's Poem

Pierced by Fire from a Voodoo Machine Gun
Going Down Stairs on the Run
Now my Scream is a Fetish
As I fall Ragdoll to the Pit

Witch fire gifted me with blindness and I was cast into a buried demon's darkness. Today I have risen in the smoke and can see. Long ago I entered you and sipped your blood. I sealed your fate. How you lusted, panted; memories of your early desires are hidden in my mind like the many bodies in your basement. Some of them are pieces, others are stumps. Time rots the flesh away and leaves shining bones; it leaves our soul in the power of voodoo, trapped in the reassembled fragments of a skull.

Once we were sociable and kind, but I entered and brought the withering into you and your inner universe. You dreamed of falling and awoke drooling in the belly of a nightmare. You devoured the sweet flesh of the innocent. The night was long, the heart a dry bellows, the hands trembling, the head stabbed by imaginings, the blood magma explosions, and finally the joy of murder ... creamy flesh against the black vinyl of a raincoat and blood raining on our blond wig.

You see her trying to choke out a scream and rattle free of the chains. You remember flowers not from a grave; a garden in the churchyard and the cross. It is painful remembering the early days of kindness. They shrivel like the wilting blooms. A wrinkled petal falls from your hand and I'm in you like a rusted metal skeleton. Turning, grinning and scanning with a beast's fiery eyes. Hold your head and moan; I'm many voices whispering your secrets. Rage and strike up the fountains of her blood and leave a memory of her smeared in fingerprints. I'll know another of the secrets you can never forget.

You dress like her and walk like her; it's your own throat you seek. A severed head is rolling in the tunnels of your mind and you're a werewolf fleeing your transformation in the slashing rain. Their faces hang from spelunker's spikes and their hearts are spilled on the stone. I read your future in the entrails; I make you psychic so you can't hide in the dull pain of crushed intestines. We share visions of the dead rotting in tombs and know a cryptic wisdom from the pattern of the bodies. In the name of oracles, graven images and the relics of the damned we descend and pull moldering flesh from the earth ... broken bones jutting from torn cloth and my brothers and sisters the grinning skulls. I've been many pleasures and voices for you and now I'm falling dust and death rattles.

A gurgle of blood in the bowels of the impaled tells you I've lied.

It's Halloween, the jury is assembled and the magic circle will break you. The dead have risen as the dead and we can face them. I've brought moonlight here to the basement and webs of lies are illumined. The glory was never yours. My lies were the power. You know this now as you lift the blade to your throat. The voices of the skeletons are frightened whispers. They tell you that I was never more than one voice - the voice of blood and suicide.

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Walking Dead Man's Blog

By Walking Dead Man

About Me: I'm deceased as in dead as a ventriloquist's dummy ... but I'm also the walking and talking dead. I remember many past lives from the perspective of a very revolting man who burns no scented candles and makes no

moral comparisons. I reside as unclean movements in the shadows of Toronto ... that figure suddenly looming, the quick flash of an elongated hand in the darkness. Someone you know is behind you but can't see.

I'm always on the prowl for my next meal.

My Profile: I like heavy metal music or drums because I can feel music more than hear it. Some classical music is fine at dinner, but it would sound better if my eardrums weren't hard as the dinner pans. I'm a life-long comic book collector. I still read the funnier ones, while feeding on human blood and flesh. Let the pages rot as they turn.

Sexual Orientation: I swing both ways; mostly oral sex involving blood and flesh. Prefer a soft body, but can swallow the hard stuff. My erection mostly wimped out on me and since it grew back it needs too much fresh blood to work often. I like candlelight dinners and deathly dances.

Photo: No recent photo. Be thankful for it.

Links to Favorite Sites:

City Morgue

Toronto Blood bank

Northern Star Comics

Death Chat International

**** Walking Dead Man Rots in the Water with a poem in his mind***

gleaming fangs and venom trails at the crossbones in the cracks

the monsters of night have hissed and growled in the yawning grave-sky gap

and we live on the blind side of a madman's sharpened ax
our tearing claws arc wide within the blackest cloak of night
a shining moon, a silver skull that strikes you from the deep
a flaming sun, a gilded scythe that cuts your body down
we've risen in your empty sleep and killed you in your mind
now you're in a netherworld lost somewhere in the dark

weeping like a ghost of doom with sorrows and with bones and all the many lives you led are shattered on the rocks that were swallowed many years ago by the waves of angry seas

****Blog entry October? @ WalkingDead-man.blogpower.com***

**This entry is hashed in story form. I would rather paint a word portrait of my personal history than bore people with inane political comments, reviews and offbeat opinions.*

Guess Who's Truckin' Again?

Sure, I'm a dead man on the move, and I plan to rule this crummy northern city. If you think you can stop me, then scrape your ass off the gutter slime and try. But don't count on success with those silver bullets, because I absorb the poison as fast as it's dosed out.

Here's how my new walking dead man deal began.

An oppressive dream stank in the broken chamber of my soul. Eyes burned with a razor's light and I could not move or breathe. A heavy hand of death snaked from eternity to lie across my melting brow ... its sweaty covering stirring murky thoughts of some grotto of the soulless as I wakened partially; the veil lifting enough to grant me awareness of the nightmare. Beyond me, I saw sterile darkness, and the cold of death. Icy, bitter cold like a man frozen in ice would feel if feeling were possible.

Pinned in my corner of Hades, I could do little but look up through the cracks in one evil eye. Currents in the gloom became fresh flashes of light and dead silence grew to the whisper of a song in my right ear. Tongues of evil rose and spoke as the roar of a storm; rain lashing the shore and trees. The dragon whistle of a hurricane's wind as it recklessly shattered something large and wooden on the rocks.

Desperate cries for help reached me and faded in circuitous routes of the wind. A boat or a shipwreck I thought, then a flash of lighting snapped beside me and my vision spun in a kaleidoscope of rain as the charge threw me over. I felt a dull hammer blow and my opening nostrils picked up smoky odors. They clung like the perfumes of a rank swamp and of the grave and pyre; an incense of slime, burning flesh, unspeakable rot, and festering corpses.

Water spilled in all directions. Spray burst in streams from dirty waves breaking on the shore. Heavy rain and hailstones threshed the landscape like the beating of monster wings. Something huge and wooden battered the rocks continually. I kept trying to move, to escape the dream, but I remained numb and bound; drifting in a hellish flood of half thoughts and uncertainty as the storm shook me in and out of consciousness. Then over time the air grew crisp and still.

My head cleared. Oily water oozed out of my ears and nose. I could see a break wall composed of huge broken stones. It had a hole cut through it for a culvert that carried a thick flow of polluted water. The storm had caught me up and thrown me to the bottom; water tumbled into the lake next to me. Something fat and swollen like a huge dead fish existed above me and it stank like death. A trickle flowed into my mouth and the taste wasn't of fresh water but industrial pollution ... and something else; blood ... a trickle of blood was pouring steadily over my lips and into my throat.

Dawn broke faintly red through leaden clouds. I could see clearly and the picture held a repulsive aspect. Twisted half-dead trees bit the sand with exposed roots. The stained walls and tall stacks of an ancient factory rose in the distance. What I'd though were huge dead fish were my legs, swollen with watery corruption and existing above my fattened and fish-chewed middle. The storm had left me on my back on a downward angle, my head and broken neck propped bizarrely on my rib cage.

My condition was ghastly. I was dead; long time dead and I

was healing. The healing flowed from the blood of another body and energized some bath of pollution and chemicals that had gathered in parts of my cortex and brain. Two corpses hung from the rocks above. Freshly storm killed they were bleeding; a blond woman heavily through a gash in her neck. A natural cut in the boulder directed the flow to my lips.

The hull and mast of a sailboat lay smashed over the break wall nearby. A willow tree sat partially uprooted on the sandy shore. Doom and devastation had come with the wind storm, but it hadn't killed me. Instead it had washed me up from a watery grave and somehow given me new being ... awareness but not genuine life. I wondered how it could be possible, and then I remembered my past life, and other lives I'd lived. I hated them all ... hated myself. I'd always been evil; though this was the first time I'd known of it. It made me unique; people lived and died once. Perhaps there were others like me.

They were full lives, reincarnated existences; but this time I'd come back as a dead man. There seemed no explanation for it. Lightning, blood, a body and brain fed on the vile wastes of a factory ... I thought it over and I knew. Power of evil; I'd always been wicked. If I was back, it was an accidental formula of depraved men and demons. They had called me and as their unknown messenger, I would carve out a new frontier of hell in the land of the living.

The light grew salty and washed gray as I continued to feed. Slowly the healing worked its magic. I watched the swelling subside. My body expelled vile gasses, maggots, worms, and liquids. Eventually I could move my arms enough to reach up and put my twisted head and neck in place. Convulsions seized me and tossed me about for an hour. When the time had passed, I could move; my first act being to crawl to the dead bodies above, sink the remains of my decayed teeth in and eat some of their flesh.

Evening arrived with a blaze of hellish red. I was well enough

to stand; my brain clear enough to take stock. "Human," I thought. "Perhaps barely." My body remained a moldered mess. Rotted clothing, dead skin and greenish gore formed a scaly coat over my flesh. My face remained mostly eaten. I felt hard clumps of hair on my head. I could move but I did not breathe and my heart did not beat.

Looking to a moonless sky, I shivered and the hunger rose again. For some evil reason, whatever reason, the secret was blood. I needed more of it to heal and to walk as the dead. It was my guess that enough of it, a large feeding could give me a passably human appearance.

Stumbling in the twilight, I got over the rocks to the shore. My left leg dragged wretchedly as I moved through the sand, using my nose more than my eyes in my hunt for fresh blood. There was none and I seemed to be in a remote spot; nothing but empty sand beach, forest and the spotlights on the distant factory stacks.

Returning to the rocks and the bodies, I tore off the man's shoes and laboriously put them on; wishing the skin on my hands was new like the leather. Then I climbed back to the beach and headed through an open field toward the factory. It was strange to be walking when I had no feeling, but in some ways, it was better. Dry weeds, thistles and stones had no sting; my legs didn't get tired and I wasn't winded. But the more energy I expended the more the hunger grew. Blood powered me though my heart did little more than quiver occasionally. The blood spread through my body with hundreds of tiny shivers and convulsions. I needed, will always need, to be situated near a strong supply.

The factory leaned visibly, crouched like a predator in its shadow; this boarded-up beast was dead but not buried. I saw lights in the southern section and heard some faint clanging of machinery. The rest of the factory was dark and the whole thing stood behind rusted fencing with barbed tops. Moving to the front, I spotted a gravel road winding into darkness. There weren't any cars in the lot so I assumed that

automated machinery had been left running unattended in the night.

A blast of hunger hit me with a fist to the belly. I was at the point where a man would stop to catch his breath. Since I'd just fed, I knew the feeling would get much worse and I would be ravenously desperate if I were to exert myself for any long period. Perhaps I had to heal more to reduce my craving.

Following the road out, I walked in the haze of yellow-tinted light. I thought little and felt nothing other than hunger, the slow swing of teeth and the taught pull of my tight jaw and neck. Insects of some sort were fluttering and I caught one in my mouth. It did nothing for me. There were animals near in the woods. I could smell their blood, but had little chance of catching anything. Slower moving human meat was the prey. I speculated on the wisdom of animals. They wouldn't come near me; not in a million years. They were far too smart, while men, in their pride and assumed glory would take a quick and bloody fall to their proper place beneath me in the food chain.

I came to a light and lane. There had to be a house as there was a mailbox, but it was too far in to see. Dr. Dean Randall was the name on the box, and that was good enough for me. I needed a doctor and more ... so I went down the lane cursing my bad foot as it dragged in the muck.

A lonely spotlight illumined a quaint country house. It had once been a farmhouse; it was clear that the doctor had refurbished it as his own private digs. He had satellite TV, an added two-car garage and all the other modern amenities. The doctor was also in the house. Lights were on downstairs in three of the rooms.

With the scent of blood as my guide, I moved through a lilac hedge and across brown grass. Breeze and open windows told me the doctor's location in the house, and that no one else was present. Sliding a swath of flowering bush aside, I

peeked in. The room had been extended with a big screen TV at the front and a half wall hiding the back section. The glow of what looked to be computer screens lit the back.

The curse of hunger gnawed at me as I dragged my aching leg around back. Dizzy spells, a feeling of falling downhill and the throb of my rotting brain shook me with mini earthquake force. Staggering in the unlocked screen door, I seized the edge of a heavy table and held myself up. The roaring poured like wax out of my ears and nose. I shuffled quietly toward the doctor's scent, resembling a dying man in the desert making those last steps to water.

But I didn't dare jump in ... fortunately darkness webbed most of the house. The doc was an energy saving sort of person; but not conscious enough to turn off appliances. Light flickered from a movie playing on the big screen; he had two computer setups on in the back room and sat in silence at one. Blue-white light shone on his face, revealing a plump and aging man with a respectable shock of gray hair. He was typing a message to someone on one screen; on the other screen, he had a photo image. I strained my eyes and saw someone naked in the picture. It was a child; a naked kid with fully dressed older men. Meaning the doc had to be a pervert; but that was of little concern to me as he would suit my purposes.

A blood spell came on me like unseen powers of the moon and tides. I launched myself out of the shadows and over the hardwood floor with unbelievable liquid speed. An impossible and terrifying kill roar emerged unbidden from my throat, and it ignited Dr. Randall's screams as the struggle began.

He proved to be unusually strong, but my ghastly hunger gave me the aggressive edge. He blocked me and wrestled me off, hit me with a lamp, blocked me with a stool. I managed to get him from behind before he could escape through a window.

Blood and pus flowed into my eye from wounds left by the

glass lamp, but I knew I'd gotten a piece of his shoulder. My frozen muscle tissue became hard and elastic and from that moment on I delivered a mean beating ... breaking his right leg, pulling him back in the window ... slamming him across a table ... and choking him before coming down on his chest for the final feed.

Slipping into unconsciousness and death, disbelief replaced the terror tightening his brow. His training as a doctor told him it could not be happening. He could not be dying at the hands of a walking dead man; but the pain and the vision told him the nightmare was real. Soon I'd choked him silent; his lifeblood poured from severed veins and sizzled into the jolts and spasms that made up my circulation.

The moon rose in a clearing sky outside the open curtains. Strength returned, giving me time to prepare the blood and body for maximum food supply. I carved him up in the bathtub with his surgical knives, allowing the richer blood to pool at the bottom.

In the bedroom, I worked on a change of clothes. My dead man's duds had rotted right into portions of my skin and flesh. It took painstaking work with tools from the doc's scissor bag. My nerves were mostly dead so I was able to cut off the rot, water bugs, ooze, and wash much of the smelly stuff off myself.

I turned down the light to soften the blow of staring at what had become of my body, and with my fresh meal taking effect I saw healing taking place – purple gashes closed, scaly gray skin hardened over exposed flesh. It created a patchwork of a man. Corpses would look better due to the preservative effect of embalming. As a walking dead man I'd come back far uglier than the dead. Especially my face; it upset even me. But it was an advantage. The grey-green mess of lumpy moldering skin and the stark look in my eyes combined to make a fright knockout. The burning soul of a demon rested in my gaze. I didn't have the dead look of a mindless zombie.

One of Dr. Randall's best dark suits, some dark glasses, a hat and silk scarf had me passing off for the living. I dragged back and forth at his mirror. The limp showed but the rest of my hideous appearance stayed effectively camouflaged, especially in the dark.

Coiling tongues of evil spoke in my brain, a scheme emerged like a dream. This guy would have patients. Maybe there were appointments here at his cottage. Heading back to the computers I sat down at the one next to his shelf of medical books and checked the screen. He had his business set-up in computer office software. I quickly found that his main office was nearby in Grimsford; appointments were there.

Unfortunately, he was on vacation for two weeks and this summerhouse was in a remote Northern area. Not even a farmer's village nearby.

Sitting back, I pondered and the voices in my head nibbled my brain to life. What to do? Make house calls maybe? Then, to my surprise, the screen saver disappeared on the second computer and I saw lines of text appearing.

I got up and moved to it. It was a laptop and other devices attached to a larger screen. The doc had a chat program running. Looked like he kept it up all the time and that's why he had the laptop.

A message had come in from FunlandAlice. Rather than answer I took some time to read his saved chats. Minimizing the window, I was hit by a screen-sized wallpaper photo of a young girl engaged in sex with an older balding man. It wasn't the doc, but I got the gist of it quickly. The good doctor fancied kids; he had a computer full of child porn and possibly a list of victims.

It made me grin and it was opportunity knocking. I got back to the chat window and chatted with Alice, thinking that perhaps I could be her salvation. Feeding on her would spare her from a life of sexual abuse, and she probably had lousy parents in need of being swallowed by me.

"... I'm naughty, naughty," she said. "My daddy spanked me hard today and I bit his hand so he'd hit me more."

"Really, don't they feed you there," I replied. "Did I tell you about my doctor bag? What I've got in there?"

"No, you didn't tell me about the bag. Is it why you name yourself Doctor Wonderful."

"It is one reason. I have many things in my bag, but one special thing is a strap. It is fashioned from a beaver's tail and I use it on bad little girls like you. I hit them harder and ..."

"Oooohh! Oooohh!"

Pulling the keyboard to my lap, I kept up the chat. It felt rather strange, staring down at my bony fingertips and my lap. Genitals were something I had very little of ... even the memory of sex seemed extraordinary. As the walking dead, all parts of the human body were appetizing to me. The dead me had one appetite and feeding was far superior to any sexual experience. As for little Alice; she or her entire family would do as a food source. They certainly would give her a spanking if they knew she was talking to me ... unless, they were in on it, too.

"So you live in the city?" I said. "I'm up north."

"Downtown Toronto."

"When could I pop down to see you?"

"Not now, I have to go. My parents are back. They go away day after tomorrow. They always leave me home alone. You could come then. You'll have to be careful. My daddy is a policeman and if he ever catches you he might shoot you."

"Don't worry. I'm smarter than your daddy is. Make sure you don't tell him anything."

The chat ended, I took her address and I considered it a lucky strike. Visiting Alice would get me out of this nowhere county and starting fresh in the city. After that I spent the

night going through the doc's laptop, finding it a goldmine of contacts and addresses across the country. I'd definitely be taking it with me as some of them were in Toronto.

I spent another day at the cottage feeding on the doc. He wasn't due back at work for nearly two weeks. I still took time to dispose of him. Best to keep skeletons out of the closet; missing persons bring no future grief. If I was thorough, it was because I had little else to do. TV just doesn't have programming for the walking dead. It's more for zombies and the living dead. His bones I picked and packaged. I planned to take them with me and bury them far from the cottage.

A beautiful northern sunset faced ruin. I stepped out the door feeling myself to be the genuine embodiment of the nasty pollution behind those magnificent sweeps of cloud and light. It was time to leave and I had the doc's car in the driveway waiting. Tossing the gym bag containing his bones into the back seat I got in behind the wheel. Pulling out of the garage had already shown me the lousy driver I'd become. Luckily, he owned a small Ford Fusion; a big vehicle or truck would be beyond my handling skills.

Control of the gas pedal was difficult with my stiff foot. I ripped up a spray of gravel and took off like a punk in a drag race, only managing to slow about 100 yards down the road. Soft shadows from drifting trees swept the car and I felt the weight of a dozen tombstones in my belly. The light nudged, the darkness stung, my memories were something better forgotten ... the whole of this new incarnation dragging me down to the shallow grave I belonged in. My mind had grown clear enough for speculation and it was grim. The living go from day to day trying to find some small pleasures in life and the walking dead go from meal to meal in a thickening zombie dead zone. Awakening the mind merely awakens knowledge of evil; and sadly, my memories were even darker. I'd lived as an ad executive, a big corporate manager, a police captain and more. In all of those lives, I'd been eviler

than any walking dead man had. I'd killed with lies, pollution and false charges. It would have been easier to just drink my victims' blood and end their torment quickly.

A hungry animal strikes and never thinks; and the return of a mild gnawing in my belly came as great relief. Soon I'd be able to forget ... the good I'd never done ... the thick album containing the faces of victims ... the worthlessness of life, death and the walking dead.

Pools of darkness began to blind me and an hour passed with the road growing wider and from gravel to blacktop. Other cars whizzed past as I drove slowly. I caught my reflection in the mirror. Blood flecked my lips and crusted on my cheeks; my eyes were healed but dark and blackened. I felt like road kill that had got behind the wheel and my need had grown to a light burning in the sky.

I found enough country roads to avoid the freeways. The city grew closer even though it still seemed like the middle of nowhere. Bright lights suddenly appeared out of inky darkness, and ragged shadows began to swirl. Vehicles blocked the road ahead so I slowed and came to a stop. A group of men flashed lights in the gloom at roadside. They dragged something from the underbrush. Odors of blood dilated my nostrils and lifted my spirits. But it wasn't human blood; they were dragging a bear.

Hunters ... their boots and orange jackets showed in the headlights and one of them approached my car. I didn't want him to see me so I turned my head away as he came up to the window.

"Looking for something?" he said.

"Just trying to get through," I rasped. "You're blocking the road."

I glanced at his rifle. He suddenly switched on a huge flashlight and shone it in my face. Then he choked and stepped back. His fat face whitening as if he'd seen a ghost.

"Hey boys, we got some kind of freak here!" he yelled, and then he dropped the light and swung out his gun.

I should have quickly backed up. Instead the scent of blood roused me to attack and I threw open the door and rushed him. Seizing his rifle, I pulled it free and bashed him on the head. The other men moved toward me as I dragged him around the car. I got him in the passenger side then got back around to the wheel. A shot blasted out part of the window as I backed up and I felt shot penetrating my shoulder and left side.

I swung around, pulled a U-turn in the ditch, and began to drive away. The hunters were running to their trucks to give pursuit. The man I had captured was semi-conscious and starting to move, so I grabbed him as I drove and pulled him to me. Biting into his shoulder and neck, I slurped on his blood. He began to struggle fiercely and the car snaked down the road barely avoiding the ditch. He'd kicked the passenger door open so I shoved him away and he fell to the road as I spun in the mud and regained control.

As I raced away I saw the other hunters stopping to pick up their pal. Speeding off through the night I felt both anguish and the strength of healing that blood brings. Ten minutes passed and I saw no one in pursuit, so I figured I'd spooked them bad. They liked easier prey like bears; no one wants to chase a genuine bloodsucker, especially not one that bullets don't kill.

The city tumbled down on me like a big ogre of lights and smells. I had to come in on the freeway but it wasn't so bad. The blood fragrances on the wind were enough to boost my spirits. My wounds had healed and I'd been granted some time to look around and maybe think before I visited the girl.

The downtown resembled a colossal graveyard where every building would soon be multiple tombstones of my making. The feeding possibilities were endless, yet all logical thinking told me to begin at the beginning. Follow up the invite and

use the leads I'd stolen rather than randomly hunt. Perhaps frame the old doctor for a bunch of murders and leave the police hunting for him while I started anew.

Alice lived in the downtown area so I used the laptop and an Internet map to pinpoint her. Taking a slow pass by I found her place to be a large house on a quiet side street; renovated Victorian brick with a couple tower rooms. A few lights were on. The front drive stood empty. Turning my eyes back to the road, I considered that she might be a liar. If her father really was a police officer, she wouldn't live in such an elegant place.

After circling the block a few times, I decided to park around the corner. I got out under the streetlights and admired my reflection in the glass doors of an apartment building. An older woman passed, restraining her mutt as he tore at his leash and yipped at me. She hadn't seen me as odd so I walked the other way, with new confidence in my disguise and the powers of healing.

"What's life if you take no risks," I thought. Then I stopped at a phone booth and called Alice's home number.

She answered on the fourth ring.

"I'm just down the street," I said. "Is the coast clear?"

"It is," she said. "You can come over now."

I waited until the street was completely empty, checked nearby windows for peeking faces, then went up the walk and buzzed. She came to the door and opened it and I studied her for a moment before stepping in. Alice was cute and blond with a small nose, and like most modern young kids, wearing clothing far too sexy for her age ... a tiny skirt, running shoes and a strapless elastic top.

She didn't seem afraid of me but I was in the shadows. On stepping into the light, I saw a ginger cat and it immediately hissed and ran off down some basement stairs. I hoped the musk I was wearing would cover the smell, as I didn't want

to kill her immediately. My scarf blocked my face but I couldn't hide my battered-looking eyes. To my surprise, she stared at me but no fear showed on her face. She seemed to take my odd appearance as a simple fact.

"Come into the living room and we can talk," she said, waving her hand.

"Sure," I said, following and trying to hide my limp as much as possible.

It was a large room with two chandeliers. Through some quirk of mercy, they were dimmed. Shadows flickered as I scanned the room with weak eyes ... sculptures, paintings, racks of glassware, some antique chairs, a marble floor and a large couch and armchairs at the west of the room by the fireplace.

I followed her there to the fireplace and sat across from her on the chair. Sniffing quietly I gathered the scent of her young blood. I wanted to be sure she was alone, but incense was burning in the room and it stung my nose. Some lingering traces of blood odors came through but not enough to show someone else's presence.

Alice grinned ... a baby's grin but a wicked one. "You certainly overdress," she said. "And I can see you're trying to hide something."

"Trying to hide something? What do you mean?" I said.

"Your eyes, and probably your face. It looks like someone used your doctor's bag on you."

"Not exactly. I got into a small accident on the way down. Hit my face on the windshield in a fender bender. I thought it best to cover it up."

"I hear you like to spank little girls," she said.

"I certainly do."

"Anything more?"

"Well, I probably shouldn't tell you," I said. And I was about

to continue when my nostrils suddenly flared. I smelled blood. Someone else was in the house. I turned and looked around, and then rose to my feet as two stocky men entered the room.

The biggest man was about the size of a bear. He wore a dark suit and a long trench coat. "What else do you like, you perv?" he said.

Alice giggled. "That's my daddy," she said. "He doesn't like anyone else spanking me."

"Shut up, Alice," he said. "Listen, pal. I got a present for you." Then he stepped closer and pulled a gun from his coat. A sawed off shotgun. I could see light gleaming off the Winchester marking.

"I thought you were a cop," I said as calmly as I could with my rasping voice. "You're going to shoot a man with a shotgun. That's overkill, don't you think? Especially when I'm a doctor."

"No it isn't, because you're a perv. Besides, the gun is loaded with rubber pellets. It'll blow your balls off but you'll live."

"Hold on, Marv," the other cop said. "We got him so why not bust him. In this city he'll get at least fifteen years and we'll get promoted."

"Nope, I'm going to blast him."

Alice giggled again. "They always play this game," she said. "What they want is a lot of money."

Rage crossed Marv's face like sudden lightning. He stepped over to his daughter and yanked her off the couch by the hair. I could see muscles rippling under his coat. The guy was a steroid freak of sorts. It looked like he was going to break her neck then he threw her hard on the marble floor. I saw her roll over and wince like her back was sprained. She didn't cry or gasp, just stared at her father like she hated his guts.

"Okay, you got the picture, doc," the other guy said. "We

caught you cold and we know that a doctor like you earns at least 200 grand a year. We want 500 grand, converted to cash. Either that or your life and career are over."

I didn't speak immediately but fell into brief reflection. Theirs was certainly a lucrative and clever business. That thought flowed on the surface of growling hunger spasms rising from my belly. Even as a monster, I had my pride. Marv's labeling of me as a pervert angered me immensely. The guy was a creep himself; his daughter was completely warped because of his brutality. There would be no mercy on either of them. I wasn't sure what to do about the kid.

"Do you get the picture?" Marv's pal said gruffly, for the second time.

"Yes, I do. So picture this," I said, pulling off my scarf.

Stunned by the sight, Marv stepped back and his gun hand shook. His partner gasped and pulled a Glock pistol from his coat. I looked to Alice on the floor and she remained unmoved. At least for a moment ... then she quickly ducked out of sight when the shooting began.

I imagine the dappled light from the chandeliers gave me a more ghastly appearance than usual. Then the shotgun blast hammered me and I saw a spray of my own flesh and puss as I got thrown down and slid across the floor. I took out a shelf of glassware and small sculptures and then slowly got up amid the broken glass.

Marv looked panicked as I started to walk toward him. He moved quickly to reload ... real shells this time. His buddy didn't wait, but unloaded his Glock on me. The bullets hit hard, sending spurts of gore up my chest and slowing me like boxer blows. I got to Marv as he was raising his gun. Then I seized it and the fight began.

I pulled the shotgun loose and struck Marv's pal with it as he moved in on me. The handle glanced off his head, the gun flew from my hands, and then I went down as Marv nailed me with a knee and a hard right hand.

Being repulsive was to my advantage. They didn't want to jump on me and that gave me time to roll up and grab Marv's leg. His buddy tried to help and tripped. He crashed to the floor, and I sent Marv tumbling backwards.

I used the free moment to jump his pal on the floor. My sharp broken teeth hit pay dirt and blood spurted from his neck. In seconds, he was dead and I'd been briefly refreshed.

The strength of healing hit me and I rose to a strange scene. Marv was back on his feet and Alice had come out into the clear. She was holding the shotgun.

"Toss me the gun!" Marv yelled. "Do it before he eats you, for Christ's sake."

Alice remained frozen, an icy and unfathomable look in her widening eyes.

"I'm not going to eat you," I said.

"Don't believe him," Marv said. "Give me the gun now." Then he lunged at her and she swung the gun and fired. Marv took the blast full on and was thrown up in the air. He hit the floor like a sack of butcher's meat, his guts snaking up like a strange birth from his opened torso.

Another abusive father had earned his due ... slaughtered by his daughter. Only Alice didn't see it as the kick knocked her back against a chair and her lights went out.

So now, it's like I said at the beginning of this post. *Guess Who's Truckin' Again?* Sure, I'm a dead man on the move, and we're going to rule this dark city. That's the two of us, because I kept my promise and didn't devour Alice. It's more like she's my adopted daughter now, and I got her riding shotgun as we fly through the shadows of another city night in her poor dead poppa's sports car.

So what the hell, eh. Every walking dead man needs a friend; a sidekick to take the pain out of this race through the gutter slime of what used to be life.

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Intro: The Tales of Walking Dead Man
(But I, Walking Dead Man, have no name)

Ancient moon, my mystic satellite
Demon colors of the mind's eye
I lurk within these thousands of years
Viewing days passing from a time reversed

Now the moon is a pearl
Fallen into my palm
I lock it away in my purse
Call it darkness and night forever
As I strangle the man in the moon

Ancient sun, my molten god
Hypnotist's gold orb spinning by
lost in dreams; I'm mesmerized
Viewing nights as they pass from a place reversed

Now the sun is a coin
Fallen into my palm
I'll juggle it round
lock it away in my purse
Call it icy night forever
As I strangle the people of earth

Cry out my name
I'm the robber who stole the light
Curse my name
Through frozen tears and blindness
Go begging the comfort of a demonic inferno
You have found the gates of the damned
Now we are alone on a black, glacial world

Blind and surrounded by monsters
You know my name is hunger
You whisper my name accursed

Seeing the Werewolf

A Walking Dead Man Tale

The roots of shrubs and small trees clutched the sand like petrified bird talons and beast claws. Broken trees, branches and driftwood were scattered before me and a field of dunes stretched out to the lake. A crust of dirty snow made the crest of the first dune and I saw some wisps of dead grass and seagull feathers.

Picking up a feather, I noticed that I was naked, but it was such a natural nudity that it failed to perturb me. I was more interested in feeling the wind. It slid across the rippled waters of Lake Ontario in brush-stroke sweeps of white and sent hail rattling along the stony shore. My nose was so unnaturally keen the air felt like a rank exhalation from a monstrous ice whale, and in the breath of the ice whale I could smell another warm creature approaching.

It was a man and he was naked. I watched him emerge by an ice-sculptured dune at the shore - a terrible, unexplainable fear rising in me with every step he took. He tossed his shaggy head back, and then he turned and locked eyes with me. His were eyes of blue ice backlit by fire, strange plasma that forced me to lower my gaze to his genitals, which were swollen, blue and frost-crusting. The humiliation felt worse than fear. It was a horrible ape-like thing, being dominated by the power of another man's genitals.

He exploded, his erection and the throbbing of it like a fuse that set off the rest of his body ... pulsing lumps, scabs,

flowering wounds of open red flesh, his face twisting and graying, eyes shooting fire ... the hideous shrinkage and contortion of everything. Yet while the rest of him shrank, his patch of shaggy hair lifted and crawled round every part, and of course he became a wolf.

Or should I say werewolf? – as he was much bigger than your usual wolf, his coat a bright gray, and his eyes full of human intelligence. He loped away along the shore and disappeared in a line of pines that showed darkly in the hail.

Then I awoke, and it was on that day, after the dream, that I went completely mad.

I had a good job in the office of a big pulp and paper firm, but that seemed unimportant. I decided I would never go to work again. My werewolf claw would never again touch a computer and virtual paper.

Instead, I sat on my bed naked and meditated, when never before had I wasted time on things like meditation. Hard blue ice formed in my mind. I realized that God was an icy thing, like Lake Ontario in the dream. You could be a simple thing like ice, just as the gurus said. But even when you're ice, thoughts get in the way, and I found myself looking out the window and wondering why all those people were going to work when they could stay home and be ice.

A man who has vision today will probably be owned by a mega corporation tomorrow. Someone had said that. I saw a world where virtually everyone was wired by computers into corporations; even brain-dead anarchists reborn as zombie intellectual property and aging protesters living in the comfy retirement digs provided by the master online connection. No rebel or radical remained, except perhaps the werewolf. Everyone was scrambling to get big on-line, and to the top of the net. It was a society composed of two classes - celebrities and non-entities, with the non-entities fighting fiercely for publicity. The web was everyone in the word screaming, "look at me, and buy me!" when nobody really had the time to

care. I thought about dropping out of it. I thought about swearing never to play the game. Never would I do a song and dance for a crazy world. I thought about it then I thought it was better not to care at all. Now I see and I just don't care at all.

Lenin to Bakunin, all has been erased by the glossy blandness of advertising. I think the werewolf spoke in my mind saying, "This is an announcement. The devil is dead. He no longer has a voice. Yet we can't live without him so we reinvent him as the junk in our back yards."

It was interesting that a werewolf had come to make such an announcement, and to make it to someone who neither cared about it nor would spread the word. I pondered it as I went out and looked at the many bucksters and panhandlers on Yonge Street. I tried to guess what it would mean to them. If it wasn't rock -'n'- roll renamed, what could it mean to them? If it wasn't rock -'n'- roll blasting what could it mean to me? I sincerely hoped that it wasn't the answer, because I didn't want to be another one of those guys with the answer. I didn't want to beg people to believe in my new commercial truth and me.

I didn't get far before my musing ended. Rounding a corner, I came upon a man with very wolfish features. He was dirty, clothes like rags, eyes with cold fire and yellow fanglike teeth. One look told me he wouldn't let me pass. Disgust was on his face, that and contempt, and he took a swing at me.

He took a swing at the wrong guy. I don't believe in violence and I just don't care. I fought him all the way up the block before the police rushed in. I told them he worked for the werewolf, that the werewolf had a message about the devil, who was maybe trying to get some publicity in order to launch a comeback. Yet the same look of disgust was on the faces of the police, and they arrested me. Seems I hadn't put any clothes on, and it was sort of a cold Halloween for being naked.

I really don't want to bore you with my personal history, not when you can switch to five million web and device channels to get bored by everyone else. In a way I'm hiding behind the werewolf so you won't see me and hate me. Let's just say I've done a lot of stuff since my arrest. Sometimes I run naked in the streets with the werewolf at my side. I've climbed power pylons, buildings and towers while fleeing the police. I lost my girlfriend after I tore her dress off in a shopping mall. Sometimes I meet were people in the street who'll look me in the eye and have sex there and then, without saying a word. Isn't it amazing how words spoil everything? Mostly though, I'm locked up and in isolation.

I have a psychiatrist named Danny. He's a homosexual and somewhat old fashioned and Freudian. Danny likes to tell me I'm gay, too - according to Freud male exhibitionism is a release of suppressed homosexual wishes. A mere technicality I say, since it's women I have sex with mostly, or think I have sex with. The werewolf? - well, it seems that many people have dark dreams and visions just before the onset of schizophrenia.

There is no werewolf, Danny likes to say. The first time he said it he pounded a book on the table for emphasis. An old book by Freud, written back when he was coked out of his mind. Sometimes Danny yells, but he's not really angry - it's only theatrics meant to crack me. I tell him it would be better if he really were angry. Then sometimes he weeps and tells me there really isn't much wrong with me. "Goddamn werewolf!" he says to himself as a lonely and abandoned look comes into his eyes.

Sometimes Danny brings Jimmy in - this is to scare me I figure because Jimmy is permanently locked up. Jimmy used to cover himself with blue and white powders and lay naked, pretending he was dead. He had a mirror on his ceiling. It wasn't really a problem before he started bringing other people in to be dead with him. I tell him to watch it or he'll feel the claws of the werewolf. He does watch it; he calls me

one crazy son of a bitch. Jimmy and Danny have both killed their emotions, only Jimmy is more clinically perfect.

Lately I've been seeing the werewolf in alleyways, and he's wild, tearing and worrying at corpses. I've told Danny and now he thinks I'm going to be in alleyways killing people. But I'm not interested in killing people, and what the werewolf does is his own business. It could be that the devil sent him there for failing to bring him publicity. It could be that he's dropped out, or maybe that's where you end up when you can't get on stage or TV or the social net big time. I can't say that I really know.

It is true that I'm different because of the werewolf, but I've never been saner. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying the werewolf is for you. I'm just telling you he's there. So don't get scared if you see him, but don't dine with him either. Just remember that tomorrow there will be a perfect world - we'll all be famous and plastic surgery will be a human right. If you were there now, you'd want to be a werewolf . . . or maybe ugly and covered with warts. But hey! Why wait until then when you can do it now?

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Interpretation of a Dream

A Walking Dead Man Tale

Under normal circumstances, a desperately suicidal patient like Cam wouldn't have been seeing a psychotherapist. Cam's wealth worked in his favour and he stood out as brighter than the rest of my patients. In his initial phone call, he informed me that his appointments would deal with my specialty, which is dream interpretation.

He said he would pay for immediate therapy yet he didn't mention the scale of his problem.

His moment of arrival at my office remains as a vivid point in memory. I had an old photo on the wall of three Japanese nuclear workers who were nearly fried alive by radiation. A study on their bizarre psychological problems had made me shiver -- and I was shivering slightly for a second time and turning from the photo to the window as Cam walked into the room.

"Got the shivers, doc?" he said as he joined me by the window. "It's a peaceful scene out there isn't it? Calming the minds of the mentally disturbed. I bet that if you look long enough you'll start to see through the tricks of nature. Maybe you'll even catch a glimpse of what really is there behind that shallow mirror."

At any other time, I would've humored a patient with comments like that. Cam was different. His voice had hypnotic qualities that made him more like another doctor. And while he was speaking, a veil on the scenery seemed to lift. The breeze-blown willows, the trimmed beds of grass and flowers and neat rows of benches -- even the sickly patients strolling on the grounds seemed to shiver in some fun-house mirror of illusion.

The everyday images and the reality of them broke up in my mind and something black and hideous loomed. I suppose it was much like what occurs when a person faints; only a quality of vibrant awareness came with it. Staggering back from the psychological blow, I nearly fell as I made my way to my desk.

Cam should've been dumped as a patient right then. He shouldn't have got past my initial questions. He wasn't at all well and his answers were the wrong ones, but I suppose that in my disoriented state they seemed right.

His pale face was open and moonstruck, and for some reason I let him ramble on, taking hesitant puffs on my unlit pipe as

he related his bizarre and often suicidal personal history. He'd tried to kill himself using every method from gas to drowning. Every attempt had failed so he'd simply given up on suicide.

"Hum," I said and nodded. "Yours is the most interesting tale of self-abuse I've yet heard, but I should remind you that I've been retained to interpret dreams -- from a Jungian perspective, of course."

"Yes, of course," he said, his shock of unruly hair shaking as he spoke. "And since my life is only a dream, your study will be an interesting detail of the dream."

"Perhaps life is really only a dream for us all. The threads that fasten the mind to the body are thin ones indeed."

"I don't mean it that way, doc. I mean that someone is dreaming me. I'm not real."

"Ah, I see. Your dreams are having a profound effect on your mental health. Even so, for my specialty I need to know what you dream when you are asleep."

"That's easy," he said. "My dreams are rich in imagery. They are varied and they all have the same ending."

"And that ending is?"

"It's me, fleeing. Chased by a huge creature that is inky black and moves with the agility of a cat. I'm so frightened that I want to succumb and die as this beast pounces and feeds on me. Yet my body won't obey and I keep escaping, running with incredible agility and speed, escaping every time."

"That would indicate a conflict with the anima. Perhaps you can't come to terms with your own dark side and this has welled up into the conscious mind, taking form as suicidal acts. It really would be better if the beast would capture you, as that would indicate resolution of the conflict. As far as your personal analysis goes, I mean your idea of your life being someone else's dream -- I see nothing to substantiate that idea."

"You wouldn't. I concluded that over a long period of time. There have been many subtle hints as to my personal lack of reality. Animals hate and fear me. Other people seem to be partially hypnotized by my presence, as if they must join me in the dream state in order to respond to me. Those key items and other sensory data leave me convinced of my unfortunate situation. I have now also concluded that this beast pursuing me in my dream is in fact the dreamer who created me seeking me out to destroy me. This person may not even be aware of what is happening in his own conscious mind -- rather it is the dream-self trying to destroy the monster it created. So far I have survived, and it worries me as to what the fate of the world will be if mankind is displaced by its own dreams."

"I would say that you need long-term therapy as the psychological effects of this conflict have overwhelmed you. If it brings you any peace, I can tell you that I have often thought that it would be so much better if the world were ruled by the dreams of humankind, rather than by man himself."

On his second visit, Cam was drawn and pale. His veined blue eyes seemed faded and were surrounded by bags so heavy they hung in a corrugated oval. The skeptical expression that had painted itself on his flat mouth irregularly during the first visit now seemed permanent.

Apparently he'd read several books on Jungian dream symbolism, without supervision. This new knowledge led him to conclude that the person dreaming him was me.

"It's the detail of the symbolism in the dreams that convinces me," Cam said. "Only someone studied, like a psychotherapist, could fabricate such imagery. I believe that I'm drawn to you because it is you who is dreaming me into existence."

I nearly choked as I exhaled, then I took another long and

illegal puff as I thought it over. I felt weary and dizzy. Golden rays of the afternoon sun flowed in the window and he did seem a lot like a dream character as he looked at me expectantly from behind the drifting haze of smoke. "Patients often come to believe bizarre things when tormented by dreams. Perhaps if you go over your most recent dream we can get to the root of this."

"Sure," Cam said. "The most recent dream is a long one. A repeating dream. I'm in this foreign city. Paris or London perhaps, and it isn't modern times. More like the 1850s. The lanes are dark slippery cobblestones; there is always mist, flooded sewers and the stench of horse manure. I feel wet, cold and lost -- like I've got to speak to someone. I don't know who, just anybody. Vague human shapes are moving in the distance so I head for them. Then an aspect of purgatory comes in as it seems to take forever to reach these people, and when I do, they simply vanish before I can speak to them.

Eventually the dark lanes open on a vast square. At its far end, a huge tower reaches up into a whorl of sucking storm clouds. I can see a lot of human activity, people milling about, horses and carts and other things. But it's all ghost activity. The people are never more than silhouettes and whenever I get too close to any group the figures vanish.

All of this disturbs me greatly and in the end, I run about shouting in frustration and shaking my fist at that huge phallus of a tower and the clouds it penetrates.

But it does no good and only leads to more frustration as no one ever sees me or hears me. There is never anyone even solid enough to have complete eyes.

I wander in the square and eventually I reach a church, perhaps better described as a huge gothic cathedral. With incredible weariness descending on me, I go up the steps and inside. It's empty, yet alive with inky shadows. They're ugly things like cobwebs and bats that drip, crumble, and fly about

as a sort of stain of corruption on the church. Candles glow down at the front and they cast shadows away, including the hideous cobwebs. The brightest light is concentrated in a star shape near an altar. I see unlit candles there and feel compelled to go down and light one. After a few steps, I notice something bright beside me, turn and see a mirror. It's full length yet the image in it is only of the wall and a painting of Jesus behind me.

There is no me, and this terrifies me so much that I begin to run from the altar. I burst out of the church doors and into the street, seeing the darkness coalesce behind me as I move. A horrible black thing takes shape out of it and begins to pursue me. This is the monster I mentioned in our first meeting. It is a fearsome silhouette moving with the agility of a tiger. This predator seems to project the very essence of terror, and since it came from a church, I'm struck by the realization that I'm unholy and must be destroyed.

But as always, I do escape. This time losing it in the lanes just before I wake."

"I see a lot to look at in this dream," I said. "Yet there is nothing in it that should lead you to conclude that I'm somehow dreaming you."

"Oh, I forgot to mention that part. When I look in the mirror and see the painting of Jesus on the wall, Jesus has your face. That's how I figured it out. It's telling me that you are my creator. It's you who dreams me and are responsible if I'm something unholy that should be destroyed."

"Nonsense," I said as I hid my shaking hands under the table. "It's only natural that you'd see your doctor as a figure of salvation. The proof that I'm not dreaming you is that I'm wide-awake now as we speak. In your disturbed state, the boundary between dreams and reality is breaking down. You are losing your grip. You really have to reinforce your conscious self. What I want you to do right now is clench your fists and shout it out - I am real and not a dream! I

want you to do this at least three times a day, and each time you wake from a dream."

On his third and final visit, Cam caught me napping. I awoke in a startled state at my desk and saw him standing in the doorway. He looked shabby and rumped, like he'd not slept much.

I knew that I looked much the same. He'd left me confused after the last session. I felt more responsibility than usual, mainly because he was a patient whose fixation rested on me. It ate at my conscience that such a character was out there and suffering because he felt himself to be a product of my dreaming.

In my groggy state it took me some time to formulate some careful words, and I didn't get a chance to go with them because Cam ran up to me, leaned over the desk, grabbed the front of my shirt and shook me.

"Don't go on with nonsense," he said, his eyes shining with near hysteria. "I want to hear the details of your dream, the one you just had now before I entered."

I pushed his hands back and brushed down my shirt. "Okay, I guess it can't do any harm. Sit down and I'll try to remember it."

Cam sat and his face grew calm. The sun flashed gold on his watery eyes and it worked on me like a hypnotist's watch, drawing the memory out of my mind.

"In my dream I'm a magician and sorcerer, high in my tower wielding the symbols of the planets and universe. Yet I'm a miserly owner of these things and nearly all of my time is spent counting what I have. This time around, I find that a moon symbol has been stolen from me so I whirl my cloak and rise out of the window as a mighty force.

So great is my power that the day becomes night as I descend on the Earth, and I speed my search by becoming

omnipresent darkness feeling for the missing moonlight. I do find it and there is a ghostly figure holding this orb inside his chest in place of his heart.

This for some reason enrages me and I fly down as a massive black bird that pursues him . . . then it gets to be a long murky dream of a chase with an ending I can't quite remember."

"Try, you must remember," Cam said.

"I'll try," I said, since it seemed so important to him ... though I didn't want to as a feverish feeling had come over me while relating the dream. "Ah, now I remember more. I'm running in the darkness. Running endlessly, though I don't seem to be human. More like I'm some kind of animal or beast. I can feel the tremendous power of my limbs and predatory hunger as I run. But this ghostly man still escapes me at every turn; he runs and leaps with the power of a devil. Now he's getting over a high wall and escaping me for good, and I can see his face. He's "

"He's who? Who is the dream man? Tell me!" Cam shouted.

But I couldn't tell him and neither could I stand the memory of him grinning at me as he escaped over that wall. I looked down at his sickly features and thin madness-withered frame. Cam had never been a real person; he was my dream just as he said.

And he wouldn't escape this time. I moved slowly, surely, dreamlike -- tremendously aware of the golden light streaming in the window. It seemed to be heavenly light marking a certain moment of destiny.

Sliding open my drawer I let my fingers ease onto the handle of the Glock pistol I kept there for protection. Never taking my eyes from Cam, I pulled it out, stood and fired.

"Yes, yes," I heard him say as I pulled the trigger. Then the first bullet hit his chest, tearing open his shirt. The second got hit him in the face with a hammer blow that sent a dark

pattern of blood spots into the wall.

I'd expected him to vanish, and that I would wake. When it didn't happen I kept firing -- bullet after bullet knocking into his collapsing corpse. In the end, his body rested in a pool of blood on the floor and I ran around the desk to it.

Cam is gone now and it's certain that no one can dream him back to life. I've not traveled far to wake from my nightmare. In fact, I'm in another wing of this same institution, where I can see across the autumn grounds to the window of my old office.

My past life as a doctor seems like a dream. In it, they found me there chewing on the leg of Cam's corpse like some sort of human predator.

Yes, they all think that I'm mad, but all I did was interpret Cam's dreams, just as my doctor does for me now.

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Slug Hunt

A Walking Dead Man Tale

The cruelty of his small world was captured and shivering on the sticky web of the dream. Holes in the endless tumbled buildings and eroded faces in the concrete revealed a mood of agony and loss. He heard something snarl then the grind of teeth became the squeal of radials spinning through greenish wisps of smog.

He saw his wife again -- Janice was dead, gray and splashed with a violet shading of wine, blood and bruise. A derelict factory loomed over her like a squat giant. Up in the gloom he saw the city itself, what it had become ... a soulless

monstrosity made of the smoke and thunder of tarnished commerce ... a bone-grinder shaking mechanisms, devouring purposeless humanity.

A wall was blocking him; a wall had always blocked him. It was stone, brick, cement and all the metal of derailed trains and freeway wrecks. Severed limbs crowned the rubbish heaps at its base. Tar and blood bubbled in the cracks. It made him think of every shallow thug he'd ever been up against, all of the nasty bosses who'd fired him, and every bastard who'd ever insulted and underrated him. It was nearly everyone. Their faces flashed - warped and ugly as fresh skin grafts. They were the stopper, they'd beat him down, turned him into a broken man. There was nothing left and he thought that maybe his wife had been right in riding out of it on the bottle.

Wind gusted, and he was a giant, carrying all of the rage and hate of mankind as fury against the wall. Blood ran and flesh tore as he hammered at it with his fists, but it didn't come down. It couldn't come down when it was already fallen. All it could do was boom and amplify the misery like a hollow drum.

Jeff awoke on the spit and instantly remembered getting smashed and walking out of the city. The spit wasn't much better than the alleyways he'd been sleeping in -- it was a big hook of land made from garbage and fill and it stretched out into the lake. It had its share of stunted trees, wildlife and mutant grass. It also had ground water so poisonous it would eat your flesh like battery acid.

Waking was nearly as bad as dreaming. He was in a hobo roost and it was early morning, the sun sailing up high and rust-tinted in the trailing greenhouse exhaust of the nearby city. A number of bums were passed-out in the dirt and cardboard around him. On one side, there were shabby huts of crate-board, corrugated tin and cardboard. Thorn bushes and stunted trees were to his left and gulls squawked directly overhead. Across from him was a pond of industrial waste. In

the distance sailboats drifted on milky Lake Ontario.

Licks of sulfur and filaments of silver spun among green bubbles and strands of foul brown smoke. As he tried to settle his swimming head, he unwittingly focused on a blob of dark mud floating to shore. He was sure his life was over. He wasn't physically finished like the bums around him but he was fast on his way. The binges were getting worse, and he had little to live for anyway. He'd no property left and a tax debt compounding to mind-boggling numbers. His wife was buried, and his daughter was a hooker ... his son armed and dangerous on those rare days when he got out. For Jeff the bottle of life was empty. Now it was time to choke on the dregs at the bottom, and to be better than the rest. If you knew you were dead, killed by fate, you were better than the others who were too blind to know.

On the shore, the lump of mud began to crawl like a worm and Jeff's negative thoughts vanished as he studied it.

Sometimes it shimmered like a bluebottle fly, and at other moments it was slime green. It had a way of sliding forward that was quicksilver smooth and it moved right up to the closest wino - a guy with a sherry face of popped veins - formed a gross sucker at its front and glued itself to the man's forehead.

For a second Jeff was sure he'd become a hallucinating wet brain already, but when the worm oozed in the man's ear the horror of it became the truth. It wasn't long and the bum's eyes opened. They were lifeless eyes, a dead-as-maggots stare.

The shakes hitting him, Jeff began to rise, but before he was halfway up a muzzle-flash caught his eye. There was a crack and a heavy dull thud as the head of the derelict behind him became the leading edge of a slapping splash of blood and brain matter.

Throwing himself to the side, Jeff rolled and crawled off through Frisbee-sized mushrooms. Crushed cans, rotted

canvass and heaps of cigarette butts marked the edge of some thorn bushes, and while he was screened by them a couple more shots thundered into the roost.

Reaching a mound of iron ore pellets, Jeff moved out of the brush and tried to spot the gunman. A small dump was beyond the mound and the killer was on the far side of it, reloading in a patch of crabgrass. He was blond, Nordic, a bodybuilder wearing brown slacks and a checked hunting jacket. From his angle he wouldn't have seen the pond worm in the man's ear, and it was some of the others he'd shot. That meant he was a pure killer, an off-duty cop or a vagrant-hater out shooting bums on the spit for Saturday morning sport; maybe even a Neo-Nazi out for practice.

Jeff felt anger convulse, close like a claw in his stomach. The killer took a new form. He became the embodiment of everything Jeff hated -- the lucky sophisticated guy who had nothing better to do than exterminate the unfortunate. A new breed of man that had emerged a few years back, when kicking the downtrodden became politically popular. Jeff swore under his breath. He intended to get even. It would be a final strike at the authority he'd always hated. It was the one thing he had left -- his belief that all authority, every man, every system had to be challenged. If the enemy had taken shape as a killer, then maybe it was because it had killed his life already.

Moving from behind the ore heap, Jeff dashed through the dump, dodging decaying furniture, rusted drums and spikes of broken glass and metal. He got halfway across before a huge spring caught his foot and threw him into the rusted-out hulk of a pickup truck.

Hearing Jeff fall the gunman spun around and fired. The slug hit the wreck with the wham of a heavy metal fist and opened up the hood like it was the lid of a sardine can.

Jeff kept moving, ducking behind wet heaps of cardboard and newspaper, continuing his advance on the gunman. Two

slugs pounded at his heels then he saw the gunman move to reload. Favoring his weak leg, Jeff rushed into some bushes, finding cover before the gunman could trigger again.

Rays from the swollen sun glossed the sweat on the gunman's brow. His expression was intense and he seemed about to lose his cool. It was obvious that he hadn't expected one of the bums to fight a war with him. He shuffled around nervously in the crab grass, looking for his target.

Jeff had taken note that his weapon was a three-shooter, and he began by tossing an empty Five Star sherry bottle. The gunman fired and shattered it where it landed, and then he scratched his head and moved over into the dump.

Positions were now reversed, with the gunman behind a mound of crushed bricks and Jeff near the patch of grass. It was time to take a risk; Jeff emerged from the bushes and dived at the edge of the grass, getting behind a weedy mound as a slug kicked up sod.

Risking it again, Jeff popped his head out. A slug whistled by and sawed a limb off a dead maple. And that was the three. He'd have to load another clip.

Litter, wind and dust were flying in every alleyway, down the hard years of Jeff's life. His teeth and jaws were locked bands of iron. Limping, beaten man that he was he pulled up strength from discarded dreams, crumpled steel and rust. Jeff was a gaunt man, a half-crippled man, his face was scarred and creased and dark with stubble. But it was the eyes that told his story; they weren't wino dead -- they were white embers, hot with fire from a life too terrible to think about.

It was too late to shoot, so the gunman tried to bash Jeff down with the barrel, and he found it was too late for that too. Jeff ploughed into him like a train, thrusting rusted metal into his belly. It penetrated like the jagged fender of a wreck, then a hot river poured between his legs and flame was in his eyes as his intestines spilled out on the spit.

Jeff picked up the gun, finding it to be a TAR-HUNT Slug

Rifle. Only a monster would hunt with such a weapon. It was like killing ants with boulders. Yet it was loaded and Jeff figured he might need the three shots. He was going back for the poor guy with the worm eating his brain, to put him out of his misery.

There was little to contemplate other than the screech of gulls and the birthmark-colored clouds slipping over the sun. He was thirsty and he knew there was no clean water on the spit. He would have to find a bottle. Then, as he came off the earth path leading to the roost, he forgot his thirst.

Three men had been decapitated by the TAR-HUNT slugs and the corpses were mounds of raw flesh, crawling with ants and horseflies. The premature carrion stink was so vile that the roost was impossible to enter. The other derelicts had fled, four or five of them, and the guy with the pond worm in his brain was also gone.

Scouting for them he doubled around to the far side of the makeshift huts. Fat drops of blood led up to the ramshackle construction. A huge peeling Pepsi sign served as a door. It had once been electric, now it shone with blood traces.

Jeff's hunter instinct made him hesitate. He picked up a stone and heaved it at the side of the hut. There was shuffling on cardboard and a moan of pain inside.

The door began to creak open. Something felt wrong, so Jeff raised his weapon. A man came out slowly. He was dragging his feet, his arms hung limp and his entire body was alive with bloodsucking worms. Only his mouth was clear and it poured with blood and moaning.

As the door blew shut, Jeff squeezed the trigger, the kick of the gun hitting him like a horse hoof. He saw the man's middle disappear in a whirlpool of violet as he was thrown against the Pepsi sign. It crumpled easy as tinfoil and the wall fell apart, a spray of gore and worms shooting in to coat the interior.

Gray light washed in and Jeff saw the other bodies, all of

them crawling with worms, except the original one. And he only knew it by the shoes because the body was now wrapped in a milky web.

Shooting would be pointless. Fire was a better idea. He fumbled for his lighter, and as the silver flashed from his pocket, the webbing on the man's head began to split.

A green-purple tentacle waggled out. Blister-like suckers lined its underside. It got a hold on the wall and pushed out two more tentacles, and then it pulled itself the rest of the way out. Chunks of skull fell away and hung on hinges of webbing as it oozed up the wall. There were six tentacles in all, the man's brain made the body. It pulsed with several colors of ghastly liquid and had knobs of varicose veins at the bases of the tentacles. A huge blister in the center appeared to be a morbid eye.

Jeff's teeth chattered. He decided to shoot, but when he raised the rifle, he found that he couldn't will his trembling finger to pull the trigger. Throwing the gun down he went back to the lighter and had the same problem again when he tried to start a fire.

The brain worm was now moving toward him -- in the same easy way it'd moved when it had been tiny. Hate was another set of tentacles emanating from it. Paralyzing hate. Jeff could feel its loathing of him -- it was a tangible thing, as real as the green wisps of poison over the place of its birth. It invaded his mind, screaming with a power of murderous extermination. Blistered tentacles shot like lightning to the roots of his soul. Razor ribbons of pain twisted in his bowels. Burrowing down the creature found the umbilicus it needed to sever to end his existence.

And then a dam burst. Another kind of hate - fire-bright - emerged. Jeff's hate, his loathing of a world that had robbed, poisoned and deadened him. All of the angry faces flooded up like a grotesque bubbling of blood; their hunger an inner rain of glass splinters and knives.

Jeff heard the creature scream from the pain of it. It had been about to put a tentacle on his foot. He kicked it away violently and watched it retreat to the fallen hut.

Jeff's heart was thumping, its beat strengthened. The creature had crawled to the bottom of him and he'd refused to die. Just like that he could refuse to die for everyone else.

Running to the farthest hut he set fire to it with his lighter and watched as the flames licked up fast. Moving around the huts, he created a circle of flame that quickly grew to a roaring column of crimson and soot. And he didn't wait around; he turned and dashed across the spit wasteland, getting a hundred yards before the screaming of the burning brain worm began. The sounds were psychic emanations, sharp bone fragments exploding in his head.

He stumbled and began to crawl on the lumpy earth, and in time, his mind cleared. The city was ahead and it was like another monster, with tentacles of smog. He could see that it lived out of death, greed, envy and hate. Yet his own hate was gone, burned to ashes with the brain worm. Somehow, the creature had saved him, exorcised him, and his thirst for life had returned. He knew he would go on to a new life. He would still limp but he'd no longer be crippled by self-pity and hate.

He thought about the worms. If monsters were growing on the spit, it was probably too late to stop it. Something terrible was on the way. Yet people had let their own inner monsters thrive and grow, and it was too late to stop that. The brain worms were something they had earned.

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Red Light Lady

A Walking Dead Man Tale

T-Bone's work boots squeaked grossly as he walked down the damp access tunnel. The sound loud enough that a rat heard it and squealed as it dived through the grid and down the cracks leading to the subway corridor. A train was already rumbling below, so he paused, staring at trickling ground water and bleach stains on the eroded wall. Moments later the door stopped shaking and he produced his key, threw back two huge bolts and entered.

Concrete dust gave the stuffy air an aged taste. Drifting down because of the nearby trains, it had coated nearly everything -- his girly pictures, toolboxes, chairs and the bank of screens. A cleanup would help so he pulled some rags from his pack and polished the panel, screens and his leather chair. He sat for a moment with his feet on an orange crate and rolled the new filter circuit in his palm. A moment later, he got up, slid the panel drawer out and inserted it.

As the panel closed, the button locked and ten monitors lit up, their light combining with the single fading fluorescent bulb, giving the room a sort of movie-theatre feeling. Using the keyboard, T-Bone edited the settings file, and then he rebooted the operations computer and watched as the screens refocused.

A similar but slightly different picture showed on all ten screens. And with the new filter the images on the centre screen were clear video -- effects like pink sunlight, underwater blur and depth distortion were now gone. T-Bone could see the activity at ten city intersections, and by simply changing the coordinates, he could switch to nearly any intersection in the Greater Toronto Area and lock it in the centre screen for a better view.

T-Bone's hobby was highly illegal and also highly secret as only he knew of it. No one else would believe it to be possible. Two years ago, T-Bone had moved to Toronto to aid with the red-light project -- the installation of more red-light cameras at city intersections. The system itself detected red-light jumpers by recording their plate numbers. Privacy rules

dictated the system be set to see nothing else. And at Transit HQ, which was high above T-Bone, they did see nothing else. Up there the city computers and banks kept the system working, reporting system failures and pouring gold into the treasury as violators were issued computer-generated tickets.

The red light system saved lives, but in spite of the wonderful advantages of it there were always nasty people questioning it and filing legal challenges. Privacy crackpots -- T-Bone saw them as that. Always worrying that Big Brother would be secretly watching everything and invading citizen privacy. Silly folks they were -- T-Bone knew Big Brother wasn't watching. In installing the new system he'd made sure it was foolproof. Government officials and police could not use it as a general surveillance tool.

Time jades all people, and T-Bone had been hired to maintain the system as well -- which was just a little too much temptation. He'd wanted to do some experimenting with the camera system and the software, so he'd run a cable straight down to this abandoned subway service room and built his custom system using discarded systems and parts. A thing of beauty it worked in conjunction with the main system. The main computers could go right on recording violators while T-Bone tinkered around, honing his underground lair into an electronic den where he could spy on city intersections.

It had been a boring scene at first, with the distortion, and weird colors and lack of control. Yet odd as it was he'd often sat in his chair for hours. He watched workers stream across the walks at rush hour, kids going to and from school, Friday night drunks and midnight raccoons. Parades and rallies, weddings and funerals all went by in the pink sunlight. It was a dim, distorted alien world where none of the people were quite right, and it suited him. The human aliens were beings he really couldn't fathom. Sometimes he hated them and wished the fizz and snow of the screens could somehow replace them and fill the world with the peace of silent noise. He couldn't grasp their motives and he didn't care about the

things they cared about? They were all losers hiding from the fact that they'd soon be bones rattling in a coffin.

He'd never really belonged in any world -- though he hid his attitude with a wide smile and strong handshake. T-Bone, the friendly mulatto engineer, always working in mostly white corporations, and he had some real technical brains behind his simple tradesman-like facade.

Ugly things hide behind simple names. An ugly demonic thing likely hid behind the word Earth. Even his name - T-Bone - had an ugly story attached to it. He was originally from Australia and his name was Larry -- his family had moved like Gypsies across that wilderness. A rough life and he was often left with abusive relatives. At age ten he'd been brutally raped by an uncle on the sand beach at Highland Falls. And though he didn't call the police, some of the other kids had witnessed the crime from the bushes. Unidentified men from town strangled his uncle a week later, and the day Larry started school was the day he got tagged with his nickname. The other boys were sitting on the bridge railing as he passed and as he wasn't part of the local gang he passed silently and apprehensively, ignoring their whispers and giggling. Then one boy, Eddie suddenly shouted "The Bone! We saw you get the Bone!" And they all roared with laughter as he turned white and started to run. At school the nickname became his name -- even the teachers picked it up without knowing the reason behind it. He returned to Highland Falls that first evening, planning to jump and drown himself -- his self-esteem sinking right into the mud at the bottom when he discovered that he was a coward.

By the time T-Bone's family moved on the damage had been done -- the loner's personality had been cast, and a host of devils lurked inside of it -- weird homophobia, distrust, brooding, anger, resentment and the rejection of all of the usual values society tagged to individuals. It was a perfect personality mix for the cameras -- he felt calm and in his proper place watching a distorted world of intersections and

people obeying lights that he could care less about.

His reason for the new filter and the end of distortion was women. The city had a lot of beautiful women and he wanted more than a distorted view of some of them. There was one in particular he wanted to see in true color, and as the memory of her rose in his mind he began hurriedly switching through intersections along the grid, many of them with simple view cams he'd added himself. What was it? Silver Birch and Jenson Ave -- that was the corner -- somewhere in the 300 range. Running a string he watched as all ten screens blinked through intersections, then something caught his eye and he hit the stop key. It was a light jump in progress on the Mansion Road; a big sucker of a truck barreling through at high speed, its silver box leaving waves of distortion on the screen as it flashed by. Quickly switching to the next intersection on the route, T-Bone watched the truck approach. A young woman pushing a carriage was just getting across. "Thank God," he thought, "I sure don't want to see a baby get pan caked." Then a man appeared on the crosswalk. T-Bone's view showed him from the rear. Brown-skinned like him and wearing a blue suit. He seemed to be stoned or something as he stopped in the centre and faced the oncoming truck.

It was still a hundred metres away, and T-Bone bit his lip, wondering why the idiot wasn't getting off the road. Then his eyes widened in amazement as the man suddenly tried to escape. He ran for the right side, throwing his arms out as he tried to leap. Something light -- gossamer and almost invisible flashed in front the truck, and then it was gone. But the man remained -- he hadn't been fast enough and was now food for the big grill.

The truck nailed him. T-Bone saw the crazed eyes of the Chinese driver, the impact and the body bouncing high in the air -- bordered by blood spray as it headed straight for him.

Frightened and gasping, he fell out of his chair and the orange crate clattered as it overturned. Sitting up he saw

purplish liquid pouring on the screen. Switching back through the grid he tried to find the truck, but it failed to show at the next light.

He had a recording of the accident, so he switched the whole thing to the center screen and replayed a version of it minus the distortion. "Damn shit," he muttered as the body and blood spray flew straight for him again. With his arms spread, and shooting up at about forty-five degrees, the guy looked like some sort of super hero taking flight. Only it was a death flight -- and T-Bone wiped his brow with a handkerchief as he watched red blood pour on the lens.

"Bad news day," he thought, and then he looked at his watch. Nearly nine p.m. and if he wasted any more time he would miss her. Switching back through the lights he got Silver Birch and Jenson on one of the screens and then switched into the centre for a better view.

Ten minutes passed without a single person passing by. A few cars trailed exhaust as they drove slowly through the intersection. Other than that it was about as exciting as staring at a still of plastic fruit. Then she appeared, coming off the side street. Her windblown platinum blonde hair excited him. Everything about her turned him on. Only he wasn't quite sure why. She wasn't the type he'd gone for in the past. Robust, healthy women had been his preference. This one was more like a ghost. Pale skin, slim with delicate features and always wearing white -- dresses thin as gossamer. The whole effect enhanced by her long luxurious legs. Other women were dragged and bent by the wind, but she floated into it, fluttering like a flag of beauty. Seeing her close up and in true color made him gasp. And at that moment, she seemed to look his way, her eyes like twinkling crystal.

Then she was gone, hidden in the shadows of an oak tree and T-Bone nearly ran to the screen, trying to see more of her. A few seconds passed then he saw a bit of silky white -- her legs moving as she went up the steps to her home.

She lived in the second house up from the north corner, a two-story frame dwelling. A weed garden and its riot of wildflowers covered the front, and a huge oak tree blocked any view of the living room window. Hitting the keyboard, T-Bone used a code that would cause the red-light camera to swing. This being a repair tool to fix circuits remotely -- only T-Bone had modified the code so he could move the lens and hold a certain view. The scene he chose being her bedroom window. He couldn't see much of it, just a glitter of dark glass with a leafy branch swaying in front of it most of the time. But it was enough to lock him there for more than two hours.

Near midnight, the bedroom light came on and he saw her moving past the window. He remained frozen and impassive as he watched her brush her hair. After that she left the room, returning ten minutes later. She pulled off her top and bra, walked to the window and opened it a crack. T-Bone stared with hypnotized fascination as she smiled out at the night sky.

Then the lights went out, and T-Bone sighed deeply and rose from his chair. There hadn't been a man in the room with her and that made him happy. If there had been a lover, it would have meant no in for him. A lover would've meant he would never have her. But now he saw opportunity and his stony face broke into a grin.

T-Bone's happiness was short-lived. Three days passed and she didn't show at the lights and her bedroom light didn't come on. A state of apprehension and worry began to eat at him. He began to fear the worst. Using the secret room in the daytime was too risky, but he still thought of chancing it as a way to see if she came out of her house in the morning or at noon. One more day passed and he decided to compromise and simply go to the corner of Silver Birch and Jenson, hang around and see if he encountered her.

He knew that simply standing on the corner all day could get

him reported by the neighborhood watch people, so he dressed in a repair outfit and took a city van. The day was sunny, his mood gloomy -- but that didn't bother him as his mood was nearly always on a downer. If he could catch sight of her things would change.

Silver Birch was a winding street overarched with maples. There were also a number of the namesake birch trees in front of mostly small bungalow-style houses. Her house was in the older section of the street and as he approached the intersection he felt a twinge of guilt. Parking right out front would be too obvious and he knew that if he tempted himself he would try to stare in the windows. For the sake of self-control he pulled over before he got to the intersection, in a spot where he had a clear view of the sidewalk and the lights. If she came out he would see her, and that would be good enough.

Two hours passed -- and T-Bone saw in close-up some of the same people he used to watch by camera, back when it was possible to spy openly during the daylight hours. It was interesting but not all that exciting -- and all the while he kept biting his nails, hoping she would show. She didn't and noon hour arrived with the sunlight shifting out of the trees and onto the van. He started to sweat in the heat and with the sweat came semi-delirium and worry. Why was nobody coming out of that house? What had happened?

Finally, it was too much and he got out, deciding to walk by for a closer look. There was nobody on the street and as he stepped to the shady sidewalk, a cool breeze swept him and he felt a lot better. At the corner, he waited on the light, and then he sauntered past the first house toward the riotous weed garden that marked her house. He faced straight ahead as he passed, then when he was at the driveway he took a quick glance.

And what he saw surprised him so much, he stopped, turned to face the house and gaped. The place was a dilapidated, boarded wreck, crouched in rubble, trash and weeds. A faded

for sale sign stood in the centre of the yard, nearly buried by long grass. The driveway was cracked like it had been through an earthquake. And the weed garden wasn't a garden at all; it was just weeds. Paint peeled on the sills and the whole place seemed to be on a tilt. No one could possibly be living there; no one could have lived there for at least ten years.

His hair stiffened and a feeling of eerie fear crept in his blood as he raised his eyes to the bedroom window. It was the only window in the house that wasn't boarded and the glass was intact. It shone with dust and darkness, like cellophane on a well of emptiness. All of T-Bone's dreams vanished as he stared at it -- then he lifted his eyes to the moldy shingles on the roof above and felt a tear falling across his cheek.

A gust of wind blew through the weeds, and a sheet of yellowed newsprint rose and blew past him. Suddenly the mix of sadness and fear became too much and he turned and began to run. Jumping into the van, he slammed the door, and moments later he'd swung a U-turn and was speeding away.

Back in his technological lair, T-Bone, the sad eye of the underground, stared listlessly at the nighttime intersections. There was nothing to really watch for now that she was gone. Force of habit kept him going more than anything else. Sometimes as he watched empty roads and the clock ticking past 3 am, he realized he'd been doing this so long he didn't know of anything else to do.

But mostly he realized nothing, and just stared, feeling somewhat dead inside like he'd finally gone all of the way and actually turned into a mindless camera. But not quite because he still had a bit of the predatory instinct and often switched through various lights to interesting scenes. At the end of about three weeks, he had taken to watching the West Queen Street strip, an area of heavy drug use and prostitution. On

one corner, a number of hookers hung out. Over three days of observation he learned about all that anyone could need to know about their sordid lives.

But like a voyeur, he kept watching anyway -- seeing fat johns and their filthy laughter and pimps yanking hair as they pulled the drugged-out girls from the gutters at 2 a.m.

One Friday night as he stared into the darkness, the rubbish and the trickling sewer water, he saw something different. He saw her -- his platinum lover, out strolling in the night breeze. His heart leapt but his eyes didn't believe what they were seeing. T-Bone rubbed them hard, but she didn't disappear. Red from the flashing light glowed on her pale skin. She moved forward with the slender beauty of a tigress. As always, she wore white and this time it was shorts and a halter-top; an outfit that highlighted her perfect long legs. As she reached the centre of the intersection she looked his way; the moonlight glittering in her eyes giving him the feeling that that she could see right through the camera to him in his lair.

As she turned away, his heart skipped a beat and then nearly burst as a red Porsche suddenly sped through the light, blowing its horn. She leapt out of the way so fast he could barely believe it and then she walked off into the shadows and was gone.

T-Bone's mission in life was to find her again. Now that he knew she was out there he would never give up. A fantasy developed where he would spot her on camera and run to his car, race to her and pick her up. To aid in making the dream come true he worked on the equipment, developing new settings so he could switch through intersections and swivel the cameras faster. To his rear, he installed a map of the city; it covered the whole wall and had two bright red dots marked on it -- one marking her home intersection and the other marking the new one she had showed at on the other

side of town.

There wasn't any time to look at the clearer focus in the centre screen; his eyes flashed across all ten screens, absorbing the distortion, winking lights and blue-tinted night. T-Bone flew across the intersections like a racecar driver going off on ten roads at the same time ... a mind-boggling effort that possessed him -- so much so that he sat there with the determined look of a madman as he hammered at his keypad and controls. On the Friday following her reappearance he really went out of control -- shooting through the lights on a trip that lasted for hours. By 2 a.m., which he considered prime time, he didn't think he could go on anymore. Horrible pain stabbed at his eyes, colored lights and distortion swam in his aching head and his stomach had turned sour on him. But he couldn't stop himself; he kept working the night until finally he fell right out of his chair and vomited wickedly.

He thought his entire stomach lining was going to be thrown, but after a minute he felt a bit relieved and raised his head. And it was then that he saw her -- just a glimpse as she had already crossed the street. The platinum hair, profile and her way of walking were unmistakable -- bouncing to his feet he ran closer to the screen, slipped on his own vomit and moaned miserably as he hit the floor.

In the daytime T-Bone was often dead tired and dragging himself like a sack. Lack of sleep showed as drooping purple bags under his eyes. What work he couldn't put off he passed on to subordinates. He had a private lakeside office in a high-rise but no secretary so it was easy to leave the door closed most of the time. In the afternoons he slept with his face on the desk -- an uneasy sleep peppered with haunting dreams. She was there in bizarre dream intersections and alleyways, always tossing him fleeting smiles and then vanishing before he could reach her. Often he woke in a state of burning frustration, and though

he hadn't drank in the past he now kept whiskey in his drawer. A solid shot of Club and he'd stroll to the window, look out at the distant lake and islands and try not to think of her -- and it often worked for a short few minutes. But not any longer than that -- she always escaped him but he could not escape the ghostly image of her always rising in his mind.

As a loner he didn't have friends he could use as a distraction -- it was always the reek of whiskey and then his feet pulling him beneath the smoggy sunrise to damp darkness and his voyeur's lair. Over a few weeks, he spotted her a few times. Just fleeting glances and never a solid sighting. Even in his worst states of high frustration, he still went carefully to the map and marked sightings, using a large red dot.

When his luck improved, it was again a Friday night -- rather than jumping the system through lights, he'd decided to take it easy and study the crowds streaming from various events around the city. A formally dressed concert hall crowd was spilling across a Yonge Street intersection, and as it began to thin, she appeared. Her long white dress elegant, revealing a sophisticated side of her personality he hadn't seen before. Headlights flashed across her face as she walked across the street headed directly for a handsome gentleman leaning on a newspaper box. Her eyes glittered like gems or like the eyes of a woman in love. And in that instant T-Bone felt jealously he'd never felt before. His hands rose from the keyboard and he gripped the air. Then when he saw that the man was only lighting a smoke, and she was just passing him, a great feeling of relief passed over him and he slumped in his chair and watched calmly as she vanished in the night-lights.

She began to appear almost nightly and T-Bone spent a great deal of time studying the map. At one point, he noticed that she grew closer to his lair with each sighting and he began to believe she was coming to him -- driven by passion. But rather than arrive she outright passed him, appearing next at a set of lights farther north.

T-Bone was heartbroken by this and after the sighting, he swore he would get to her; if only he could somehow study the map and predict where she would appear next. At work he'd all but forgotten about his job as he sat locked in his office drinking and staring at a replica of the map. Yet the more he studied it the more confused he grew. Trying to make a logical pattern out of the dots proved elusive because there were endless patterns you could create and apply, and never know if they were valid.

Heaps of paper napkins grew on the floor as T-Bone worked at tracing every pattern possible; angel faces, demon claws, shapes of vehicles, birds, bears, ornaments and plants -- his drawing seemed endless. And the connection of dots was never quite right -- somehow he always knew it, discarded his work and started again.

Friday arrived again -- and with so many sightings on Friday, T-Bone arrived at the office with a bunch of note pads and a bottle of whiskey. By the afternoon, he was drunk with crumpled paper all around him. His hands shook so much he couldn't write so he threw the pen aside in frustration and leaned back in his chair. His vision swam in an alcoholic haze as he stared at a large copy of the map tacked on the wall. Then things got so blurry he could see nothing but the red dots marking the intersections where she'd appeared. The dots seemed to float on their own in midair and then they connected and he saw a word.

"LOVE," he said it aloud, and then he knocked over his whiskey bottle and pulled himself up. The chair he simply threw aside as he hurried to the map. Staggering slightly he pulled a red pen from his pocket and as carefully as he could he connected to dots the way he'd seen them. When he was finished, he'd spelled the word LOVE at an angle across the city map. It was almost perfect, except that the last dot had not been filled in yet. T-Bone knew beyond any doubt that this was it and that last dot was the intersection where she would appear next.

T-Bone had sobered up by sunset. Stopping off at his downtown apartment he showered, shaved and put on a light suit. He took his city wagon, driving leisurely across town. The sun was falling in a blaze of red glory that seemed pointless as a backdrop to the everyday people on the sidewalks. Lights in the sky held little meaning or beauty for him -- all of his faith had been placed in the glittering eyes of a woman. The sun couldn't sink fast enough and twilight couldn't sift in soon enough for T-Bone. Nightfall meant he would see her and this time he would not let her get away.

As he reached the corner of Grace and Allan, the last rays of sunset were rising like streamers of fire over the western treetops. Almost like a natural fireworks celebration indicating a great event to come. Getting out of the car, he looked around at the quiet neighbourhood, and then he took a walk to get the feel of the intersection.

The streetlamps came on as he reached the lights, giving him a better view of the houses. This was a clean residential street of front gardens, porches and neat fences. Only one house looked out of place -- an abandoned place on the northeast corner. It was overgrown with weeds and in bad repair, much like the house where he'd first spotted her. This one didn't even have a for sale sign in the yard -- like the owners had given up on attempts to sell it.

T-Bone crossed the road and stood out front for a few minutes, staring in at the dark cobwebby windows. He saw nothing and all he heard and felt were wind chimes and the breeze. A gentle tinkling and touch that would likely have spooked others raised T-Bone to a state of elation.

He knew the time wasn't right -- she wouldn't show this early. But just knowing she would was enough to cheer him. His feet took him back to the car, where he sat and waited in a state of certainty underwritten with feelings of aching romance. He felt like a groom, who knew his bride would

eventually appear.

The breeze drifted softly through the window and his hair as the hours passed, and as 2 a.m. approached, he began to stir like a corpse in its coffin. His new suit scratched his chest and knees as he opened the door and eased himself out. Stepping to the sidewalk, he stretched, raising his arms high -- an unwitting worshipper of the full moon flying high in the ragged fleece of leaf and cirrus angel hair above.

Fresh lilac-scented air filled his nostrils, and he felt unusually strong and exhilarated as he walked to the lights. Once there he leaned on a newspaper box and studied the deep shadows and crowded houses. There wasn't any late night traffic on the deserted street and the only sounds now were vague snatches of party music carried in on the breeze. His eyes turned to the abandoned house across the road. The grounds were shrouded in shadow and darkness, but moonlight spilled across the treetops and spotlighted some of the higher windows with ghostly light. He studied a weird reflection of the moon in the glass, and then a sports car suddenly whooshed by on the road and broke his concentration.

T-Bone watched the red taillights recede in the night then he looked back at the house and saw a flash of gossamer in the driveway. It was her -- walking out to the sidewalk, and even in deep darkness her skin shone with pale moonlight. He could see the heavenly glitter of her eyes and her silky crown of platinum hair even before she came under the lamps.

Her step was purposeful, like a woman who knew where she was headed and was perhaps hurrying in the darkness due to fear of what might lurk in the night. Her dress was light and silky and open at the neckline. The breeze blew its folds high, revealing dazzling legs. As she reached the corner, the light flooded down on her face -- perfect cherry lips and a small nose. Her expression self-absorbed like some inner turmoil had her slightly upset.

She didn't notice T-Bone at all; her eyes failing to grant him

recognition as she began to cross. She was headed straight for him, but in spite of that he couldn't wait. Stepping away from the box, he moved toward her, blocking her path so she'd be forced to speak to him there in the centre of the street.

He was almost face to face with her when she noticed him approaching. Her reaction was a startled glance; she halted immediately, began to back off and when she saw that T-Bone was still stepping up she turned and began to run straight up the middle of the road.

T-Bone hesitated for a moment, and then he shouted, "No, you can't run from me this time! Wait! Please!"

But she didn't listen and he could see her escaping. Turning he began to pursue her, sprinting as fast as he could. An eerie feeling swept him; it was almost the same as all of those nights of pursuing her by camera, except that this time he could really feel the chase, wind in his face and the exhilaration of a pounding heart.

She didn't vanish this time, and he gained on her rapidly. He knew he'd have her in few seconds and as he ran, he dared not take his eyes from her fluttering form for fear she would be gone. He saw her long legs moving as swiftly as his and then she was running no longer. Quick as a dancer, she stopped and turned; he saw her beautiful smile and blowing dress -- saw them fade and vanish, replaced by headlights and the grill of a speeding truck.

T-Bone had enough time to jump aside, but he didn't do it. He just kept running toward the truck and certain death. He kept running because he knew his dream woman was a ghost. He'd known since that night at the Silver Birch intersection when he'd seen the abandoned house.

In life, he could not have her and so he'd decided to join her in death. He was certain she loved him or she wouldn't have left him that message on the map. And if she cared that much then he wouldn't let trucks or red lights get in his way

again. Raising his arms, he smiled as he ran, and when the truck hit him, he flew so high in the air his body landed in the telephone wires. But he saw none of that -- T-Bone saw ephemeral flashes, a world of pink sunlight, blue-tinted night and distortion. The alien world he'd seen through the unfiltered cameras, and ahead on the street, he saw her, smiling as she waited for him on the corner of Silver Birch and Jenson.

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Chasing the Headhunter

A Walking Dead Man Tale

Russ Jameson looked across the city from the steps of the reference library. It was late spring and the heart of New Toronto rose up from a vibrant green landscape. Domes and the cubes and rectangles of high-rises followed a soft angle down to the lake. The sight was as nice as the fresh air. Russ preferred his hometown to all other atmospheres, even though he was a well-traveled person.

Reaching the bottom of the steps, he flipped his red spring jacket over his shoulder and strolled down the fused-glass footpath, feeling quite carefree as he unconsciously followed one of his shortcuts across the lush green-belt center of the city. He felt carefree because this was the first day of his spring break, although it wasn't an official break since he was living off a grant and advance he'd received to research and write a scholarly book. The work wouldn't make him wealthy so soon he'd have to decide whether to return to teaching or propose another book -- preferably a book that would involve some travel.

The walk added a rosy hue to Russ's face; he stopped and looked up at a corporate tower. A thick-lipped smile betrayed

his wandering thoughts. He knew little about the real world of business and labor, and for all of his travels he knew little about the modern world. Most of his intellectual life and best thoughts belonged to the dusty pages of the past. He lived in two worlds and the one he walked in was certainly an uglier ball of confusion than he understood it to be. The greening of the city over the last decade and the ultra-modern beauty of its unique designs were all it took to convince him that things were on track.

He approached Bain Meadows inhaling fragrances that seemed to be the sweetness of life itself. A feeling of exhilaration swept over him and he broke into a run, following a path that snaked through a wooded area of the park before cutting a long curve across the wide meadow. Russ felt wonderful, like he was on top of the world with a second wind, drawn on to the future by a silver cord of power. He watched his feet race through pools of light and shadow on the hard earth path, then he raised his arms as though crossing a finish line victorious, looked up and let the leafy boughs of the trees sweep his mind like a fast motion picture.

One of the shadows unexpectedly turned to mud, he slid and tumbled on the path, and before he could rise, he heard a piercing scream

Jumping to his feet, he turned to the sound. A grassy dune rose up out of some tangled underbrush and two blurry forms were struggling in the sunlight at the crest. Russ had given his head a bad knock. He squinted, trying to see a bit better. The smaller person, a young woman with long dark hair, had fallen to the grass. Twinklings of bright light like those from a signal mirror were rotating in a circular pattern around the aggressor. Russ's head cleared some and he saw that the reflections were from a polished knife a tall man was swinging round and round. Splinters of silver jabbed at his eyes repeatedly as the man arced the blade and viciously struck the woman.

It was too late to save her but Russ still stumbled through the brush and up the side of the dune, ready to grapple with the killer. His eyesight returned, but a hot flash came with it and he fell to his knees. He got a momentary look at the killer's face and an object swinging on his belt, and then he saw spots of liquid silver as his thoughts fell away into the darkness.

Russ's eyes opened, he was on his back staring up at an enormous dark cloud. He recalled what had happened and jumped up. He looked around quickly, fearing he would be jumped by the killer. But no one was around. He figured that he must've surprised him and scared him off. The body of the girl was sprawled in the grass at the top of the dune. He didn't have to examine her to know she was dead. She'd been mutilated. Stepping closer he noted that she was wearing an open brown sweater and a halter dress. She'd been very beautiful and her death made him sad. He turned his gaze away and shook his head; he couldn't bear to look at her any longer. The knife was beside her in some weeds; a fancy hunting knife with a marbled hilt.

Sitting down in the grass, he thought things over, finding thinking difficult when his mind was overloaded from work and shock. If the body and knife weren't in front of him, he would've believed it all to be a stroke and accompanying hallucinations. It occurred to him that it wouldn't look good if he went to the police with a hazy description of a killer about his own size, age and height. They'd note the scrapes from his fall and think he was guilty.

He could show them the knife. It would have prints on it and prove his innocence - unless? Unless, and a scary thought dawned in Russ's mind. Unless the killer had wiped it clean and left it there to frame him. After all, he could've killed him while he was unconscious. Maybe he had left him alive so he could take the rap.

The more he thought it over the more he was sure that was it, and it meant his only option was to take the knife and

track the killer on his own. A gut feeling told him there was no other way.

The whole thing had him spooked and more than a little frightened. He made his way out of the area cautiously, keeping off the path and in the bushes to make sure he wasn't seen. Reaching the meadow, he peeked from the underbrush and saw a sprinkling of people strolling in the field, enjoying the last days of what had been a poet's spring.

Keeping to the southern edge, he paced through a carpet of grass and wildflowers that hummed and chirped with life. It was a short walk to the university grounds and he got there without encountering anyone. He was sure he hadn't been noticed. Stopping beneath a maple tree, he shuffled from heel to heel and studied the ivied buildings. Finally, he decided to phone in a tip on the whereabouts of the body and go home. He had no real strategy and something seemed amiss.

Still dazed and haunted by thoughts of the body, Russ gazed out the front window of his house on Bedford Road. Orange light and cirrus clouds brush stroked the evening sky. On the sill, a framed photograph of his ex-wife, Marla, sat next to a miniature replica of a dinosaur skeleton. Musty odors of homemade for false security, his thoughts drifted away to better memories and then returned with a clearer view of the killing. The butcher rose up from a dark grave and loomed over him, seeming as near as the shadows on the wall. Russ became quite sure that this murderer resembled another member of the university teaching staff. "Paleontologist?" he thought as he stared at the skeleton. "No . . . anthropologist, that's it. He works in the anthropology building and I think his first name is Sheldon." Russ took his thoughts back to a time when he'd been in the anthropology building for a meeting of the staff association. Sheldon had been there and had come across as a well-mannered, handsome fellow who was doing some work on African tribal societies. Sheldon could be the murderer, he

wasn't certain. What he needed was a closer look. He decided to check it out in the morning.

Russ was furious, he'd slept in and it was now one p.m. His sleep had been dreamless, so he'd floated through the morning like a log, without waking. The radio was on and as he made a coffee, the news station began a fresh hour with the details of the killing. It was the first of its kind in the area and the victim was a student named Angela Wandsley. Speculation was that the killer was a strong male, young and with a high testosterone level and previous history of violence.

Splashing cold water on his face, Russ tossed on casual clothes, and then he phoned university information. His man turned out to be Sheldon Jameson by name and he still had an office in the anthropology building. Jameson was his own last name, and the thought that the killer could be a distant relative was chilling. It gave him a real case of the creeps.

He hurried out, slamming the door, and he looked like a man on a mission as he paced toward the university grounds. The streets were moist and spattered with mud from a strong rain. It was windy and everything that could blow in the wind was blowing in the wind. Once on the grounds he followed a snaking path to the anthropology building, hearing a bell toll three times as he reached the Plexiglas doors at the front. He knew the building fairly well, it was four stories high and shaped as a half-circle. A garden and patio were enclosed at the rear.

Stepping inside Russ checked the info terminal and read Sheldon's office as number 113. The odd numbers ran along the west side of the corridor and that placed the office at the rear of the building. He decided to pop around back and see if he could look in from the garden.

The wind and wet had kept the back garden clear of people. Russ slipped soundlessly over the interlocking stones of the patio. Vaulting a sculpted bench, he looked through a hedge

and into Sheldon's window. The curtains were richly embroidered and open and he was drawn forward. Keeping to the side of the window, he leaned over for a good look. He didn't spot Sheldon at first, but the rest of what he saw startled him. The office was set up like a weird bachelor pad with colorful pillows and throw rugs scattered over the floor. The walls were hung with tapestries, devilish masks, shrunken heads, decorative hunting knives and bookshelves.

He was wide-eyed at what he saw and he jumped when he suddenly spotted Sheldon. The office was a bit below ground level and Sheldon was sitting cross-legged on a rug, right below the window. He was nodding his head slowly and he held a black shrunken head in his palms.

Russ stayed by the window, held there by morbid fascination. Sheldon's tangled curls shook as he spoke to the head. The window was ajar so Russ heard him clearly.

"You've got to come to terms with it," Sheldon said, sending a chill up Russ' spine. "Then you'll realize that I'm the headhunter and you're the prize."

Russ's memory returned like a cloudy sky and he relived the killing. What had been a blur was now a shrunken head swinging from the killer's belt. He leaned away from the window. His head was swirling with dark thoughts. The world, even his existence in it, seemed uncertain.

A door banged shut and Russ peeked back in the window. Sheldon was gone and he wondered what to do. Then the answer came to him, a voice in his head. "***You must chase the headhunter, until it ends.***"

Jumping the garden fence Russ dashed through the bushes and flowers and around the side of the building. He stopped dead in his tracks by some sumac bushes and watched for Sheldon leaving by way of the front walk.

Sheldon's tall, slim figure appeared on the walk. He was striding along confidently, the fringes of his thigh-length jacket and high moccasins streamed in the wind. Outwardly,

he looked like a handsome young teacher; inwardly his heart had to be as black as coal. Russ stayed by the bushes; he was riveted to the spot. A strong feeling of déjà vu was sweeping through him with the wind, and he knew that when he put a foot forward to follow Sheldon he'd be repeating acts he'd carried out many times, so many times they were the pattern of the ritual he had become. A calm feeling entered him; it was like the calm that possesses a wounded animal when it surrenders itself to the fact it is being devoured.

A ways ahead Sheldon turned sharply and strode on into the strengthening wind, heading down a narrow path toward a stand of poplar trees and a mountain range of dark slate clouds that had risen on the horizon.

Russ' calm mood slowly faded, a strong gust of wind pushed him from behind and he raced off over the field in pursuit of Sheldon. The day had grown very dim and the trees were leaning in the wind, their leaves rushing in a wave of sound. Running with the gusts, he felt like an eagle, pulled on by an unseen updraft from the wings of the sky. Drawn to his fate by an evil power no man could resist.

Sheldon had gone out of sight in the distance, but Russ homed in on him without seeing him. Before long, he reappeared, and he was sprinting as fast as he could, halfway up one of the grassy hills that ran between the north downtown area and the summer fair grounds.

Sheldon made it to the top of the hill in almost no time. Digging in hard and lowering his head, Russ picked up speed, hoping he could get to him before he disappeared in the grounds. Reaching the bottom of the hill, Russ glanced up and stopped to catch his breath. Sheldon stood at the top in wind-ruffled ragweed. His arms were outstretched to the dark slate sky. In one hand, he held a shrunken head, and in the other, he held a long piece of fluted bone.

Russ was winded, his lungs burned as he sucked in air and the scene before him became more and more hallucinatory.

The effect was hypnotic; he was drawn slowly up the hillside. At the halfway point, he stopped and waited.

Sheldon lowered his arms and looked down; his eyes were shimmering gold behind blowing curls and a pale face. His deep voice traveled on the wind. "Russ, dear brother! I took your head in Africa, to gain the power of your soul only! Now how can I work with your ghost always interfering! We are leaving this city! Your wretched spirit is too strong here at home! So come along Russ, it's time you came to terms with death!"

Sheldon lifted the piece of bone to his lips and blew. A deep, distant, hollow sound filled Russ' being and grew in strength like an earthquake. All he could see was the shrunken head, which was his own head, and stormy darkness. Then the bone began tapping against the head.

Russ knew it now, he was a ghost, he was incomplete in every way, and he wished to be either whole or dead. The latter wish was the only one really left, so he didn't resist as he was pulled to the top of the hill, the shrunken head, and what was sure to be an evil end.

The head grew before him, large as a balloon, begging to be touched. Without knowing why, he began to tap a finger on its desiccated cheek, and the result was black magic -- its mouth opened, the jaws of a monster, ready to devour him whole. He could only cower as it inhaled to suck him down.

Then he heard the voice again, telling him to chase the headhunter until the end. It was his own voice and it filled him with strength. Throwing his body into motion, he forced the jaws open wide and leapt like a tiger, straight down the throat of the beast.

Brilliant daylight arrived with the force of an exploding star. Russ stood at the top of the hill with Sheldon, and he felt whole once again. A blazing shield of sun shone in the southeast, and under the sun like a mirage were the steamy jungles of deepest Africa.

"Until it ends," Russ said, and Sheldon seemed to understand. His mouth was agape as he watched the head crumble in his hands

"You're only flesh and blood, Sheldon. You can't fight a ghost."

But Sheldon was determined to try. He drew his hunting knife and struck a blow to Russ's heart and it cut into nothing.

Still holding the knife, Sheldon fell to his knees and ran the blade across his palm, like he couldn't believe it hadn't worked. Blood welled in the cut, causing Russ to laugh for a moment before he opened his palm and revealed his own weapon. It was a weapon that Sheldon had heard of but had never seen. It was the deadliest weapon of all.

Sheldon's cries rang out on the hill, and traveled like frightened ghosts on the wind ... a haunted howling that could only be the voice of a dying headhunter.

It was over and Russ Jameson was running, a shimmering ghost in the field. He raised his arms to freedom and victory. Behind him on the hilltop, a wisp of smoke lifted from a shriveled doll in the weeds.

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Symbol on a Tomb

A Walking Dead Man Tale

The eyes of a princess brightened, casting a magic spell on a castle and its ghoulish inhabitants.

In that distant fortress of gloom, fog began to drift in the minds of ghoulish sentries, allowing an agile clown to slip by quietly.

A wide arched doorway opened on a spiral staircase running down from the Grave Tower. The clown saw it as his gateway to freedom, and he knew a princess waited at the end of this avenue of escape. She was hidden in far-off time, somewhere deep in the Earth's eye.

He took flight in the darkness, racing down those winding stairs. Glancing back, he saw a luminous green form appear in the cobwebs above. It raised a sword that cut through the murk like liquid steel, and as it streaked toward his head, he ducked and managed to toss a dagger. The point caught the ghoul's eye. Glowing blood splattered and he heard the ghoul's tumble and death rattle, then he reached the bottom of the stairs and booted open the heavy wooden door.

Daylight streamed in; he saw the ghoul sprawled on the stairs - its thick green tongue protruding and leaking blood.

Ancient objects from plundered graves decorated the slimy stone walls. He pried loose a copper shield, threw it over his back and rushed out the door.

A drawbridge was ahead on the road. Bolts of ghoul lightning rained down, tearing at the ground and deflecting off his shield. Getting across the bridge, he leapt an embankment and landed on a muddy path. A jagged bolt ripped the bark off a nearby oak. Tossing the shield to the ground, he hurried out of range, running through the curling smoke.

Decaying leaves and black earth at the edges of the path's beaten centre met with gargantuan tree trunks. Faint daylight filtered through the canopy of branches above. In his mind's eye, the clown saw the howling face of a ghoul lightning breather. Then another light appeared - far away and crystal. Glancing back, he saw the castle towering over him. Turrets leaned into gruesome visions. Spellbinding sights from the grave flowed in the miasma encircling it.

Deciding to return home to Temagame Forest, he plotted a route in his mind. It meant passing through the City of

Zodiox. Brushing himself off he headed down the path, cursing the luck that got him captured by ghouls in the first place. He knew the ghouls hadn't managed to seize his friends, the purple princess and the magician, and he wondered where they had hidden.

A sudden rumble and he turned on his heels. A portion of the castle wall had collapsed and a dark shape stood in a dust cloud on the far side of the moat. Sweat beaded and trickled on the clown's forehead. He couldn't hope to win a fight in his weakened state. All he could do was flee and hope to escape.

The dust cleared, revealing a repulsive thing - a seven-foot ghoul. Hostility pinched its face and it leapt the moat with ease. Blood glazed eyes, rotted fangs and a drooling mouth showed as it moved closer. Filthy brown hair sprang from its chin and it held a rusty iron spike in its fist.

Turning quickly, the clown fled down the path through patches of mud. In places, it was so sticky he had the bad-dream feeling of running in slow motion. Glancing back, he saw the ghoul gaining rapidly.

A brilliant light appeared on the pathway ahead. Dust motes floated in a sunlit octagon, and the clown recognized it as an opening to the magician's nightmare screen.

Cold chills shot up his spine as he increased his speed. The ghoul almost had him spiked, and then a dark object flew down through the trees. Diving, the clown ducked it and rolled to the edge of the path. A glance back to the ghoul and he saw it screaming silently as a disembodied black claw tore into its throat. A moment later green blood jetted and it went down hard in the mud.

Thunder boomed through the nightmare screen and the ground began to tilt. The clown seized a knot in the twisted tree beside him and held on as the mud on the path rolled up like a carpet and split. Then as the earth continued to shake, he jumped up and ran ... bushes and thorns flailing at him as he escaped through the forest.

A premonition filled his mind and a rumble shook his bones as he neared the end of the path. Sinister eyes were watching from a window in a Grave Tower, and then electric-blue light pulsed and knocked him to the grass.

Consciousness slipped away in wisps of smoke. Moments later, he rose and saw his dead body lying in the weeds. A patina of death ringed his eyes. Turning he saw fragments from a rainbow spinning skyward to the flaming yellow sun. A princess's face in a crystal ball touched his mind and drew him south. Thick brown grass took him into veils of mist and a jade waterfall rushed nearby. Then he was walking on slippery wet stones and he tripped and fell ... into a void.

The clown landed on his feet in long wet grass. He was facing the ghouls' castle, watching as black lightning split the sky and struck one of the Grave Towers. Ablaze in scarlet flames, a ghoulish lightning breather fell from the tower window; its ghastly scream echoed from the castle walls, then it splashed into the moat below.

Crocodiles fed. Looking up the clown saw the face of the magician in a white cloud. Slowly it drifted in the direction of the City of Zodiac.

The magician had the clown in mind as he came to ground in a crater. He turned and his golden hair and twinkling blue eyes were the only signs of beauty in the desolate landscape. Wind rushed in and swept the folds of his long coat. Gold sparkled in a sudden beam of sunlight and as he looked to the East, a symbol appeared on a faraway tomb.

Turning and placing his hands on his hips, he gazed at the leaden sky and saw beyond to a pink sun drifting in pale clouds. In the grass below, the clown approached the city...

... Looking ahead the clown saw a dense forest of stone towers and turrets stretching over a flat plain. Beyond the towers, the fall colors of Temagame Forest showed...

... Nightmare's doorway opened in sunset clouds, and the magician appeared, sliding across the sky on a golden beam

of sunlight. He landed on the spire of the SunWheel Tower, the highest perch in the city, and stood there in the ephemeral rays of sunset, studying a land of flashing colors and long shadows.

Intricate webs of light and shadow shifted on the stone walls of the towers. Domes reflected the evening light and dazzled his meditative mind with polished illusions and unreal beauty. The City of Zodiac followed the curve of the earth and faded away into the mystic ghosts and dying dreams of fall. Autumn leaves blew on the wind, and in his mind became a river of gold symbols pouring down the steps of time. More leaves swirled to clouds in the streets below and they changed reality to autumn tinted streams.

He turned on the spire and his eyes ignited as he spotted a lone clown traveler approaching the city. A flow of gold twirled to a bolt in the magician's hand. He tossed it and it tumbled across the city toward the clown...

... **A macabre creature peeked** through a crack in a rubble-stone wall, watching the clown cross the field. The skull face of a demon appeared as it moved swiftly along the wall, the one hundred shrunken heads on its belt swinging as it ran. The demon's belt didn't boast a single clown's head, so it mounted its black stallion and hastily set out to collect one.

A mass of cobwebs blew free as the gate slowly creaked open, unleashing the skull-faced demon. Huge hooves kicked back clods of earth as the laughing horror raced over the fields. Veined eyes bulged behind the skull demon's face of bone. Its mouth twisted with bloodlust. Exhaling a river of steam, it held its sword high. Envisioning a grand moment of victory and a fountain of spurting clown's blood, the demon bit its blackened tongue and spurred its stallion cruelly.

Stopping in his tracks the clown stared at the approaching skull demon. He was certain his last act would be a desperate one, then he saw a golden lightning bolt tumbling down from the sky. He caught it in his white-gloved hand.

The skull demon closed in for the kill. Blades of steel and lightning met, sending a boom of thunder down the wind. The clash sent the skull demon flying from its horse; scorched and deafened it rolled in the grass.

Tracing an arc in the air, the golden bolt radiated fire as the clown brought it down. It caught the demon as it rose; its head thumped to the ground and a jet of black blood soaked the grass. A moment later, its body of bones and armor was ablaze with golden flames.

Turning, the clown faced the City of Zodiach. Charred bones rested next to the hilt of a shattered sword beside him. A belt of shrunken heads circled the bones. The largest of these heads being that of a headhunting skull demon.

In the west the face of the magician showed momentarily in the setting sun...

... **The clown galloped along the** cobblestone streets of the City of Zodiach on his newly acquired black stallion. Violet rays filtered through thick gray clouds. A spell from the princess was in the air, pulling him onward to the temple of the ghouls.

Ahead of the clown, the source of the spell scaled the side of a building in the twilight. Reaching the rooftop the princess moved quickly and hid in the shadows. Her night-vision eyes glowing faintly as she peered across the street at the ghouls' temple. Green ghoulish sentries stood at observation posts built on the thick stone walls circling the buildings. The central structure was an emerald dome with an open roof that made it easy for the ghouls to sacrifice to the Zodiach and the Cyclops moon.

The princess looked to the entrance down on the street. Two broad oak doors set between marble pillars sculpted in the form of entwined cobras stood between the world and the inner temple.

A ghoulish slave master pounded the knocker. Behind him a group of female human slaves waited for the doors to open.

Moments later one heavy door opened and the women walked into the temple. The ghoul sentry checked his back and the street then he barred the doors and climbed back to his observation tower.

Evil sacrifices performed by the ghouls were legendary, but the princess had not witnessed any of them. As the story went, the ghouls called up a demon from the black abyss. Others things were required - a full moon, women to sacrifice, drums of human skin, ritual knives, unholy priests, torn hearts and the great stolen cup of ghouls...

... Cyclops moon climbed in snow-white veils of mist. The clown dismounted in a cul-de-sac and walked toward a rope ladder at the dead end. Purple eyes appeared in his mind. A spell from the princess sharpened his hearing, and he hid in a corner as clattering hooves came around the bend.

A ghoul dismounted and walked over to inspect the black stallion. Becoming suspicious, he began to move down the alley, stopping every now and again to swish his sword through the shadows.

The clown held the tip of a long dagger he'd taken from the saddlebags of the headhunter demon. His arm relaxed then flashed forward, sending the blade through the night to nail the ghoul to the far wall. Tiny diamonds and drops of blood sparkled on the hilt of the ghoul's new throat decoration as the clown made his way up the ladder. He moved across the rooftop toward a long purple shadow...

... **Another crater in the wasteland found the magician busy**. Dust was in his hand and from it he tossed a handful of gold symbols into the thin air. Colors transformed to silver, purple and black. He opened his palms, catching new symbols of daggers, lightning bolts and claws. A second toss and the symbols spun through a wrinkle in time and through the nightmare screen above the City of Zodiach. They came to rest quietly and sparkled on the rooftop, next to the purple princess....

... Moonlight revealed a sentry ghoul walking along the crenellated stone wall. A flash of purple lightning shot across the street, slashing a throat with its heated edge. The ghoul's head fell, thumped in the street and rolled into the shadows. Another ghoul rushed up to investigate, but a black claw struck him, and he collapsed on the wall, having only a bleeding hole for a throat.

Ghoul sentries converged on the bodies from their various posts, forming a tight circle around their dead companions. Moonlight pooled around them for a brief moment as they exchanged guttural words, then a rain of daggers, claws and lightning flashes struck them. Gushing blood formed tentacles in the moonlight, scattered drops glistened like dew on the walls and the bodies did a slow collapse into the smoking slime.

The clown scaled the wall while the princess climbed one of the gate pillars. Moments later the oak doors swung open. As the princess looked out her eyes shone, creating an oval of light in the street. Shadows were banished as a brilliant shape took form. A bright mane appeared and a lion emerged, gathering full definition as it bounded past the princess...

... A brilliant ball, the moon dominated the sky above the temple of the ghouls. A dreadful cacophony began as their demon ascended from the black abyss. A giant fiend it took shape out of the depths of darkness. Its eyes glowed red as coals. Its maw shot crimson fire. Malevolence and bloodlust twisted its hideous features. Shaking loose its smoking coils of hair it raised sharpened green claws and looked toward the women.

Crouching low the clown kept out of sight in one of the temple's hallways. Jail shadows from a heavy metal door made a temporary prisoner of him. Staring out at the court he awaited the princess's signal, and it came as lightning flashed near the women.

Paws padded down the hallway. The clown spun around and saw a flaming lion racing at full tilt toward him. Swinging the metal door open, he hid behind it as the creature raced through.

The lion's roar filled the temple as it leapt at the giant fiend. Fire streamed from the demon's maw, striking the cat as it arced through the moonlight. Blazing with red flames and purple light it locked into the demon, tearing at it as it sent it for a fall on the altar floor.

Green blood and putrid flesh spilled from the demon's wounded shoulder. It seized a huge sword as it roared and rose. Wary, the lion slowly backed off, and behind it the women escaped through the open door.

Turning sharply the lion bounded out the door as the demon swung its sword. Metal clanked and scraped on the marble floor and the door clanged shut.

A spiral carpet of silver moonlight appeared in the sky above the temple. The startled demon lifted its face to the moon and saw the magician tossing a handful of gold symbols into the night air.

Thunder boomed and lightning began to flash. Black rays shot from the demon's fiery eyes, blasting the descending silver bolts out of existence. It raised its powerful arms and knocked away several flying claws, then more lightning charges hit it and it staggered back and fell against the sacrificial pillar.

Roaring it shook its fists and opened its claws in anger, but the magician was out of reach and as the demon lashed out at the air two bolts of steel caught its palms and impaled them to the pillar. A blue bolt flew into its fiery maw, completing its crucifixion as the magician landed on the altar.

Standing on one heel the magician began to spin, becoming a blur with a gold shimmer. Waves of symbols streamed into the air, vanished in the darkness and then began to fall as a rain of gold daggers.

Ghastly cries replaced the drumming as fire, steel and claws ripped flesh and limbs from the panicked ghouls. They trampled one another as they rushed to escape, but the clown and the princess got ahead of them and sealed off the exits. They could only turn back to their roaring demon and the attacking magician. In the end, they saw symbols flashing through slime and steam, and they collapsed in the sticky spray of blood filling a temple fast becoming their tomb.

In the pattern of bones and decay, a symbol remains ... of a clown, a princess and a magician.

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Long Way Down

Grim Reaper is back in town

New Year's Eve a long way back, I think. Yeah, that's it. I remember the trees blazing with lights - and the explosion.

The story starts in Toronto at the city hall square, just after sunset. I was sitting on a stone bench by the skating rink, killing the boredom by sipping whiskey from an ancient silver flask. Children skated clumsily by - a blur of colors and innocent voices in my mind. I knew a black event was about to occur, and it began with a grim-faced and disgraced politician named Howard S. emerging over at the big oak front doors. The guy had decided to kill himself with industrial dynamite and my job was to collect him.

Howard didn't hesitate; he stopped and started snapping his cheap plastic lighter. It worked but he couldn't get at the twined fuses. I studied him with interest then the action got blocked because a giant cop noticed my liquor flask and stepped from the dazzle of Christmas lights to hassle me.

"Can't drink at this costume party, Mr. Reaper," he said, holding out his lumpy hand for the flask. "It'll be a night in

jail for you, for your own safety."

"Say, officer - see that guy over there," I said as I buried the booze in my cloak. "He's got a big knife hidden in his coat."

The cop frowned and looked. He saw chubby Howard S. behaving suspiciously, toying with something large inside his winter trench coat, and decided to forget me and walk over and check.

He got there just as the dynamite went off - it was the two of them in that part of the square and it looked quite spectacular ... the whole thing hitting me in drunken slow motion. The bodies flying apart like cork flares of blood, bone and torn cloth; a cooked torso shooting over the city Peace Garden. A lot of flesh vanished in the flash fire, but the politician's false teeth and his bloody jawbone landed near the skating rink among a crowd of horrified parents.

Panic followed - I decided to avoid the fleeing crowd by walking through the area of the explosion, and was just stepping on the blast-cracked concrete when the yelling started. Damn booze, I'd forgotten to make myself invisible and now a bunch of uniformed guards and cops were running toward me - guns drawn, with the idea that I was the terrorist who'd just struck. I don't suppose being and looking like the Grim Reaper helped me much.

But it did help in that I cast a long shadow, and as they ran into it they died ... the bodies of the first two cops thumping to the cold cement just beneath the band shell.

Glock muzzles flashed and hot bullets dug into me - and enough was enough. I vanished into shifting smoke and shadows and stepped from the veil at the side of a skyscraper a block away. Shaking off the lead, I noticed I was on an empty street beside a hotel Christmas display and a newspaper box. And as I started to walk away the headline caught my eye - Fourth Grim Reaper Mutilation Killing.

Melting the box open, I grabbed a copy and read the article. The story meant I would stay in town. A sort of copyright

thing - I don't allow others to impersonate me in the death business. It could cause confusion.

"Hum," I wondered where to find this guy. But I couldn't think as the Christmas lights on the hotel were blinding me. Flashing bulbs created an animation of Santa waving, and sent waves of pain into my brain. I popped on shades of darkness and all went comfortably gray.

Best way to trace a man is from his point of death - and this guy had one, but it was murky and unsettled. Perhaps it was as yet undecided as to who would get to him first and kill him. Trying a different angle, I switched my view to see all people in the city dressed in Reaper costume. Turned out there were two hundred of them and the effect of it nearly knocked me over.

"Son of a Bitch!" I raised a fist, forgetting that I still had my deadly silver-knuckled gloves on. A stray bolt flew from them and struck a man emerging on the marbled steps of a nearby building. He had no chance to scream. Cooked, he fell to the cement.

Walking over I noticed the building sign said it was the Supreme Court, and as I tossed the man's spirit into the black velvet of a temporary holding pit, I gathered that he was a judge. His body looked like a rather large and burned roast, the blood still bubbling up. Gazing at him, it saddened me that my mistake was much like many of his rulings - arbitrary and deadly. Now the poor chap would just have to wait in the holding pits with the rest.

Deciding it would be better to think things out over a drink; I turned back and went over to the hotel. Sirens were screaming over near the square, the hotel bar seemed safe, but as I got through the first set of doors, I found myself confronted by a bouncer and an armed task force cop.

The cop raised a Remington rifle - "Don't even think of moving."

"Drop dead," I replied, and they both did and I stepped over

them and found my way to the bar.

The dark paneling oozed dampness and smoke, the lights flickered. Invisible, I drifted in the visions of my shades, studying the various people in Reaper costume. My target finally came into view in a house in the north part of the city. He was a muscular guy grinning at his mirror. I would've passed him over but a telltale woman's scalp hanging from a nail on his closet gave him away.

Taking a moment, I read his mind, and found that his New Year was to be celebrated with a killing. Since I've never really liked big parties, I decided to join him. To profile him, I would say he was handsome, a solid build, and he had all those friendly and traditional qualities of the psychopath that American publishers enjoy. After his death, he would live on in books titled either *Grim* or *Reaper*. But let's keep in mind that I am Grim Reaper, and I don't write for American publishers. So in spite of his heroic charm, I can say that to me he was just a nuisance and in need of punishment.

His lair wasn't in his home. It was located in a dead portion of sewer beneath an abandoned silo on the waterfront. I chose to get there at 11:30, fifteen minutes ahead of him.

Looking around I found his base choice of atmosphere good, but his taste in detail effeminate. A small altar of rose marble was used for animal sacrifice. Daggers were decorated with grinning imps. He even had a miniature chainsaw with a pearl handle. The place smelled pretty, herbs and dead flowers everywhere. He kept the corpses somewhere else.

The chainsaw was a nice little weapon - I tried a few sample slashes with it then kept it and toyed with it as I waited on a stool behind a black linen curtain off from the altar.

A minute later, the killer showed with an unconscious blond victim in tow. I listened as he tossed her down on a straw

mat and undressed her. She came to and screamed as he was arranging his knives and humming a sort of rap tune to himself.

This disturbed him and he turned to her and threw a dagger into the wall beside her. His golden curls fell foppishly in his face as he put on a nasty grimace. "Scream and scream, my lady. Because soon your head will be gone."

And he was correct in that statement - in reading his mind I had noted that he was a very dull serial killer who first cut the victim's head off with a chainsaw. Sort of like a butcher, he preferred to work with dead meat.

His pre-death ritual was long and boring. The decisive moment came when he decided to seize his chainsaw and discovered that it wasn't there on its stand.

A ghastly look got stamped on his cold-carved face as he realized that someone had been there, defiling his lair. He began to look around suspiciously, and then he walked over and pulled the curtain open.

His jaw dropped.

"Looking for this?" I said as I raised the chainsaw.

He countered by backing off and raising two daggers - I pulled the cord and tossed the buzzing weapon. Dropping the blades, he caught the handle, nearly chopping his balls off as he tried to balance the saw, then his angry eyes widened as he stared at me.

"What's your game?" he said. "And how did you find me?"

"My game is death. If I found you, guess that means you're dead."

The captive lady heard this and whimpered and cried.

But he didn't - he just restarted the chainsaw and charged.

A crude killer, he moved in with force to thrust the saw

through my chest. Blood gushed from the wound and I went back against the wall, groaning before releasing a death wheeze and rattle. Then I slid to the floor and the animal kept cutting, staring into my open but dead eyes.

Tossing the gore-soaked saw aside, he put his hand right into the bleeding hole in my chest. "I'm going to eat your heart," he said, hot saliva spraying my face. But you don't seem to have ... a heart."

My eyes ignited. "Grim Reaper has no heart," I said, black pupils sucking him in, and then he was falling as he flew back and crashed into the altar.

I rose, chainsaw in hand. "Now, let's see if you have a heart. Cause if you do you're a fake Grim Reaper."

He shook. He stuttered. "You really are the Reaper." Then he grinned. "So this is a warning, right. You can't kill me and you can't save her. I know the rules. The Grim Reaper collects people who are already dead. You can't play God."

Pausing, I popped the cork off a slim silver flask and took a swallow. "Theologically and morally you are correct. But who said you had to die?"

"What?" he said.

"This," I replied as I threw the chainsaw. It buzzed into him and stayed humming as I stepped over. Throwing down my shades, I froze him in a wave of darkness. Then I grabbed the saw and cut him open. Violet organs and tubes spilled out and hung. I removed his heart and put it in his open hand.

Turning away, I lifted my shades and smiled at the lovely blond lady. "Later," I said, and she vanished and reappeared somewhere in the dark city night.

Spinning around, I roused him and said. "There you are - theologically and morally correct. You are alive. You feel no pain and you no longer have a heart. Unless you count the one you are holding in your hand."

"Duh, duh," he said, horror on his face as he looked down at his gutted chest and the heart in his hand. "I can't live like this."

"Ah, I see. You can't live without a heart like the Reaper. Then die, you fake!"

Silver in the abyss. The scythe swung and he fell in darkness. "And hold onto your heart," he heard me say. "Cause it's a hell of a long way down."

And down echoes with him, in the pit ... forever.

Then I resolved to be theologically correct in the future.

"I won't kill people anymore," I said to myself as I leapt up and out. "Time to hang up my lightning gloves."

Only I forgot to dematerialize into the night and I knocked down the sewer wall and about half of the concrete silo. About ten policemen were out there, preparing to raid the place. The debris came down and crushed them all.

New Year's resolutions never did work for me - It's a cruel world isn't it? Life itself is long way down. Better to be dead in the first place.

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A Network Story

A Walking Dead Man Tale

Joey Lightfoot usually scored the highest in positive attitude drills and he bagged the Miller account on one of his conquer-the-world sales outings. He did a lot for this Miller guy, we all did, but in the end he became a roadblock to the team's success and Joey arranged to meet me for a discussion in regards to the sour deal.

I waited at the Ann Frills desert joint out on 303, enjoying the flavours of spring, Colombian coffee and cherry cheesecake. The only blemish on the budding green world beyond the open window being some country-style toughs parked in a red convertible. I could see them spilling whiskey and puckering their lips as they exhaled blue geysers of hydro pot smoke. It really made me wonder what they had for brains to be in need of dope on such a beautiful day.

Then Joey drove in and I grinned, thinking how he looked higher than they did though success and not dope had him on the up. Born a country hick, Joey stretched to a thin 6'4" behind the wheel. He had what it takes to sell in the countryside - a handsome mule-face, eyes of shining blue sincerity. His singsong rustic voice could draw leads faster than old Hank Williams could draw hillbillies. An aura of Midas glowed at his fingertips, and since he sold vacuum cleaners and household stuff, he needed the magic. The Babe Ruth Hurricane carried a price tag that really belonged on a big television set or an oven. For the money, it promised to make cleaning a rug as much fun as hitting a home run.

Joey used home run in many of the slogans he dreamed up and as I watched him get out I could see that the sneering local toughs were thinking home run, too, only they were planning to use Joey as the bat.

The biggest of them, a lumpy guy with reddened eyes the size of two dollar coins and uncombed blond hair spiked by grease and the highway winds, hopped out and stepped into Joey's path.

Just on a notion, I pulled out my notebook and listed something under The Network, Strengths and Weaknesses of the Road Team. It had to do with fighting. We had listed all sorts of strengths and weaknesses of members, yet we had neglected to mention muscle and that would never do.

My note mentioned that Joey lacked muscle and the ability to defend himself. Perhaps a self-defense course could be

recommended at the next sales strategy session. And as I wrote the note, I could see that the country punk was balling his big fist. Joey would last about one second, and then he would be pile-driven into the earth. Which would never do - the team needed him for leads. Even a blemish on his face could be damaging. The nightmare possibility of our Team coming in lower than the Ottawa team on overall Network growth statistics popped into mind.

It would never do so I simply stood up and kicked the entire picture window out, causing Joey and the stoners to look in my direction and everyone inside to duck and move back. Sucker expressions expanded their faces, and I decided to complete my act before their brains came back into full order.

I pocketed my pen and smoothed my suit as they watched. Broken glass crunching underfoot, I walked to the front door, pulling out another pen as I stepped up to them.

Joey now realized the situation he'd walked into, and the speechless blond gel head had found his voice. "Hey, asshole," he said. "You can't do that to Ann's window."

"I know," I said, flipping the silver pen tube and pressing a button that sent brown mist rushing into his face. "And I can't do this either. Least I mean I couldn't do it if the Network didn't allow it."

Falling to the dust, the punk's only answer was to claw at his face and choke on the pepper spray. Then the stupid expression of another big guy melted and became one of outrage. He leapt from the front passenger seat and came after me, taking a swing that I ducked. Catching him by the throat, I used the pen to carve two deep gouges in his face, and while he was reeling from that, I hit him hard in the balls. I stepped back as he fell.

The drunken driver had seen enough, he spun his tires, shooting gravel as he backed away and turned out. A moment later, he was racing off on the misty spring highway.

Dust was settling on my suit. It pissed me off. Batting it off I

signaled Joey to follow and we left the two guys moaning in the gravel as we went back inside.

Ann Frills was at the door, her blond bangs and dark hollow eyes shaping a tunnel of interest. "Put it on my account," I said. And she nodded, showing her Chiclets as she smiled and turned. I heard her yelling to her kitchen boy as we sat down, telling him to call the glass company. I knew it wouldn't be a problem. Ann was on the Team; we brought lots of business her way. The local lawman, Don Nelson, was also in the Network, and if he came out, he would charge the local punks with breaking the window and force them to sign a purchase paper for a big order of products from his wife's direct Internet sales company.

The kitchen boy cleaned up the broken glass and if anything the fresh air improved the atmosphere in Ann's. Uneasiness over the scrap faded, but another curtain of bad feelings descended as Joey and I discussed the Miller account.

"So it is a serious problem," Joey said.

"Okay. I want a full report before I decide. Same as always."

"Pretty much the usual," Joey said. "I did a run out on the Kingston back roads and came up with Miller - a city executive turned country gentry. He built a house out there for his wife and they had barely moved in it when she left him. I sold him a vacuum and while making the sale I discovered that he was lonely and bisexual. He came onto to me but I managed to duck out with a promise to return. When I did, it was with Uncle Merv, our representative in charge of sales to homosexual clients. Merv hit it off with Miller and when I left, they were necking on the couch. After that, things went smoothly right through the network. I passed out the lead slip and everyone contacted Merv to arrange for a piece of the action. Ann Frills delivered all of Miller's meals. Mary Sampson got a cleaning contract from him. Alf sold him encyclopedias and discs. On the weekends, Merv got him drunk and took him on shopping sprees at

member stores. He bought a few big-ticket items.

Wannamaker sold him two powerboats and Jackson sold him a Mercedes. By the time a month had passed, he was in love with Merv and Danny came in and arranged a new life insurance deal. He has a million-dollar policy and Merv is the main beneficiary. A declaration of his homosexuality is contained in it. He also bought a statue for his grave and an expensive funeral package from Weaver."

"Sounds ideal," I said. "It's not often that a lead pays off so big. So why do you need a follow-up? Something I can do to smooth some ruffled feathers? Or is it a case where the money has run out?"

"Miller has a stable income and perfect health. His feathers are ruffled and you won't be able to smooth them."

"How's that?"

"Got a report from Officer Don Nelson - Miller was in town at the police station asking questions about Uncle Merv. Nelson didn't help him, but he says that Miller is talking about hiring a detective. He thinks we're all part of a big conspiracy."

"Damn that Merv - he's been skimming the customer again. He's likely pulled about fifty thousand out of Miller's accounts. If a detective gets a chance to investigate we'll be screwed."

"Not if you come in and play the detective."

"I could try that. Okay - let's go out to Miller's now and see how we stand."

Another lead gone full circle, I thought as I followed Joey out into the lot. On the way to the car, I noticed that the two local toughs were still there. The guy I pepper sprayed shivered beside a bucket of dirty water, trying to wash the pain out of his face. His pal was nearby, moaning and holding his crotch.

"Jeez, I didn't realize I hit him that hard," I said.

"You going to leave them here? What if they go after Ann?"

"You have a point and I may be able to use them," I said, and then I looked around as I walked over to them. Ann's place was now deserted. The odd car buzzed by on the highway. Stooping I picked up a discarded Coke bottle and dipped it in the bucket. Then I pulled a bag of white powder from my coat lining and poured it in. The drug being angel dust - about ten times the normal dose a person would take. "Okay boys, we're going to drive you to the hospital. Ann wants you to drink some of this water and aspirins. It'll help kill the pain."

The guy with the sore balls reached out right away and downed about half the bottle. The other chap was a little more difficult. I ended up yanking his neck back and forcing him to swallow it. Joey helped me toss them in the backseat, and then we were off on the road to Miller country.

A rough stretch of 303 turned through valleys of dense deciduous forest and rose through hills of pine. A meadowland covered about 50 acres on the last run up to his house. Robins, jays and butterflies flew on a fragrant dandelion breeze - an atmosphere that would have been perfect if it weren't for the vomiting trash rolling about in the back seat.

Glancing back, I saw froth and swollen lips.

"Shit, they're puking on my new upholstery," Joey said.

"Just use your Babe Ruth Hurricane, it's guaranteed to vacuum up any mess."

He gave me a sad grin. "Why not dump them here?"

"No, not here - I want to see what Miller's angle is before I do anything."

"Sure, you're in charge of finalizing this deal. Say, you seen these yet?"

He handed me a large plastic card. A scroll embossed with

gold lace formed the background image. As I glanced down it I found slogans like Feed the Need, Bet you can't eat just one, A little dab 'ill do yah . . . and so on. "Interesting, but what's it for?"

"A little thing we're compiling at the church. A scroll of the best ad slogans of all time."

"Nice touch. I've been meaning to get by for a service. I think it's great that we have a reverend in the Network now."

"It is great and he thinks just like us. We've got our sales awards and ribbons decorating the walls and we've replaced the old book with our new Online Sales Bible and a holy motto that says -- If you eat our Jesus bread you're eating the Breakfast of Champions."

Modern country houses generally look impressive and the tranquil atmosphere and bright sunshine made a gem of Miller's place. Foliage crept over the stone walls, the windows shone like facets and the paint glowed with perfect luminance. Joey mentioned that with land values rising by the day out here, Miller was getting richer by the moment.

Joey pulled in and parked. We walked up to the oak door. He mentioned that one of the reasons for the tranquility was that Miller lived alone.

"Strange bird, but rich," I said.

"Guess I might as well outline the problem," Joey said. "Miller is what you could call brilliant but also paranoid. No one can work for him for long before he fires them. He brings out different people on contract to work on the house. What it means for the network is that since Miller sees conspiracies by nature, he has noticed that everyone he has been buying from seems somehow connected. He believes there has been a conspiracy to rip him off and his past records show that he will likely hire detectives to investigate us. Of course anyone he hires will know he is a nut, but routine digging might still

mean trouble for us."

"Trouble, you can say that again." My hair nearly stood on end at the thought of this well-connected corporate guy paying to have us done in.

"I'm leaving the decisions to you," Joey said. "You figure out what has to be done."

Suddenly feeling the weight of the stolen police Glock in my pocket, I knew what to do. The Glock was a gun that resisted ballistic tests, which is why I kept it. I considered shooting Miller as soon as he answered the door, but when no one answered; I reconsidered and decided we had better talk to the guy first.

"He has a gazebo in the meadow behind the place," Joey said. "Likes to sit out there and read surrounded by his weed garden."

And that turned out to be the case. We walked through trimmed bushes and windy maples to the back and spotted Miller sitting on a white wicker chair in the gazebo. He didn't look up from the coffee-table book he was reading until we were nearly on him.

Miller had an impressive shock of golden hair, clear blue eyes and a smile that never quit. He even had that salesman's quality of smiling while he gave you shit. And shit was what he gave us. He said a quick hello then pointed a finger at Joey and began to lecture him on manners. Apparently, Miller didn't like being disturbed during his reading hour.

Joey tried to reply but Miller kept cutting him off. The initial grin gave way to anger on Miller's face. His quick temper and obvious paranoid lines were a tip that he had gone off his nut some years ago. "I know Merv is in their pay," he said. "You all are -- masquerading as a bunch of shallow business and sales people. You made one big mistake -- I know that no one could be as devoid of character and phony as you people are -- so that means you're actors. You're brainwashed losers who sold out to the Alien Nation. Now it isn't enough to have

the robot ships filming me from the treetops, you have to get close and rob me of every shred of dignity. But you won't get away with it. You won't -- because I'm bringing in a team to sweep this place of the robot bugs and the human bugs. And that means you."

He glanced accusingly back at Joey and continued with his paranoid rant. I thought it over, considering that under other circumstances Miller could've been an asset. But he knew enough to get some sort of crazy investigation going and that meant the team was in danger. Time had come to abort this sales operation. I figured that even the big outfit he worked for had to know he was nuts and that would work to our advantage.

Shards of cracked sunshine fell tinkling through the rocking maples - a sound like broken wind chimes. I had the old power racing in my head again. Murder is the angel dust I use and when the rushes start, they are perfect and as powerful as a blood-red eclipse. I run in the darkness of those moments of shattered light, and I know that I will get away with it.

It took a fair effort to drag our drugged-out captives to the back. The gel head kept trying to crawl away and I kept knocking him on the head with the butt of the Glock. Blood on his face blinded him and he didn't know which way to crawl. When we got them to the gazebo I knocked them both on their backs and stomped on their balls. Gel head ended up hanging backwards over the gazebo rail, his blue lips spewing reddened froth. Blood ran thick on Miller's battered face as he crawled in the grass below. And the third guy sat there biting his lip with broken teeth and rocking himself like he was a mad baby.

"Looks like Miller has been given an overdose by those two drug addicts," I said.

Joey grinned from ear to ear. "If you aren't buying you're

dying. And that's a fact."

And because of that fact, the last lead slip always goes to me
- The Team hit man.

"I am very impressed with your handling of this job," Joey said. "For a reward I have a straight lead for you. No sales or complications, just straight payment to get another threat to the Team out of the way."

"He handed me the lead slip and I studied the name. "Your wife?"

"Yeah, and I don't want to talk about it."

"Don't have to," I said as we walked away. |

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Digging up the Past

A Walking Dead Man Tale

The sunlight is golden and it falls over the horizon like a slow meteor, sinking into some distant ocean. I never see the day. My sleep comes with the light. This book is always in my hands in the evenings when I wake. Bound in ancient leather, its pages are strengthened by the mould and yellowing of time, like its leaves are becoming leathery parchment instead of dust.

The letters spill into my eyes. A spidery scrawl, they are the memory of all things. I remember nothing alone, and each night I begin again, recollecting pieces of my past. Fragments without cohesion that tumble into the abyss -- so that I am never whole. Sometimes things are taken from me with such force that I see the fire of my mind as it crackles back into the book.

Stirrings of things undone, failure that I have forgotten; the

shame of being human towers over my life and I have lost the will needed to wash it away.

My finger touches the page, becomes a beckoning claw in the twilight. I see the torch and reddened eyes burning under the hood of the demon.

It is back to the beginning this time -- I burst through a huge door, splintering the rotten wood, and I am standing there at the top of some basement stairs, my eyes adjusting to the gloom. Keen odors of decay fill my nostrils. Blue light gleams on the cylinder of the handgun I hold. Wisps of pale smoke drift from the barrel and I know I have killed someone.

But who?

I see that I am an ordinary man; unshaven, my lean features tending to the rugged and handsome side. There is hunger in my gray eyes, and I know that I am a man driven mad. I have killed my child, and I see her face. An angel's face that I know hides unspeakable evil. She is gone, crushed by bullets from my gun. Gone in the shrieking of the tempest, her shattered skull crumbling in the caverns of the dead from which it came. Silence, oblivion, the grave has closed over her and now she belongs to the withered claw and the hooded one who lurks in the darkness below.

Wicked phantasms gather, sirens of evil sing songs of darkness doubly terrible under the bleak sky. Cries growing funereal - death wails of an evil that waited for a thousand years, only to have been turned to dust and death by my gun.

The light flashes, crackles from the book to my hand, blackening it to a corpse's claw. I see my arm wither as the life is taken from it. Then I see her stirring, drinking my life into her moldered corpse.

. . . stumbling down those steep basement stairs . . . I fling myself about desperately in the gloom, looking for some kind of lamp. My eyes adjust, sweat and dust pours on my face. I have found the shovel, but the earth is packed hard - too

hard to dig. And that is not good because I want to bury her body deep. There is a large trunk in the corner below a waxen and cobwebby window. Perhaps the earth is softer beneath it. Rushing over I pull it aside.

Now the book crackles, and the ceiling cracks . . . looking up I see moonlight, and suddenly I am in a grave, with earth being shoveled on top of me. Cold suffocation and I am clothed in a torn dress.

A silent scream rises in my throat, and then I see myself digging in the soft earth that had been under the trunk. Digging down deep, until my hands are blistered and bleeding, and the shovel scrapes on stone.

The hammer comes down on the stake and it sinks through my heart, its sickening crunch the sound of my death and a flint struck to ignite a flame that will become eternal burning. I do not know where this image comes from or why it invades my space now, then my vision goes back to her and I see myself dragging her limp body down the stairs to the grave I have dug.

Her face sinks forever beneath the earth, and when I am done, my tears are from both sorrow and exhaustion. Sorrow because she was my daughter, and my curse.

I am nearly blind with tears as I drag the trunk back over the grave, and when I finish I collapse on it and sleep on it. Endless dark dreams and emptiness, I awake burning with pain, hunger, thirst, and sorrow. Without understanding why, I throw back the lock, and open trunk. And there is the book, and I know I will open it, and that it is her book. Then my eyes close.

The twilight is deep purple and it falls on the horizon like a final curtain. I will never see the day. My sleep will be eternal this time. The ancient book is in my hands and her angel face is a silhouette on the worn leather.

Mould and the yellowing of time have taken me and my body is leather, parchment, rot and dust. In the basement she is rising, her hand pink with life stolen from me. Tiny fingers break the soil.

I have read the book, holding it with my hands of splintered bone, and it is her book. It tells a lonely story and the ending leaves me forever forgotten. Yet she is remembered. And now I must sleep, knowing that it is the fang that lives on while the bones are buried.

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Houngan World

A Walking Dead Man Tale

I give credit to Columbus for discovering this island of Hispaniola, but I keep it in mind that I have also discovered new worlds.

Let me take my hat off to the Spanish, who killed one million Arawak Indians, leaving them dead in clouds of flies ... a feeding waterfall of flies of the flesh-ripping variety. Then there were the fields of bones, shells, carapaces, skulls of silver and jade, and history that is darkness, ashes, silence, hunger and void.

Yes, human history is mostly a dark, deformed shadow that is better forgotten, but history suited the man I possessed. Moduka's emptiness of soul was natural, and he was at home in the solitude of the sanctuary as he reached out for voodoo manhood. It's an odd thing to want to find and worship a god when immortality is only hunger. Yet I gave Moduka a god, filled his questing breast, and made the creature fly over barren ground and desert. I taught him the value of higher thoughts and dreams.

When I entered him, I felt the power of my possession. Perspiration and spasms were softening my new flesh and my jaw kept unhinging, snapping back like it wasn't part of my body at all. There were blinding flashes and icy hands upon me to control my leaping as I was dragged from the sanctuary.

"This is a Loa of power, one next to Baron Samedi, our lord of the dead," the mamba witch said in Creole . . . and hearing her words, the others quickly whitened my face with ashes.

"Here is the greatest of houngans!" The proclamation boomed in my skull like an echo in a cave, and then I found myself staring down at inscriptions in the sand. There was some residue of memory; I knew of other worlds I had devoured and destroyed, yet it was all very vague and dim as I'm a being who discards yesterdays like excess baggage, keeping only the power.

Finally, they threw the asson at my feet and the dry rattle of snake vertebrae in the gourd was a transforming sound. I became Moduka, and a full-fledged houngan priest of voodoo.

My mind was a quickly shifting dream. I was a son of the ever-changing spirits. The black skin I'd had all my life suddenly seemed new and amazing. I was proud that my house had a sleek tin roof, walls of healthy wood and a bed of banana leaves that would always be kept fresh by my servants.

Moduka's future as a houngan had been decided in the beginning when he climbed the treacherous faces of the Ciboa Mountains without the help of man or Loa. To the people of the villages he was as tall as those cliffs, and the women would fall to their knees and embrace his hips, finding them more beautiful than the blossoms of the bougainvillea vine. It was clear that even if events had followed their natural course he would have been a man of great power. Moduka was indeed a good choice for possession and of course, the voodoo made it easy for me to enter without

arousing suspicion.

Once initiated my reputation grew so fast that I was barely established in my church when an agent of the new ton-ton came to test my authority. I was resting on my porch that day, sipping rum while the sun peeled the last of the paint off my bleached railing. My rake-thin and cowardly servant, Hasely, dashed out of the trees to warn me. "Run for your life, Moduka! This man Kapu wears a fresh head on his belt!"

I didn't run. Instead, I struck Hasely a jaw-cracking blow for daring to suggest cowardice.

Kapu was a tall sinewy man whose natural expression was a zealous sneer. His eyes were bright and reminded me of one of those altar skulls with tiny light bulbs behind the sockets. He wore the head on a scarred and notched belt. It was the head of white man who had probably been only a visitor in Haiti.

Kapu's sneer slid like oil into a grin as he unclipped the shrunken head and dropped it at my feet.

"I am not impressed by this," I said. "It is the head of some girlish white boy you backstabbed in Port-au-Prince."

The insult whitened his lips, as his sneer grew murderous. "This is to show you how to kill," he said. "The head dried naturally. It is not shrunken through witchcraft. The death was clean and no illegal black magic was used."

"My ceremonies have a clean air that your murders don't," I said.

"Take me to your hounfort!" he said, almost snarling.

I obeyed and found that my own people had fled from me. We came off the path and passed through an empty village. Only birdsong and the cross greeted us at the front of the hounfort.

"I know you don't believe," I said, "but that doesn't matter -- when you pass the cross you'll be in the spirit land and in my

power."

Kapu spat and swore in native Haitian. He gave the front of the houmfort, its magic drawings, paintings of a cauldron, and crossed knives the fiercest stare. A stare I found ridiculous. Then his eyes went to the palm-leaf roof and the mud huts composing the surrounding sanctuaries. Without a doubt, he exuded a vile form of strength, but I still felt that I could crush him with the weight of my shadow alone.

"I feel generous today," Kapu said. "Otherwise I would go in and break down your altar."

I said nothing, but it was clear in the glances we exchanged that he was the one who was afraid.

"Don't imagine I'm here alone," Kapu continued. "I have fifty armed men nearby. So here is my command. Hold no ceremonies of evil magic. If we hear the beat of the big assators we'll break you and this village like we would a single drum."

Again I said nothing and Kapu walked away to where his anger could twine and grow behind the safe breath of fifty armed men.

Night fell and the moon shimmered like the largest bubble in the sea. I sent a servant out, running ahead of a zombie who wore a chain with a razor-sharp machete encased. The message for the people was be at the houmfort or risk being found in the dark by the zombie. They feared nothing in the world more than the rattle of that chain and I found that amusing. If voodoo was their nightmare what would they think if they knew of the Old Ones that could at any time awaken? And what would they think of my true form, which had already awakened?

Drums and dancing were my preference for the opening of a large ceremony, but with the drummers too frightened to be proper mediums I decided to loosen everyone up with rum. After pouring the usual water at the bases of the assators and spitting a spray of rum over the drummers, I passed out

bottles to the people. Once the liquor flowed things developed naturally into joyous singing in Creole and native Haitian. Brightly colored scarves began to flash as the dancing began, but my own pose remained stern and I did nothing other than throw scented bark on the fire. No houngan ever celebrates personally while there is an enemy to be slain.

As the assators thundered into the first stage of possession, I went into the houmfort and sat cross-legged by the central totem. In the flickering red altar light I fashioned a voodoo doll out of grass, rags, and mud and black feathers. When the likeness of Kapu was complete, I paused and listened to the drums boom their way up to a second level of possession.

My flesh horse-shivering in the heat, I went to the altar and took down a bottle marked with a big skull and crossbones. I poured some of it in a calabash and lit the contents with a wooden match. Heavy smoke coiled from it. I said an incantation as I carried it back to the totem. There I fanned the smoke and saw Kapu's face in the wisps. Pouring blood from a bottle I drenched the doll. No sooner had I finished than I heard the ecstatic screams of the celebrants transform to death cries.

I knew people were being cruelly butchered, but I did nothing except listen as the beat of the assators faltered and slowly died. Then I heard gunshots, the shouting of the raiders, mad cries and singing. A minute later the heavy thock of machine guns sounded and bullets cut through flesh and bone. The final sound was of the remaining drums being smashed.

I felt a whirl of troubling human emotions rising in my alien personality. Smoke shimmies blurred skulls, chains ... thunderstones and plastic flowers on the altar moved as the endless desert of space rose in my mind. I was parched and starving and the blood-soaked doll agitated my thirst -- but I have always thirsted for blood, and I grinned as I rose and made my way to the door.

The door creaked open, feeling stone-heavy, and I found the corpse of one of my servants spiked to it. I walked out and as I expected, Kapu was waiting. He stood flanked by two huge bodyguards, and he was smiling, taking much pleasure in the pain he was sure I was hiding. As we faced off, possessed worshippers continued their dance; some with wounded arms but still frenzied ... they were gore-speckled, shaking out small tongues of crimson and violet from machete gashes. Their clothes were blood-drenched rags and like voodoo in bright colors. The scene was tinged with a hellish magic and the sight of the massacred dying in ecstasy did more to unnerve Kapu and his men than it did me. Perhaps Kapu noticed something deeper in the moonlight. Beads of blood bright as gems may have shaped a death mask only he could see. Whatever it was, it caused Kapu's heart to visibly sink.

I pulled up the voodoo doll like a magician might pull up a rabbit from a hat, and the entire scene momentarily froze, a tableau of death. Kapu's eyes came to life like rays of moonlight reflecting on a turbulent sea. He gestured and a guard to his right took aim at my head with a Russian assault rifle.

Kapu laughed hollowly. "A voodoo doll can't save you."

I let my face relax to its normal serious expression and pulled a thorn from my hip pocket.

"Kill him!" Kapu commanded, and the guard pulled the trigger just as I ripped the thorn into the front of the doll.

The bullets knocked my head off and it was mostly spattered and crusted around a hole blasted in the door of the hounfort. Yet I remained standing with the torn doll in a locked hand. Viscous black blood oozed up at my neck.

Kapu's grin became the gape of a skull and the horrified eyes of his men went to him as he moaned. His shirtfront split open and pale swelling appeared, it was like a mushroom suddenly sprouting on a rotten tree, and it burst, sending a gush of putrefied innards to the dirt.

Terror became as real as chaff on the breeze. Kapu's men were so horrified they stumbled and even fell and crawled as they fled. And flight didn't save them. A thick column of flies bubbled up from the blood on my neck stump, and I remembered other landscapes of death as I swooped in and ripped into the flesh of the enemy.

I have worn many bodies, but as a man, I've never been more than an ordinary man. There is no unordinary man. There is delusion, men believe themselves grand, but humans are only flesh and blood. It's amusing how every human believes itself and the species must survive, and through collective effort reach the stars and higher being. And be the species no more, but something greater.

Nothing needs to ascend from Earth, and even higher alien beings have been devoured by my kind. As Moduka I don't think I've ever had any remorse about the end to come.

In voodoo, I would be called man and his devil, an evil being. But on all worlds beings are social and aim for an ideal order. Evil is the corruption of that order. I destroy everything. I don't corrupt . . . so I'm not a devil; I'm an end of things.

Time for most human beings is the pulse of the drums, a linear trance with each new day filed in neatly behind the last one. For me one day would be a million windows, each with a scene of Moduka's life, and into them, something new would slip, almost unnoticed. A startling occurrence might be a multiple vision in the faceted eyes of a fly in my mind. I would dance in the smoke of the fires while a wheel of the human world spun around me. Haiti I saw through a jumble of perspectives.

I always see much more than the immediate landscape; visions sliding at the edge of my awareness ... the red flowers of the flame tree, tides retreating and leaving a wake of froth, flocks of scarlet ibis rising into the blazing sun, the matchbox houses of Haiti from the eye of a hurricane, the possessed dancing on hot coals, and lightning tearing across

my boyhood in the Ciboa mountains. Yet I still have the eyes of an Old One, and the only thing absolutely real is the black void.

I became known as Calfou, ruler of the crossroads, an ash-whitened face to be feared, and as my reputation was now unchallenged I spent much time in the sanctuary. If I emerged and burned a single candle in silence there would be a whole night of flying shadows and drumming as the possessed danced off the intoxication of that candle. It was said that if you looked into my eyes in firelight you would see hell, and many came to see hell. It was at the end of those tumbled-together days, at the end of roads alive with madmen, that I found my own end and prepared a final ceremony.

Of all the madmen, there was a voodooking of madmen. His name was James, apparently because his parents had been in colony with Christian missionaries. Corrupted Christianity is a current along with African spiritualism in voodoo, but the Christian cross and the voodoo cross are different things. James' cross was pure African voodoo; he was a bokor magician who used coffins and the souls of the dead. A huge man he had a thick build like a Samoan, and a mocking grin filled with secrets. His thoughts were black-magic madness, twisted as lightning and mandrake roots. His jet-black skin was webbed with white scars from a time when he'd nearly been crushed by the clawing bodies of the risen dead. As a boy in the Ciboa Mountains, I'd known of him and feared him. Whenever he came to mind, the first image would be of him standing on an outcropping of rock raging at the approaching hurricane. I hadn't seen him since boyhood and was still in awe of him.

It wasn't news to me when a servant dashed out of the palms and collapsed at my feet to tell me that the bokor James was on his way from the mountains, pulling a massive coffin he had mounted on huge handmade wooden wheels. It wasn't news because I had willed the day. With folded arms, I

listened as the servant shook with malarial fever and told how James was approaching with Shango thunder preceding him and angry legions of dead souls at his heels.

Before James arrived, an anxious multitude had gathered around the hounfort. Sounds of weird thunder and hoof beats set the crowd on edge, and when James appeared under the darkened sky there was a calm-before-the-storm silence. James strained, powerful as an ox against the harness and ropes, pulling the massive coffin on as the people wilted out of his way like dying grass. It was as if a corpse of stone was contained within, a soul as solid as the core of the earth.

A possession of Loas began with the banging of a single drum, and when James came to a halt before me, the land was suddenly alive with frenzy and thundering drums.

No words were spoken as I faced-off with James, and the celebration had become much too loud for words. His eyes were as I remembered them. You could shriek all the way down to the bottom of them. Turning, I led the way into the hounfort and to the door of a special sanctuary. James followed, an ashen-faced monster on my heels.

A statue-still zombie with hair like a mat of rotted vines, and wearing a conch horn, guarded the door. He stepped aside and we entered a room with walls of mystic paintings and guttering candles. Numerous sealed pots containing the breath of initiates and decorated with black-and-white crosses were spilled over the earthen floor. A zombie entered carrying a smoking basket. Trance came upon me and I saw my real body and the ruins of decadent civilizations I had destroyed -- magnificent temples, blood red suns, myriad beings involved in final copulation. A million cells like jeweled facets opened my mind to visions of marvelous complexity. The chain of my existence was a trail of microscopic spores, glittering in swirls through the solar winds of the Milky Way. I became lost in visions and writhed on the floor, yet I was

still aware of the resonant voice of the bokor as he made his incantations to the dead. Earth appeared again, a speck in my eye, and we were spirits moving outside among the people. The many faces seemed doll-like and unreal in their twisted ecstasy. It was a dance of painted marionettes, and the wicked screams and laughter belonged to devils that couldn't die. Like flames, they had no choice but to dance and celebrate the power of doom.

With the bokor I faced the coffin, and it pulsed with the light of some tremendous burning. Drumbeats were rumbling in the earth as James stepped up and unfastened the latch. A radiance that stirred up emotions of sheer terror could be seen at the crack of the lid, and it blazed on James' flesh, turning his body to glistening ebony. Fire and light was a mask on his face and he threw his arms wide to the people and laughed hard enough to shake a house. Grinning wildly he seized the lid and threw it open, and then he gave it a powerful shove and sent it rolling on its big wheels into the dancers.

It rolled like thunder, throwing people out of its path in waves, and from the brilliant interior darkness rose. It was a beast, a horned giant, and it roared like an inferno and hissed like doused embers, then it exploded into clouds of winged insects. They were like flies or grasshoppers, yet they were as beautiful as jewels with breasts of brass and beaks of razor-sharp crystal.

My head swam in their beauty, and my spirit was the shimmering cloud they made; knowing the time of transcendence had arrived I tossed up powder from a gourd, made smoke and became a shadow rising in the sky.

Time has passed and now I look down at hills of gathered bones and a buzzing glitter of insects. I am the spirit of the houngan world, and I am the beast of old watching the winds strengthen. Time flashes by, I see it as flesh ripped from the carcass. The future is clear in the bleak sky. Tomorrow the sunrise will peak on a volcano in Haiti,

and more flies will hatch from the mountains of corpses. Black as tons of ashes they'll ride the winds above the Ciboa Mountains. And I will be them, the winged plague of the end.

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Faces in the Ice

A Walking Dead Man Tale

Slow clouds and tentacles of mist and monsters crept in a year before the great ice storm. And when the storm did come, the gloom was over me for a time before I realized what had happened.

A steady and hissing rattle of sleet beat on the roof. The wind's chill gusts moaning low and bringing about a continual creaking of boughs. Wet gloom dripping like Chinese water torture on the cabin window emptied my mind in the same way that hypothermia empties the human body of energy.

Then storm gremlins started to snap things. Thousands of knuckles rapped on the walls. Branches and ice swayed against the eaves and little gusts of wind gained the power of ax men. The terrifying crunch of weighted tree trunks sent down shattering avalanches of ice chunks that rocked the old place to its foundations.

I have been alone for a long time. Thank heaven for that. It's been that way since that last day, when the divorce went through and my wife Mia drove out to taunt me. She stood in the doorway wearing her fur and little black dress. Her babyface growing slanted and feral. She grinned, showing the fangs of an unreal monster. When she spoke, it was with a voice gone hollow and cruel, even her laughter seemed warped by the electricity of other dimensions. I went to the

window and watched as she drove away into a reddening sunset; knowing that only an evil force could've turned easy-going Mia into that. Distorted faces of monsters were in the rolling clouds, spreading and falling with the violet dust of twilight. Some kind of alien thing had happened, like an H.G. Wells thing. Only there wasn't a war or any fighting back. Higher powers can just change your world, without asking, and that is what they did.

But so much for Mia, this is really about the storm and my struggle -- Near dawn the screech of tires carried in on a whooping gust of icy wind. A bang and the crunch of fenders and steel guardrail followed, and then trees crashed on the valley-side. An hour of yelling followed by screaming rose out of the shrill wind. I simply ignored the last screams of monsters, and soon only the music of falling ice bombs penetrated.

Hours later rays of sunlight swept out of the gloom and tinted the curtains with gold. There weren't any cars passing on the frost-locked highway, and the monster grunts and moans had faded in my ears. I began to think that perhaps the storm marked the end of them all and a divine return to earth for human beings.

I have a mask I wear - wouldn't dream of even opening the curtains without it on. It has soft rubbery skin with a crop of stiff brown hair and features that go perfectly with the sickly tint of monster green. The mask has never failed -- their partially blinded eyes can't see the flaws and they always think I am one of them when I wear it. I used my next-door neighbour to make the lovely thing -- Jim Schiff being my only neighbour way out here. The monsters got to him before I did. They turned him into a devil. I killed him the day he poisoned my cat, Yellow Paws.

Yellow Paws had been over there throwing down Jim's

garbage cans and when he returned I could smell anti-freeze on him. I used a squirt bottle to flush him and he bit my lips as I sucked the poison out of him. He lived but now he has only one good eye and a bad limp. Jim wasn't as lucky. I topped off a whiskey bottle with anti-freeze and got him that afternoon in the garage. His eyes were dark rings, his cheeks moldy green like cheese. He didn't look human at all and he wasn't Jim, or the old Jim, even though he played as though he was --- I only call him Jim for lack of a better word to describe the thing he ended up to be.

His lined face sucked into a glove of anger and fear, he kept roaring and spitting the stuff out. And I kept refilling the bottle and pouring it down his throat again. "You'll pay for this," he bellowed. But I didn't listen and it was only after he was dead that I started believing him. Yet they never did get me - his tramp cousin found him in the dirt covered with booze and anti-freeze and instead of calling the police he buried him out in the woods and stole half the appliances from his house. I dug him back up to use his face for the mask - and the funny thing is no one ever came looking for him.

Mask patted in place, I opened the curtain and could see Jim's house sitting next door like an old haunted wreck, creaking under the grip of about a ton of ice. Sunlight gleamed on a huge column of ice rising at its side, giving the impression that without the support the place would collapse.

I glanced up at a wide split in the cloud wall, worrying that my place might be just as damaged. It appeared to be only a small break in the gloom -- across the valley golden ice showered down from even heavier clouds; falling on a valley that resembled a cornucopia of weird ice sculpture.

Evergreens were bearded with frost, their boughs braided with heavy ice and snow. Sunbeams moved like spotlights, creating a deadly sparkle in this fragile world. Crusts of ice gravel coated the slopes. Spikes and stalactites hung like

fangs from the abandoned Queensway rail station. Columns, elephant feet and other squat beasts of ice had formed around the highway 312 warehouses on the far side. I could see a crumpled hydro tower surrounded by spruce that glistened with ice as bright as Christmas lights.

I decided to step out and see if my roof was secure, but found the door frozen shut, so I went to the kitchen window and managed to force it open. Easing out, I slipped and slid down to my butt, crystals of snow falling in my eyes. Facing the road, I saw angels of ice melt and gasoline rainbows swirling in the pavement.

Rising I walked carefully beneath ice dripping eaves and made my way out into the yard, trying to get a view of the auto wreck that had happened earlier. Beneath the snow bank, I spotted bent blue metal and a shattered windshield fused into the road like an igloo. The lone driver's last act had been to try and crawl out - now he was on his knees and immortalized in ice. His Ford had collided with a fallen pole and dragged it for a ways. Unfortunately, a power line had landed right outside the door and when he crawled out, he got stuck. After a time he'd seized the line, trying to use it like a rope to pull himself free. Only it had been live and high voltage had turned his arm black as licorice and left him a blue-faced statue on the roadside. He had a crust of snow for a cap and Cyclops glasses of ice. His teeth and jaw were wrenched into a ghastly position, like he'd bit on the charge for a long time.

Though he was a ghastly corpse, he did look human and more attractive than the monsters. It meant that it was true that many of the monsters had in fact possessed humans. In death, they faded away like a snakeskin.

The thought of a Herculean hero saving the human race passed through my mind, and faded quickly as the rumble of skidoos shook the valley. They were riding a ridge of softer snow and running up to the bay highway, meaning they would be at my joint in about four minutes. Their yellow alert

jackets contrasted with their purple Arctic suits. Jackets meant they must've rode over the lake on some sort of rescue mission.

Ice powder and blue exhaust jet-trailed as they cut the valley like ice picks on the fly; I could already see green faces and goggles. It all seemed to reflect in the avalanche of silver ice. My head spinning, I slipped as I hurried back to the window. Hard ice gave my cheek a mean blow. Scrambling up, I climbed inside and closed up.

In the dark, I couldn't see anything so I stuck a candle in an empty whisky bottle and struck a match on the wood stove to light it. Embers were smoldering out inside. Damn, I said as I realized they would've spotted the smoke.

There was no way around it; they would be at the door shortly. Candle in hand I descended to the cellar and my gun rack. Pistols, a Remington shotgun and a submachine gun, I carried them all up. Placing the machinegun on a brace by the north wall, I set the angle for the door and connected the trigger mechanism. I had been working on this setup for a while, in case a last stand against the monsters came about. Lacking the skill to hold and fire a submachine gun, I had found another way to do it.

Shielded by a bookshelf, I waited in a dim corner, snuffing the candle the moment I heard their engines roar in.

"Holy shit!" one guy shouted then the engines died.

Not able to resist, I went to the window and crouched. Ice on the glass blurred the scene but I could see them there hovering over the frozen body. They were monsters but their voices were human. It spooked me enough that my hair rose.

A bottle was passed. Laughter broke out, and then shots rang out as they severed the power line with bullets. Likely the line was dead now anyway, but they weren't taking any chances. I could see one creep kicking at the corpse. His green face flashed like slime on the glass, and I realized they weren't out on a rescue mission. These guys were looters and

they were beginning here by picking the dead man's pockets. Five minutes passed. I moved back behind the bookshelf. A knock came at the door.

"Help me," I moaned, just loud enough for them to hear.

"Hey, you alright in there?" the guy hollered.

"No. Part of my roof collapsed. I can't get free. Can you get the door open and help?"

Muffled voices came from the gloom, and then the man spoke. "Just hang on. We'll be in as soon as we pick this ice away."

Then I heard the sounds of a pick and breaking ice. They pulled on the door but it stubbornly refused to move. I saw a crowbar splintering wood in the crack, then the door flew open and I saw the monsters.

A red bearded one with popping veined eyes had his pistol ready, but he didn't fire because they couldn't see anything in the dark interior. Then their eyes adjusted and their twisted mouths opened in disbelief.

Yanking the trigger mechanism, I fired.

The submachine gun flashed fire. Bullets mighty enough to penetrate tank armour hit the intruders. Visually it looked like a bull had charged in and nailed them full force. Their bodies showered up trinkets of blood and flesh as they tumbled back on the ice like slabs of beef thrown from a truck crash.

The third and burliest of them ducked back from the blast and fell. Scrambling, rolling, sliding, he went across the yard and down the bank. In another second, he was rolling up near the wreck, a snub nose in his hand.

Rushing to the door, I fired a blast of shot with the Remington. It missed and kicked up a spray of ice, most of the shot licking a frozen corpse and freckling it with blood spots.

Unhurt, the looter got behind the wreck and winged a shot in

the door, smashing a glass cabinet behind me. I kicked the door shut and heard shots splinter into it as I ran to the window. He was crawling behind the wreck and I concluded that the way to get him was to force him to run for other cover.

Yanking a Glock pistol from my belt, I smashed the glass and fired a clip of ammunition at the wreck. Then I holstered it and grabbed the shotgun. Dashing to the door, I flung it open and fired a blast at the wreck.

Booting the door shut, I exchanged the shotgun for a hunting rifle and hurried back to the window. It looked like the ploy had worked - he thought he was under attack from two men. Bursting out he dashed across the slippery ice with the idea of hopping over the valley embankment. Sites on his back I picked him off, seeing green gas geyser through a hole in his ski jacket as he went headlong over the edge.

Euphoria swept me -- I raised the rifled and bellowed. Three of them killed easily. I massacred them - and it was a feeling that told me I wasn't really a hunter. My greatest joy was killing someone with a shot in the back and it didn't really matter if it was a monster or a human.

It is unfortunate that reality always deflates the joys of life, and my thoughts rocketed back into the gloom with the realization that I was now homeless. To escape I had to hit the road before more came to get me. My long years of survivalist training would finally be put to the test. As a predator operating from a hideout in the woods I would have to be more ruthless than even the monsters.

Down in the cellar, I learned my first genuine lesson -- little of the ton of gear I had stored could actually be taken with me. Crossing the ice-slick valley by skidoo would not be possible unless I was light. As it turned out - a good supply of ration packs, light climbing gear and light weapons, a portable medical kit and a radio added up to a only few pounds.

My thoughts came and went as I rifled through all the stuff I couldn't take with me - aneurysms of green lava erupted whenever I closed my eyes and only reopening them to the gloom prevented me from drowning in a quicksand patterned with the faces of the monsters. My former grand goal of survival seemed almost irrelevant in a world barely worth living in.

Once the skidoo was packed, I took time to drag the bodies to the embankment ... tossing them and watching as they smashed through ice-brittle brush, carrying small avalanches with them to the bottom. At this stage of the game, the most dangerous thing about the ice was that it had cracked everything it covered. It had no roots and any heavy moving object would soon be surfing on a wave of chunks and breakage.

The looters had already cut a trail, so the only real option was to follow it around the valley rim. Gunning the engine, I moved ahead slowly into a biting wind, picking up speed once I got the feel of the trail. It got harder once I left the highway and went down on the valley side. Areas of pine were safe and they seemed to hold the ice. Brush and deciduous forest were the worst, broken branches and ice had heaped and it would start moving at the sound of the engine. Too slow and it would drop and hit you from above, and too much speed and you could become the leading edge of a fresh avalanche created by the treads.

Near the Breaker Hill Road, the trail climbed out of the valley. Ice around me began to slide in bergs but I made it to the rim. Looking up I saw a roof of frozen fir branches. Moving slowly I came to another embankment. This was Breaker's toboggan run and beneath it with a wave of ice swept up to its side was the Brightsville Mall.

One of the lots had been cleared and a number of vehicles were parked there. I could see green splotches moving behind the glass doors, then they opened and two children emerged and began to play in the lot.

Pulling out my field glasses, I took a closer look, seeing green fuzz forming on the cheeks of the two boys. It told me that the monster crowd had taken shelter in the mall and were also using it to incubate new flesh.

I sighed. It was short-lived. Something flashed below; a security guard had been hiding just outside of the mall and now he'd spotted me, no doubt thinking me a member of the looter gangs.

He fired; a shot that cracked the ice in the firs above me. Before I could move a tremendous body of ice and snow tumbled down on me.

It swept me under with ruthless force, the branches and chunks of ice hammering me like a hundred fists while the sharp crystalline snow stung my eyes and mouth. The mass settled slowly and I groaned in pain as it shifted to gravity in ways that pulled my torso and arms and legs in different directions.

Finally, there was no more movement, and the vision in one eye cleared. I found that I could see up through a crack to the sky above.

Pain and numbness grew simultaneously; my head was swelling ... shooting pains of Arctic cold forcing me to bite my tongue. Slowly I forced myself to move, clawing uselessly at the ice. A few seconds of effort and I managed to get hold of a ridge of ice. My other arm moved slowly through the chunky snow and when I had both hands on the chunk I pulled hard.

It worked at first then the whole mass shifted and a branch swept in and tore at my face. I choked, my air being cut off, and then I screamed as the whole heap began to slide.

The force of the slide nearly ripped me apart. As I closed eyes tight to die I was suddenly thrown out beneath the trees. I kept rolling, hoping to get clear. When the ground seemed solid again I got to my knees and shook the snow off

my head.

I was coming out of one nightmare into another. I could see people below spilling out of the mall -- distorted green faces, none of them human. They were shouting for the boys, but I knew they wouldn't find them because I could see that part of the avalanche was now resting where they'd been playing.

My face was bleeding so much it was hard to see. The skidoo and my supplies hadn't gone down; they were poking out of a pile of fir branches. I crawled over, in the grip of a thousand points of ice pain and the first thing I grabbed was my hunting rifle.

I got it just in time, there were more shouts and faces and they were looking in my direction. Swinging the gun out I started firing. Two guys went down with hits to the face, and the others panicked and ran back inside.

The cold had got my hands. They were feeling like heavy lumps. I knew that as soon as the bruising and pain set in my entire body would be useless. I could already feel the stab of broken ribs.

It meant they would get me. There wasn't any way out except one. I went through my packs for my sticks of dynamite. Finding them, I forced myself to walk on trembling legs, planting charges a good ways to my left and right. And with that done, I moved back to the skidoo, gunned the engine and forced it out of the ice.

The Brightsville Mall is a long building; I can see melting green faces in the windows and warped faces all around me in the ice ... enough to make me want to scream. Soon I will yell, and detonate my charges, sending the masses of ice down.

Here on the clear peak I'll be able to ride down on the tail of the avalanche. The ice will smash the rows of glass doors at the main entrance, clearing them so I can ride right inside on

my skidoo.

Their world will shake, glass will burst, aluminum will crumple, ice will shatter and fly and best of all, those green faces will crack when the bullets from my automatic start to bite. The faces in the ice tomorrow will be dead faces.

But if I fail all will be lost, and the monsters and their children will live on as a man buried in ice rides crushed and dead to their doorstep.

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All of the Nightmare

A Walking Dead Man Tale

An ancient moon rose like destiny, its illumining rays a cruel beginning. A monster was digging Owen's grave; crooked, deformed hands clutched the shovel. It rose and fell, heaping up damp clay at graveside. The hostile being existed in a shadowy corner of his mind. Jagged white teeth flashed on a face made hideous by hate. Owen's brown eyes fluttered open. It was pitch dark, the air was stale, he struggled to rise, but his forehead struck an upholstered surface and he fell back. He explored with his hands and feet and pushed with all his strength, but it was no use; he was sealed in a coffin, buried alive.

Panic electrified him and he writhed until his clammy flesh surrendered. A loud scream tore across his mind and he snapped awake and clambered out of bed. "Nightmares again," he thought, and he buried his face in his hands.

Forbidding creaking and scraping came from the window and he turned to it. Something was moving in the velvet darkness outside. It brushed against the glass, a liquid smear gained clarity -- it was the face from his nightmare. Owen felt his

hair lift and his mouth tremble. He tried to reason away the twisted lips, pocked and lumpy cheeks, canine teeth and moon-bright eyes.

The front door shook with thumps and the hinges groaned and gave way. Owen clutched the back of a chair. The window shattered and the door crashed to the tiles; two savages were in the room. He swung the chair, but they knocked it away as they tackled him -- crazed with fear he fought with twice his normal strength, countering their holds and blows time after time. Their attack was relentless; they kicked, punched, bit and clawed him and their foul body odor was on him like a wet blanket when he passed out.

Broken tombs and crumbling walls leaned out of coagulating darkness and a prowling wind carried chill whispers through the damp cratered spaces. There were four men; naked, hairy and deformed, and two of them carried Owen. They passed deeper and deeper into a nightmarish land. Moonbeams lanced through clouds that were like the dark angry brows of evil gods. The beams swept over spindly trees and burial mounds, and the twisted uppermost branches of the trees quivered in the wind. A huge fire was climbing from the bottom of the night. Owen heard logs hissing, scrolls of smoke were rising up the metal spikes on a tall pole. Fright was rising from his belly again as he realized a person was being burned at the stake. Hungry flames licked the body, and there were more of the gruesome nightmare men, doing a ritual dance around the stake and showering the fire with drops of blood.

Owen was carried past the stake to the edge of a pit on the other side; light flickered on the steep walls -- the pit was lined with spiders and its bottom teemed with snakes. They pushed him in without warning and he gasped violently. It happened too quickly for him to scream.

He remained buried by snakes while a fire was built at a new stake and he wouldn't let go of the rope they pulled him up with so they used it to bind him to the stake. Owen burned; a

living torch -- his blood boiled and his flesh cooked and charred, but death escaped him. Pain rioted through him and he lived! He lived until his bed was a heap of coals. He was the stuff of nightmares when they dragged him from the ashes, and he begged for death. They tossed him back in the pit and he clawed the earth, trying desperately to bury himself.

Owen looked in the mirror again, unable to believe he was hallucinating. He was scarred, scratched, bruised, burned and swollen. The welts and burns on his puffy face left only his eyes recognizable. A busted tooth ached wickedly. He turned back to Rob and locked his slit eyes on him. Rob's face was straight and serious. Owen looked as healthy and pink as a college boy to Rob.

"No one believes me," Owen said flatly, almost in a whisper. "Janet thinks I've been swallowing the hard stuff. She'll wish she hadn't doubted me when she has to tell Jenny that Daddy is dead. They'll return from Florida and find my wasted remains."

Rob seemed unconcerned, he poked at the fireplace and the light played with his absent expression. "You ain't dying. It's all in your head. The stuff you describe can't be real -- finding yourself suddenly alone has tipped your mental balance."

Owen eased into his armchair and stared at the ashes curling on a log. "I've undergone every sort of torture and horror. I'm like a one-man dark age. There's nothing more real than what I'm suffering from now."

A web of shadows touched Rob's frown. "It's real then, but as an inner conflict that doesn't touch the rest of the world. A screwball side of your personality has surfaced, and since you're afraid to let it loose you can only fight it. Next time these men come, confront them with logic; tell them they're not possible, tell them you want to merge with them -- you'll find out what they want and what you need."

"I know what they want," Owen said, shaking his mop of

black hair. "They want to put me through the most horrible ordeals imaginable. I don't feel at odds with myself. I'm at odds with evil beings that have real substance. I'll try confronting them, but if I fail to win against them, I want you to shoot me -- make it look like an accident. I can cheat them with death, and then they can't make me suffer any more."

"It won't come to that," Rob said, morbid interest hanging on his face. "I'll stay the night and make sure no one really does break in -- concentrate on confrontation. You own the dreams they travel in, and you can call the shots on the outcome."

An empty wine bottle glowed burgundy with light from fading embers, some of its alcoholic haze warming Owen. He rested on a cot. Rob was sprawled across the couch; the wine had delivered him a knockout punch. Owen felt no tension in the air, he entertained no dark imaginings, and there were only the sounds of the night. A truck's engine was gunning proudly on a nearby highway. The horn of a train blew, and then there was the familiar rumble of big wheels that often carries people to dreamland. Deep in the woods a dead branch split and a cascade of dust, rot and twigs hit the duff. A rising song of the wind told of its ascent of faraway hills, long gusts rushed in the treetops and raced north like a giant dragon's tail. Musical sounds of a running stream, wind chimes and the gentle tinkle of breaking glass drifted with a quiet dream. Friendly footsteps kicked through the quilts of autumn leaves, and the call of a loon emerged from some distant stillness. Time flickered as torchlight till a greater fire than it began to roar. It roared louder, drums raced, and then inhuman screaming paled the night's soul.

Owen awoke with a jolt. Lightning was in his mind and he felt a storm of panicky emotions swallowing him. He'd been spirited away while he slept; a vista of shattered tombs, bonfires, spindly trees and morbid shadows had settled on the night. Autumn leaves whirled in dust devils as they skipped over open pits. A Mars-red moon glowed in the grim sky. Owen tried to rise but found himself bound to stakes in

the ground. He lifted his head and saw Rob roped naked to a dead tree. Bright flames from a bonfire made Rob's anguish clear; his head hung limp and his sweaty hair stuck to his chest. Rob shivered, then he lifted his pained face to the sky; his eyes were fixed on something horrible. He let out a bloodcurdling scream. Owen squinted and saw that much of the flesh had been stripped from Rob's right leg, and in such a way that the bleeding was unnaturally light.

Heralds of a nightmare they slipped silently out of darkness, and the bright fires cast back their cloaks of shadows. There were five rough-cut men and a woman who was equally primitive. Perverse hunger warped their crude faces. Their eyes released a pure and sheer light of evil like they had taken cruelty into their breasts to replace their hearts. Thick hair made their nakedness natural. They drew up to Rob's limp body and the tallest man held up a stone blade with knotty six-fingered hands. They stared at the blade with hollow eyes and weighed some unknowable bestial thoughts. Rob moaned, his face twitched and his head rose then dropped against his chest.

A hopeless cry echoed through the tombs; the blade was stripping Rob's other leg, slowly so that there wasn't too much blood. The woman turned to Owen, and then she slipped over to him. She slithered down in the dust and smiled viciously; her tangled hair mercifully hid most of her face. Her bluish breasts were a gruesome sexual promise.

Rob continued to cry out and Owen glimpsed the four men sitting by the fire devouring strips of raw flesh. Owen ground his teeth with fury as the cries stabbed at his conscience; a mad grimace froze on his face and his mouth was hot and foul like he was biting on a thick electric wire. He strained against his bonds, and then he fell back from exhaustion. The woman's coarse hands caressed him, moving slowly over his body and between his legs. His shock peaked and terror was transformed to evil rapture. He surrendered to her. Her sweaty body was on him and he cried out ecstatically as

fangs, venom and shifting dark faces penetrated his mind. Owen felt his body melt to hot zombie flesh, and the taste of blood grew sweet on his lips.

Sunset turned the picture window to red foil. Owen awoke. Awesome guilt was a great stone crushing him. His hands trembled, he felt unreal like he was still in a dream -- but what was a dream? Rob had been eaten alive in a dream, and he had tasted human flesh in a dream -- how could it be true? He looked around for Rob, and then he covered his face with his hands. Rob's half-eaten body lay in a pool of blood by the door. A terrible thing had to be true; madness and cannibalism, he had devoured his best friend while thinking he was dreaming. He fell forward to his knees, vomited and sobbed.

When the tears stopped coming Owen looked up and saw the dark figure of one of the nightmare men; he was haloed by the red window and wore a loose gray robe. Brilliant silver light streamed off his face, and this gave great strength to a being that had seemed only hideous before.

"You're a product of my madness," Owen said stonily. "What is it you want, or what is it I want?"

"Your friend, we killed him and ate him," said the dream person, his voice deep and hollow. "We are preparing a path for destiny and he was a fool who was in the way."

"Destiny," Owen laughed bitterly. "You make destiny out of nightmares that only want to be forgotten."

The nightmare man stepped away from the darkening window. "There are certain things that have to happen, and they belong to destiny. For there to be any nightmares there must be a most-frightening nightmare. We are part of this nightmare, this most-frightening nightmare we are preparing for you. Each night you grow stronger so that this very special gift can be yours. You are the man who will know all of the nightmare."

"No!" Owen cried, "not more!" He clenched his fists and

shook his head, but he paid little attention to the window. Beyond the glass sunset had faded to dusk and hordes of evil nightmare beings waited -- all possible nightmare beings. In this, the moment of Owen's anguish, they worshipped him. What they called bows belonged only to Owen, and their infinite horrors belonged only Owen. They were offering him it all.

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The Neon God

A Walking Dead Man Tale

Neon blazed on a rooftop, sending colored haze down to a grimy window where it haloed the face of an old man. His wrinkles shone like a web of silver, his cross-eyes were alive with inner turmoil. A beast of possession lurked in him, and he could see a garish light of salvation crackling in electric tubing that spelled CHANNEL 38.

It seemed like a thousand years had passed since the days when he'd preached on the street. Then he'd told of the neon god and the doom he would bring to end the world. Now he was hearing the voices of the angels again, and again he could feel the evil of night. The buildings, the city became a blur in his teary eyes. Twilight was a bruise, the final rays of the sun and darkness bled in the alleys, and at the bottom of his heart embers of worship smoldered.

"The fallen creature shall be crushed in the hand of God," he said as he spotted a young blond man moving furtively in the alley below, and the words had the power of scripture. He knew he must carry out the command soon. He would let the skies blow with the scented ashes of sacrifice; sweet smoke would drift with the neon blaze at the feet of his god.

Turning, the old man faced his huge loft-like apartment. In the days before the voices, when he'd been only an artist, it'd been a musty, cluttered place. Now that he was a priest of light, it was a temple. An obsidian dagger rested on a marble pedestal before him, it had a kneeling Aztec for a hilt. Picking it up, he headed for the center of the room. There in dim light stood a knight and dragon and unlit neon tubing that spelled CHANNEL 38. The knight was smoke-stained in places where he'd done some work on it, but the dragon looked brand-new. He stopped for a moment to admire its fine variegated hide and scorched metallic nostrils. Then he heard a thump. Moving quickly across to the dials of his security panel, he killed the lights.

Fury nearly sent him flying murderously across the room as he heard the sacred stained glass in his door shatter, but he managed to keep control, knowing his security system would do the work for him. Crouching in the darkness like a cat, he waited and silently vowed that this intruder into the holy house of the neon god would pay as others had paid. He would be sacrificed, purified by fire, while the riches of the neon god, a mattress stuffed with bills, would remain safe.

Iron bars were set behind the broken glass, and when the burglar came up against them he swore. They were too narrowly spaced for a hand to go through, so he took out a halved key and pin pick and pick-sawed the lock open.

The old man listened intently; it was a matter of moments, then the door whispered open and he heard the creak of footsteps -- and the snap of a bear trap and a scream as steel teeth bit into the intruder's leg.

Feeling triumphant, the old man put the lights on. He saw that he'd captured the blond kid who'd been passing in the alley. A closer look showed fashion-torn jeans, a black leather jacket and a face that was cruel even in agony.

Picking up a fake gold ornament from a shelf, he walked over and struck the kid on the side of the head. The kid collapsed,

and working quickly he freed him from the trap and dragged him over to the knight. Sticky bubbles of purplish blood showed on the gashed leg, and they set ashes blowing in the old man's head. His vision clouded, he set the neon tubing in place, and then he was deafened by the singing of angels.

The young man, a teenage thief named Davey, awoke to the sound of his own moaning. The old man guessed that the pain in his leg was intense; it'd be like hot rivets with a horrible itching. No doubt, the lump on his head throbbed around the knowledge that he'd been captured by some kind of vigilante or madman. He'd never guess that he was in the hands of a priest of neon.

Now that he could see Davey's face twitching, the old man bathed the room in turquoise light that illumined the dragon and gave it a lifelike look. It seemed to burst into brilliant existence with its neck already moving. Slowly it turned jeweled eyes and faced Davey more directly, and then it roared, a canned roar that no one would ever think was real. It was obviously cheap digital sound playing.

"What in the hell!" Davey said as he shuddered and the rippling of his flesh knocked away a skin of numbness. The old man smiled as Davey tried to move and found that he couldn't. Even his neck was frozen. His gaze lowered and he saw why; he was locked in metal, a gleaming suit of armor to be exact. It was rigid and he was held standing, fixed in battle posture with a sword at ready as he faced the dragon.

A purple web of facial wrinkles and cross-eyes caught the light as the old man stepped forward. He was wearing his priestly garb, a flowing robe that shimmered; its scaly surface reflecting various colors like the dragon's hide. The robe was open at the front, revealing a T-shirt with CHANNEL 38 stamped on it in large silver type.

Picking up a helmet from the floor, the old man moved in close and watched Davey's face twitch with desperation as he slipped it on him. Davey struggled and tried to throw himself

forward as the locks clicked in tight, but the suit was firmly planted and wouldn't move unless the old man gave the command with the special app he'd created for his holy cell phone.

Retreating out of the bright lights, the old man picked up the holy phone and began to make adjustments. Instantly, Davey heard a creak and felt his arms move, then a razor flash of pain caused him to yelp as his legs moved.

A canned voice blasted in his ears. "I shall strike you dead, dragon! And bury your bones at the feet of the neon god!"

The dragon's roaring grew distorted as it increased in volume and through the visor he saw it begin to belch fire. Plumes of crimson and smoke curled at its nostrils and mouth, then large bursts of flame began to lick at the lower portions of the suit. Davey reacted with electrocution agony and motion as the metal grew burning hot. He gasped and yelped until his lungs nearly burst, but gravity held him tight to the searing suit. His skin turned to popping boils and he felt his flesh roasting and sticking to the armor.

"Prepare to die vile dragon!" boomed the helmet's speakers. "Your fire is"

Davey's tortured screams flowed with the programmed roaring and voices. Rushing flames consumed the suit, and finally smoke rushed in and asphyxiated him.

The suit of armor swung open like a type of sarcophagus and the charred body slid to the floor. Released from the pressure it visibly swelled, smoking with lumps of blackened flesh and pus. The old man dragged it aside, and it hissed gas as it moved. He left it in the center of the room, where it pulsed and spit fluid as it cooled. Taking a holy torch, he used it to burn away the skin and flesh stuck to the inside of the suit.

When everything was cleaned up he went to the window and looked over at the CHANNEL 38 building, then he turned and watched the patterns of light falling softly on the blackened

corpse, and the rivulets of bloody fluid flowing from it. He found that the sight failed to truly move him and he fell to his knees and stared at his trembling hands. There was no enlightenment this time; the neon god would not speak to him. Anger crackled on his brow. All of his work, his saintliness, had led to nothing. Then a memory came to him. It was years ago and he was building the sculpture on the roof of CHANNEL 38. His beautiful knight and dragon; he'd worked them so fine that heaven had come into his hands and the neon god came alive and spoke to him. But those betrayers at CHANNEL 38 had put him out and denied him access to his rooftop temple. They'd turned his sculpture and the neon god into a cheap sign.

Crossing the room, he opened a closet and removed a shotgun. At the door, he knocked out the rest of the stained glass with the butt, and then he threw it open and headed for CHANNEL 38. The day had come; the betrayers of the neon god would die. He would speak the words of judgment from the muzzle of a RUGER 12-gauge.

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Digger

A Walking Dead Man Tale

Sean and Crissy tapped their heels against the polished side of a boulder. The high-rises of Scarborough towered behind them and from their perch, they could see most of Bluffer's Beach. A neat line of poplars stood at the edge of the sand berm near the bottom of the rise. A stone's throw from the poplars the sand slipped under the light-green waves rocking in from Lake Ontario.

One of childhood's small daydreams carried like driftwood across Crissy's mind as she absently watched the transparent

curls of water break to foam. Family troubles evaporated and the rush and rustle of the lake and leaves lifted her mood . . . but small worlds are always ephemeral and the best of life is a forgotten island until it lives again.

Crissy came out of her daydreams, noticing only the presence of Sean. Sean reminded her of a pestering little shark - he'd the same knack for spoiling a beach. Unexpectedly he punched her on the shoulder. She winced as she turned to his large attention-begging eyes.

"Look through the binoculars," Sean said, his red hair sticking up in multiple cowlicks. "There's a green car parking down by the beach. I bet it's some of the people searching for me."

Crissy took the binoculars. She saw a big man behind the car windshield. He had a hanging, leathery face and the intense lines of a nasty complainer around his slit eyes. A very frightened lady who resembled a plump rosy-cheeked doll sat next to him. His thin lips began to move - he'd found something to complain about.

"They're not looking for you," Crissy said. "People park there to do things they're not supposed to do."

"Yeah," Sean said, snatching the binoculars. "Wow! He's roughing her up. I bet they're fighting over dope, just like my mom and dad."

"You're supposed to call the police when you see a creep beating on a woman," Crissy said, her face concerned. "I could whistle for Digger. He'll bite him."

Sean gave her a cynical glance. "I beat-up on my sister yesterday and no one called the police; at least not before I ran away. Don't you whistle either, or he'll run up here. Besides, I know you don't have a dog. I've been over to see him twice and he's not been around."

Crissy frowned. "Digger doesn't like you, that's all."

Sean couldn't see enough, he ignored her and leaned forward. "He's getting out and limping around to her side.

She doesn't want out, but he's pulling her out by the hair. Ha! She bit his hand. She's handcuffed. He must be a crazy policeman."

"You're lying, Sean Williams, and you won't scare me. I bet they're smoking and drinking like the other people who park there."

"Nope. He's roping her to a tree now, and she's not wearing a skirt - only her panties. That means he's a killer. Cops can beat you up but they can't drive around with naked girls."

Chilling, almost gull-like screams broke the beach's harmony of sound. The truth of evil had found paradise. Crissy pushed off the boulder and held her dress against the breeze as she ran to the lip of the rise. She could make out the man down below. Sinister shadows coiled around him. He lifted a leather case out of the trunk and limped out of sight behind a berry bush.

"What's he doing?" she said, almost whispering.

Sean combed his hair with his fingers. "He's opening the case. It's full of murdering knives and hair from girls he scalped. I bet he's gonna cut her head right off. Killers from the French Revolution like to cut off heads. Dad says you don't die until about ten seconds after your head's been cut off. You feel your head bounce on the ground and while your brains are leaking out you wish you hadn't broke the law."

Crissy shivered and whistled shrilly, startling Sean so that he almost dropped the binoculars. He slid off the boulder, stared open-mouthed at Crissy's paling face, then dashed over beside her.

"Now you've done it! That creep will turn us into shrunken heads if we don't scam!"

"Digger must be sleeping," Crissy said coolly

"Yeah, and counting the burglars sneaking over his grave," Sean said angrily. He raised the binoculars. A blurry mass of leaves filled the lenses; he used a baby birch to focus.

Sweeping back to the car, he spotted the killer, and he seemed to be staring straight up at him - a fierce gleam lit his left eye, his right eye blurred by a cataract. The deep creases in his face were as dark as oil; his skin was abnormally weather-beaten, hanging like diseased folds on a sordid mask. Bluish lips formed an inimical, quivering grin. He brazenly walked through some thorn bushes, striking out when barbs tore at his sweat-stained tobacco shirt. Using his bad foot to brace himself he began limping up the rise in a very swift if clumsy manner. For certain he'd spotted them, and for certain he was a believer in the rejuvenating powers of dead slabs of young flesh.

Hand tugging hand, coronas of hair flying, Crissy and Sean ran behind the boulder and into the sumac growing on the east slope of the rise. Sean showed Crissy a hiding spot behind a decaying log, put a finger to his lips to warn her to keep silent and crawled away into deep weeds.

White knuckles and a scarred arm furrowed with muscle held a gleaming blade aloft under the crayon sun of childhood. The killer was coming over the steep edge of the rise. With his spindly legs, he pushed his distended midsection up over the last lip of earth. He stood stiffly on muddy feet, wheezing and gulping air -- his shirt and disarrayed gray hair covered with seeds and bark particles.

The killer's good eye collected a ball bearing's brightness as he searched for clues. Bare patches of sandy loam were embedded with bits of glass, candy wrappers and gum foil. There were no footprints or fresh trails in the tall grass. The only path ran from the side of the boulder and down the far slope. A burst of limping took him to the path, and then he began moving furtively like a hunter downwind of a deer.

The killer scanned the sumac with honed senses; his eye froze and a black pin prick dulled its gleam. There was movement -- it was a small, scuffed white sneaker poking out at the end of the log. A closer leer showed a white sock, a bare white leg and a hand hurriedly brushing away ravenous

ants. The killer lurched ahead and tripped over a thistle clump, but he still managed to grab Crissy's leg as he crashed into the sumac.

Crissy kicked and howled like a scalded brat. She felt the handle of the knife knocking on her skull. Her surroundings fell out of proportion -- distorted fragments of speech were like birds filling the air, tumbleweeds of sumac flew like colored popcorn and the boulder had the face of a devilish man in the moon.

Dragging Crissy's limp body, the killer was about to descend to his car and the other victim. A stone winged off his right shoulder blade. He swore, turned and saw Sean standing atop the boulder. Grinning like a wary crocodile, he dropped Crissy and took a couple of lizard-slow steps toward Sean. He ducked another stone, and didn't notice a fan of flying dirt that had appeared behind him -- the sod had burst open on the steep side of the rise.

Sean's blue eyes grew cat big as the killer stepped closer, then they looked beyond him -- a dark shape was pulling over the lip of the rise. A bearlike head showed beside limp Crissy, and a huge black-and-violet tongue slobbered on her face, causing her to stir. Fire-pit eyes smoldered beneath a wide ivory-spiked dog collar. Digger's tongue slipped back into his ample muzzle and he leapt over Crissy in almost slow motion, then he shook the loam from his ragged, floppy ears and huge decaying body.

Sean cartwheeled off the back of the boulder. The killer spun around and gaped; Digger's growl shook the ground. Knowing it wasn't safe to run, the killer jabbed and threatened with his blade, and this only served to antagonize the zombie dog.

Looking much paler and smaller the killer began to make his way along the lip of the rise, trying to circle around to the path. The dog toyed with him by crouching on his haunches, making to pounce, and then ducking back when the killer

lashed out with his knife.

Crissy got to her knees and shook her foggy head. Digger wagged his shaggy tail and pranced over to lick her hand. The killer hurried to the path, a rock tossed by Sean hit his forehead and the dizzying blow keeled him over in the grass near the boulder.

Digger loped over, but the killer lashed out like a poisonous snake and connected with flesh and fur. Digger quickly backed off, a gash of pus and gore showing on his shoulder. The sight of a freshly opened wound raised the killer's spirits and put him fully on his feet; confidence uplifted his face with a tight spider web of white crevices, and he took an aggressive step toward Digger, thinking he could strike a fatal blow.

Digger merely sat and raised his huge right paw in a handshake gesture, then he dropped his paw and his spotted tongue came out as he began to pant stupidly.

The killer immediately lunged, intending to grab Digger's ear and bury the blade in his neck. With uncanny swiftness, Digger drew his fist-sized paw up, flexed his haunches and struck out. The blow was so fast it was a blur and the paw was as hard as a clod of frozen earth. It cuffed the killer with a neck-breaking crack and force that swept on and ripped his head right off his shoulders. There was a thump as the head flew back and bounced off a boulder. Like rubber it shot high in the air, trailing twisting ribbons of muscle and blood. To Crissy it looked like a balloon rising on the summer wind.

The headless body did a short and crooked dance, and then it fell and sprayed glistening blood drops. They rained like ripe cherries on the blades of grass. The fallen body went limp as the head thumped beside it in the weeds. The head bounced on the soft turf and rolled face-up. The face was a ghastly, withered jack-o'-lantern, the frothing lips moved in a silent scream, and then the eyes began to flutter shut.

Crissy watched them close and felt pee dribbling down her

leg. "I bet he's wishing he didn't break the law," she said. Sean didn't answer; he was petting Digger and thinking of running even farther from home.

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He Only Hunts At Night

A Walking Dead Man Tale

It was a distant summer day. Sunbeams the color of fool's gold lanced through snow-white cumulus towers, and I believed in rushes and energy ... not the cruel machine at the end of the world. I was strolling down Huron Street, an easy street of old houses - frame, brick and Victorian - stretching down into the University of Toronto campus. A good neighborhood, I thought -- lots of energy to absorb from the students and the ghosts of the cool people that hangout in this part of town.

My thoughts drifted on the summery breeze, and the motion was perpetual inner peace. Then I saw something interesting - a building with a beautiful aura of energy. It was an apartment house. I crossed the lawn of a co-op, and within fifteen minutes was writing a check for apartment 203.

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While unloading the van, I looked over at the sprawling architecture of the university library. It gave me a good feeling, but when I got into my place and opened the windows, I had a bad feeling - a concrete tombstone loomed out the window. It was a new building; sinister-looking, with big tinted windows. Everything about the design was too big, square and efficient.

I let Shadow out of his cage - he'd been sleeping of course -

and he popped up on the windowsill, hissed at the building, stretched and went back to sleep. It dawned on me then; I'd seen the building in the newspaper - a place of animal experimentation for the university. Most people know the issue, but take away the passion, and you still can't avoid the fact that animals are just flesh to researchers - living cadavers that a god in a white smock has condemned.

If you saw all of the ugliness in the world as a face, it would be the Gorgon and you would turn to stone. That was the thought that stuck in my mind as I tried to write that night. Light blazed from the research building and my agitated cat hissed, spat, and caterwauled as he paced back and forth on the sill. When I'd had enough, I went over to close the curtains, and there, directly across from me, I saw a Frankenstein monster of a cat in a cage. The sight of objects protruding from an animal's brain makes for the creeps, and I suppose it gave my black cat more than the creeps. It bothered me, and I wasn't quite sure what to do about it, but mainly I was exhausted from the move. I sat with tension knotting in my head and painful thoughts about the human condition. The end justifies the means - people had all bought that lousy argument. It didn't matter whether the subject was animal experimentation or human cruelty, like our governments trading with totalitarian dictators while pretending the suffering to be just a cultural quirk of foreigners. Evil makes only more evil - I was sure I believed that, and I decided to sleep on it.

I slept soundly until three a.m. when a crash woke me. My window was busted. I rushed to it, figuring the cat had gotten agitated and knocked something through it.

Shadow was gone so I went outside. A warm wind was swinging the maple boughs, and a full moon hung in the black sky. On the south side, supermarket-bright light spilled from the research building. I figured I could catch Shadow there before he got too far, but the explosions had already started. A blue ball of sparks took off over the rooftops like a

UFO, and Shadow's silhouette dimmed the building. He suddenly leapt up and came down like thunder on the roof of the university building; his eyes glowed like hunter's moons as he struck the front walls with giant paws.

A crowd of workers streamed out of the building's rear doors. They were panicky, and none of them spotted Shadow on the roof. He was the best of hunters, a monster shadow of night with eyes, teeth and claws of pure energy. Then he vanished through the roof and went inside. I knew his power was ancient, but I couldn't believe it when I saw animals ... cats to rats to dogs and rabbits, clean of electrodes and drugs, running full of health to freedom in the night through a hole suddenly blasted in the wall.

Then Shadow appeared on the roof, looked to me and suddenly leapt down - a black monster as big as the building itself. Anyone watching from the rear must've thought the whole wall was coming down on me, but all that landed beside me was a shrinking outline and a small black cat with a fluffy tail.

He meowed, and faded like a ghost, leaving me to listen to the approaching wail of fire trucks and emergency vehicles. The entire spectacle had me off balance, and I could feel the energy shooting through me like metal to a magnet. A man in a bloody white smock was staggering near me and I noticed my hand beginning to glow, turning to transparent green fire. The change was coming on so I had to get out of there.

It's a good thing Shadow only hunts at night, I thought. I grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and dashed off, heading for a safe area of boarded-up warehouses . . . an area where I could hunt at night.

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In Defiance of the Witch

A Walking Dead Man Tale

Jamey studied the trail, finding it hard to believe the tract of Canadian wilderness was his property. He also found it hard to believe his father was dead. It all seemed unreal, hard to grasp, even the sun above as it surfed toward evening through a pristine sky of blue. Lowering his gaze, he saw Luela come to a halt up the path. A white cloud caught the sun and it became a fleece full of gleams above her. A dusting of early twilight sprinkled out of the light canopy of boughs, tinting her bikini-clad body with blue. Silver flashed in her long dark hair and she moved like a fallen angel of some alien Rubens -- with smooth ease, she tossed a heap of pine boughs out of the way.

As Jamey stepped closer, he spotted the axed end of one of the boughs and began to wonder who could have cut them. Luela turned to face him, her brow cool despite the effort. Even from several yards away, Jamey could read the invitation in her eyes. Arousal lightened his step and he had the strange feeling that his genitals were as blue as her tinted flesh.

Luela's full lips, breasts and hips were fresh springs - secret fountains of love he had to drink from and drown in. When they rose from the duff, salty sweat had stolen some of her purity. Jamey kept her in his arms, and now his genitals really were blue - tinted and softly swollen. He took in the perfume of her hair as he brushed needles and leaf dust from her moist thighs. Life was easy with Luela; he couldn't imagine it any other way.

"Someone's been out here," Luela said. "I hope they're not watching."

"This area is totally isolated. My father must've been out here just before he died."

They slipped on their swimsuits, shorts and T-shirts, and then they moved ahead on the path. It narrowed to an almost invisible rabbit run then widened to the size of a cow path. The cow path only ran for a short distance before spilling out into a clearing. Such a celebration of sunset color was in the sky that if one had synesthesia it would've sounded like Beethoven at his grandest.

A burial mound stood at the center of the clearing and the end of a faint trail. They both looked around as they approached it, but nothing else of interest was to be found, just tall grass, weeds and the screen of evergreens at the perimeter.

On a dimmer day they would've been spooked, but the sunset was so bright today the clearing was tinted with uplifting colors. A few yards from the mound, they halted and surveyed it. It was smoothly formed, almost like a breast, and covered with young grasses and weeds. Chestnuts, acorns and bound tufts of sweetgrass were sprinkled at its bottom. The whole thing wore a skirting of fresh-cut pine boughs.

"It's a beautiful mound," Luela said, "but I can't imagine what it could be for."

"It's not old Cree or Iroquois. It's a simulacrum of a burial mound that my father must've made as part of his anthropological work."

A pale white object protruded partway up the mound. It caught Luela's eye, she nudged Jamey and they climbed the soft bank.

The object was a tiny doll's hand. Luela took it in hers and pulled gently. It popped like a wine cork. She giggled and Jamey reached down and stuck his fingers in the earth. He worked around the doll and yanked it out, sending a spray of earth down the mound.

As a doll it was uninteresting; in fact it was a man in a blue suit. His tiny silver ring struck Jamey as familiar, but the

plastic face had been burned and melted to a featureless hole.

Dizziness came upon him suddenly and he leaned against Luela. He tried to say something but his voice failed and the words came out as a choke. Staggered, he looked up at the blazing sunset, and it suddenly darkened. He saw his father's withered, brown face in the shield of twilight above the mound. Shock staggered him and he slipped backward and rolled down with the doll in his hand. Luela stumbled and dashed down to him, but he couldn't see her; he came up on his knees and saw a big silver wheel spinning in the sky. Tires screeched; a glass-spilling crash and the doll gained a glowing face. He was compelled to look; it was his pal Dan, his expression ghastly. A scream tore the tiny face then it burst into flames.

An explosion made tinsel of the big wheel and a line of silver blew through the trees. Possessed by the premonition, Jamey got up, ducked past Luela and raced off, following a vision of silver. Not knowing why, he ran on, crashing through bushes, kicking up duff until he reached the highway.

Horns blared and drivers dodged Jamey as he ran into town. A ribbon of silver hummed under his feet, giving him speed. A bell tower marked the center of town, and as he headed for it, he heard the terrible screech and crash again. Picking up speed he rounded the corner of Division Street. There the premonition ended at a patch of busted windshield crystal.

Exhaustion washed through to his bones and his stomach bit at him like a devil - he faltered and collapsed to the road, and when he lifted his head, he saw a farmer escaping from a pickup hung up on lamppost. Behind the stellated windshield of a new Chevy, he saw blood, a blue suit then flames.

The flames were tremendous, yet the fireball exploded in such a way that it snuffed itself out. Jamey rushed to the car, searing his hand as he forced the door open. Dan fell partway out and Jamey caught him and dragged him away from the

wreck.

Safety was something he couldn't drag him to as he was already dead and his face was nothing but a hole -- a scorched mash of red, white, black and purple with a severed vein and a crisped slice of tongue protruding. Strangely enough his blue suit wasn't burned. Jamey dropped the corpse amid the gathering crowd, and then he fell to the blacktop and the total darkness of a blackout.

Death and funerals gave Jamey the feeling of being in a somber black-and-white movie like the old noir films. Like his father, he had distaste for all things formal. Dan had enjoyed all things formal and he would have enjoyed his own funeral. Grim sobriety and hopeless strength, there are men who are too serious, and they pay the price when a thread unravels and the fabric of their perfect world is torn. Jamey looked at the burnished coffin and figured that sudden death was better for Dan . . . but that was probably because he saw Dan's life as a dream that could only end in tragedy.

Luela moved to his side. She was a spirit of color in the lingering gloom, and he felt his blood warm as she led him out of the church. The sky was like the rolling brow of an old gray god; a god who had left the churchyard and adjoining graveyard drained to a landscape of ashes and crumbled stone in his dim vision.

"Do you see them?" Jamey said.

"See who?" Luela said.

"The weird people I told you about. The ones I saw at my dad's funeral. They're here."

Luela studied the graveyard. "Now that you mention it, those people shouldn't be there in the graveyard, not ahead of the reverend, the pallbearers and the deceased."

Jamey watched as they moved toward the open grave; gray, shambling men and women - the sort that could blend into any crowd.

"I saw some of them at my father's wake and funeral. When you ask them exactly who they are you find they're acquaintances so distant that they're not acquaintances at all. They give me the creeps - people who hang-out at funerals."

"More likely it's grief and imagination," Luela said. "No people are morbid enough to be graveyard groupies."

Sunshine as bright as trumpets came in the morning, and being a country girl at heart Luela was happy to see the last of their new furniture arrive. She had everything arranged; all Jamey had to do was guide the men in and show them where to place the stuff. Twenty minutes later, they were closing up the truck. As far as Luela was concerned, her past was in it - she was now settled down. In town, the rumors were that she was too wild to make a good wife, but she knew better than rumors.

As an afterthought, Jamey decided to check the mail before going inside. There was a pile of letters and they were mostly junk mail, but in spite of that, he tossed them from hand to hand, juggling them like a happy child as he went up the walk.

Luela took the letters and sat down at a wicker table she was using for her mail sorting. "This is interesting," she said. "A letter from Dan. He must've sent it just before the accident."

Jamey was a touch bemused, looking on as she took the opener and sliced the flap.

"Here we go," she said as she folded open the letter.

"'Dearest Luela, Now that Jamey and I are dead I thought I would explain--'"

Jamey's eyes widened as he watched Luela grow pale and fall across the table. Mail spilled to the floor. Quick as a thief, he snatched up the letter and read the rest.

Behind them the mound rose like a healthy swelling of the fertile earth; they had walked out to the clearing more

out of nervousness than anything else. So unsettling was Dan's letter that Luela couldn't sit still.

"I'm going to check on that letter. It might be a forgery, a prank. It doesn't make sense. I mean Dan being in love with you but never saying so, then planning to kill me - and himself. No one can be in love and keep it a secret - not in a small town."

"He always gave me weird looks," Luela said, "but I didn't know it was crazy love he had for me. And it wasn't a complete secret - your father knew."

"How do you mean?"

"I think your father studied so much witchcraft in the course of his work that he became like a witch himself. He built the mound and he made the doll of Dan. Before the cancer got him he cursed Dan, killed him with a voodoo doll so you would live."

Silence ensued and they strolled toward the far side of the clearing. The morbid truth rose in their minds and made a skull's mockery of the noontime idyll. At the edge of the clearing, they saw something interesting - just beyond the narrow band of evergreens there was another clearing.

They looked at one another then stepped through the trees. It was a field of small mounds with a few stunted evergreens. The mounds were very old and a longer look revealed some broken gravestones. In most cases, they were only heaps of bleached stone piled on the humps. It became obvious that this was a very old abandoned graveyard and one where the graves had swollen over time.

A cloud carried a fan of sunbeams across the screen of trees, illumining the far end of the graveyard and some figures in baggy clothing moving around a mound.

"It's them," Jamey said. "The funeral creeps."

Luela shielded her eyes and saw that it was some of the same clumsy, unattractive people she'd seen at the funeral.

"Funny how they're all cast from the same mold," he said.
"Maybe they're one big creepy family."

Jamey was more angry than frightened as they set off through the mounds. He intended to put the morbid poachers off his land. The fact that the creeps were tenacious and didn't move when they saw him caused his anger to grow.

When Jamey was almost on them, they stirred and congregated on the far side of a grave they had dug up. Even in bright sunlight, they had grayish skin, rheumy eyes and lifeless hair.

With his full attention on the poachers, Jamey didn't notice what was in the open grave, but Luela, who was following timidly at his heels, did. She screamed, grabbed his shoulder, dug in her nails and refused to let go.

As she shivered on him like a thorn branch, he glanced to the grave. A horribly mutilated corpse was lying in the wet dirt. It was Dan's corpse and the front of his suit was torn open. His organs had been removed, leaving him with the look of a gutted fish. A featureless mask covered his damaged face. Jamey knew that Dan's organs had been donated, so the ghouls couldn't have stolen them, but they had still desecrated the corpse.

"You filthy ghouls!" Jamey yelled. "Why did you drag the body here?"

"He called to us," said a hatchet-faced, scarecrow-thin man. "We're trying to bring him back to life here in the witch's graveyard . . . back to life in defiance of the witch who destroyed him."

"See how he longs for you," said a crone wearing a dress as colorless as burlap.

Dan's right hand had grown gnarled like a claw. As Jamey watched it convulsed, opening and closing.

But Jamey's anger didn't melt to fear. He pulled a strand of silver from his pocket. "The witch's graveyard is my

inheritance," he said. "And you'll do nothing in defiance of me!"

Luella continued to shiver. The strand of silver spun, becoming a wheel in Jamey's hand. The corpse quivered, and at first, the ghouls were dumbfounded, then they shielded their eyes and began to cry in pain as they stumbled away from the flash of the talisman and the corpse rising to pursue them.

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The Power of Voodoo A Walking Dead Man Tale

His feet flew, ghost swift, finding impossible support on the gleaming patches of ice. They carried him along smoothly - a dark shadow racing with the night as the stars pin-wheeled above. He reached the final row of snowy back yards and approached a high brick wall. Without slowing at all, he went up the wall, skittering like a human fly.

The spotlights hit him, revealing his ski mask and black clothing. Every moment of hesitation was a moment in which he could be spotted, and the boost of fear sent him up the wall quicker than midnight lightning. Several meters up, he came to a large segmented window of colored glass. Cutting out a blue segment, he went through and dropped to the floor.

He still had the glass in his hands. Holding it in front of his face, he looked at the blue vision and laughed. Then he discarded it in a trash bin and checked his tools.

This was the subway, one of the automatic entrances, and

breaking into it didn't make him look all that clever ... at least not for a terrorist. In spite of that, euphoria swept through him as he worked. With great satisfaction, he set the gate timer back and rigged it to his detonator. It was all very easy; not that he was a genius . . . the planning had been done by other men. His training in the arts of break and enter had made this job possible.

He was almost done when he found a note; a greasy piece of paper wrapped in behind the timer. His eyes slowly absorbed the words, and then he looked at the tiny bits of crystal embedded in his fingertips and began to shake.

It unnerved him so much he had difficulty finishing the job, and when he was done, he went back over the wall in a panic, like a man fleeing demons. He thought he saw the shadow of the devil looming over him in the snowy back yards. But behind the fear, he knew the job had been done, and that was all that really mattered.

At 6:20 a.m., the first bus arrived and a crowd gathered at the locked gates. Five minutes later, a transit inspector unlocked a side entrance and the crowd continued to grow as he failed to free the main gates.

Ice, snow and a leaden winter sky ... the wind chill was -10 and the explosion got added to that total numbness and misery of Monday morning. The timer turned over and the heavy metal gates blew off their hinges, punching into the crowd like the mailed fists of an angry god. Ten people became one with the wasteland, and many others would never be the same again. Later in the day city mini ploughs had to scrape frozen blood from the split asphalt.

An Arctic wind howled in the minds of many people, and some prayed their loved ones would find more than ice and cruelty at the end of the world. The same wind howled in Desmond's mind, but it wasn't because of grief. Then out of the howling came the buzz of the phone.

"Well done," the man said. "The Canadian government has

paid the price. Freedom for Haiti! Yes, brother -- freedom!"

Desmond hung up and his eyes fell on the wilted note he'd found while planting the explosives. --**BEWARE, Anyone who tampers with this timer. The crystals on it are poison. It is voodoo, the poison of a witch doctor that I bought in Haiti. You have one day to find me and get the antidote, or you will die horribly. -- JAKE the SNAKE.**

Black quicksilver swam in Desmond's eyes as he dropped the note. How could this Jake the Snake know that he, Desmond, would one day tamper with the timer? Why would the note be there ahead of him? It could only be voodoo.

Desmond knew of the poisons. They were real and not rumor. He had always hated talk of voodoo and zombie drugs -- hated the stories . . . like the one about Haitians digging up corpses and scooping out mouthfuls of ripe maggots. Another story accused voodoo priests of creating AIDS through abominable sex acts with the dead. Yet as much as he hated the stories, he believed in the power of voodoo. He had seen too much evil. Many of his friends and relatives back home were evil, and he believed voodoo to be the force of corruption.

He was supposed to sit tight and not go out for weeks. Order everything in. If he told the others he'd been poisoned they'd tell him to die with his lips sealed - tell him it was important that he be a hero.

A bar of twilight showed in the crack in his curtains, and it made him feel like a prisoner. By his calculation, he had until 3 a.m., and then death would take him. To hell with it, he thought. Pains were running like rats in his legs, but it wasn't so bad. A few drinks and he'd feel all right. It would be better to go out and have some quiet drinks at a bar before he died.

He threw the curtains open dramatically, like a monster greeting nightfall, and then he stepped back and blinked. A terrible hallucination nearly blinded him. There was no city

was outside, only twilight and it slowly formed a huge hideous mask.

Sparks flew from the eyes and it whirled, then it shot in the window and spun like a carousel on the walls. Somehow, it got behind him and he could no longer find it. As he turned in a circle, a terrible thought hit him - the mask was now on his face. He was seeing the world through its power.

Cold twilight fell outside. The streets and buildings were blue and ice cold. Wind whipped over it all with a killer's whistle and razor sheets of hail. People were moving in the hostile streets - zombies, wandering aimlessly ... their faces swollen, bruised and hanging with mats of frozen blood and frost. Some had eyes of icy tears, others had only purple holes. They gestured with bony hands, some of them without fingers or arms. A frosting of pus sealed the gashes in their chests and they scraped along on feet that were frozen solid.

Desmond wanted to cover his eyes, but his hands wouldn't obey him. They would only tremble, and when he lifted his eyes from their trembling, he saw other hands. The hands of some hellish creature. They looked like they'd been torn from their arms by a beast with superhuman strength. Ropes of gore and flesh trailed from the wrists as the crooked fingernails scratched at the glass.

A pattern of pentagrams formed in frost as the hands continued to move, and then pieces began to fall, tinkling on the ledge. A moment later the hands were in and crawling toward him.

Stumbling back, he dropped to his knees, staring in frozen horror as the bluish hands reached his legs and moved upward. He watched them settle on his genitals, then he gasped and screamed.

It filled his lungs with pain and the agony silenced him. Out the window, he saw a wolfish devil stride up to the window. He tossed up his black cloak and darkness and arctic cold swept in. A glow from the hands and the red of blood stained

his crotch. Madness was upon him, and it was more than any man could bear -- he had to fight this somehow. Crawling to the phone, he dialed an emergency number.

It was 3 a.m. when the emergency crew picked up Jake the Snake. Jake resembled an easy-going type of man with long hair and gold loops in his ears. Though he looked like a subway maintenance man to most people, he looked like a terrorist to the cops. Their questions earlier in the day had been designed to ferret out a confession. Now they were working on another suspect and had to treat him with respect.

"So you're saying there's no antidote?" said the cop at the wheel.

"I'm saying there is no poison. I put notes and bits of crushed glass in all the automatic mechanisms I repair. The idea is to scare tamperers off before they do too much damage."

"But this terrorist is obviously under the influence of a very powerful narcotic? He's screaming like the suffering is something wicked."

"It just happens that your suspect believes in the power of voodoo," Jake said. "When you believe strongly in voodoo it becomes real."

The cop grinned like he was glad there wasn't a cure, and Jake touched his chest, feeling the amulet he wore under his shirt. The antidote was inside it, but it would stay hidden. He'd already destroyed the poison he'd planted in the other mechanisms, and he planned on making sure that they never identified the structure of the crystals. The weathered face of an ancient voodoo priest appeared in his mind, and it was his stepfather, reminding him that he had to protect the secrets, no matter what the cost.

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The FLOODS

A Walking Dead Man Tale

People say the floods are a dream or hallucination of mine. Yet the swollen lands darkly whisper, allowing me no peace while I'm locked away.

Tonight I'm out and back on the river road. I see the gate ahead ... its fog pillars swamped in visions of lake-bottom corpses.

I shouldn't have told the doctor about the body parts floating in the inkblots. If I had kept quiet he wouldn't have turned dead-fish pale. Staying out of town would've been smart. Then I might've been okay. Guess I got disturbed then, really chilled out ... and not by the floods, but by someone I buried in them.

I remember a scarlet membrane over the moon. A morbid eye in a sky of shimmering twilight ... and I should've recognized destiny.

It was my usual stroll down the river trail; insects and melancholy in the air ... the springtime river gushing over the rapids, licking up off stones in monstrous tongues of glistening spray ... swollen and sliding on the break-walls like the gleaming scales of a sea monster. Its roar that of some hungry thing about to break loose on the town.

I wandered around the bend and the water rose higher there. The river seemed untamed, like it could snatch me quick like the head of a giant cobra. But it didn't frighten me. I knew the river relied on me for many of its meals. In a sense I was its priest and keeper.

Then I saw the gate – illumined in ghostly white like the moon had beamed it into existence. Drawn closer I saw beyond to shining pools of water and endless islands of stones and packed mud. Gnarled trees clutched the slime and

reached into the trails of fog blowing in the sky. Wisps spread like extended strands to encircle the moon in a strangler's grip. I found it a chilly place and ancient, like glacial melt had released the remains of a few centuries of doom.

Jerry appeared, though I couldn't quite believe it. He staggered near a withered oak tree, holding a bottle of cheap sherry. Features decayed, his face puffed like a toadstool ... the top of his head split, with brains, maggots and algae sponging out.

Since Jerry drowned years back, he looked better than I expected. Anything more than bones would have amazed me ... and he was animated ... letting loose with howls of laughter like he was crazy and not drunk or dead.

He wagged a finger on his fat ulcerated hand, gesturing for me to follow. Moonlight fell on his face like a pale spotlight, making him over as a being of supernatural ugliness. He stumbled on a winding course through the mud and water. Like a flag his ragged clothes streamed back in my memory. I saw myself on the day he died. I stood there smiling as I bet Jerry that he couldn't swim out to the buoy and back. Laying fifty on his ten, I watched as he stripped and dove in. He didn't flounder long before he choked and went under. For once, he got enough to drink.

I got caught in some bushes and was pulling out thorns when Jerry crested the rise we were on. He crashed into the brush on the far side and I hurried to the top figuring he'd fooled me and led me into the floods to die lost. At the top I found myself looking down at a canal; its waters blacker than the bottom end of the sky. The reflection of the moon floated like a body in darkness by a break wall ... and Jerry leaned into it, pulling a pearly jug out of the water. He took a slug of that moonshine and another corpse appeared. This one dressed in black.

I knew it had to be Steve. Some guys wear black leather jackets until they're pretty beat up, but Steve's had gathered

a patina of slimy fish scales. Steve's muffled voice touched me with unwanted reflections. I remembered his last day and telling him he had to stand up and fight. But he didn't win. He got beat up by Al, knocked cold by the water ... and there I was holding Steve's wrist and lying. "There's no pulse. You killed him, Al! We better dump him in the river and never say another word about this!"

Steve took a long guzzle of moonshine and shrugged his muddy shoulders. I heard him speak my name and a number of grim words. Then Jerry laughed and they were off along the break wall like two old pals on a Friday night.

I followed them back to the river through surroundings that grew spookier by the step; bushes and trees were flattened like dinosaurs had stamped through them. There were treacherous areas of quicksand, shifting fog and hideous things scuttling in rancid mud. The night had dimmed and the river roared deafeningly beneath the long smear of pus mist had made of the moon. We were nearing a burst dam, the torrent climbing the jagged remains like a huge froth-edged wheel. Jerry and Steve strolled up so close I thought they'd get washed away, but they sipped moonshine, and like magic there were three of them.

Jim's tangled black hair shone green and he wore gray rags coated with tiny pebbles. His exposed flesh had a dark and scarred appearance like he'd been chewed by pike. The three of them followed a gravel path that led away from the river, and as I admired the misty black blood haloing Jim's exhalations, I recalled his fate. We were up on the dam that sunny day, looking down from a pier at the racing water. "You can do it," I was saying. "It's an easy dive then ride the current at an angle to the shore. And Jim dived, his body bouncing off rocks as it washed away in frothing rapids. I had made that dive myself, only I had gone farther out to the third pier where the water was deeper than the two feet Jim had splashed into. Guess I should've told him about that.

The night wore on and time passed in splashing floodwaters.

Faces and memories, all of them attached to bloated corpses, swirled up from sediments in my mind. Jerry marshaled a gruesome parade of victims and my guilt began to morph to terror. There were tourists, ice fishermen, boaters, skidoosers, lock keepers, game wardens and more that had found the bottom with help from me. The river reared and spit forth the dead with wretched efficiency and the moon became the eye of my conscience, revealing me as a hideous servant of the abominable. Grotesque faces swam like fish in cloudy waters. I covered my eyes and shivered as I contemplated the extent of my arrogance. Then I wasn't sure what was happening any more. We were walking up a hillside and never seemed to reach the top. I wanted to scream but all I could manage was a croak. I knew I had forgotten something ... something too horrible to remember.

An old house stood on the hilltop. Charred by a fire it leaned on its foundation. Years of the floods had turned it to rot, mold and living decay. A crumbled tomb, it was a marker on some unspeakable evil. Chilled to the bone I turned to the river, seeing a vast sheet of rippled glass.

Wind gathered, pushing Jerry and his gang of the drowned up the hill. They stopped and waited in the sodden front garden as Jerry walked up the steps and took the knocker. Thunder rolled. A sound of ships breaking on rocks, and high on the charred walls an eerie light glowed in a salt-crystal window.

The house awoke and beams fanned the sky from gaping holes in the roof. It towered like a nightmare and I stumbled back fearing it would collapse and bury me in rot. My back brushed a tree and I sank to my knees, staring at the house like it was the face of a demon. I sensed that doom would arrive if the front door opened, and I tried to will it permanently shut. But it defied me and creaked slowly on its hinges.

Jerry bowed and took something from an emerging starfish hand. I saw it and gasped. They all turned and stared down the hillside at me. But that battered crowd of monsters didn't

frighten me like the thing in Jerry's hands did. He held a little girl's doll and in my soul, it was a voodoo doll.

Stuttering a frightened sentence, I rose and stumbled toward the river. Tripping I bashed my knee on the slippery stones. Thick mud clung to me, stinging my eyes and nostrils. Spitting out some foul ooze I struggled with my heart and lungs.

The riverbank trees touched the sky with a thorny net and reached over me like crooked claws. A scummy patch in the main current belched up gas, breaking the water into mirrored fragments. Blood red stains spread quickly on the surface. I tried to catch my breath. My lungs were on fire; waves leapt up and pounded the rocks on the shore. I leaned against an oak tree, trying to believe my eyes; it was a gushing river of blood.

Fear came at my back like a hurricane and I saw a moldering rope flying from a tree limb. My thoughts took refuge in the past ... a summer day with breeze-touched emerald grass. The river drifted with a soft current of opaque blue jade; its banks moist and black. The girl kicked out over the water on the rope and landed back on the bank like a little white dove. I hadn't planned evil for her. I wanted her to be my friend, but she pinched her face, got nasty and called me an ugly, creepy man. Then she screamed, telling me not to touch her.

I waited for her to leave then seized her ... said I wanted to talk, but she struggled and bit me so I gouged her eyes out and hung her up in the tree with the rope. Her body swung over the bank for a while, the tree limb creaking ...then I took my hatchet and slit her like a fish, taking her heart before I chopped her up and threw the pieces in the river.

Of course, I got lucky as always. The police charged old Johnson with the murder and I sort of blotted the whole thing out of my mind.

Now she was coming down the hill. Night rose like a cloak of grief. The wind still blew and the river remained wild. I felt

exposed, the victim of some eternal nightmare, and I wanted to leap into the river and find the mercy of the rocks. I couldn't bear the thought of her touching me.

She moved through Medusa tentacles of fog and I saw her clearly. She carried her doll and a bloodstained hatchet. Her yellowed dress was in tatters and there were lines of fish scales where her body parts had grown together. Starfish formed her hands, thick water snakes made up her arms. Bluish green tinged her hair and as the wind lifted it from her face; I saw leeches in her eyes. Her heart had not been replaced, only a pulsing hole remained and it needed to be filled.

The chill wind tore chunks of rotten wood and shingles from the house and showered them down. The air stank of stagnant water and gas. Near the bottom of the hill she began to lurch this way and that, blindly slicing the air with her hatchet. Her black lips were moving and I knew she was calling for me, for my heart.

My legs were frozen. I cringed and wept ... wept because I couldn't move to throw myself into a river of blood. She went from tree to tree in search of my flesh. Tears streamed down my cheeks until I became sure the floods were fed by tears. Icy shivers and her cold blade touched me, and then I felt a noose tighten on my neck. I choked up blood and felt my flesh splitting, the warmth of my heart slipping from my breast. After that, the riverbank sucked me down and washed me out with the floods.

They found me in town, weeping and raving, cut up bad. Rope burns scarred my neck, a deep gouge bled on my chest. They said my brain had surrendered to madness, that I was a danger to myself. But I know better; evil and insanity are alike – both are corruption and waters of the same flood.

I hear the waters whispering ... blood and tides rolling in. It is destiny that I can't escape. I belong to the dead of the river and I am food for the river. Here I see Jerry waiting, and I

must go. Tonight she'll have me, they'll all have me ... but I'll return with the floods. And it won't be some madness in my head, because I'll likely only have half a head, and less than half a heart.

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Burial

A Walking Dead Man Tale

Forks of lightning sizzled in the sky, making it an eye, bloodshot with electric veins. A bolt splintered off and struck a twisted oak tree, and it rocked from the blow, showering down rain and branches. Thunder boomed, more debris slapped the mud, and then the nightmare rose and possessed him again.

A moldered corpse was struggling to rise from the bottom of an open grave; around him were tombstones, mud and slashing rain. He was almost too frightened to flee, and he couldn't run from this; if he didn't snuff it out and bury it he would be pursued and destroyed.

His grip on the shovel was slippery, but he fought the terror, determined to foil the conspiring dead. His hair sailed with spray; his features were as wild and twisted as the wind. The thing came up in a scrambling leap from the bottom of the grave and jammed skeletal hands in the reddish graveside mud. He brought the shovel down, cracking it against the wrists, and he continued swinging, trying to knock it down. His clothes snapped in the tearing rain, his motion frenzied like he was a hurricane-kicked scarecrow, caught in a nightmare image of graves and gnarled black trees.

Its skull was as hard as stone and its neck ropes of blackened muscle; he drove it back, inch by inch into the grave. A final

vicious blow and it fell, then he relaxed, feeling hot urine stream down his leg. Lightning made a spider web and it came up again. Its face was over the lip of the grave, and its stare had a hideous mesmerism that iced his blood. A bleeding tongue showed through splintered teeth and swollen lips. Green ooze slid out of its smashed nose and the maggot whites of its eyes rolled. Its forehead was a wall of purple welts and it clawed the mud with torn hands, crawling closer and closer.

A bony hand seized his ankle. Screaming, he kicked free, drove the shovel into its shoulder and shoved it back over the lip of the grave. Then he began to shovel mud on it, desperately hoping to bury it before it came up again.

Jim awoke with a jolt, finding his bed fouled by sweat. And his waking wasn't much better than his dreaming. His thoughts whirled, refusing to come clear, and he knew it was because of the maggots squirming in his brain. He could feel them, a cancerous pulp at the roots of his thoughts.

A somber and empty world was out the window -- slate skies and mud. A rush of whispering blew across his mind like cobwebs spilling from a point behind his forehead. The whole scene ran flat; shapeless clay of a dead place. And in the underground, the dead laughed and convulsed. Indoors he was dry, his brain crumbling rot for the maggots. Months ago, the maggots had crawled in his ears, making his brain a radio tuned to the channels of the dead. Months ago, the conspiracies of the dead had begun. It wasn't schizophrenia that had set in . . . the others could believe that if they wanted, but Jim knew better.

He dressed slowly, grim determination in his silent ways. Others would have succumbed to the madness; they would already be screaming in the streets. Yet Jim hadn't given in, and he didn't care about madness. There was an enemy - the maggots and the dead - and he struggled through each day, telling others nothing, looking weak and pale as his life slowly faded.

A theatre-mask face, some fire above the dark orbits of the eyes, looked back from the mirror, and over the inner frequencies, he could hear the appalled whispering of the dead. They moaned and their moldered sinews snapped as they struggled against the cruel earth. Forcing life into his face, he turned and prepared to leave for work.

Clammy cold gripped him as he stepped outside. A clattering of skeletons rode the wind. Not a good day for walking, but he had to -- his Ford was possessed, an engine of the dead. If he got behind the wheel, it would steer him to one of the many accidents about to happen. He was sure of it.

Without giving the car a second glance, he crunched up the gravel path to the rise. A graveyard was at the top, and more graveyards were on the little hills that stretched like breasts of bloated corpses into the city.

Fog tentacles crowned the trees, their movement poisonously slow. Cold drizzle fell from scudding black clouds and the chill massaged his muscles with fingers of icy misery. Today even the dead had been numbed. It was on sunny days that they were most active, forbidding him the pleasure of the light, tearing at his coffin-lid skull with hands of splintered bone.

On the crest of the hill, he met up with a shovel and an open grave. Behind his forehead, the maggots pulsed in a wavelength of pain, and as he cringed, it became wicked screaming. The dead had opened the grave for him, he knew, and he stumbled away, down toward a black ribbon of highway, hating them for their cruel plans.

As he came to the fence, a red Pontiac squealed around the corner and slid to a halt. A burly man wearing a flannel hunting jacket got out on the passenger side. Jim could see him clearly; his silver earring, cunning face and strong neck. A Colt pistol was stuffed in his belt.

"Agents of the dead," Jim thought as the Oriental driver got out. "Poison!" the dead screamed in his head as the driver threw a plastic bag full of hypos into the ditch.

An argument ensued. Wind snatched away the voices and a branch swung over the two men like a switch about to strike. The wind picked up and its shriek found oblivion in an instant.

A raised fist from the Oriental caused his partner to go for his gun. Three shots were fired, opening the man's chest and throwing him to the ditch. The killer took a quick look around. Spotting Jim in the graveyard, he hurried to the fence.

Fortunately, the fence was tall and made of black-painted iron. Jim knew the guy would have a hard time getting over it in the rain. Slugs popped through the bars as Jim slogged up the hill. One thumped the mud by his feet, and then he was safe behind a tree.

"Bastard son of the dead!" Jim yelled from the hilltop.

Perhaps the architects that built cobwebbed canyons

like the main sorting terminal were also tuned into the dead. Jim believed that the dead worked through them in some way. Their factory hells were built in anticipation of the end to come. "I must witness with the eyes of the dead," Jim thought as he walked with his pink slip to the payroll department. He was temporary and had been terminated with a bunch of other guys when he'd arrived. He figured on getting his promised severance and returning home. The voices of the dead told him that one of the other guys was going to shoot the office staff, and he didn't want to be around when it happened.

"We'll all be dead together," Jim said, startling some of the office staff as he picked up his check. He left the post office carrying the contents of his locker in a small shoulder bag. Some of the union boys watched him pass. They had years of yellow postal dust in their wrinkles, and whiskey flasks in their pockets that made dingy rooms rosy and bright. Jim saw the maggot whites of their eyes and knew they were pawns of the dust that had buried them. They thought they were safe and secure, but they were dead.

Strolling down the rain-slicked streets, he looked for a

suitable restaurant. A deli and a cafeteria were the only places he could afford. He settled on the cafeteria because it was brighter, but once inside he was disappointed. Orange plastic seat covers and stained walls, the place was as decrepit as the thoughts of its rotting patrons. He ordered a clubhouse and let his eyes follow the waitress as he sipped his coffee. Teased blond hair, black net stockings and a short skirt; she was an angel of sluts. The sort of sleazy dream queen he used to date. Lately he'd been reduced to voyeurism, since sex was impossible with the dead screaming under the floorboards. The dead hated sex and he could see it in people -- in their hang-ups and desire to bury sex under the floorboards with the dead. He figured you had to be somewhat perverse or else you were in the clutches of the dead.

Dense mist rolled over the rail yards and beaded on his face, wet as tears in a city of sorrow forgotten and rust remembered. Ahead were the hills, their patchwork of tombstones, and the low angry sky. The coffee in his stomach was the day's only warm glow, and it helped to distance him from the sighs of the dead.

Early afternoon and the inclement weather made for an empty road. He followed the white line, feeling ghost bodies of fog brush past him. He was prepared to turn into the brush as soon as he spotted the police. He hadn't reported the murder, like everything else he kept it secret, but he assumed a graveyard worker or a motorist would've discovered the body by now.

There were no police or signs of life, just gloom, and it carried him on dreamlike, to the scene of the shooting. Arriving at the ditch, he found no corpse, and he guessed that the dead had already pulled it under.

A corpse gurgled in his head and he realized that he shouldn't have returned. Turning away, he saw a flash of red and jumped. The thunder took his heart and he almost collapsed from the shock. It was the Pontiac, parked under a willow

across the road. A blurred face hung behind the rain-streaked windshield. He wasn't sure if it was the killer. The guy seemed to be on the nod.

"The rotten junkie," Jim thought as he moved to a spot where there was a crawl space under the fence. He was just slipping through to safety when the wind gusted and the trees creaked like a thousand opening coffins. The killer burst out of his car and staggered, a needle still hanging from his arm. Jim knew the dead had roused him, and at first the junkie sloshed clumsily through the puddles like he was a zombie. His face showed bruise-blue amid a wash of mist, and his lethargy swiftly became athletic prowess as he charged for the fence and Jim.

The killer got under the fence and the race was on as he chased Jim up the hill. At the top the wind was howling out of an opening sky, and in Jim's ears it was the mad raving of the dead.

A muffled crack and a chunk of bark flew off a tree, causing Jim to duck lower as he stumbled on the squishy turf. He moved on toward the open grave and the shovel.

Reaching the grave, Jim leapt over it to the mound of earth and the shovel on the far side. Something flashed in his mind; he'd just seen a body sprawled at the bottom of the open grave -- a corpse with an Oriental face.

Grabbing the shovel and crouching behind the mound, he watched the killer jog the last few yards up. A mad grin was pasted on his vulpine face; brilliant junkie confidence was in his eyes, death was in his soul. Without hesitation, he leapt over the grave to the top of the mound, planning on plugging Jim with a close shot before he could run or hit him with the shovel.

But the damp earth slipped under his heels. He fired in the air as he fought for his balance and Jim caught him square in the face with the shovel, sending him tumbling to the bottom of the grave.

Forks of lightning shattered the sky and a close one ripped into an oak tree. The blow split it like a cannon shot, showering down rain and branches. Thunder boomed, more debris hit the ground, and he knew it was the nightmare rising to possess him again.

A killer was struggling to rise from the bottom of the open grave, so he could murder him and leave him to rot amid the evil cackling of the dead. Jim ground his teeth, knowing he couldn't run from this . . . if he didn't snuff the monster out and bury him he would be pursued and destroyed.

His grip on the shovel was slippery, but he fought the terror, determined to foil the conspiring dead and their helper.

Jim's hair and face were wild enough to be the howl behind the wind. The killer came up in a scrambling leap from the bottom of the grave and sank bleeding hands into the black mud. Jim brought the shovel down, a hard bash, and he continued swinging hysterically. His clothes snapping from gusts of wind and frenzied movement like he was a hurricane-kicked scarecrow, dancing with a mock shovel by a grave.

The killer's head was as hard as stone and his neck like steel cables, but Jim drove him back, inch by inch into the grave. A final vicious blow and he fell. Jim heard him hit the bottom and felt hot urine stream down his leg.

Lightning sheeted the sky with orange neon and the killer came up again. His face was over the lip of the grave, and the hideousness of it was paralyzing. Green ooze slid out of the smashed nose and a gory tongue stabbed through splintered teeth and split lips. The forehead was a wall of purpling welts, the eyes rolled to maggot white, and he clawed the mud with bleeding hands . . .

. . . And this time the nightmare didn't end, the thing crawled all the way out of the grave; it was grasping for him blindly as it crawled around the mound. Jim shivered, dropped the shovel and fell weeping to his knees. A face like a slab of red meat with an eye hanging in jelly came up close, and the

thing panted and slobbered reddish vomit like a dying beast.

A beast that was stone blind and crazed; it crawled around Jim, then it went up the mound and slipped over into the grave, leaving only a smear in the mud.

. . . **with each shovelful of mud** the voices of the dead grew weaker, and when Jim was finished he heard only the rushing wind; a pleasing sound that covered the dead like leaves and dust. He felt a fire burn itself out in his blood and he was left refreshingly empty. There weren't many recent memories. What was he doing here, some crazy thing to make peace with the dead? "No matter," he thought, because he had no more time for morbid things. He was sure there was something better. Before the schizophrenia, he'd been alone, so he had no life to reclaim. Now that the madness was gone, he walked away and for the first time in a long time found comfort in the storm.

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Winter Prophecy

A Walking Dead Man Tale

Evan looked across the fire lit living room at Doc Steffax. "Come on, Doc. Psychology is one thing. Call it the science of human behavior, but you're a professional writer just like I am. I mean, you guys come across like an elite group of scientific prophets with all your tiresome pages on the perfect people who are going to live in the wonderful societies that you will construct."

Doc frowned as he turned his stern features from the window and the hail rattling against it. "My written work is based on repeatable experiments. I don't approve of popular

guesswork. Man is his behavior only. The inner self and personal identity most of you fiction-writer types value - these are only illusory center points for organizing and directing human behavior."

Evan's boyish face grew intense in the flickering light. "My brain ticks in the human way. I study behavior through an experiment called life, and I reflect on it through another experiment called fiction. People are sensual, they love pleasure, Doc. That's the nature of things and you're missing it. The self is an electric point of ecstasy - we live to feel life. The explosion of images, sounds and ideas we take in from art, literature, movies and so on - it's a sensual thing just as much as sex and drugs. We're addicted to life and to our own creations. We are what we enjoy. Even writing is a sensual experience, because writing is making the language of thought into pleasurable images."

Doc's armchair creaked as he leaned forward. "If you're on about literature you must know I favor pure and responsible literature that reinforces society's values. Modern writers are involved in everything except healthy storytelling. You people have jumped in over your heads, and only to come out with the sad belief that we're all junkies being shuffled about in a meaningless machine world. The benign big-brother state that is your new devil isn't really so bad at all."

"Yeah," Evan said, creasing his large blue eyes. "Here I thought we'd died and become irrelevant like the poets, but you say we're messing with everything but healthy storytelling. It's easier when you're lost like the poets. You can live in fantasy like the old prophet up the road. Say, I just had a thought. Maybe it'll give you self-perspective. The eyes of the world are on us now. What do they see? They see two cottages and a log cabin on a snowy mountain. I own the first cottage because I'm evil Evan Marsen and I'm writing a novel that's sure to further the corruption of the younger generation. Up in the cabin there's the crazy old prophet, an evil throwback with a weirdview instead of a worldview . . .

but now the vilest music begins as they get a close-up of you, Doc. That's because even though you think you're a savior of mankind, there are many people who think you're the most dangerous guy alive - the man who sold the planet a powerful new science of behavior modification that will eventually erase the human spirit."

Doc Steffax remained as cool as stone. "You're addicted to emotional behavior -- you like to dig nasty reactions out of people. I can live without the eyes of the world. I don't want any negative influence on my thinking. I'm working on a difficult paper."

"Well, so far I sure haven't been able to influence you. Must be because I'm a lightweight author of fiction. Watch out for the old prophet, Doc. He might move you to spiritualism. Say, it could be that the old goat is writing a masterpiece of prophetic poetry right now. Something in a new Biblical style that'll make him remembered when we're long forgotten."

Doc Steffax swallowed some strong whiskey-laced coffee and took on a placid look. "I've decided to go with you tomorrow, to visit the prophet. He should be an interesting character. Not a logical person, but a remarkable one I can examine further."

"Suit yourself, Doc," Evan said. "I hope you like strong home-made moonshine and a gloomy future - the old angel-possessed devil never carries any good news. He's more of an end-of-the-world prophet."

The north wind boxed the tops of the evergreens on the southern slope of Decker's Mountain, but the shaking was only a paper tiger beating a circle above what had been a clear, cold day on the ground. The sun was beginning to set, and it was pouring tinted light through mottled bands of clouds on the horizon. Doc Steffax turned his gaze from the cabin window and the south. He felt small, as though he were a child. The bigger magic of the mountain towered over his logic, and for a moment he considered the possibility of a

glory greater than behaviorism.

Evan's long blond hair shone with the light of sunset. His eyes were liquid like the sky. He listened calmly as the old prophet spoke. The prophet's dark brown eyes twinkled like the eyes of a younger man. A spirit seemed to be smiling behind his coarse gray hair and leathery face. "Here is the prophecy. Every wrong road to wisdom will be traveled. You," he said, pointing to Evan, "say we are what we enjoy. Doc Steffax says we are what we do, but in no case do we have what is called an inner self as it is an illusion. Rather than answer your trick questions directly I will illustrate. When you belong to another, what does he own? He owns what you do, he owns what you enjoy, and he holds your soul in chains. But he doesn't own what you think. He can't fully own that without being you. Is it a simple illusion your master cannot be? I think not. So the real question is not what you are ... rather it is - **To whom do you belong?** I have answered your question with a question, which is fitting because if our inner being is illusion, then so are all questions and answers. On Evan's other point I have a straightforward answer. I don't live to feel and enjoy the images of prophecy or images of anything else. I prophesy because I live."

"I don't know exactly what you mean," Doc said. "Do you think we belong to supernatural spirits and gain reality through them?"

The prophet turned his gaze from the fireplace and gave Doc a look of disbelief, and then he dropped his bony body on a small rug and sat cross-legged. He took a necklace of painted bones from around his neck and stared ahead stonily as he held it in his palms. ***"In clear ice I see your future. On a bitter night Satan celebrates as the north wind. He rushes over a glacial land. The moon is full above, by the fire below the child of the one has become the baby of the other. Fate tests three men by confession. In hope of deliverance, they will confess to Satan. Doom comes with the calling of his name."***

The snow coating the lake was like a fine blue powder in the soft twilight. Evan smiled elflike. "I see a vision, Doc. You know who I see in it? I see our old prophet. He's placing his magic bones in a drawer and taking out his reading spectacles, and he's chuckling. He's laughing at us and what a couple of dopes we are to be taken in by his witch-doctor routine."

"I suppose so," Doc said. "When it comes to witch doctors, picking out a fake is difficult. That's because the real articles are also quacks. I got to hear a prophecy anyway, so that's my money's worth. For now, it's back to the books and my paper. I've no more time for entertainment. I'll be seeing you Saturday. I hope you won't be feeling argumentative."

As the winter days blew toward Saturday a deep, ruffled blanket of snow thickened over the mountain and lake. On Friday, the south wind returned from oblivion and began a melt that smoothed to ice with Saturday morning's hail. By Saturday evening the north wind was howling like a wolf as it beat its paws along beneath the rising full moon.

Evan's thoughts were drifting as he gazed out the cottage window and listened to the wind tearing across the moon-bright sheets of glare ice. "I wanted to be isolated, Doc, but if I'd known the North Pole was shifting south I would've stayed in Toronto." He remained at the window, hypnotized by the frozen world outside, then, as he was about to turn away, he saw headlights flashing, down on the county road. "A beat-up pickup is pulling in, Doc. I bet it's someone on the wrong road to Boonfield Crossing, like always."

The lights of the pickup switched off and a young long-haired man got out in the moonlight. There were a couple of things about him Evan didn't like - the desperate look on his face and the speed at which he slid across the ice to the door.

When the door burst open and the man stepped in holding a Glock pistol, Evan was sure he didn't like him.

. . . Evan decided he'd better do what he was told and

began to tie Doc's wrists and legs to the chair. Doc stared straight ahead at the blunt barrel of the handgun and the young man holding it. He studied the man carefully, noting his long stringy hair, thin lips and icy blue eyes. Searching his thoughts, Doc tried to find the right psychology for the situation, but there was none - he felt like the powerless victim he was.

Evan smiled sweetly. "Come on, Danny. You say you've read my work. If so you know I'm not the sort who would turn people in."

Danny's street-hard face remained sullen. "I set out to commit the perfect crime. It won't be perfect if there are witnesses who can say I was in this neck of the woods. And famous witnesses at that. Serves you right anyway, Evan. My shrink says my depraved and callous attitude was helped along by your books."

Seeing an opportunity to seize control of the situation Doc loosed his clenched teeth and spoke. "Your psychiatrist is correct, Danny. But just like Evan helped you warp your mind I have the power to help you heal it. You say you've committed a crime, we'll take your word for it, but I don't believe in jail terms for people who aren't responsible for what they do. I can treat you in secret and really make you an acceptable person."

A log popped in the fireplace and Danny grinned evilly. "I am a better person, Doc. I'm a graduate of one your behavior modification schools. My shrink was against the treatment. He hates you more than he does Evan. Before the modification, I was a serial rapist. Now I dispose of my victims. It was modification with a big M."

"How do you like that, Doc?" Evan said, amazed. "He's more your baby than mine."

Doc's face switched from gray to red. "Can't you shut up just for once, Evan!"

Danny held up his left hand as a command for silence. "You

see why my crime is perfect. It's because the cops will never suspect me. I'm an angel who was made holy by divine Doc Steffax. I am a bit confused, though. Evan says I'm your baby, and you say Evan warped me. It's funny because I remember saying I raped because Satan was in me. One thing for sure is that I'm not responsible. We all agree on that. And if I find out who is responsible - it's curtains for him. How about you, Evan? You know Doc, and Satan is a character in your novel ***Fall to Paradise***. Which one of you is responsible for my crimes?"

Evan felt like he was looking down at himself from above. "Satan is responsible," he said quietly.

"Satan," Danny said, his pupils dilating and his hands shaking. "How about you, Doc - is it Satan?"

Doc remembered the prophecy and its mention of Satan, but he wasn't capable of believing in anything supernatural. Danny looked crazed enough to be tricked, so he decided to try it. "Yes, Danny, Satan is responsible. Satan is inside your head. You will have to shoot him to get him out."

Danny's hands shook again, and then he fired. The Glock cracked four times, and the bullets struck Evan and Doc. "Now no witnesses will see me kill Satan," Danny said. "Satan, I always knew it was you."

The north wind howled then died down just after Danny pulled the trigger on Satan.

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Halloween Tales

Night Angel

A Walking Dead Man Novella

The Cure

Crisp leaves edged with shades of burnt orange and rust sailed on the chill autumn wind, the odd one scrabbling across Tam's unshaven face like a fast and dirty rodent. Bark bits, dust and twigs bit into his clothing and as he reached the steep embankment, he squinted into the ferocity of the gale. Bleak gray clouds rippled like the moving rib cage of a whale and the horizon looked pale and nearly colorless like a vampire had swallowed the wine of sunset. The shutters of darkness would soon close hard, with a mood of suicide - an atmosphere that spoke of the many people who broke down in the face of the emptiness of fall. This was the season of self-loathing - a time when people went mad and played with self-destruction. Yet he wasn't here to kill himself, and if there really was such a thing as madness, he'd been mad for years.

Polluted water flowed in the wide stream below. Froth and chemical poisons spitting in the surging murk, climbing and splattering rounded boulders, sending up spray that flew as mist on the wind. He could see skulls in the muck at bottom. Bones he'd dumped years ago. Bright sockets glaring, ghost faces of the dead stretching to rubber screams as the skin of the water reflected the faint light and rippled through transparency and mirror shades.

The old footbridge was gone, eroded to a stump by chemicals and washed away, and the waters were too fast and toxic to ford. He dug his moccasins in hard as he went down the bank, and at the shore he spat on the waves then took a brand new hatchet from his pack and began to cut a small maple tree.

His blows were smooth and effective, and the gusts soon aided him - sweeping in over the bank and tossing the head of the tree forward until it snapped and crashed across the stream. Tam enjoyed the screech of the splitting wood and watched as it settled in the leaping water, waiting for a safe

moment to cross. A moment that never seemed to come as the tree rocked in the waves. He bit his tongue impatiently then he picked up and leapt over the dripping roots and ran across the slippery trunk. The water splashed up over his pounding feet and sloshed into his face as he made the jump for the far bank - a vile chemical taste seething past his lips as he landed. It caused him to stumble and fall. And as he lay there on his back, he spat fizz several times, trying to get the chemo/bacterial stink out of his mouth.

The flavour refused to vanish - it was foul - tastes of rotten corpses lingering with metallic slime on his gums. He took his lip between his teeth and bit, feeling better as warm blood flowed on his tongue. A moment later he was up and climbing the bank. At the top, the wind roared through the trees like a beast and whipped his clothes as he plodded on through wilting weeds toward a path in the woods. Broken oaks surrounded him. Even the lichens on the many boulders had a moldy, cobwebby look of decay. There was more dead matter and petrified wood in this forest than anything else and the sound of it groaning in the gale stirred fright.

The cold began to eat at his bones, so he was glad it wasn't a long walk - about a quarter mile to the clearing. Poison ivy and thistles crunched underfoot as he came out of the trees. And in the center of a field of thick dead crabgrass, the crumbling walls of an abandoned factory rose. Carbide Boniphal Chemical and Nickel Company, Ltd. - the faded words could still be read on the side of a rusting trailer leaning in the weeds beside the main building. Boniphal was the name of a special poison - the company had killed the land and the water in this area while developing it and its byproducts. It had killed both natives and whites with horrible diseases and made this place a no man's land. Some of it had been cleaned up with public money, but this rise was simply fenced off and Tam knew he was the only person who came here. And it was sort of like returning home. He'd worked at Boniphal more than two decades ago - he'd lost his mind after five years at Boniphal and had spent another long ten

years in a secretive maximum-security lunatic asylum outside of North Bay. When he got out he returned and found that everyone had died. He'd been the lucky one - no long term exposure or weird cancers and growths like the others.

Standing beside a deep crack in the wall Tam studied the sumac on the far side. It rose to flames in his mind like red autumn fire. Long faces rose in the distortion of imagination, some of them laughing wickedly - then they settled and his vision was of a paneled room and a circle of middle-aged men at a polished table - men passing judgment on him.

Voices echoed through hostile tones and pain crinkled like electricity and crisp cellophane behind his eyes. It worked to drain him of blood and energy; his heart felt like a painful lump swelling in his breast.

"You murdered that woman!" Doctor Wesley exclaimed through piggish jowls. "Fixation! There isn't a devil, or Satan or Lucifer. Your Night Angel is a dream and only a dream. He is the manifest effect of the Boniphal poison in your brain cells. Genetic damage working to destroy you. Our medication and therapy show that to you now. Don't they?"

He seemed to be looking down, seeing himself at the table, chaos whirling in his mind as the form of the Night Angel rose like a hidden tornado. Satan had possessed the woman. He'd known that when he'd killed and dismembered her. And Doctor Wesley's medication was more poison, not a cure. The Night Angel wanted him to lie - so Tam's drawn face softened with remorse, his crooked right eye shed a tear. Drugged peace eased his wide mouth and his thin lips trembled delicately. The look of the wild faded from his eyes - he seemed as gentle as a lamb. Gentle because the angel wanted it that way. He heard himself saying, "Yes, I understand it now. My thoughts have cleared. It was a toxin induced fixation - the Boniphal poison damaging my brain. What I did to that woman was cruel, despicable and unnatural. But I'm not guilty of planning the murder - it was the disorder. I thought she was Satan-possessed. The

hallucination was very real at the time. I heard the voice of the Night Angel - it taunted me, tricked me and drove me to do evil things. But the angel is gone now. The new medication melts him away like a bad dream."

Some of the others had probing personal questions and questions of a perverse sexual nature. In the end he heard Doctor Wesley addressing them. "Gentlemen, it is possible that he may have some reoccurrence of the hallucinations and temporary states of fixation. But he won't be dangerous. The tests show that a tendency toward fixation torments him at times, but the new medication removes all tendencies toward violence. He won't function perfectly in society, but well enough to get by. I think we can report this as a success and Novactis' new medication as a cure for the violent symptoms of this form of poison-induced mental disorder."

The others nodded, two of them grunted with satisfaction, and then their faces rotted off and became fire and smoke - wisps of rancid poison drifting across time. Many years had passed and the angel had called him here again. Tam didn't know why, but he was certain the angel's wishes would not be something the doctors would approve.

The Angel

Brightly painted lanterns formed an astral circle of light and granite boulders a second circle of earth. He'd built a huge bon fire with select logs of deformed wood and now the flames roared in the wind and he could see the yellow moon rising over the fanglike jags of the building's shattered roof. It was a scene of heathen worship amid desolation - wildlife and birds had abandoned this place and for a moment he felt like the last predator at the centre of something black and diseased. He whispered a name then his lips formed an O and he began circling the fire chanting the strange words the poison sent to his mind.

Ghostly forms began to drift in darkness and smoke - tenuous and fading - nothing more than memories rising from

the bones of the thousands of dead creatures buried here in sludge. Drifting into the wind, they coagulated and rose next to a halo of light in the crystalline portion of sky by the moon. Turbulence above howled like a cold demon, icy sweat beaded on his forehead and as the words grew complex the Night Angel took shape. Its powerful head hooded like the grim reaper, and its vast wings glistening like sharpened ebony and steel in the moonlight.

It looked down on him with dagger eyes of glowing red and commanded him to stop the chant. And when it spoke its words cut his flesh and seemed to splinter his bones with piercing shards of sound - the command for obedience contained in its fiery breath promising that he would face judgment-day punishment should he even think of questioning this being's desires.

"You are soft flesh and corruption, a student of weak human doctors," the Night Angel said, its voice booming in his mind. "It disturbs me that you are doing nothing to aid me in the war on my rival, Satan. Listen carefully - you will begin again. Though you killed Satan in his incarnation as a woman, he is returning again. Halloween is the date. Go and find the woman whose child is to be born on Halloween. I will guide you to her. Stalk her, study her - because on Halloween eve, the child will be born and it will be the Satan seed. Before that time you must find her, wherever she is and kill the child. It must not see the light of the sunrise or it will be too powerful to stop. Kill it in the womb to be sure."

"It will be done," Tam said. He staggered as the voice thundered. "It must be done or you will die!"

Darkness whirled and deepened, becoming a liquid coil in the sky. Tam saw the angel melt to stars and skulls and vanish. Clouds raced over the moon, covering it completely, and the wind rushed so hard it shattered the fire and lanterns in front of him. Logs burst to sparks as they exploded and flew, and moments later, he was thrown to his knees. He stared like a blind man into absolute darkness, feeling the sweat harden

like ice on his neck and back.

"The child will die," he whispered through freezing drool.

Rosemary

Autumn shades and sunlight tinted Doctor Wilson's window. He studied Rosemary with knowing eyes, admiring the glow of health she radiated. Her dark hair and skin shone - a beautiful luster that reached perfection when reflected in her large brown eyes.

The Doctor put on his practiced pleasant smile. "Your pregnancy is as normal and stable as I've seen. Unexpected complications are always a possibility, but you seem to be a very happy mother, so they are unlikely. My guess is it'll be a by-the-book delivery near the beginning of November, and that isn't far off so relax and deal with the pains and cravings till then."

Rosemary nodded and forced a pleasant smile of her own as she stepped out the office door. Her bulk and the discomfort slowed her as she walked. "I feel like a damn clucking hen," she thought, and then she grimaced as she noticed ragged balls of dust gathered on the corner tiles by the door. If she was to have her baby girl in a hospital, it could at least be spotlessly clean. Wetheron Hospital was starting to look untidy and it was more than the recent funding cutbacks. It was a sort of demoralization where the staff was starting to decay. She'd noticed an unshaven doctor on arrival and a few orderlies that looked pale and hung over.

At least Doctor Wilson looked professional; there was some relief in that ... but not much because other things were eating at her. Daily worries and the hospital actually helped to keep them below the surface.

Number one on the worry list was Jason. As a husband he'd managed to go from a great lover and companion to an angry man - over the last few weeks he'd come apart at the seams. He'd been a temperamental prick all morning. Stretched any further his pettiness would become wife abuse.

"Thank you," she said to a stocky Greek man holding the exit door for her. "Absent-minded, I'm not seeing anything but my troubles," she thought.

A chill wind tore at her dress as she stepped outside, and she couldn't see the car parked anywhere on the semicircular exit road. Patiently she went down the line car by car, but Jason wasn't there. "He's taken off again. Damn him," she muttered.

A taxi driver opened his door, but she turned him down and headed for a small parkette by the public sidewalk. Sitting there on a bench amid the scraggly trees and blowing leaves, she waited for Jason to return.

The sky was gray and patterned like fine feathers, the light filtering through a bit on the bleak side. It seemed like only yesterday life was very simple and happiness prearranged. She'd married the right man, they were doing quite well at a time when others were in serious financial straits, and a beautiful child was to be born ... a bundle of joy that would brighten gray skies with a smile and firm up the pattern of their planned and orderly future.

But that was yesterday and this was today. She was growing certain that she'd married the wrong man, and divorce was something she feared a hell of a lot. The poverty that would likely devour her if she became a single mother was not something she wanted to think about. It was like thinking about being raped and perhaps worse because endless humiliation could come with destitution.

Life, happiness, the meaning of it all - simplicity had been shattered and the world now swept over her like a great power she'd never fathom. She began to feel that there should be joy in just being a human being. That was what a baby was about - celebrating just being born. But when she looked out at everyone she knew, it was obvious that happiness was a house they built, and it quickly exited their lives when they didn't have all of the materials. With Jason,

the house was burning down - and this was the first time Rosemary understood that she hadn't really been happy; she'd built an illusion around herself. So the question was whether to try and save it or just escape the flames.

Smog rose from motorists tearing by to beat the lights. Fumes licked at her nostrils like reverse smelling salts that dizzied her. She had a picture of Jason racing in his car to some unnecessary business rendezvous - she could see a touch of sweat on his lightly browned skin, then his mouth warped and his eyes fired up like an imp's. Rosemary twitched on the bench and shook her head. "Visions like this will never do," she thought as she moved her fingertips gently across her eyes.

The wind gusting in the treetops seemed unduly loud, like tearing parchment, and she looked up, seeing people passing the flower shop and others boarding the streetcar. Their fall clothes seemed dowdy and ragged; people were getting to be scarecrows, just carrying on in a dull march ... their lives no more than a survival routine. There wasn't anyone who could rise above it all and live for higher principles. It made her think of evil and it wasn't a roaring lion but something that sapped the strength out of the world and made life lesser and plain.

Traffic thinned, pedestrians had vanished for the moment. Rosemary looked south, up the empty street, hoping to see Jason driving back. But there wasn't any traffic and her eyes fell on the old Waters Funeral Home just across from the hospital. A number of cars were parked in the lot, including a hearse. A lone man stood smoking in the shadows near the exit. He stared straight at her then he looked away toward the patchwork rooftops of nearby houses. A cloud of smoke passed from his pale lips. She noticed that he was unshaven and his suit was ill fitting like it belonged to someone else. Darkness ringed his eyes, making her think of him as a drug addict or someone terminally ill. A creepy feeling came over her - maybe he'd stolen the suit from a corpse. He looked

that vile.

Then his eyes settled on her again, and they held piercing fire and life that the rest of him didn't have. She could see him well enough to note that he wasn't staring at her face; he was staring directly at her swollen belly - at her baby girl. Hate shone like stars in those eyes, and his right eye was a crooked evil eye. It startled her so much she got up and hurried over to the taxi line.

Rosemary shuddered as she adjusted herself in the seat, then as the cab pulled out she saw the man shuffling off past the flower shop. From the rear he looked quite normal. But his look hadn't been normal, of that she was sure.

Like many taxi drivers, this kind fellow managed to go straight out of light traffic and into a jam. They ended up stopped dead beside a self-serve beer store barely two blocks from the hospital. The driver issued lifeless words of apology then crept ahead slowly, just behind a streetcar. Irritated, Rosemary studied the street and the many tiny clothing shops hugging the sidewalk. She wished she could afford a shop of her own - she had plans on starting a home business based on her computer and special designs. But that would be after the baby was born.

At the intersection they were out front of a sleazy bar and condo place called the Parkview Suites . . . which added to her discomfort, as she took no joy in studying its cheap facade. When the taxi lurched ahead, it was only for a short jump that ended with a rocking halt. It left Rosemary staring down the bar's alleyway at torn asphalt, blowing litter and leaves. She saw a man and woman standing near a huge metal trash bin. They were engaged in animated discussion. As always, she studied the woman first, registering her as a frizz-headed blond hooker wearing a dress and jacket much too thin for the weather. Then her eyes went to the man and her expression became one of shock and disbelief. It was Jason. His face fiercely grim; the serious look he wore a lot lately as he issued his selfish commands. He said something

brief then Rosemary saw the woman get to her knees in a squat.

Covering her eyes Rosemary began to cry quietly as the taxi lurched forward and sped through the light. The ugly image of Jason swam in phosphorous darkness, and flashes of the strange man lurking near the funeral home came and went. She couldn't escape the conclusion that both men hated her and both belonged with stinking rats in the sewer.

Rosemary's house stood in a hideaway location on a street dead-ended by a railway grade and a hydro storage yard. It was a new house, but an odd design, sitting atop a tiny rise. Its atmosphere was best described as a spooky home-of-the-local-ghost feeling. They'd purchased it because of its low price; and at the time they'd hoped to save for a house in a better neighbourhood. Her pregnancy hadn't been planned, and over time she'd grown fond of the place and didn't bring up the subject of moving. She hadn't been thinking of it at all until now.

The boughs of huge old maple trees arched over the driveway, throwing heavy shade on the taxi as it crawled up the rise. Light the texture of salt filtered through, creating a shifting pattern on the polished hood. A gable and a piece of the western sky appeared, and as the car pulled in by the walk she had the bizarre feeling that she really was a sort of ghost, with a blockhead for a husband and a comic creature kicking in her womb.

The pie-faced French taxi driver remained about as cold and unconcerned as the weather. She paid him with Jason's credit card, tossing him a nasty glance as she got out. He had the nerve to squeal the tires as he backed down the drive. Frowning she watched him swing out on the road and race off. She felt like calling in a complaint but decided against it.

Cold waves from the icy asphalt seeped through her thin shoes. The bones in her feet had been aching since the beginning of her pregnancy and they ached even more as she

started up the walk. To ease the pain she stepped into the leaves and long grass, getting a soothing feeling from the soft turf. She didn't go straight in but strolled around the grounds.

The sky had gone dull and mountainous dark clouds had moved in to cover everything like a lead seal. The place resembled a gloomy prison yard, the house squatting in the dim light like a jail block. Stepping up to the plank fence she peered through a crack and studied the weedy hydro yard. It looked old, more like a junkyard than a storage area. And it was broken down, decaying like her life. She had the feeling that everything had passed with summer and now she'd entered a netherworld where she'd spend an eternity raising a child with a husband who had about as much love as a drooling zombie.

His shining armor had rusted quickly, but what could she do about it? She felt guilty because it had been her decision not to have sex during the later months of pregnancy. Other women did but she felt it was gross, and though he argued about nearly everything else, Jason hadn't disagreed. Even so, he would still likely bring it up if she confronted him with his infidelity.

She turned east, facing the subdivision and saw a mild glare from the sunset reflected on the windows. She shielded her eyes and as the spots faded she saw something flapping in the wind. It looked like a large ragged piece of fur attached to a pole hammered into the ground near the boundary line. She knew Jason was the only person ever down in that fenced off area and wondered why he'd put such a thing there.

Deep leaves reached up to her shins as she took careful steps down the rise. Odors of fresh earth, roots and some sort of chemical fragrance filled her nostrils. As she got closer she saw that it was a section of fur.

Thistles bit at her ankles but she continued to push ahead. A

huge maple tree shaded her as she reached the spot, and the wind seemed to die temporarily. The fur hung at about chest height on a wooden pole that'd been lightly carved. It appeared to be a sort of tiny totem pole, the images on it vaguely defined but almost forming faces, wings or skulls.

Reaching out she touched the fur then quickly pulled her hand back. It was wet and sticky blood smeared her knuckles. She recoiled in horror as she realized that this animal had been recently killed and skinned. Her eyes went to the grass and she saw more blood. It trailed through the weeds to a corpse. About the size of a dog, it had been blackened by smoke and rested in seared grass. She couldn't tell exactly what kind of animal it'd been.

"God," she whispered and the world went from cold and distant to close and hungry. Someone had sacrificed this animal in the yard and she strongly suspected Jason. He'd been out in the yard before they left. At times, he liked to talk about a cult he'd been involved in years ago - a group that was into a lot of animal sacrifice. She hadn't known him then. Perhaps now that he was losing it, he was regressing to his old ways. The thought sickened her and she felt suddenly paranoid, feeling an evil force and hidden eyes watching her. She choked and then she panicked, beginning to run up the hill. She didn't get far before her head began to whirl and she tumbled in the grass.

Next thing she knew she was in the house in a groggy state with a vague memory of picking herself up and walking the rest of the way. Except for a few abrasions, she was okay. She sat in the kitchen with a first aid kit, washing the scrapes with alcohol. Feeling a sudden thirst, she went to the fridge and poured herself a small glass of tomato juice. After one sip, she remembered the blood and her stomach churned as she put the glass aside.

Heading up to the bedroom, she discarded her grass-stained clothes and put on a clean dress. The change helped her relax and back in the living room, she sat staring at the TV,

undecided about what she would do.

The phone rang - she picked it up and said hello. But the person didn't answer. She could hear him breathing. "Jason, is that you?" she said. Then she heard a click.

"That son of a bitch," she muttered. "I'm tired of his weird behaviour."

She needed help and decided to call a friend, and the person she picked was Karren as she was her only friend who wasn't married and close to Jason.

Karren answered after two rings - her light voice sounding almost gleeful. After some small talk, Rosemary mentioned her problems with Jason.

Karren sighed with disbelief and Rosemary could practically see her shaking her head with disgust at the other end. "The man has lost his marbles," she said. "You should get out of there before he's up in a tree house with the squirrels and wants you and the baby with him. You've got his credit card, so use it to draw out some cash. Get a cab right away and come over. I work nights now so it'll be easy for you to stay. We'll call a shrink or something tomorrow and get advice on what to do about him."

Rosemary felt reinforced by Karren's support and decided to leave quickly. Another way of getting cash occurred to her. Jason trusted her to do his online banking - so she went into his study and booted up his computer. In minutes, she'd transferred 10,000 dollars to her own chequing account. Jason had about 30,000 left in his account. He'd been socking it away for a new house. Since he was too lazy to do the banking, she doubted he'd notice the change any time soon.

She packed her bags in a hurry then sat down and picked up the phone. It usually took twenty minutes to get a cab and that might be too long. Putting down the receiver, she wrote a quick note then went out the back door and crossed the yard to a gap in the fence. Stopping there, she looked back at the house with tears in her eyes. It had taken more than a

year to decorate it, and now Jason had lost his marbles and spoiled everything.

The path went through the hydro yard and a ravine and ended at the local mall. Jason used it all the time, jogging down it to the store and back. So much brush had overgrown it now it was hard to traverse. And there were hazards - broken glass, boards with nails, pieces of metal and other junk. Her progress was slow and as she moved along in the semidarkness, she thought of Jason. He'd always hated animals. He wouldn't even let her keep a cat. And now she was glad she didn't have one because it could end up sacrificed to his cult totem.

As the perimeter of the hydro yard vanished, the path began to descend into the ravine. It wasn't a steep drop but it was dark at the bottom. The path had been cleared and lined with wood chips in this part, making it soft and easy to traverse. She'd gone about 100 metres down it when she spotted a portion of a dilapidated structure showing through a gap in the bushes. Halting she stepped through for a better look. Some tramps were living here in a hovel. She could see a sweater hanging from a stripped branch. A closer look and she saw the logo and lettering on it - Temagami Hiking Trails. She'd bought that sweater for Jason at a tourist shop two years ago, and the sight of it terrified her. He could've given it away to someone less fortunate. But considering his selfish nature he probably hadn't. If he was spending time down here in a hovel, he had to be mad.

Getting back on the path she looked up at the darkness and it seemed to spin like poisonous smoke in her head. Clamping her hands on her bags and clenching her teeth she began to run, thinking that she wanted out of this place; and she never wanted to return.

Evil Returns

Darkness swept into his eyes like thick bursts of painless soot. Tam jogged across the hydro yard and swung

himself over the high plank fence. Rosemary's house had all but disappeared in twilight, and he figured they had to be out because he knew they didn't retire early.

He felt through his pack for his flashlight, and then he began to move quietly through the deep leaves and grass. His totem suddenly appeared in front of him; he moved the light down to its base, comforted by the carvings he'd created. The animal sacrifices were a necessary evil as they absorbed evil spirits on the grounds and allowed him to do his work.

It would be best to check the house. He headed up the rise, pausing at the halfway point to study a depression in the leaves and grass ... someone had been out in the yard recently even though no one seemed to be in the house.

At the living room window, he saw nothing but darkness. Walking to the door he rang the bell and knocked loudly, and then he ducked through the lilac bushes at the side. Five minutes passed and no lights came on so he went to the back. Taking a small pry bar from his pack, he forced the aluminum door and shouldered the inner door open. Stepping inside the back porch, he turned the light on. He went through the kitchen door, spotted the phone and went over and checked it for messages. He found one message on it. It was Jason, saying he'd been called away on business and would be home late. His tone was apologetic and phony.

So where was Rosemary? He scratched his head. She never went out at night so she should be here. Perhaps medical problems and distress over her loony husband had forced her to the hospital, or maybe that taxi she'd taken had got into an accident. It was also possible that she'd fallen or something and was unconscious and in the house somewhere.

Tam squeezed his eyes shut; the wing of the Night Angel flashed across his spotty vision like a scythe. Something wasn't right and he knew it. Evil spirits seemed to be blocking his thinking processes. He concluded it would be best to

conduct a thorough search of the house.

Detective skills and logical thinking were not key assets of his -- he searched the upstairs rooms first, thinking he would find her collapsed somewhere. A half-hour went by before he found the note. And he read it once then reread it slowly. Spurs of vengeful fire flew in his mind, raising his mood to fury. He bit his tongue and stamped his feet. That wicked and whoring husband of hers had got in the way of his entire plan and now he didn't know where she was hiding. If she didn't return the days he'd spent working in the hydro yard would be a waste. Everything was set up - chemicals, blasting caps, the death scene - and on Halloween he was to do what he had to do and then burn the house down.

He had to get her back, but he couldn't think of a way to find her. Stumbling upstairs he collapsed and rested on the bed, rubbing his temples and watching waves of shadows pass on the ceiling. Fear of the Night Angel tormented him; he didn't dare try communing with it before he had this problem solved.

It came to him that Jason was the key. Jason had screwed things up for him and Jason had a background of evil and witchcraft, so obviously he'd done it on purpose or through his channeling of some demon. As the father of the Satan child, he was doing his best to save it.

The Night Angel would know just how to punish him -- but first Tam would capture him and prepare him for the Angel's wrath.

He bit his lip as a new feeling of satisfaction grew, then he heard a car pulling in the driveway. Checking the clock, he saw that it was nearly midnight. Popping off the bed he adjusted his pack and took out the pry bar, and then he thumped down the stairs and waited behind the door for Jason.

Tam heard the key in the lock. The door began to open. He swung the bar, smashing it right through the glass. It caught

Jason on the forehead, stunning him. And as he fell against the frame, Tam seized his arm and yanked him inside. He stumbled across the floor and caught hold of the banister, and before he could turn and put up a fight, Tam delivered a hard blow to his shoulder. Jason went to his knees and groaned, and then he threw himself sideways to the floor.

Scrambling up he faced Tam, his eyes blinking as blood poured down from a deep cut above his brow. Moonlight shining in through the glass glistened on Jason's battered face as he began to charge. And Tam stepped back, grim determination and fury filling his mind. He had a vague mental picture of his bar swinging out like lightning. Then time passed and he had a rope around Jason's chest and shoulders and was dragging him through the leaves. His anger had settled, vanishing into a black void where words and thoughts melted to silence.

A Friend's House

Rosemary felt dizzying fear and confusion wind down to an uneasy mood as she reached the Sanders Mall parking lot. She stumbled at the end of the path and began to hyperventilate. Her lips went cold as she hurried through a tiny playground. A quick step from the curb and she was on the asphalt lot and moving toward the sidewalk on unsteady legs. Then the jolt of a misstep caused her to stop and scan the mall.

The scene unfolded and she gained keen awareness of the crowd. There were dozens of people streaming through the row of glass doors. They shouted to one another, tossed shopping bags, slammed trunks and car doors and generally treated October's Halloween end as another hurried event in life.

Leaves tumbled on the cold ground, the windy atmosphere adding urgency to their efforts. Rush job, race car to the grave -- she wondered what they were running from or to . . . they had no time for love or anything more than a

quick embrace and no capability for quality in their conversations or ideas. Nowadays a lot of things existed in books and if they didn't they wouldn't exist at all. Life had become shallow. The pocketful of genuine dreams had vanished; the soul declining to materialism and a packet of daily worries and fears. Jack-o-lantern gods looked down on all of this and laughed mightily, and it struck her that humans did not appear to be made in God's image. The pumpkin gods had more feelings than humans; they had smiles and patience -- in a warped way.

Either laugh or you'll cry her mother used to say. But being pregnant and married to Jason was a situation that made both of those options hard things to do. He turned her stiff and cold, she could cry for herself perhaps, but not for him. And she noticed that many people in the crowd were in the same boat as Jason. Their faces showed no emotion at all. They walked through the doors like zombies, no longer alert enough to remember what had died inside.

"Perhaps I had it easy for too long," she thought as she entered the doors. "I let Jason take over and make the decisions, and when things soured there was no escape. He had me in a corner behind jail bars, and for a long time I didn't know it."

Times weren't the best; some shops were boarded up. Halloween displays were featured in most of the open stores, she stopped at a book store and studied lit pumpkins in straw and a wooden sign that said Read a Scary Story. A garish serial killer showed on a glossy cover, and his face reminded her of the frightening man she'd seen staring from the funeral home parking lot. It spooked her and when she turned trails of paranoia rose in her mind. A lot of men seemed to be watching, especially one fat man over by the food court. Rather than loiter any longer she headed for the subway, feeling some of the fear vanish as she rode an escalator down to train level.

She had a ticket, so she went straight in and down the aisle

to a red bench where she dropped her bag, sat and began to exercise her stiff fingers. A large lifeless crowd was on the other side, waiting to travel in the other direction, and they all seemed to be staring - bug-eyed monsters, cold fish out of water. She felt uncomfortable, her legs sore and her muscles aching, and she was sure that with the loose clothes she'd thrown on she looked like a huge overweight rag doll. Overnight she'd become Pregnant Raggedy Ann -- the husbandless welfare mom that society now loved to hate.

A train rushed in on the other side and a feeling that Karren would understand came with it. She closed her eyes, heard the electric jolt and screech of the train leaving, and in her exhausted state her memories seemed almost like visions. It was high school again and she fought with Karren over Tom, then they made up and became fast friends during two weeks when neither of them had a date. That was followed by James and then Karren's pregnancy - it ended in abortion. James took off to BC while Rosemary remained with her friend, giving her encouragement at a time when suicide was her foremost thought.

Karren's messy marriage and divorce was another dark period; Rosemary knew few of the details of that. But she did know that Karren had been through it all. Karren would understand when she arrived at her door. And that made all the difference. She boarded the train and closed her eyes in semi rest as it accelerated, looped and raced to the other side of the city.

Nebulous thoughts lurked at the edge of troubling sleep. Something terrible and unresolved crept in a fog of inner confusion, and like some monster of madness it threatened to crush the fence of sanity and plunge her into chaos. It was about to sweep her into dark dreams, then the rumbling of the wheels turned to a squeal and she was jolted to consciousness.

The doors seemed to open lightning fast, and as she struggled with her bag she feared she wouldn't make it. An

elderly black man saw her plight and seized the doors, allowing her to get out without breaking an ankle from hurry. She emerged in the night a block from Karren's house. There weren't any cabs at this lonely suburban station. From the rise she looked down at a sea of houses – some with black windows, other winking with lights. It gave her that old feeling of suburban loneliness. There were a million people here, and that meant very little when she couldn't touch any of them. She felt locked out and locked away. The lights became jack-o-lanterns in her mind, and a tear rolled on her cheek from the mockery of it.

The walk downhill was easy; she passed a couple teens with streaked hair, and encountered no one else on the next block. Nearly all of the lights were on in Karren's house and her car was parked in the driveway. The tall birch and the neat yard seemed friendly in the dark - a feeling largely different from Rosemary's own downtown house. It made her wonder how many people were afraid to even approach her front door.

She felt a touch apprehensive as she rang the bell but that vanished as Karren answered almost immediately. Her smile was dimpled and huge, as always, but something had changed in her look. Rosemary put it down to less makeup. Karren looked a lot better as an older and mellower suburban woman. As a teen she'd been flashy to the edge of sleazy.

Karren's smile turned to a sad frown as they embraced, but as they separated, she ruffled Rosemary's hair and said, "We should really feel sorry for Jason. You look just fine - pregnant but rosy as Rosy."

"I am fine," Rosemary said, stepping in slowly. "Few women have the physical strength I do at this stage of the game. Must be the big bones."

Karren took her bag and coat and led her down the hall saying, "You need to sit and relax anyway. I've made some lemon tea so wait a moment and I'll fill you in on the

situation here."

Rosemary did just that, sitting on a deep soft chair. She found Karren's living room to be homey and nearly spotless. A large screen TV flickered as an action movie played, but the sound was muted. Furnishings were solid, with few knickknacks. A man's living room, though Rosemary knew Karren had done it that way purposely. Karren had always been a person who focused on her personal appearance -- fashion, makeup, health and figure. So perhaps there was some vanity in keeping exterior surroundings plain, so as not to be overshadowed by them.

Karren was also quite beautiful -- she wore her dark hair up with a couple long tresses hanging down at her shoulders. Her eyebrows were naturally arched and high and her brown eyes were set with a slight Oriental slope -- a fierce effect that became sensual when combined with her small nose and heart-shaped lips. Her skin was dark like Rosemary's, and in teen years many people had mistaken them for sisters. Together they looked exotic to an extent that some people mistook their race. Once, while parked in a hamburger joint on a trip to New York, some fascinated local males had whistled and called them pretty niggers. Rosemary was in fact Greek in ancestry and Karren was Scottish/Italian - so there was nothing black about them at all other than their tanned skin.

"You hungry?" Karren said as she entered with the tea.

"Not at all."

"You're really just about due aren't you?"

"Any time, any moment."

"I better fill you in on the situation. I won the house in the divorce settlement. The basement is rented out to a guy named Dave Windsor. He's handsome and he's gay, and he pays his rent. I'm working nights so I'll introduce you to him and he can take you to the hospital if necessary. I have lots of space, so you can stay as long as you want. Maybe we

should discuss Jason and what the odds are on you two getting back together."

"None at the moment," Rosemary said. "And I don't have time to weep about it. I have to think about the baby."

"Good girl, that's the attitude to take. What's this about Jason going crackers?"

"It started a while ago. I don't know what came over him. His behavior is nasty and erratic like someone on drugs, though I know he isn't on any."

"Don't count on it, dear. I thought Johnny was clean and he was caught using needles."

"No needles here. Jason is all business. He was growing colder and colder by the day. When I got pregnant, he changed for the better. He started treating me wonderfully, like the most caring husband in the world. Then he started getting mean - nastier every day. It's like he hates me or something. He left me at the hospital and ran off with a"

"Don't hurt yourself by repeating it. Johnny did the same sort of thing to me. I stabbed him for it, but it didn't pay off. He won custody of Joey. I almost never get to see him and he's been poisoned towards me. He's been taught that I'm a criminal and insane. I don't want you to make the same mistake. What we're going to do is play by all of the rules. I'm working tonight, but tomorrow we're going to see a shrink I know. We'll build a case against Jason. If he can be helped we'll help him. If he can't be helped, we'll make sure he's kept away from the baby. And don't go soft on me. It has to be done - it's a cruel world. If you don't take care of yourself you'll see your baby taken away by that lunatic."

"I'll take care of myself," Rosemary said, suddenly bursting into tears.

The Promise

Karren left for her midnight shift medical job at the St.

Michael's Burn Unit in downtown Toronto. Rosemary stood at the window, feeling suddenly lonely as she watched the polished car slip away like mercury under the street lamps. Though exhausted, she didn't feel like sleeping so she went back to the living room and sipped tea in front of the set.

In the dim lamplight, the big screen flickered hypnotically and worked magic that temporarily erased her worries. She slowly flicked through the pay channels avoiding drama. A river of shadows rushed on the walls from the many action movies she encountered. In show after show brutal death appeared as exciting and colorful scenes. A racing motorcycle screamed over a cliff. Human devils leapt through choreographed scenes as they engaged in mortal combat. Spaceships moved through fantastic maneuvers, pulsed laser light and exploded. A new action hero fired off twenty times his body weight in lead without reloading once. A rampaging monster ate human beings like they were popcorn. A hijacker shot a man in the throat, and as the ketchup pack burst out in slow motion she shook her head and turned off the set.

The darkened screen left her in a room suddenly very dim; she saw movement near the window and gasped. Then she realized it was fog rolling outside and sighed. She walked to the curtains and looked out; mist as dense as angel hair caught the light as it rolled over the road and whited out the yard. A sudden image of Jason out there lost in the fog came into her mind, causing her to wince as she forced it away.

She decided it was time to hit the sack, turned and headed up the stairs. Karren had given her a bedroom facing the backyard. It was spacious with a bed that looked adequate if not fully comfortable. The room seemed hot so she opened the aluminum window a bit and then paused to study herself in the mirror. Her long loose dress failed to hide her pregnancy. Her eyes seemed expanded, wet and glossy and she felt momentarily spooked by her own gaze. She'd read that the latest studies on pregnancy showed that women underwent brain changes during pregnancy; changes that

were an actual increase in intelligence. Perhaps something like that was happening to her and she could see it as something weird reflected in her eyes.

Pulling herself under the covers, she immediately dozed off and fell into mangled sleep. Her dreams had no visual aspect, but were like more fog and a cold flow of alien feelings ... unpleasant and fleeting. She felt herself running away, bare feet flying in the empty night. And she felt something inside her that she was trying to save. The baby appeared as warmth and light - a fragile orb she had to protect. Then cold arms touched her; tentacles that made her shudder. She saw a face of jagged ice and evil, and heard a voice. "The child has been promised to me," it whispered. "Promised as a sacrifice to me." It was a haunting voice, its tone evil and knowing. It filled her with terror, causing her to wake.

Icy wind rushed through the open window. She rose and went over to close it. As she grabbed the slide, the curtain brushed past her face and she saw out into the night. Below the fog had thinned and was drifting into pockets. The treetops were rocking in a strong breeze, and above them she could see the moon. A dark cloud was rising on the horizon in the shape of an angel. A night angel, she thought, and the thought made her shiver. She remembered the voice from the dream and felt her flesh become clammy and cold. Shutting the window quickly, she pulled the curtains tight, hurried back to bed and sat there shivering under the covers.

Natural Healing

The agony and fever had gone on for so long that Jason wasn't sure if it had been hours or days. It was hard to even conceive of himself as a human being while in such anguish. Nightmares rushed like distorted video in his mind. Monsters and confusing images of disaster took shape. Hideous faces and the false memories of delirium doped him with shock after shock ... brain twisting special effects that contained sickening horror and new forms of pain. He'd wake to stinging flesh and try to scream, only to find himself tightly

bound and gagged. Alert, he'd moan low for hours as his knotted muscles fed his brain with pulsing aches from swelling and bruises. It would ascend to a pinnacle and then he'd faint, and rise out of black waters to nightmares and go through the whole thing again.

This time it was worse - a foul odor made the gagging stronger and the thought of dying on vomit seemed like pleasant sunshine. He heard heavy boots hitting a hardwood floor and it caused hope to rise in his mind. Someone was coming - perhaps he was being rescued. It was a shining thought but a red jolt of stabbing pain immediately replaced it. He felt the hard boots shoving his stiff legs aside, then the blindfold was suddenly torn off and brilliant light exploded like needles of fire in his eyes.

Jason couldn't see a thing - just light whirling like alien eggbeaters. A rough hand pinched his face then the cloth was ripped from his mouth, nearly taking his dry tongue along with it. The light eased and spilled like blurry sugar in his eyes. A train of bruised thoughts began to chug in his mind. Strong odors rose to his blood-caked nostrils and he felt his stomach heave like it'd been punched. He vomited uncontrollably; a burning mass shooting through his lips, tearing at his throat like hot acid. Needles of numbness and pain covered his skin like moving quills as his flesh convulsed, but he couldn't stop. He heaved many times then fell still.

Hot steam drifted into his face. A form began to take shape - a tall man working over some sort of portable stove. Thick vapors rose from a bulbous black pot, and Jason guessed that it was the source of the vile odors.

As his vision cleared his eyes darted about the room. This was a huge place. It looked like he was in the hydro warehouse next to his house. He could see boxes and rolls of copper cable piled in stacks. He focused on some burlap bags in a corner and noticed bloodstains. Then he spotted a swollen and blackened hand protruding from a hole in the

cloth, and he nearly started vomiting again as he realized that corpses were the source of the odor.

The big man was turning to face him, but Jason couldn't see him clearly. His face seemed dark and distorted. His eyes like smoldering iron.

"Your sins of the flesh have wounded you, Jason," he said. "We don't want your flesh to become infected like your astral body. The Night Angel asks that you be healed. As the warlock father of the evil child, you will atone by working with me, seeing to it that the child is not born. You will not try to resist. Your past of evil powers and magic have put you in our control and saved your life. We need you and because of that will spare you." He held up a slender-necked bottle of opaque green glass. "This is science and it is magic and potion that will cleanse your mind of evil thoughts. It will allow you to confess, speak of your past and tell us the name of the demon that owns your soul."

Thick liquid rose in Jason's throat and choked him. He couldn't speak. A memory came to him; images from years ago, when he'd been in a coven down in New Mexico. In ceremonies of blood, sex and magic, he'd promised his soul and his first-born child to a demon. But he'd never believed it. He'd done it all for the thrill, drugs and sex. Now this madman was going to force him to drink poison to get the name of the demon. The name - he thought back, seeing vivid smoke and flames. Night Angel was the name. He'd promised his first-born child as a sacrifice to the Night Angel, and in the ceremony the angel had been called as an ancient force of evil, named as the spawn of Satan in secret hieroglyphs.

Jason wasn't sure who this madman was but the creep was certainly deluded if he thought of himself as some sort of priest, and of the Night Angel as a holy force opposed to sin. Perhaps he'd been brainwashed by a coven of the Night Angel and sent here to destroy him and his first child. The coven was seeing to it that the promise was kept. If so it meant

that deluded or not, this character was as deadly as Satan.

Jason knew there wasn't any such being as the Night Angel. The occult was all fraud; a product of warped minds and drug induced visions. He was certain of it but he also knew that certainty would matter very little in the long run to the people this monster thought he was serving. This man could still make people very ugly, very sick and very dead.

Gulping hard, Jason felt blood and agony shoot in his badly bruised neck. His captor was studying him like a bug, looking him up and down before he spoke. "The natural healing must begin", Tam said authoritatively. And he turned back to the pot and began pouring various ingredients into the furiously boiling liquid. "Herbs to heal your wounds," he said. "A bottle of wood alcohol to cleanse your skin, bark extracts to destroy the germs. Spring water to purify ..."

He stirred the smoking pot with a large wooden spoon, and then he scooped out a wide flask of the boiling liquid and turned. "Let the healing begin!" he said as he reached out and poured the chemical on Jason's bare legs.

Jason screamed as the liquid scalded his already tortured flesh, and along with the pain, the words, "The father of the Satan seed will be cleansed!" were scorched into his brain.

A Cold Day

Soft beams of morning sunlight shone through the dining room window and warmed the polished wood. The early day appeared crisp and cold and the evils of night seemed far away. Rosemary sipped vanilla tea, and except for dust motes in the sunbeams, the room stood sparse and spotless. In her thoughts, she looked for exit signs that might take her out of her current situation, but she found none and in the process ended up thinking about Karren.

Karren had lost both her husband and son. Cleanliness remained; that and the aching of loss. A bad marriage had ended in financial stability and a loveless life. Rosemary supposed nearly the same would happen to her if Jason

remained in control. Except that she would only have the loveless part, minus the financial stability.

The sun painted a rainbow in the clear glass of the neatly inlaid window, and the beauty of the day imprisoned her. After years of a comfortable home, the clean new setting felt like an institution. It felt like Jason already had her put away. He'd rejected her and she'd been forced to leave home. He'd left her no other choice. And now she was here and the beautiful sun continued to shine on a life become cold and empty. Thinking things over she understood why some people refused to bring children into the world. Human warmth hadn't entered their lives and they didn't want little ones along to share the pain of the journey.

Karren came down the stairs at 10:30, a tired expression suspended like a mask on her face. She refused Rosemary's offer to cook a hot breakfast, and ate nothing at all. After wiping the kitchen counters she joined Rosemary in the dining room, cradling a cup of black coffee in her hands as she stared absently out the window.

"I phoned home early this morning," Rosemary said. "Jason isn't there and I didn't leave a message on the machine. He must have gone to work. I used the 632A code first so he can't trace this number."

"I doubt he went to work. At this stage, they usually alternate between brooding and searching for the spouse. He's probably called just about everyone you know by now. I guess he hasn't remembered me yet. Don't answer any calls here. If you're alone, let the machine take it and then check who it is. In his case, he's unpredictable. I'm not sure how he'd react but I'm sure he can't take a lot of frustration. He's probably dangerous and may try to assault you. You have to set the terms of meeting with him to be in control."

"Jason's been displaying moods of abusive rage for a while ... without any reason - unless the idea of being a father is too much for his businessman's pea brain. Maybe he just hates

me."

"If he hated you he would've run off or physically thrown you out. He's in a poor mental state. I think his love has become an obsession. We'll talk that over with the psychiatrist today. He's dealt with many similar cases so he'll know what Jason is about."

Medallion

The distant sun had a lonely effect. Their phones didn't ring or show messages at all that morning. At noon, Karren and Rosemary drove three kilometres across town to the Walker Street Mall. It was light parking as the lot was only half full, and the crowd wasn't large. Rosemary felt uncomfortable on the open mall floors. It would be too easy for someone who knew Jason to spot her, and if he had called around probably a number of people had their eyes open. Ducking quickly into shops with Karren, she watched jealously as she tried on sensual tops and dresses that would never fit her own swollen body.

Rosemary stocked up with lip-gloss, perfume and other necessary items at the drug store, and then they enjoyed a sweet lunch at the Just Deserts hut in the mall food gallery. One p.m. approached and Karren felt it was time to head over to Doctor Mather's office.

The medical offices were in the same sprawling complex, just a stroll down from the shopping area. They pushed through a heavy door of varnished wood into a sterile environment of piped-in satellite music, rubber plants and swirled glass and plastic ornaments. The elevator rose in a clear plastic tube, dropping them at the fourth floor level, and from there it was a short stroll to the doctor's office.

His office was more mall sterility, but vastly improved by the presence of his receptionist. Margaret was an attractive redhead with a knack for getting close to other women. Karren spent five minutes discussing local gossip with her then informed her of the emergency appointment she'd

booked for Rosemary. They sat and read fashion magazines while they waited.

Doctor Mather emerged twenty minutes later. He was a short plump man wearing an elegant suit. Rosemary was surprised as she'd expected a man of strong stature.

The doctor had an intimate smile for Karren. In general, Rosemary had a good feeling about him, though she found it hard to see him as a tough customer who could deal with abusive husbands.

His initial consultation room, as he called it, looked like a living room. It had a couch and leather chairs and soothing nature scenes hung on the paneled walls. The polished ashtrays and an old television set appeared to be there for decoration.

Thick casebooks lined the library shelves and the doctor took one down, opened a page and wrote her name and a few personal details on a fresh page. She studied the rotund man as he wrote; he had large blue eyes that brimmed with kindness, gray hair that had receded gracefully and a face that was healthy and unwrinkled in spite of his age. He looked wise in the way a reverend would be wise, but hardly looked like someone who knew a lot of personal business and dark secrets.

"You still do everything by pen?" Rosemary said.

"Oh, I suppose you expected computers and recordings. They create a barrier between doctor and patient. I don't favour them. We do have computers for billing and tax purposes, but they aren't here. I also don't trust them as a medium for case files. There are hackers who can break into them and it's easy for people to copy and distribute information. Your file will be handwritten by me and viewed by no one else. I keep my files in that shelf and once it's locked it is fireproof and burglar proof. It is also held to the floor by heavy bolts."

"Karren says you have experience dealing with abusive husbands and with cults and the occult."

"Yes, and it's a dangerous area. I know you probably expected a big man. I use a detective agency when security is required. Based on what Karren has told me I can tell you immediately what I'll probably recommend in regards to your husband Jason. That is you must stay where you are and not tell him where you are. If it becomes possible, I'll contact him and arrange a meeting. That way I can assess him first. Abusive types are experts at manipulation. A line of intelligent defense must be set up to prevent them from controlling the situation. This also reveals the extent of their personal anger. If murderous anger is brewing within, he'll start phoning me, threatening to use force. Though he'll never really do that because it's the spouse the abusive husband wants to reach."

"I'm glad you're straightforward on this."

"It's the only way that works. Let's talk about Jason. Karren told me a bit about his recent strange behaviour. On the occult involvement -- I understand that it was years ago and he was never in so deep that it involved deprogramming or trouble with the law."

"Someone's been sacrificing animals in the yard. Jason is the only person out there at the times it happens. He was involved in a cult years ago -- some sort of witchcraft practice and belief in a fallen angel. Last week I found this medallion placed under the mattress. He put it right below my midsection. He may have some superstitious beliefs regarding the baby and thinks this medallion will provide protection. He denies putting it there."

Doctor Mather took the medallion and turned it over in his palm. The metal was tarnished. A raised angel wing was on one side, a grinning skull on the other. It looked to be ancient. "I've never seen these particular images before. I can do some checking. This seems to be some obscure and unknown group and that's good. I mean it's good that he's not involved with a group known to be dangerous."

The Servant

Tam's poison programmed Jason's mind into a charged medium of hellish visions - a renegade neuron set switching uncontrollably through a grotesque horrorscape. Sometimes images would normalize for a few minutes and he'd see the grinning face of his captor, then the head would melt to a skull and the attacking demons of strychnine would take over again. In lucid moments, the realization of it all delivered fear even more gut wrenching than that of the visions. Hell didn't appear as an alien place or an exotic land of the damned. It appeared as a suddenly familiar place -- as a universe in his mind that he'd forgotten for some years.

Fallen saints walked broken-backed in rags on broad streets paved with the petrified corpses of murdered children. Angels writhed in white agony as madmen screamed. The city of gold was bright as it burned with fire and brimstone. Raging winds carried the mighty howls of wicked beasts.

Corruption licked up like flames in his mind and more visions followed -- an endless concatenation of evil. All of it took place in his soul. All of it part of him. The nightmare rose in consciousness as intimate memories now reborn, and the terror was in knowing that every human had such a corner of the mind ... a personal hell, infinite and merciless, coded in the genes and developing in the brain from the day of birth ... waiting for the dark hand of the angel and the turn of the key of that would unlock it.

In time the visions receded in the shadows of his drugged brain and something unseen and hideous began to creep in the light. He remembered the excruciating pain of his healing and the shock of the poison, and it didn't bother him because he'd gone completely numb. Numbness penetrated his thoughts, his brain, his flesh and his bones - like he'd become a plant or organic life that couldn't feel anything at all. Hades and poison had destroyed his spirit and left him empty.

Tingling in his toes led him to look down the length of his

body. He saw that he was bandaged and realized that his body was probably a huge mass of scar and burn tissue. He couldn't bring himself to care about it at all; probably because Jason was dead or all he had believed was dead ... which was really nothing at all - a mass of lusting flesh had gone numb. Lusting flesh was all that most men were - so in understanding that he knew he had lost nothing.

His vision clearing he looked around the room, and then he breathed deeply, finding the stink of the corpses to be as fine as perfume. As he exhaled the door opened and he sat up and watched Tam enter the room.

Tam's eyes had the brightness of moonbeams. They held a strange power he couldn't fathom, and when Tam looked down at him, it was with understanding. He saw no pity or hate in those pupils.

"Be thankful that the angel has need of you," Tam said. "Because of need you have been saved. And you are a higher being. Vanity and the sensual nature have been removed so that obedience will come easy to you. Nothing has been left for you but to serve the angel, and you will begin by aiding us in destroying Rosemary and the evil child she carries."

Halloween

Halloween fell on a Saturday and it arrived in rush of tropical air up from the Gulf of Mexico. After a rather uneventful day at home, Karren surprised Rosemary with the news that she'd be working on Halloween eve. In the public health business, the forces of witches, goblins and holidays brought more customers into the hospital for treatment. Rosemary concluded that she'd never be personally happy in that sort of occupation. Home life and holidays were just too important to her.

This Halloween also wore warts because she wasn't at home. She was still at Karren's and feeling rootless and depressed. She didn't want to go out by herself and she didn't want to be alone in the house. As partial compensation, she'd bought

bags of candies and treats and a pumpkin at the neighbourhood store. Passing out goodies to the kids seemed like the best way to kill the evening, and time was already passing as she set up tables and bowls in the hall. She filled a punch bowl with jellybeans and tiny chocolate bars, topped off a cookie can with kisses and set a large sack of mixed nuts near the door. Triple-sized suckers in large cellophane wrappers stamped with a nutty pumpkin face were her feature candies. A carton of tiny potato chip bags and a flat of toffee packs rounded out her selection.

When the candy bowls were arranged to her liking she went back to the kitchen to finish the design on her jack-o-lantern. It had already been gutted and the pulp tossed. Using a fruit knife, she carved out a mischievous face - slanted eyes, triangular nose and jagged teeth. It was too windy for a candle so she used a battery-powered night-light instead. It had a yellow tinted bulb that made for a nice effect when she placed it inside.

She cradled the glowing pumpkin above her swollen belly like it was a second baby and headed for the front, carefully passing the tables and candy bowls. As she opened the door wind whipped across the porch and sent her hair flying. It tore at the candy wrappers so she stepped out quickly and shut the door. Gusts were sweeping the yard but the air didn't seem all that humid. Her guess was that it would be a very windy night but not a rainy night.

She placed the pumpkin on a sturdy porch bench then looked out at the last dying haze of sunset. Strong claws of wind raked leaves across the yard. Twilight showed in a darkening the sky and an enormous dark cloud was rising on the eastern horizon. She didn't see any kids approaching and the wind was whistling loudly on the balconies of some nearby apartments, making her wonder if the night was safe enough for them. She decided it wasn't that bad yet and went back inside.

Stepping over to the hall mirror, she fixed her strewn hair,

and before she was done the first trick-or-treaters arrived. The door opened with a spooky creak and she saw three costumed kids standing by the porch pumpkin. "Treat," they said, holding their bags forward.

Wind tore at their bags and ruffled their costumes, adding to the Halloween effect. Rosemary supposed the kids loved the windy night as it gave them more opportunities to scare people. She tried to look fair, but she actually gave the most candy to a tiny ghost and the least to a big pirate.

"Give me more," said the pirate. "I didn't get any chocolate bars."

"Why should I?" Rosemary said, frowning.

"Because the news says a big wind storm is coming. Probably most kids won't be allowed out. You need me to eat all your candy or you'll eat it yourself and get even fatter than you are."

"I'm not fat, I'm pregnant," Rosemary said, her cheeks reddening as she stuffed some small chocolates into his bag.

The smaller kids said thanks as she closed the door. She watched through the glass as they walked off in helter skelter wind, then the land phone rang and she went down the hall to answer it.

The call was from Doctor Mather, and he sounded unusually excited and out of breath. "I had a talk with Jason and don't feel he's dangerous. He came to the office yesterday. I arranged a first meeting for the two of you then I had to run out for an emergency call. One of my suicidal patients. My secretary forgot to notify you. It's for tonight at your house. I'm going over now and I want you to meet me there in an hour. We're going to talk things over with Jason. It should go well. He sounds like he has guilt feelings. It's a start anyway."

"This is all happening rather fast," Rosemary said. "I don't know if I want to see him. I'd rather talk to him on the phone

first."

"Okay, do that - but you must see him now or his condition might worsen. Grab a cab and meet me there."

The line went dead as Doctor Mather hung up and an unknown fear started her fingers trembling. In her heart she didn't want to talk to Jason just yet, but in spite of that she robotically pushed the numbers.

The phone rang once and the call was picked up. Two strange beeps were followed by a delay and Jason. He said hello in a voice so hoarse and dry she wasn't sure who it was.

"Jason, is that you?"

"Of course it's me."

"Are you sure no one else is listening in. What's the matter with your voice?"

"No one's here. I have a sore throat, so it's hard for me to talk. If you hear interference it's probably the wind. The power has been blinking on and off for a while."

"Are you sure you want me to come over tonight?"

"I love you darling," he said in a voice so wooden it seemed like he was talking to a tree or a wall.

"You certainly haven't been acting as if you do."

"I realize that now. I had a long talk with Doctor Mather. He's opened my eyes to my reckless ways."

"You sound more like he's hypnotized you. Maybe you should be in bed."

"No. Our relationship is too important to ignore. I want you to come over. I have a surprise that will make you feel much better about things."

"All right, but only for a talk. I don't plan on returning home yet."

"You don't have to. Come over and we'll talk. Maybe get some sort of understanding."

Rosemary put the phone down. The conversation had done little other than make her feel dizzy and unsettled. Her feelings for Jason had grown about as flat as his voice. If he cared about her why wasn't he angry or sad? He came across as a bad actor reading his script in an emotionless monotone. She suspected Doctor Mather was telling him what to say. But then maybe Jason was just weird and only experienced emotions and anger at the wrong times.

The doorbell rang, interrupting her thoughts. She had no time for speculation so she decided to take her mind off it for another half an hour and have some fun with the kids.

A small stream of the little ones poured in out of the blustery night and in less than a half-hour, the candy was nearly gone. She decided she'd had enough and took in the pumpkin and shut off the porch light. Before leaving for home, she thought about calling Karren, then decided to keep her out of it. Doctor Mather wanted to meet her there so she called him to confirm. His answering machine picked up so she figured he'd already left. After dialing a cab, she waited outside on the porch.

There was a constant rattle as the wind hurled twigs into the tin garbage cans. Dust devils swept up leaves on the road, swirled and exploded into dark chaos; she could already see a fallen branch in the side yard. It didn't seem like a friendly night at all, and she hoped the stormy weather wasn't an indication of things to come in her relationship with Jason.

The Citywide cab streaked up the empty road at surprising speed and braked hard at curbside. She walked down and got inside, hoping the driver was going to keep to the speed limit on the trip across town. The cabby was a young black man and had some sort of protest sign taped on a side window.

Rosemary gave him the address. "What exactly are you guys protesting?" she said.

"More government regulation of the taxi industry," he said.

"Too many inspections and rules. It's costing us a fortune. You don't know what it's like lady. Ever had someone take over your life? Ever had that feeling?"

"Yes," she said, a nasty picture of Jason forming in her mind.

"Then you know that when that happens you got to fight, and if you don't fight you're handing over the power. The monkey on your back will strangle you if you don't get him off."

"I see what you mean," she replied. And in her thoughts, she pictured herself handing the household power back to Jason. She was certain he didn't love her. He wanted a sex toy; a wife and child he could control. He was setting her up to conquer her again. Doctor Mather was probably completely fooled by him. A tear formed in the corner of her eye as she realized she'd never go back to Jason. She wanted a divorce.

Rosemary sighed. Her lungs filled with stale air. She hit the window button, opening it a crack. The wind slashed in like a knife and the glass began to vibrate so fast it sounded like a saw. Irritated, she took a couple deep breaths then powered the glass shut just as they hit the valley overpass.

A moment later wind buffeted the car. The taxi driver remained unperturbed and sped up, fighting his way across the bridge. The expressway below was jammed, the valley traffic resembling a long sparkling necklace.

Traffic on the far side of the bridge was also bottlenecked, and as they reached Yonge Street the line of cars ground to a halt. Hi-rises towered on all sides, amplifying the gusts. She saw a newspaper fly by like a kite, and then a whoosh of wind from an alley carried a rain of dust and cigarette butts into the hood.

A pizza box tumbled out of the dark and sailed like a bizarre orange omen over a sudden fender bender. Lacking patience her taxi driver spat and swore then swung onto the sidewalk. Pushing through startled pedestrians, he went down a dark alley. At the next block he made a left. An opening appeared in the bottleneck and he zoomed through it and raced down

some side streets.

He drove the rest of the way at a good clip. Coming down Sally Bird Hill, he ploughed through blowing leaves, and then the car entered her neighbourhood, first cruising past a costumed crowd lined up out front of a theatre.

Rosemary took a casual look at the people. They didn't seem festive at all but appeared lame and weak as they huddled against the wind. The one exception being a big man whose face was covered by a demon mask. He leered in the window at her as they passed. Twigs and leaf bits were caught up in his wind-strewn wig. Streetlights reflected like moon pools in his eyes making him seem almost like a real demon, and for a moment she had a flashback of the strange man she'd seen at the funeral home.

They turned into residential streets and as the car closed in on her driveway, she noticed that the hill and house were shrouded in darkness. The cabby braked and stopped before turning in. Looking around she saw that all the lights in the subdivision were on. It was only her house and the hydro yard that were blacked out.

Powering down his window the cabby stuck his head out. "The power line to your house is down. I can see it hanging over the fence and those bushes. It's a live wire so make sure you don't go near it before the repair crew arrives."

"Damn, it has to happen now. Just pull in. I'll deal with it."

Nosing in the cabby drove uphill slowly, the sweep of his headlights illumining a chaotic scene of wind-bent boughs and flying leaves. The car rocked to a stop and Rosemary said a simple keep the change and good night as she paid the fare and got out.

The headlights lit the walk and front door, but they didn't reveal anything other than leaves skating across the empty night. She pushed forward against the wind and as she walked away, the taxi pulled out, leaving her in darkness and a swirl of debris. "Geez, why didn't the idiot stay till I got to

the door?" she muttered. "And where is Jason?" she thought. "What a gentleman he is - leaving me out in this wicked storm."

A flying twig snapped into her eye. She stumbled and banged her knee on hard metal. Her hand touched the cold painted surface of car - a station wagon. She realized that it had to be Doctor Mather's car. He'd parked it partly off the driveway beside a willow tree.

She'd hit her funny bone so she waited by the car until the tingling stopped. Dark mist raced over the moon above, and some faint light filtered through the crooked web of branches. The front door shone in faint moonlight and as she was about to take a step a branch snapped and whipped the ground beside her. Spooked, she broke into a run for the door, and then halted a few feet from it.

The old house really was an eerie place this time, enough so that she was afraid to go inside. Something was definitely wrong. The situation worried her. Jason should've met her at the door. Perhaps his condition had gotten worse. And what about her doctor?

She edged closer then Jason's voice came to her on a snatch of wind. She looked around for him and realized that the sound was coming from the door speaker. Her fear transformed to anger. If Jason's new caring nature involved being too busy to answer the door, she wanted none of it.

Pacing to the entrance, she yanked the door open and stepped into the dark hall. She couldn't see a thing so she called out. "Jason, where are you?"

His voice echoed and seemed to come from the ceiling. "I'm in the living room, honey."

As she reached the end of the hall, she noticed a haze of light in the doorway and turned. A single guttering candle lit the room. Jason was sitting on a recliner in the far corner. Only his form and large moving shadows showed. She could barely see him.

"What's going on here? Why didn't you come to the door when I arrived?"

"I was in the basement. The storm broke some windows and I was down there checking the damage. I didn't hear you arrive."

"What about Doctor Mather, where'd he go?"

"The phone here has gone dead. He went out to his car for his cell phone."

"I didn't see him out there."

"Maybe he's still in the car. Give it a minute and if he isn't back I'll go out and take a look."

"We better. Branches are falling out there. He could've been hit."

"I hope not. I don't need more problems."

"Listen, Jason, you'll have to wait here in the dark for a minute. I'm going up to the bedroom. There are a couple things I need."

"Okay, go ahead."

Scooping up the candleholder Rosemary headed for the stairs. She walked up carefully, found the bedroom and looked around. She could hear the wind knocking hard at the window. Walking to the dresser, she opened a bottom drawer and took out her diary. She checked the lock and found it firm. She didn't want Jason reading it and wanted to have it over at Karren's place. A nightlight stood by the mirror. It was in the shape of a rocking horse and battery powered. She flicked the switch, but it didn't work. She guessed that Jason might have batteries so she picked it up and carried it with her as she returned downstairs.

Back in the living room she placed the candle on the coffee table and sat on the couch. "I need batteries, Jason. Where are they?"

"I think I have some with the flashlights out in the shed. We'll have to go out anyway. Something must've happened to the Doctor, he hasn't returned."

"Okay," Rosemary said, twisting at the battery lid of the rocking horse as she spoke. She stood up, prepared to leave, then something clicked at her fingertips and the portable light came on.

It was quite brilliant without its cover, its power lighting up the whole room. Shadows were cast out and Jason suddenly got to his feet. Rosemary blinked -- the vision of Jason taking shape in her mind being too impossible to believe. She was so certain that it was a bizarre trick of the light that it didn't fully register at first.

The grotesquerie failed to fade. It solidified in the shifting light created by her trembling hands. A rumpled cap of burned scalp and ragged strands of dead hair topped Jason's head. His eyes were black gun slits in a massive purple bruise and his nose was mashed below them - veins pulsing above the nostrils like thick fibers in a transparent slice of melon. His mouth resembled a slash made by a butcher knife and his clothing was a bloody tatter of stained skin and rags.

"I didn't want you to see this," Jason said, stepping forward slowly.

And in Rosemary's mind, he stepped from an impossible nightmare into reality. The floorboards creaked and the sound penetrated like a ghostly explosion in her ears. Her scalp tightened and her hair rose. Fear and revulsion swept her with incredible speed. She didn't make a sound but just threw the night light at him, turned and fled wildly down the dark hall. Heavy footsteps sounded behind her as she reached the door. She stopped, fumbled with the handle and screamed in terror when it didn't move. A second try opened it and she burst out into the night and ran deep into the yard.

Wind kicked her with such force that it felt like she was running against a net. Her hair tore back, her muscles

strained, then the blow weakened and she burst forward and tumbled in the leaves. Rolling up she glanced back and saw Jason standing in moonlight by the door. A machete gleamed in his blackened hand and he was scanning the darkness, trying to locate her.

A faint patch of yellow light showed to her left. She turned quickly and saw that the interior light had come on in Doctor Mather's car. A door was partially open but no one appeared to be inside. She guessed that the wind had sucked it open.

The light also revealed her to Jason and he growled and began to stride towards her. She got up quickly and ran, her knees slapping in wet grass. Heading for the car her hope was that either the keys were inside or the Doctor was nearby.

Reaching the light she swept the car door open and tossed herself inside - all in a smooth thrust that would've worked had something not blocked her. She dogpaddled over it, tumbling on her side toward the passenger seat, and then horror rose as she felt the touch of cold flesh. She kicked it away as she scrambled the rest of the way to the passenger side.

The interior light still glowed. She looked to the wheel then screamed when she saw Doctor Mather slumped below it. Blood poured from his swollen lips. A huge bullet wound marred the side of his head.

Something gleamed on the carpeting - the handle of a pistol, and the terrible truth grew in her mind . . . the encounter with Jason had snapped the Doctor's mind and he'd shot himself.

And her mind was threatening to snap, too. The Jason thing was coming up to the door ... with faint yellow light webbing his face, and crooked boughs highlighted behind him, he appeared as the most terrifying of human ghouls. She wondered what sort of evil force could do such a thing to a man and she realized that she was up against much more

than the Jason thing. This was something wicked and unknown.

In moments, Jason would be in the car. She hit the lock beside her then looked in the back. Both rear doors were locked so she only had to deal with the driver's side. The corpse was leaning partway out the door - one arm dangling to the ground.

Jason was nearly on her. There was no time to manipulate the body. She leaned sideways and shoved it hard, sending it tumbling out. The feet still hung in the way and Jason was right at the door reaching for the handle. Scrambling over she grabbed the heels and forced them out. Then she pulled door shut hard and heard Jason roar.

She sighed with temporary relief, and then noticed sticky blood on the steering wheel. Her eyes went to the ignition, and her relief ended when she saw that the key was partially turned and broken off. A tiny portion protruded but she'd need pliers to turn it.

Except for a faint dash light, it was dark in the car. A hand banged against the side then there was silence. Noise returned with scratching on the hood, and as her eyes adjusted she saw Jason dragging an enormous fallen tree branch. The blade of his machete flashed in the moonlight as he chopped at it. Then he put the blade aside and moved to lift the branch. Shifting his weight, he swung it over the hood and into the windshield. It hit with a hard thump that scratched the glass. Rosemary ducked below the dash as the second blow came in and put a small spider web crack in the plastic.

Fear rose and paralyzed her as she peeked up and watched the branch fly in again. It hit with a crash and when the crack expanded to a huge indentation, she gained the will to move and seize the dead doctor's gun from the floor. A dull black weapon with a Glock embossing, it was so powerful that it had blown most of his head off. She held it in both hands and

shook so much she was waving it from side to side.

His eyes flaring and carrying a gleam of hatred, Jason raised the branch for a final deadly blow ... sweat slime and ghoulish intent gleaming on his face as he prepared to swing. She heard him grunt as he strained, then the branch came in hard and shattered a portion of the windshield. Cubed fragments showered in and when the branch pulled back a hole the size of a fist remained.

Dropping the branch, he retrieved his machete. He threw himself up on the hood, his hands slipping and banging as he crawled up to the hole. Raising the machete, he began hitting the edge of the hole with its butt. Blunt stars of shining fake glass flew in as he enlarged it.

Rosemary's eyes widened with horror as the hideous face stared in at her. Foul breath touched her nostrils. She felt like crying and vomiting at the same time, but did neither. Instead, she raised the Glock, pointed it at Jason's forehead and pulled the trigger.

Death was instant. His face exploded like a red melon and his body slammed on the hood. She saw his fingers trail blood and twitch as he slid off the car and into the leaves.

Her hands stung from the recoil but shock kept the gun hard in her fingers. She remained frozen for a few seconds, then the side window shattered, a hand reached in and grabbed her hair and she fainted dead away.

Evil Angel

Tam kicked Jason's tattered shoulder, rolling the crushed skull face up. The exposed flesh, rot and oozing brain matter made him shiver. He shook his head in disgust - all that work done in creating a zombie and it couldn't even handle a pregnant woman. So much effort had been put into it he felt like crying, and then like beating Rosemary to death for spoiling his work.

The mixed emotions confused him momentarily then he spat

and decided the body was too close to the driveway and rolled it back out of sight in the heaps of damp leaves. Getting to his knees, he shoved the dead doctor under the car.

He turned to Rosemary and his anger became a cruel smile as he studied her limp form. Now that he had her tremendous relief swept him, and it was followed by an even greater power of wind that swept the door shut as he was reaching inside. It closed hard on his hand and he howled and stepped back. Tightening his lips to a white line he moved forward to open the door and pull her out.

He dragged her carelessly and she flopped limply in the deep grass. It was hard to move anything in such a strong wind so he rolled her onto her back, took her arms and began pulling her like a sled on a downhill track to the totem. His direction was against the press of the gale and it cut his movements to the speed of molasses.

Gazing up at the unforgiving sky, he saw clouds racing over the moon in a continuous pattern of wings. They beat down as a dark force that roared through the trees, creating a swaying, rubbing and creaking of branches -- frightening alien sounds that would terrify a common person. Tam heard them as a siren sound of the angel.

Halfway down the hill a fist of wind ripped up the rise and slammed him with wet leaves and filthy dust, and he spat, perversely enjoying the taste of the mud. After a moment's pause he pulled Rosemary over some exposed tree roots and on to the bottom and the totem.

Tam looked barely human. He was covered with stains and dirt from many days of living outdoors and in the warehouse. Yet in his mind, a state of euphoria and power was rising and he felt himself to be the pinnacle of human endeavor.

His eyes returned to Rosemary's pregnant body and instant rage coursed through his veins. His vision penetrated and he saw a hideous male creature baring its fangs beneath her

flesh. Resisting the urge to pounce on her and stab the thing to death, he kicked her legs then handled her roughly as he tied her left wrist to the totem.

He tried to revive her with a sharp slap. She stirred but failed to awaken fully. This caused him to frown. Killing her while she was awake would be so much better, but it wasn't necessary. The job had to be done, so if she didn't come around soon he'd have to finish her in her sleep.

He hadn't lit the ceremonial lamps and his dagger had to be prepared so he turned from her and pulled out his lighter. Raising the stained glass, he lit the first wick, then he stepped back and let the light fill him with its radiance. He noticed that the lamps weren't in a proper circle so he took time to arrange them before he lit the rest.

Gusts of wind came in and steadily jabbed him back. Finally, he had to crouch to keep from being blown away. The lamps rattled in spite of their heavy supports and he began to worry that if he didn't finish soon they'd be shattered. There was also the possibility of trees falling and destroying the circle.

Tam reached for his angel wing dagger and came up empty. He groaned in frustration as he realized he'd left it back at the warehouse. He couldn't finish without it so he turned and ran up toward the fence. Thistles whipped at his ankles, knuckles of wind rumbled along the fence boards and a loose timber at the end slammed back and forth with heavy thuds.

He slipped through a gap in the broken boards and looked around the hydro yard. A few emergency lights cast a faint and eerie orange glow. A roof had torn away from one of the sheds and shingles and tin were strewn across the grounds.

A chunk of rotten plywood cracked underfoot as he stepped behind some stacks of bound crates. He went down the row and emerged at the main storage shed and entered it through a side door. A warm putrid stench wafted through the room and he gagged as he moved along the shelving in the darkness.

Light from an emergency spotlight flooded through the glass, illuminating the central area. He spotted the angel dagger where he'd left it - stuck into a crate board. Hurrying over he pulled it out and as he turned to leave, he saw a van cruise up and park in the warehouse lot. He edged over to the window as the headlights went out and a lone worker emerged. The interior lights showed no one else in the vehicle.

The man hunched against the wind as he walked toward some rolls of heavily insulated cable. Tam watched him like a predator while he made a decision on what action to take. He decided that he didn't want anyone in the way so he grabbed an unhinged safety door from a stack by the wall and threw it through the glass.

Brilliant shards burst into the small spotlighted area. The wind caught the door as it fell to the gravel and sent it skidding a ways across the lot. The burly worker turned, his gaze focusing on the explosion of glass. He watched the door slide and didn't see Tam at all. A situation Tam took advantage of as he leapt through the frame and threw the dagger. His motion was liquid, his toss strong and accurate, catching the guy in the chest near the heart. And death came so quick that the flat press of the man's lips remained and he never got a chance to reveal either pain or surprise. He lifted his arms partway up then he fell on his face like a statue kicked over by the wind.

Tam pulled the dagger from the corpse and ran so fast he was panting as he dodged through the fence. The whoosh of wind almost lifted him off his feet then darkness and the circle of colored lamplight filled his vision and he felt the magic of the Night Angel and the powers of evil tongues descend. He began to chant softly as he headed over the rough ground to Rosemary, the wind tearing his words away as he uttered them, like they were treasures snatched for the gods. Air currents above shrieked in a long cry and the Night Angel took shape out of icy clouds. Its hood of darkness

shrouded the trees and its wings added a cutting edge to the winds.

The power of the spell woke Rosemary and the eternity of loss that awaited her grew as an emotion of deep terror in her eyes. Tam saw an aura of the angel envelop her and she rose as a supernatural vision, inspiring his chant and sending his voice into louder frenzied tones. He lifted fingers and hands that felt like swift wings, ready to fly with the blade, carrying its sacrificial blow to her belly and the growing demon seed.

Closing in he detected subtle agony in her face. Her lips trembled and slipped in and out of a pleasurable grimace. Tam was sure it meant childbirth. He didn't have time to complete the full ceremony. If he didn't strike now before child emerged from the womb, it would be too late.

His hand and the dagger flew up, flashing a silver arc in the night. His lips twitched and his morbid eye moved as he targeted the blow. He slowly stepped in to strike, and then he saw red dripping on the blade and ended up falling to his knees. Blood from the workman he'd killed in the hydro yard still coated the blade - a taste of murder that the evil child would feed on and use as re-channeled energy to destroy him.

The magic of the chant vanished from his lips like it had never been there. Panting desperately he pulled his flask of water from his pouch and quickly wet the blade. He cleansed it with a strip of linen then he looked up and saw Rosemary's eyes closing ... the painful joy of childbirth flushing her face with radiant beauty. He still had time to end it and with her eyes shut the end would come easy for her. He rose on his knees, his body bending with the flexibility of a snake, and he held the blade in both hands to make sure he planted it hard and firm. His muscles unwound smoothly, and he had the feeling of a practiced priest, performing a rite that'd been repeated throughout history. Then he saw something long and black in Rosemary's left hand, her eyes opening wide and

her expression shifting from agony to one of anger and revenge.

She pulled the snakelike object up from the grass, and Tam realized it had to be the power cable he'd knocked out earlier to darken grounds ... a line carrying thousands of volts that would burn through him if its exposed end touched him. He knew it was death but he was already plunging for her so fast he couldn't stop.

His senses were heightened and warped by the magic of the angel. In his mind the entire scene locked into one long unfolding instant. He had a final vision of deep darkness flowing as Rosemary's power repelled it from the circle of light. He saw her swinging the cable slowly like she was casting a spell from some large magic wand -- a spell that bound his vision to her thoughts.

Meteors showered in the clearing sky. They spun in brilliant rings above the scene like a great natural power as the electric end of the cable snapped to him.

Then he saw himself through the eyes of the Night Angel -- an ugly and twisted man -- eyes full of liquid hate as he plunged with a dagger, carrying the evil of death to a beautiful pregnant woman.

He saw the crackling blue charge from the cable touch his arms and send his body flying left of the totem. A blast of flesh-ripping fire roared as he bounced, igniting his head like a matchstick. Hot blood as black as the angel's vials of poison burst from his eye sockets, nose and lips. His face boiled away and his clothing and flesh burned off in a camera flash of horror. The force sent him on to tumble in the grass like the remains of some blackened voodoo doll, and the winged dagger flew from his hand, carrying some of the charge into an oak tree.

. . . and in death he saw the force of the dagger split the tree trunk . . . the angel wing handle grow and take form as the Night Angel . . . an angel of death and ancient evil. All

illusions of the divine vanished, leaving his spirit howling into emptiness as the angel's fangs expanded and swallowed him. As the wheel of fire consumed him, and he was banished with the angel, he saw a child of the true light emerging from Rosemary's womb, and he heard the sirens of approaching emergency vehicles blasting over the roar of the wind.

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Halloween Candy

A Walking Dead Man Tale

Ronnie's parents were cat fighting again. His mom's cherry-red cheeks warped as she screamed like a banshee and tore her dagger-long mauve nails down his father's chest. Drops of dark blood sprinkled out on his matted hair as he pushed her off and grimaced, and then he grabbed his whiskey glass and threw the contents in her face. She bared her teeth, howled with rage and came on again, but Ronnie didn't stay to see any more. He spat between his crooked teeth as he bolted out the side door, happy in knowing that if they were fighting it would last for hours. He could stay out very late.

Dashing through the crisp leaves, he raced out of the lamplight and into the orange chocolate darkness of a windblown Halloween. Ducking through a hole in the link fence, he cut across old Mather's weedy property, headed for the rubble-stone wall on the far side. When he got there, he ducked behind the old oak and studied the yard. The windows were dark; meaning he was out. Faint patches of mist drifted in the yard. Wisps curled above the mounds of leaves like long fingers of poison. The light of the rising moon tinted the whole scene yellow and shone like gloss on the dozens of pumpkins in the garden. Ronnie knew Mather didn't tend the

garden; he rarely went in it during spring or summer. But the pumpkins grew anyway and every year they got bigger and there were more of them.

A cottony cloud breezed over the moon, and when the light spilled back in Ronnie saw the faces cut in the pumpkins. Dozens of them, each face different in its ghoulish mirth, and each perfect in its own way. Mather had cut them. Ronnie knew that -- it was about the only time he came out -- in the twilight each year, just before Halloween. And the rest of the time, he lived in darkness, the only light being the faint one in his basement.

Hunger ached in Ronnie's belly; the pumpkins always made him drool for sweets. When they came, his parents always fought more and he was mostly locked in his room, dreaming of Halloween candy. Last year he'd got out and stole some candy from the other kids. This year he was too late and couldn't think of a way.

There was a party happening beyond the high wall. He turned and saw smoke ghosting up toward the stars. A multitude of voices and the relentless beat of dance music alternated in volume as the wind shifted. Eerie noise that made him think -- perhaps there would be candy at the party. Food of some sort would be there, so it was probably worth a try.

Then the jack-o-lanterns spoke in his mind and he knew for sure that it was worth a try -- more than a try. It was a wonderful way, an excellent plan. And it was a great thing that the pumpkins were kids, too -- with voices that were cheerful and resonant as they traveled on the crystalline moonlight and touched his thoughts with magic.

They spoke, they laughed and they knew -- and Ronnie saw the vines trailing across the yard ... the first dense bunch leading to Mather's basement window and the second trail up and over the wall to the party.

Leaping to the wall, he climbed the vines and peeked over; it was a costume party as the jack-o-lanterns had said. He

could see the grim reaper, George Washington, a cave man, Romans, knights, skeletons and many beautiful costumed women – all of them sharing drinks and talk in the smoky yard. There was a band shell with a DJ spinning discs and an open patio with tables, and most importantly, there was candy everywhere. He saw dishes of candy apples, and licorice. Candy kisses and humbugs, soft candy and peanut brittle, chocolate bars and toffee. So much candy it made his head spin.

He dropped back down the vine and ran in dizziness to Mather's basement window. The mass of vines had broken the dusty glass and a moonbeam shone down, illuminating the room below. The voices told him to be careful and he was cautious, avoiding the shards of broken glass as he climbed in. Looking around in the faint moonlight, he saw guns. The walls were lined with them -- old revolvers, Saturday night specials, expensive new handguns and rifles and grenades. And in the centre of one wall of guns, a mask had been hung on a nail -- an orange jack-o-lantern mask.

Ronnie took the mask down and put it on, finding it to fit perfectly, and then he grinned, feeling his warm breath come partly back in his face. The pumpkins spoke and he obeyed, first pulling a sack from the closet then filling it with as many guns as he could lift back out through the window.

He was amazed at his strength as he pulled the sack through, but when he was finished he realized he'd never get a sack that heavy over the wall and threw some of the rifles back in. At the wall, he took the time to count most of the weapons and found that he had nine handguns, an Uzi, a Remington, a Ruger, two rifles, five grenades and some other small stuff. He knew all of the weapons were armed or loaded because that was what the pumpkins said.

With the music blaring, no one heard the clatter as two big sacks of guns landed in the flower garden below. And with

all of the dancing, no one noticed jack-o-lantern Ronnie as he pulled his treasure through the grounds. This year things were better, Ronnie figured. He didn't like stealing and this time he'd trade rather than steal.

A pirate cavorted and leered, and then he whirled away as Ronnie stopped at a table in the garden. A punch bowl and a silver dish of candy kisses sat on the table, and when Ronnie was sure no one was looking, he dumped the candies in his bag, removed the Uzi and put it in the dish.

The candy apples were on the patio, but when he went towards them, a lady mime grabbed him and spun him around in a dance, forcing him to head back into the grounds. He had little difficulty working under the vines and spotlights. Grenades went in the trade for Jube Jubes, an old New England revolver was payment for hard candies and a Browning snub-nose bought black licorice. He gave a Ruger rifle for the peanut brittle, while potato chips were worth no more than a Glock 22.

As his task neared completion, the tobacco smoke began to get inside his mask and burn his eyes. Ronnie decided he didn't like parties, at least not adult ones. The music was deafening, the games and dancing were silly. None of them ate any candy; they just drank a lot of booze -- like his mom and dad. Though unlike his mom and dad, they were friendly. He recognized the same evil slur in their voices and knew it meant lies, just like his dad's endless drunken lies.

He pulled the sack of candy back up the wall and then sat cross-legged amid pumpkin vines and scattered autumn leaves. A pirate's urge to count the booty struck him, and when he looked in the bag, he realized he'd forgotten the candy apples. It made him feel like weeping; and he decided to head for the basement to get another gun to trade. But before he could move, the jack-o-lanterns said no and a man at the party started yelling.

In a shadowy section of the garden, a costumed knight had drawn his sword. It trailed moonlight and it was real metal. "I promised you I'd get you, Jack!" the man shouted. Then he swung the blade hard. It cut into the neck of a man dressed like Robin Hood. Going deep so fast that blood and saliva fizzed up like cream soda.

Ronnie gaped as Robin collapsed, his neck lolling and spilling dark red syrup on some dead flowers.

A hooded woman screamed hideously.

"Don't let him get away!" yelled George Washington as the knight ran across the garden toward the band shell.

And at the point, the music died. The DJ upset his equipment and ducked off into the scrub. Then the grim reaper suddenly appeared near the shell, holding the Uzi. He fired a spray at the knight, but he ducked the bullets, causing three eighteenth century ladies to be cut down, the projectiles tearing their dresses and faces like invisible razors. Hot blood poured from the lines ripping through them and Ronnie cringed as he imagined how it must feel to have a tummy full of Halloween bullets.

The jack-o-lanterns whispered mad things in Ronnie's head. Full panic had now broken out under the yellow moon, and bullets continued to fly. Nearly all of the guns were in use now as costumed people seized them and fired at imagined enemies. George Washington got gut shot by a painted black man wielding the Remington rifle - and his fall was quite dramatic -- last words ejaculating into the night and then nonsense continuing to spill into the chilly air, along with a slab of reddish chocolate that hung from his open belly.

A Roman had found the dish of grenades and he tossed the first one at a pirate; sending him flying in five directions of candied fire, sticky blood, bits of flesh and limbs -- his torn head going straight over the wall to land and roll among the pumpkins.

The second grenade smashed the glass doors on the patio

and showered the garden with shards, burst bags of M&Ms, and the hands and fingers of the Gypsy who'd been carrying them.

Splotches of whiskey flew like candy kisses as the grim reaper's Uzi swept across the patio. Several people fleeing toward the garden were also hit, the hot lead licking up tongues of blood fire as it danced across their faces.

The third grenade blew, leaving a cave man toasted; his body flaming like a marshmallow over by the pool. The pool cover had been knocked loose and tiny chocolate bars and blood floated on the water. A ghost splashed into it, hoping to escape the fire. And as his soggy costumed dragged him to the bottom, Ronnie saw two Romans cut each other down in a pistol duel.

A second cave man fired wildly with a Weatherby, only to have his fur fly when a skeleton planted a Smith & Wesson slug in his heart. Then it was bones turned to flying jelly as the Uzi came in for another kill.

The grim reaper finally got his, falling to pieces faster than peanut brittle when a Ruger shot hit him directly in the forehead. And a minute later gun smoke and the last man remained. He was one of Robin's merry men and there was more gun smoke as he turned his revolver on himself and painted the wall with his brains.

The house was on fire now and the flames caught a grenade sitting on the patio -- it blew, sending debris flying high. Ronnie ducked as candy apples and glass showered over his head. Then the smoke got so thick it choked him and he pulled his sack to the edge and dropped down into the darkness of Mather's yard.

It seemed weird to look up and see the black smoke drifting toward the moon. And even weirder when he heard a strange creaking and saw the vines moving on the wall. They were pulling back into Mather's yard, and as they did a corpse and body parts came with them, showering pebbles as they fell.

Spotting one of the candy apples, Ronnie scooped it up and took a bite of the delicious crust. In Mather's garden, the vines were squeezing blood from the corpse and the jack-o-lanterns were smeared with flesh and humming new music of their own. Music only Ronnie could hear. Opening his sack, he gathered more of the fallen apples and dumped them in. Then he thought of the guns and how nice it would be to take a couple home for mom and dad.

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The Halloween Mask

A Walking Dead Man Tale

Janice bit her lip, finding the taste of her life sour, and at a time when she really wanted something sweet and different, like Halloween candy. Mainly life was the middle-class illusion her husband Frank wanted it to be. She had fame as an actress but no one knew her real secrets. Frank had built her a self-image that was so polished everyone saw it instead of her face. On rare days when she thought of the grime of life, of its grim misfortunes, she equated it all with the crooked monsters lurking in her stained past. The past Frank liked to talk about . . . pills, prostitution, and the vomit of back-street poverty. Frank didn't like anything that couldn't be polished clean, and he saw her past that way. He thought it would be nice if computers somewhere would sand the rough edges off life. Perhaps turn all the gray hairs to fine silver and rubbish into pretty autumn leaves. It would be that way in the future. The way Frank saw it the future would be heaven and heaven was a clean suburb from beginning to end. A sanitized place where wealthy young married couples could frown at the misfits presented on American TV shows and complain about high taxes and poor people who took government handouts

but no responsibility for the mess they'd made of their lives.

Janice knew Frank saw her as a throwaway model who adjusted well to his whims. He believed she'd been lucky to hook a husband like him . . . a driving force that had made her a star -- if you considered a small weekly spot in a Canadian sitcom stardom. She also believed she had been lucky -- many women put out romance ads that asked for a man like Frank . . . executive, body builder, blue eyes, believes in Power Talk, sport cars and money. No woman would ever need a robot as long as society kept tossing guys like him off the assembly line. It brought a cynical smile to her face and she jogged up the path, now thinking of how his sexual performance never varied, but in the way, the performance of a cyborg never varied. Frank really believed he was like all those men in fast fiction stories; guys with copper balls and penile implants of flexible steel. But he wasn't because even those shallow characters had some feelings and he didn't have any except for the anger and resentment he felt if she brought the subject up. And she supposed that anger would turn to fury when he found out she was leaving him. She even feared murder; her new lover was a musician, who didn't work or have an income. Frank could never bear the humiliation of it. But too bad for Frank, her lucky prince charming locked in his armour, whose luck had run out. She would find a way.

Sunset was falling from crimson to mauve, tinting the suburban perfection of her world. Runner's exaltation lifted her and she could've dashed right through the twilight to the golden mannequins of the moon. Janice could've gone that far if she was a little more agile. But she wasn't and a root hooked her foot, wrenched her ankle and threw her down mercilessly. She went skidding in wood chips and dust. A roll left her beside an enormous log, a smashed nature mural of autumn golds spinning in her mind. She touched her bleeding nose, and then the rest of the world lost its sanitized glow and evil appeared.

A grotesque mask looked down from above. She could see it hidden in the foliage and limbs of a gnarled oak. Wind-tossed shadows made it impossible to see if it had a body, but it twitched like a living face. The fire of sunset reflected in its eyes and brought back memories. As a teenager, she'd had a Halloween mask just like it - a handmade thing with the same features. She'd believed in witchcraft then and had fancied herself a white witch. It was laughable now, a silly teenage fantasy -- she used to set it so smoke would drift from its mouth and scare her friends when she cast a spell. Nowadays she never thought long enough to believe or disbelieve in anything. Religion and the real occult were too heavy to contemplate, but she knew she didn't believe in Halloween. Witchcraft, well, she wasn't sure: she'd been a teen gal living in a rundown house with alcoholic parents while all her friends were rich. At least as a witch her friends would visit and be enthralled by things other than the shabbiness of her room. Dreams of all the things she lacked had always been there in the flickering of candles.

True, there was nothing worth believing in any more, maybe her musician for a while -- Janice was a woman who wanted attention all the time, and Frank did provide that, though in a negative way. She supposed her musician would be all love and attention for a while and when it was gone she'd have to leave him, too.

With that settled, her vision cleared and the mask was still there in the tree -- looking impossibly alive . . . so regardless of what she wanted to believe in she had no choice but to believe in it. It was just plain ugly, a Halloween thing; how could she have liked it as a teenager? But she'd been a different person when she was young, full of vigor and superstitions; remembering it made her feel like someone else. She had changed so much she'd practically died.

Its stare was hypnotic, she felt haunted right through to her bones - something pressing and paralyzing like an invisible web or grid of steel wire touched her. Her horror turned to

fascination and she watched without gasping or screaming. It began to move and now she could see that it was more animal than gargoyle mask - the semi-human face was like some bizarre form of camouflage . . . like the faces that would form in its smoke in her teenage years. The body didn't have any final form, seeming to be more effect than physical reality. It moved in the branches with the agility of a cat or squirrel, though it looked to be as big as a bear. On the way down it slid on the trunk like a snake or a lizard, stripping off loose leaves in its path. Some moments it had the shimmer of wet fur and others the gleam of snakeskin and armour. When it came up close it seemed to be crawling out of another blurred dimension -- the hair-raising electric slithering noises it made lending power to that illusion.

With the quickness of death and horror it leapt on her, seeming to shrink as it smothered her face. She began to choke, her head filling with a foul odor that made her think of bear piss, and she felt a sharp object, a needle drive through her skull. Then the creature slithered off her face, like a soaked pelt, trailing blood and brain matter as it moved to her thighs.

Nestled there it was wet, sharp and cold. She could feel nothing but it, and the heat was an emanation from its fiery eyes. The stare was as hard as diamond drills and cruel. With certainty, she knew this thing was much more intelligent than she was. It had cunning and knowledge, a mind of charcoal, shadows and secrets.

Her secrets! These were her eyes. Deep bat-clouded caves. Now she screamed, a lung-ripping scream that brought raw pain to every nerve, and sent her mind tumbling into a slime-slippery tunnel.

She'd gained sudden and terrible knowledge and she knew the thing had passed it to her. It had sucked out parts of her brain and used them to build a cave; a place that contained every foul moment and every vile deed. It was a cave made of the black half of her soul. A dark Halloween where

creatures could hide, watch and exult as she cowered and retched before the torn viscera that remained of her life.

Footsteps thundered; a maggot-dripping corpse walked in the blowing cobwebs. It was a man; her husband, Frank, and he had really died a long time ago when he stopped loving her. His eyes were black -- pits sucking her down, reading her mind. She felt fury devouring her, because now he was laughing at the secrets she'd so painstakingly hidden. She longed to destroy him, only the Halloween thing made her aware . . . that Frank was destroying her. It showed her every petty thing he'd ever done and from the first when he'd been a john with the idea of making her an actress. It was a parched and crushed world he'd given her, as hollow as the emptiness of his dreams. Without words, with silence, the thing showed her how he had made her shallow, loveless and emotionally dead. Then it let her see her body and how he was destroying it . . . lines, wrinkles

Flowered with blood, rot and torn flesh, her body writhed. The thing moved, then Frank vanished from her mind and the cave loomed up again. She saw the gargoyle face, a mask of bone and hide that'd been unhinged and tilted back, revealing green eyes set in blue-veined tissue. Enormous white tongues spilling from a black orifice slithered on her skin from her thigh to her throat. Her body was bleeding and she understood that the creature was cleansing her.

"God, what are you?" she gasped.

"Be me," it whispered, and for a moment, she became a strange animal, licking blood from her body with a hundred tongues. Then she saw it suck its tongues in, press its face up and hinge it back on.

Cool air dried the moisture on her skin as it slithered away into the trees, climbed the branches and took form as a mask. Its eyes flared with autumn twilight and it made her remember . . . remember her spells, pentagrams, and how as a teenager she'd created it and used it. The mask had been

her pet, it had done evil for her, and then one day after she'd run away from home it had left her. And she had entered the misery of adulthood and vanquished all memory of it from her mind.

Now the mask was back, it was Halloween again, and it had returned because Janice was its goddess and creator. When she stood up she was naked, and healed. She was a teenager again. Frank was no longer part of her body or her soul. And it didn't seem strange. For a time she'd been in the mind of the masked thing, and knew it was better to be loathsome than shallow, bland and weak. She grinned then she bent down and picked up a stone and a piece of broken glass. Twilight filtered through the leaves and she looked up, enraptured. It was a lovely evening; she could already hear the gleeful voices of kids trick-or-treating . . . an evening perfect for strolling naked in the woods and just the right time for killing Frank. Tonight she would wait for him in the garage, beat him with the rock, use the glass to tear out his eyes and bring his corpse as food for her Halloween thing. His head would make a fine ceremonial skull. Grinning, she thought that perhaps her little demon mask, the thing, had turned her into another thing, and the same could be said for Frank because he was a monster about to become a corpse thing

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The Lair of Mr. Black

A Walking Dead Man Tale

Dim shapes whirled outside the dusty clubhouse windows. A gust bottomed out and they settled - a slow colored rain, then the boughs creaked and a wheel of leaves

lifted in the twilight. It was autumnal beauty, the bright burnt orange of the maples and sumac forming a giant eye. An eye made of dead things, like the eye of the vampire they were hunting.

Joey slowly shifted his gaze from the revolving leaves and the ravine-side, looking to the far exit and the lane. He could see the gang filing out - windblown teens in jackets of either black or brown fake leather. They moved under a broken streetlight, and he saw a flash of white legs as Angie and some of the women popped into a Ford Electro. Most of the guys were unlocking their racing bikes, except for Alex, who owned a Yamaha.

"You wishing on stars or something?" Danny said. "Come on, we'll take a last look at the list."

Turning on his heel, Joey mopped his straight dark hair behind his ears. "There's nothing on that list. Maybe I'll get out of vampires and into music. **The Neo Raging Pumpkins** are playing tomorrow night."

"Music doesn't last - not forever like vampires do."

"Huh. We've been wasting time forever." Joey frowned. "Fifteen we've followed. Fifteen big disappointments."

Danny pored over the list, scribbling notes. His young face was moon healthy; otherwise, he would've resembled a budding bureaucrat. An impish grin suddenly grabbed him. "It wasn't all disappointment. We found out a lot of interesting things."

"Sure, interesting -- if I learn any more about people's private perversions I'll scream."

"Checkmate," Danny said. He dropped his pencil and crumpled the papers into a ball, which he tossed into a wastebasket across the room.

"So, you're giving it up, too?"

"Nope." He pulled a sheet of paper from the drawer. "We

have one more person to tail. I got the info from Alex. If anyone's a vampire this guy is."

Danny's blue eyes glittered with hope. Joey slumped his shoulders and tried to look bored. But he couldn't - it was like trying to resist the last potato chip. Curiosity had always been his weakness. Because of curiosity, he'd joined the club. There were joggers and walkers who sometimes came up litter-strewn Elmfield Lane, and they all retreated quickly when they found it to dead-end at signs that said CHILDREN OF DRACULA and NOSFERATU, the words resembling splashed blood. Only Joey had gone inside to find a clubhouse and some members of a teenage vampire society.

They'd come down to clubhouse by subway, but for the investigation they decided to go on roller-skates. Joey fastened his windbreaker while Danny locked up. Having no serviced streetlights, the dead-end lane was dark. A gibbous moon was rising, spilling faint light through high-rises. Leaves skittered down the incline, riding on strings of wind, and their slow progress enhanced the feeling of mystery. There was teenage glamour in having a hideout at the bottom of a cul-de-sac; it made them feel proud enough to challenge vampires for ownership of the night.

Avoiding a neon Milky Way of major streets they raced on the smooth asphalt of side roads. In general, Toronto followed a barely perceptible incline down to the lake, and they were headed in that direction, flying on that advantage. Joey was sure most people who saw them thought they were nuts to be rolling in the autumn. It would blow their minds if they knew about the vampire hunt they were carrying out.

Moonlight glistened on the roads, and with the pools of lamplight formed a ribbon of mercury under their wheels. Three kilometers fell away into some gutter of history, and they halted at the crest of a steep hill. Joey looked at the brilliant signs below and then to Danny. Nodding, Danny took the lead. The hill was too fast, so he bent his left knee and kept that skate rolling out front while dropping his right skate

back for horizontal drag. Joey did the same and they did a long posed slide down, letting go near the bottom so they could flash over to a park bench.

This was Taylor Park, and they were facing an older, poorer part of town. Sidewalks were left cracked or filled in with asphalt here, something you'd never see in the better neighborhoods. A mortuary with a showy sign was directly across the street. CASTLE VALLEY, Home of Peace spelled in hellishly bright letters. Quite a large affair, a pile of rough-faced stone blocks with a newer white brick building attached. Lights were on behind some of the windows and they were panes of frosted glass that revealed only vague shadows.

"Here comes our man," Danny said, giving his head a toss right.

The rest of the street was a solid brick wall notched with small shops and upper apartments. A number of people were moving on it, but Joey had no difficulty spotting the man. He had a bold stride and was dressed all in black; black sport coat, shirt, shoes and trousers. His head was melon bald with neat black hair at the sides. Long features excluded him from the handsome department, though he was well built and was one of those guys who seem made for baldness.

"What's your gut feeling?" Danny said.

"Looks like he's on his way to a casual funeral. A weird priestly sort of guy. He feels important; you can tell that by the way he walks. Notice how he fastens the top button on his shirt even though he's not wearing a tie. Only nerds and mommy's boys do that. He doesn't strike me as a vampire."

Heels clicking and echoing the man walked over the mortuary parking lot and in a side door. He didn't appear to notice them."

"Gregory Black is his name, and he prefers to be called Gregory. He's an embalmer. Lives with his mother. He's single and forty one."

"Why did Alex pick him as a vampire?"

"He has a black Mercedes 300-E with darkened windows. In daylight he goes everywhere in it, always parking in the shade. Never goes out in the sun, like he's allergic to it. Buys all sorts of stuff for his skin. His job is nightshift, and he haunts the sleazy parts of town at very late hours. No girlfriends or boyfriends, a loner."

"You mean the corpses keep him company."

"He might be drinking their blood when he's supposed to be draining them. If we could get inside and take a look--"

"Forget it. I refuse to break into a mortuary. The guy is just another pervert. He probably wears his mother's skirt and sings while he finger-paints the bodies."

Gregory Black blew into obscurity with the falling leaves. There just wasn't enough in him to keep Danny and Joey interested, and they soon found themselves working on another problem. Since they hadn't discovered any vampires, gang democracy elected them to a new post. Halloween was a week and a half away, and the task of decorating the clubhouse was theirs. The treasury was handed over to them and with the small sum they were expected to make the place into a spooky cavern.

It was all coming along fine. They had some lights and black netting festooned to the ceiling. Boxes of strange odds and ends were stacked in the closets. An online bulletin magazine that advertised freebie junk was their source of information, and Joey was reading it while Danny studied a new vampire novel on his e-reader.

"Wow!" Danny said. "The guy's unarmed and cornered in a cavern by a monster breed of vampire. He's finished for sure, and then he leaps up, rips a stalactite from the roof and stakes one monster. His pal comes around the corner and blows the other one's head off with a silver shotgun slug. Their bodies just crumble and rot. Scabs and clay chunks."

"Here's a new ad," Joey said. "Rubber bats, all you want for a quarter each."

"Where?"

"Over in Cabbagetown."

"Let's skate over now before they're all gone."

An arched bridge crossed the ravine and from the railing, they could see heaps of leaves and a shadowy trail below -- a perfect haunt for monster vampires. They didn't go down. Instead, they rolled on into Cabbagetown, coming immediately to a couple of police officers standing by their cruisers. Danny grinned and said hello, having learned from experience that being friendly was the way to avoid getting trouble from cops.

Heading into a side street, they began an easy skate down toward Carlsview Street and the bat stash. Lampposts and the hookers leaning on them were the scenery. Being teenage boys and without money, they were nearly invisible, but solid enough to get stuck at an area where construction sawhorses blocked the sidewalk. A stretch Limo parked in the middle of the road forced them to brake.

Turning, they looked back up the road. A tall street hooker with a short leather dress and fat legs was switching her hips as she walked down to the Limo.

"Wow, what a sleazy tramp," Danny said.

Farther up a curly blond beauty was out on the road. She wore red hot pants and was revealing most of her breasts to a car curbing-crawling up to her.

"Say," Joey said. "Isn't that Gregory Black's Mercedes 300-E?"

"Sure is. Let's watch and see what he does."

As it turned out, there wasn't much to see. The passenger door opened and cold air and the hooker were sucked inside. It was impossible to see any more because of the tinted

windows.

A moment later, the stretch limo blocking them started backing up. Having rejected the fat-legged woman, the passenger was now eyeing them.

"Shit, that guy thinks we're hustlers," Danny said.

Joey looked at the man in the limo, at his heavy beard and hollow eyes. Even his worst nightmares weren't quite as bad as the idea of having sex with him. Gregory was now backing up the street, so Danny punched Joey on the shoulder and wordlessly they skated off, following the Mercedes up the road.

Even though Gregory drove slow it was hard to tail him. It was hard to tail anyone on skates. They didn't want to be obvious and sidewalks choked with leaves and pedestrians made that difficult. The Mercedes kept to side streets, weaving its way east. Since the roads were mostly speed bumped, they managed to keep him in view.

"He's got her doing something to him," Joey said. "That's why he's going so slow."

Danny was too winded to reply. He was beginning to trail Joey. Just as they were about to give it up, the car nosed in at the gates of a cemetery. Gregory Black popped out and produced a key from a pocket in his leather jacket. He glanced around, the little bit of hair he had at the sides was mussed. He didn't appear to notice them skating in the shadows a half block away.

Moving to the sidewalk, Danny and Joey tripped along in thick leaves, watching as the car drove in.

"I know that cemetery," Danny said. "It's big and there's a charnel house back a ways. His mortuary must own it."

Joey smiled. "I bet he takes the woman into the coffin shack and pays her to play cold dead while he does his thing."

"Yeah. I knew he was a weirdo."

The gate was closed but Danny tried it and found it unlocked. It opened soundlessly and they skated in and up the road a piece. Crunching through the leaves, they came to a huge tiered stone, sat and removed their skates. They had runners in their backpacks, and they surveyed the graveyard before they put them on. Lights of the city were reflected in the sky. The cold fall wind was blasting parchment from the trees and leaves spun and skated. Large stones were everywhere - obelisks, statues and rectangular markers. Gregory's car and the stone coffin house were at the bottom of a low hill. A wedge of yellow light showed at the base of the door.

"The guy moves fast," Joey said. "He's got her in there already."

As they were going down the hill, Joey realized they'd made a mistake in not taking the road. The blanket of leaves crackled viciously and the mounds were becoming deeper near the bottom. It made for strange fear; if there was an open grave under one of the mounds they could get sucked down quicker than a scream.

Leaf dust covered them and they brushed the worst of it away as they stepped out on the road. After a glance around they crept up to the door, and then halted, both of them afraid to peek in.

It seemed like wind, the door was suddenly thrown open and they were confronted by Gregory Black. His eyes were wide, and icy with a glaze of light from the sky, but he didn't hold them there with mesmerism. He held them with a gun. A Colt pistol specifically. Shadows on his face began to drip, and they saw that it was blood.

Danny almost fell over.

"He really is a vampire," Joey said.

Gregory Black sneered. "Try cannibal and you'll be closer. Those are nice reflector buttons you boys wear. They're visible from about a mile away."

Danny looked at the button on his jacket and choked. Joey did nothing other than stare.

"Get inside," Mr. Black said, waving his gun.

They shuffled up the steps, their courage failing them. Gregory sure didn't look like a mommy's boy now. His features were long and wickedly fierce, his bald head like a nut about to crack from the intensity of his warped mind. Black suited him perfectly, he moved like a shadow.

Dim light from a near-dead tube illumined the cobwebbed walls. Coffins gleamed in the room. Then they noticed something hanging on the wall. As it grew clear, Danny fainted dead away, thumping softly to floor.

Joey was stone still, a victim of the Gorgon, staring at the thing on the wall. Long frayed hair meant it had once been human. The face was withered and voodoo-doll hideous, a black swelling protruding from a hole where the lips had been. Long incisions had been made to open the chest and ribs, which were neatly split and tied apart, opening cage-like to reveal the gory hollow of the breast ... only a black hunk of meat remained, pinned there by a dagger. Scraps of flesh remained on the dangling legs.

"Don't just stand there!" Gregory barked. "Drag your friend to that coffin and put him inside."

Doing as he was told, Joey dragged Danny over. But he couldn't lift him. He was too limp and heavy.

"Never mind. Prop him up and leave him there. Now open the black coffin."

Trembling, Joey stepped over to the black coffin, fearing that Gregory was going to shoot him and dump him in with a corpse. He lifted the lid and wiped sweat from his forehead. The hooker was inside, bound and gagged, staring up with terrified eyes. He wondered if she saw the relief on his face.

"That's Melinda in there," Gregory said. "She's tonight's dinner guest."

"Yes," Joey managed to say, the word barely stealing past his hammering heart.

"It's on wheels, so wheel her to the table." He pointed to a small scarred table set-up near the corpse. An assortment of knives gleamed and they weren't dinner cutlery or embalmer's tools. They were tanto and dagger points, dart points and a big Intruder Bowie. A deadly collection of the sort an assassin would keep.

Using all of his cool, Joey prevented himself from bolting. Common sense was echoing in his head, telling him he couldn't do anything unless Mr. Black put down the Colt. Getting behind the coffin, he found it moved easily. Ever so slowly, he wheeled it to the table.

Although bound, Melinda was able to move, and she bolted upright and stared at Gregory. Her pretty eyes were blue crystal balls foretelling her death, and Joey was wondering if it wasn't this cruel end and evil power that had put her on the streets in the first place.

Gregory gestured for Joey to take the chair, and he did. It was an uninviting dinner. The cutlery was expensive, but the meat was a little stale and the ladies were uncommonly quiet.

Something on a wire took to banging out in the rushing autumn wind. A hail of leaves scraped the stone walls. Danny groaned, lifted his head, and then passed out again. Gregory was unconcerned to the point of looking dead. His eyes went up and maggot white, then he folded his hands and said a silent grace.

Temptation was cooled by fear and Joey was left impotent. If he acted he was sure he would lose the struggle and get shot. There was also humiliation as Melinda implored and begged for help with her eyes.

Grace was short, a few more mumbled an evil words. When it was finished color came back to Gregory's cheeks and his

eyes stabbed at Joey.

"Her heart is black," Gregory said. "Black with sin and food for Mr. Black. Now bring me that heart!"

Rays of rage showed in his eyes, his stare all but burning the corpse off the wall. Joey turned slowly, trying to force himself to obey the command. His eyes rediscovered the opened ribcage, the dagger and the chunk of black heart.

Gregory's hand twitched on the gun, and Joey popped up and stepped cautiously to the corpse. Close up, the reek was incredible. Fumes reached like tentacles down his throat and soured his stomach. Holding his breath, he removed the dagger and the rotten meat.

Its backside was putrid green and it jelly shivered, threatening to squirm off the knife and onto him. Turning back to Gregory, he was nearly sick, and Gregory banged the gun handle impatiently on the table as he moved around to him. His face was scabrous with dried blood and a rope of drool swung from his chin. Without a doubt, he was mad, and his madness was hunger.

Taking the dagger and meat with his free hand, he ordered Joey to the other side of the table with the Colt. Hesitating for a moment, Joey saw a wet bulge in Gregory's pants, and it sent him back speedily to the chair.

"She must see that darkness of the female heart; see it eaten before she goes to the slab. Then she'll understand that fate devours unfaithful ladies of the night."

He put the meat to his lips and bit into it sweetly, chewing delicately. The light settled on him like a wax mask and he looked as real and wild as ghouls Joey had seen in the horror magazines they collected back at the clubhouse.

Melinda was unable to bear it; she convulsed, hardly able to hold back the choking vomit.

Sick ecstasy grew bright on Gregory's face. He put the Colt down and selected a large Tanto knife, and then he

swallowed the heart, stared into Melinda's eyes like he might be in love with her, and lunged. Her bonds prevented her from squirming out of the way, and he drove both the Tanto blade and the dagger into her throat. Blood spurted to a fountain as he pulled out the knives. Throwing them down he seized her by the shoulders and sank his teeth into her wounded neck.

Terror and shock hit Joey, he moved to jump left, then right, and both times his eyes held him. He stared at the bloodsucking maniac, then the moment of fear rose to lighting and he scrambled up on the table, snatching the Colt before falling to the hard floor. He banged the back of his head and he felt his right knee pop; rolling he found himself staring up at a face bearded with blood. More blood was sprinkling over the table and there was the gleam of a knife. Then the face moved for him, a slow, horrible giant dropping down.

His hand shook so much it was swinging from side to side, but he still managed to pull the trigger. He didn't miss, a hammer blow knocked the head away, and as the sound of the blast filled his ears, he saw blood paint the ceiling. Two hard thumps followed as Melinda's corpse fell back to the coffin and Gregory went backwards with his chair to the floor.

Gobs of gore and brain tissue were glued to the ceiling, like tea leaves, and as Joey fell back and gasped, he could see the face of a vampire in the blood. And as the face spun into darkness and void, Gregory flopped his legs for the last time and coldly greeted the black-hearted slab.

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Ghoul Bait

A Walking Dead Man Tale

Firelight tinted the warm Halloween night sky and he muttered as he moved like a bear on the prowl. "Sonny, I really meant it when I said I was goin' to carve a piece outa you."

He gazed into the clearing, seeing the shining chrome of bikes on scorched, flattened grass. Leather, denim, tattoos, sweat and grime decorated the mingling figures. A dark future appeared in the drifting wisps of bonfire smoke.

Faces shifted to waxen death masks in the firelight, and then they came to life - scarred, unshaven, and ugly. Familiar faces ... laughing faces ... the twisted faces of brutal bikers. They aroused anger, causing him to whisper. "Bandits, you thought you dumped me in a gutter grave ... especially you, Sonny. But now I'm back and the time is right."

The bash reached full flight with blaring neo classic metal music and mindless celebration tearing up the clearing. He thought the beer looked far too cool for the swill drinking it, and he remained in deep shadows with a dark river of revenge pouring through his heart.

A new bike rumbled in and when the engine roar died it became apparent that some blond jailbait had hitched a ride on the back. He saw Sonny's acne-pocked face light up like the moon. A moment later, he put his hand on the shoulders of his two burliest bandits. No doubt giving the word that he wanted some private and quality time with her before tossing her bruised flesh to the rest of the wolves.

The gang got nasty and destructive like the flames, most of them getting crazy drunk and wiped on coke and some new street dust. None of them noticed the eyes watching from the bushes, and slowly they got rowdier and out of Sonny's control. Which was okay by Sonny, because he moved in on the young blond and in a short time was leading her off into the woods.

Moving through the pines like a black cat, he came up behind them as the scene developed. Sonny hadn't wasted any time. She was gasping from the hand tightening on her throat, and then she was thrown down as Sonny moved to drop his pants.

Sonny reached down for her then a chain whipped out -- a bolt from the night. It bit into his buttocks. The coil ripped flesh and muscle. A scream rose from his throat and he spun as the chain was yanked back.

Flying to her feet and gasping the girl ran off into the trees. Sonny dropped to his knees, and then an iron came out and knocked his skull.

It was another clearing, a graveyard this time, with rows of busted stones poking out of tall crabgrass and weeds. A classic bikers' acid strychnine glow of dew and moonlight brightened the scene. He held Sonny above the ankles and pressed forward, dragging him over the lumpy ground. His goal being a charnel house set in a hillock.

Warped, bleached wood and rusty iron bars and latches made up the heavy door. A strong breeze set it to creaking. He used a flashlight while he lit the lantern. Moments later shadows swirled like bats and half of the charnel house's interior became visible. It was a huge place, made for war or plagues. Even the cobwebs looked deformed. He checked his bike first. Untouched, it gleamed near the door. Some irons and chains were spiked into the wall a ways inside, and Sonny's body flopped around like a rubbery piece of shit as he dragged it over.

Raw pain rose as brilliance, bringing Sonny to consciousness, and when he tried to move he found himself manacled and chained to a wall. Sonny had always looked close to death with sunken cheeks, a twisted nose, rough whiskers and long stringy hair ... but he'd never been this

close.

Sonny saw an agonizing blur, then it became a huge angry bear of a man leaning out of flickering lantern light; it was his old enemy Rico. Vengeful madness glazed Rico's eyes and he held a mint shiny hunting knife.

Before Sonny could release a groan, Rico laid a few boots to him. Then Sonny started wailing as Rico drove the knife into his wrist.

Things weren't turning out to be as much fun as Rico had expected. Sonny was begging, but blood was squirting everywhere and the hand wouldn't come loose. It pissed him off and he started muttering and cursing. "Damn you, damn you! I'm gonna cut off your hand. Shit, I wish I had a butcher school diploma."

Victory at last, he grinned at the severed hand, and Sonny lay in shock as his blood pooled on the floor. Then a sudden scraping noise startled Rico. Something was moving farther down on the edge of the shadows. "Somebody's in here", he muttered. "Don't tell me that little blond followed us here."

It stepped into the light and it wasn't blond, a girl or little. Rico gasped and dropped the gory hand. This ghoulish creature was big ... powerful, with a face like machine guns had carved it out of petrified wood. Its eyes were fierce and filmed with red, and its body was thick and lumpy muscle that appeared to be formed of ashen clay and dripping rot.

It moaned hideously and walked straight for him. He scooped up the knife and with a swift thrust planted it directly in the thing's heart. Stopped dead, the ghoul growled as Rico broke the blade of the knife trying to pull it out to thrust again.

Muscles like cold hard clay found a grip on Rico, upended him and threw him up against the wall. He slid to the floor dazed.

Stupefied by the blow ... his thoughts reeling in disbelief, Rico watched as the thing kneeled on the floor. It picked up a

chunk of rusty metal and began to cut its hand off. The hand tore away slowly, red-and-green goo oozed out and stringy black-and-white flesh snapped elastically.

It walked over to Sonny and ripped the chains out of the wall, then it went back to get its severed hand. It put it against Sonny's bloody stump and the stringy worm-like flesh squirmed as it attached itself. Sonny's face began to twitch, then it turned greenish and his eyes fluttered open.

"Oh-oh, looks like I didn't exterminate Sonny good enough," Rico thought as Sonny got to his feet and began to step across the floor. His blood running cold, Rico froze. He was too terrified to move. He could only stare as Sonny's eyes became cruel slits.

Sonny reached down and took him by the throat with his new hand. Lifting him slowly he crushed the life out of him.

As Rico fell to the floor dead, Sonny stumbled back, chains rattling on the stone floor as he flailed his arms. His head spun in a whirlpool of black visions, then his brain caught fire and he screamed and gagged as rusty metal tore across his throat.

The most loathsome of monsters hates even itself, and the new graveyard ghoul that owned Rico's head, and Sonny's body wished it could tear itself apart. Yet it could only sit there and moan. Finally, it rose and turned to its larger master and knew obedience.

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Growing Up On Halloween

A Walking Dead Man Tale

Alison carved the face out neatly with her fruit knife.
The job was slow and detailed, but finally she stepped back

and saw that the finished pumpkin grinned stupidly like Daddy, so she grinned, too.

This fellow was the last pumpkin of her little lot and she knew she had to place him in the perfect spot.

Oaks heavy with autumn leaves shaded the wan afternoon sun, creating a warm colored haze in the back yard. The largest of her jack-o-lanterns stood in front of a mound of leaves by the tool shed. The second biggest one sat on a small table where it would be clearly visible from the street. Her baskets of Indian corn lined the stone path and hung on the picket fence, so the only place for this pumpkin was by another mound of raked leaves facing the length of rope she'd hung from the porch balcony.

Carrying the pumpkin over carefully she put it in place. And as she admired it the back gate suddenly swung open and Daddy came barging in. Alison ducked behind some evergreen scrub, only she'd ducked too late to escape him.

Daddy roared like a bear. "What're you doing out here with no clothes on! I'll tan your hide, you little pirate!"

He charged the bushes and she flew out and raced into the house. Getting to the bedroom she put on some clothes, hoping Daddy would calm down. But he didn't. He was waiting in the hall when she came out.

"I don't want that rope hanging from the balcony."

"But that's for my scarecrow."

"There'll be no scarecrow. I don't want you frightening the neighbours with more of your silly pranks."

"It's not to scare the neighbours. It's for mommy to see so she can come back in the dark tonight."

"Oh no, not that again. Mommy is never coming back. She died and you know that little girl."

"Yes she is. She is!"

"You'll never grow up will you? You're going back to that child

psychologist. What's her name again?"

"Her name is Melanie James and she's stupid. Mommy is coming back and I am growing up. It's just that it can only happen on Halloween."

"There'll be no scarecrow and no mommy talk either. After supper we'll go out on the balcony and remove that rope." He said it firmly. Then he stormed away.

Hordes of the littlest kids were out in costume and at 6.30 it was quite dark. No one had shown at their back gate so Alison had her sharpened fruit knife out and working again. Connected patterns of cookies and Disney characters emerged as she moved the blade smoothly and delicately. Some of the cute designs seemed to glow with red at the edges and speak strange cartoon words in her mind. On the last shape she stabbed the blade in deep, and then giggled when she thought she heard some sort of gruesome Halloween death rattle.

The rope felt huge and rough in her tiny hands, yet she had no trouble building a knot in the hemp. She threw the noose over the scarecrow's head then hooked the end of the rope around the door hinge. Moving back to the railing she crouched and pushed with all of her might, and slowly the scarecrow went up and over.

Air burst from her lungs in a strange sigh and she staggered back as it fell. There was a violent thump as the door hinge strained and a sickening squish and sound of cracking neck bones from down below.

The full moon was rising now and when she looked down, she saw its light glistening on Daddy's ghastly face as he swung there on the rope. Alison just hoped that scarecrow Daddy wouldn't frighten the neighbours.

She waited on the balcony for an hour, hoping mommy would come, but mommy didn't show so Alison began to cry. Tears

rolled from her big blue eyes then she heard a swishing noise and looked out in the yard. Mommy was standing there by a jack-o-lantern and baskets of corn. Her blond hair flowed in the moonlight; she was beautiful, naked and pale, as she looked up at scarecrow Daddy with eyes of glowing fire.

Suddenly her lips parted, revealing a fanged mouth. Her back arched slightly and she hissed wickedly at Daddy.

Alison stood up and she hissed, too. New fangs cut the edges of her lips and deep inside she felt incredibly proud, because just like mommy, she was growing up on Halloween.

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Pumpkin & his Chainsaw

Walking Dead Man Tale

Late afternoon bit Pumpkin like a mangy dog, leaving him quivering with agitation as he stared out at the wilted leaves falling in the wood lot. Autumn made him feel crumpled and dead like the rest of the city. It was a season he hated and a time when he needed regular fixes to feel alive again.

Halloween always came around the corner as his biggest fix. The bewitched day was really the only good thing about fall. It was also the reason he'd been nicknamed Pumpkin. On all other days, he existed as the watcher and the voyeur, yet on Halloween he became the doer. Rubber worms in the candy apples, puke pills in the orange kisses, firecrackers in the doorways, obscene messages sprayed on the courthouse windows, LSD in the prom punch, paint bombs and spikes on the highway, burning hay on the tracks, firing blanks at the suckers near the mall while dressed as the Reaper. Pumpkin had pulled just about every mean prank going, and he'd

never been caught.

This year he'd settle for nothing less than the spectacular. Something grand that would get him remembered as more than an aging smart-ass wearing orange clothes half of the time. More than a pathetic fool needing quick stunts to even get noticed.

He did have a plan in motion, and he grinned at the thought. Getting up he went over to his computer. "Time to check my e-mail, and see if Marvin bought the bait," he muttered.

Knocking the mouse he watched the screen light up and he grinned when he saw the tiny e-mail jack-o-lantern waving a Jolly Roger.

To: pumpkin@interlog.com
From: coolmarvin@screwview.com

Yo Pumpkin! Hear at ScrewView web we pay close attention to the groovy ideas of our top subscribers. Youre idea to web broadcast a Halloween orgy is a great one. Consider it on - beginnin at 9 p.m. on the bewitched evening. Start page for this live webcam video extravaganza is screwview.com/hallofilm.htm And we have more then 3000 paying viewers lined up for a show with ten full camera angles.

We'd appreciate any donations for costumes and setup as this is on short notice. Contact me immediately if you know any partners who can help.

* Life is just a bowl of cherries, waiting to get popped.
(Cool Marvin)

To: coolmarvin@screwview.com
From: pumpkin@interlog.com

Cool! Cool! Cool! Marvin. I can help with costumes and stuff.

Not just money wise. I mean, I have the real stuff. A friend of mine has a costume store and I can twist his arm for a lot of costumes and black webbing and rubber bats and stuff.

Believe it or not I also have a pumpkin patch at my house so I can bring some pumpkins. As you should recall I also live in Toronto. So get back to me as to when I can drop a vanload of the stuff out to you people at the screwview penthouse.

* Just livin' on the pussy's cutting edge.

(Pumpkin)

An orange explosion marked the end of sunset in the west. Standing by the chain link fence Pumpkin watched as twilight blue filtered into the mist trails down in the valley. A line of cops in navy uniforms poked through the tall weeds by the watercourse there. They'd been combing through the area for about a week, looking for clues on a bedroom rapist who used those tunnels and gullies as an escape route. Personally, Pumpkin hoped they would corner the guy and blast his head off. The jerk just had no right to commit crimes like that without filming them for everyone else to see.

As the cops faded into the mist, he perceived them as little toy men locked inside a small bubble of right and wrong. Another bubble of petty desire contained the rampaging rapist. And perhaps the darkening sky was the biggest bubble - sealing everyone in Toronto in a prison.

If gods lived they were voyeurs, Pumpkin was sure of that. Because you never saw them but they were always there like evil jack-o-lanterns looking through the glass at people and their follies. They could shake the whole world like a bauble, and play the biggest prank of all by snowing down shit on everyone.

They'd rained shit on Pumpkin's life since he was a kid. Some of it was sexual abuse crap he wanted to forget but often couldn't. And now that he was remembering it, the gods were making him mad.

Sudden fury filled him and he turned away from the fence. Powering up his Greenwood chainsaw he eased the spinning blade forward and leaned into the trunk of a dying pine.

Vibrations shook his arms as the blade bit in deep and spat sawdust. The resistance jarred his bones and pulsed in his blood and brain. And it soothed him, causing his anger to fade and the disturbed feeling to vanish. It was the black magic of the chainsaw; it cut down trees and bad moods, leaving a neat pile of brush and logs.

Odors of fresh cut wood filled the cool autumn air. Pumpkin inhaled deeply, feeling a sort of relaxed euphoria as he crunched through the leaves and sawdust to the pumpkin patch. Pausing there, he studied his prize and aging melons. He patted a giant then his eyes went to the smaller ones that would soon be wearing Halloween faces. "Wonderful, wonderful things they'll see," he thought. Then he turned and went up the steps to the porch. It was time to drive over to Marvin's penthouse and lay the final plans.

Leaves blew on the back alley wind and scratched Pumpkin like some dead fingers of the darkness and the season. He watched grimly as Marvin's lackeys unloaded the van of its Halloween fare.

For a moment, he stared up at the bright lights of the penthouse. Then he felt Marvin tap him on the shoulder.

"It's heaven up there," Marvin said, his eyes like glowing like a cat's. "And whenever the action begins we seal the stairwells. Only one elevator for access. There's no way the police can raid us if we shut it down, and we got enough of them paid off, so a raid's not likely anyway."

Pumpkin pulled a tiny orange orb from his pocket. It had the face of a jack-o-lantern. He handed it silently to Marvin.

"What's this?" Marvin said.

"It's a high definition web cam that looks like a pumpkin. I

packed a few of them in with the decorations. I figure you can use them in place of the plain ones for better atmosphere."

"Man, you thought of everything. Don't worry; you'll get your reward when my big black rod goes into action on some blonds. Just e-mail me a rap sheet. What you want to see. I'll pass it to the young ladies."

Pumpkin waited as the autumn days passed. They were slow and dark like the smoke of bonfires and they seemed endless. When Halloween did finally come, he could feel the orange flames, burning in a jack-o-lantern in his brain.

In the early evening costumed children, their parents and all of the cute stuff fluttered by like cartoon bats as he impatiently walked the streets. And it was only as the clock neared 9 p.m. that he came alive.

Marvin also came to life at nine sharp and a web view appeared of a cavern-like penthouse and a lot of painted women, dressed mostly in leather and black netting. Marvin did his introduction wearing only a lion cloth and jewelry. His black skin gleamed with oil and if he wore a shit eater's grin, it was probably because he would eat shit if a subscriber paid him to do it.

The cameras also revealed two naked blonde women necking on the rug behind him. Other camera angles revealed more opening action. Screwview.com liked to give the impression of 24-hr sex at the penthouse.

"Tonight the forces of Halloween witchcraft have possessed us and we're having a party," Marvin said. He spread his arms dramatically and was about to continue when a loud rattle and bang caused him to jump.

Paneling suddenly slid open behind him revealing an elevator and a man in an orange Halloween costume. Marvin glanced back and saw the man's skull mask and shopping bag and

since it was only Pumpkin and not the cops, he turned back to the cameras. "Welcome to our big Halloween Screw at screwview.com," he said, and then he signaled for the action to begin.

And as he did, Pumpkin pulled his rigged chainsaw from his shopping bag, powered it up as he stepped forward, and planted the whirring chains between Marvin's shoulder blades.

It cut through before Marvin could scream; though his expression became one of surprise as blood spurted out of his mouth. A moment later, the blade and flying gore emerged from Marvin's chest. Then Pumpkin yanked it back out and shouldered the collapsing body aside.

Screaming began as the corpse thumped to the rug. Pumpkin pulled off his mask and spoke above the noise. "Everybody's screwed, just like Marvin said," he announced. "Plus the title's been changed to *Pumpkin's Halloween Chainsaw Massacre*."

With the stairwells sealed and the elevator out of order, only those who jumped to their death escaped the magic of the chainsaw. Pumpkin's face remained white and calm amid the storm of flying blood. He felt the vibrations lifting him, relaxing him with euphoria, just like when he cut a pine.

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An Alien Halloween

A Walking Dead Man Tale

October 31st.

Welcome to the future and CBC Toronto's new Live Satellite Eye on the city. Greg Manson reporting. For those

viewers whose power has just been restored, the scene we are studying now is the city Emergency Command Centre on University Avenue.

The crowd we're zooming in on is in blowing leaves out front and as you see it is composed of reporters, city officials and concerned citizens. We see chief of police Sam Reba and Sandra Weatherton of the University of Toronto astronomy faculty at the fringe near the steps. Though they seem to be frowning into the wind, a tip that just came in here at Live Satellite Eye might be cause for them to smile. Our sources say that command team leader Jenson Sing is about to emerge and announce that the power outages are ending and we are on track for an alien-free future.

. . . and now the big doors are opening. Jenson Sing is poking his head out. Wait a second. He's being forced out. Someone has hold of his shoulder and he's struggling . . . slipping . . . somebody has thrown him out on the dusty steps . . . he's going down, and he appears to have injured his back in the fall.

Police Chief Reba is rushing to him . . . alien terrorists . . . Live Satellite Eye is now reporting that alien terrorists may have seized the Emergency Command Centre in Toronto.

Hold it - the doors have been thrown open wide. I can't see anything there in the dark. Damn, look at that expression of terror on Jenson Sing's face. Reba has drawn a gun from under his jacket, and we can see something stepping out of the building.

My God! What is that thing! If I didn't know better I'd call it a Halloween hoax? It looks like some kind of half human and half amphibian monster. And it appears to be roaring like one, too. Is that smoke or steam shooting from its nose membranes? Isn't it the same sort of monster they reported everywhere just before New York went silent?

It's getting violent down there . . . Reba's firing shots at him or it . . . and the bullets aren't even scratching the thing. It's

like it eats bullets for breakfast.

Our man on the ground is now reporting that this thing is an alien terrorist wearing some sort of protective suit. In spite of that it sure looks like a real monster -- and it's crouching now. Perhaps Reba wounded it. No, it's leaping. Unbelievable - it just used its skin flaps like wings of some type and soared twelve meters into the air.

It's got Reba and it's throwing him down. People are running, panicked, in all directions. That horrible slimy thing is tearing at police chief Reba with some kind of knotted claws. It's ripping his uniform open . . . blood is seeping out. Man, was that a vicious punch to the breadbasket. Damn, I think I'm going to be sick. I can't stand reporting this stuff via live satellite. Nate, can't you patch out this segment with a floating lens smear? --- What? You can't . . . some sort of bug in the satellite feed. Oh no, why does the only lasting glitch have to be with our equipment?

This is Greg Manson and CBC Toronto's new Live Satellite Eye reporting from high above the Emergency Command Centre. Power has been restored but the alien tech bug has now also become the alien monster that murdered our police chief.

And this is no guy in a Halloween costume. A hail of police bullets has failed to stop this alien terrorist creature and it has taken command team leader Jenson Sing hostage . . . holding him in a bus shelter. We are focusing on medical personnel as they reach Police Chief Reba's body. It looks like they are preparing to move his remains.

Just down the road, we see a fleet of police cruisers blocking the monster's path to the north.

Our man on the ground reports that there are questions as to what this thing really is . . . police experts are saying it's a terrorist wearing a special suit, while those who've seen it close up swear it's a monster and probably an alien. For

those who can't see it clearly it appears to be part amphibian, humanoid in form and seven feet tall, with deadly claws on its webbed hands and feet, and fangs in its broad facial orifice. This thing is said to stink like the living dead. Judging from what it did to the police chief our guess at Live Satellite Eye is that it is a monster of some type. Not necessarily an alien, perhaps something genetically engineered. One report that came in from an RCMP informant is that a secret experiment at a University of Toronto genetics laboratory may have created it. Those in the worldwide alien conspiracy camp say a malfunction at SETI led to contact with hostile aliens and they have beamed directly to Earth. Considering that New York is gone, their argument is a credible one.

Holy shit, it's smashed out the side of the bus shelter with one blow, and it's dragging a terrified Sing with it as it heads for an alley. The police can't fire on it due to the hostage so they're letting it move ahead.

We've got a shot of the far end of the alley now and there appear to be a few members of the emergency task force already in place -- waiting for it to emerge. Nothing but shadow is showing in the alley mouth. They're hitting the area with spotlights.

There it is - it's dropping Sing and roaring - spitting out green-tinted steam. Guess it doesn't like being in the spotlight. It's moving, running, charging . . . the task force men are backing up. The lead cop is lobbing something. Looks like a grenade or stun bomb.

A direct hit and the flash explosion has knocked the thing ten meters in the air. Sheer force has thrown it against a brick wall. It's going down, down . . . and damn, it's getting up.

This is Greg Manson and CBC Toronto's new Live Satellite Eye reporting from City Hall where the alien monster is now running berserk. The police chief and seven members of the emergency task force are dead, and

emergency command team leader Jenson Sing appears to be almost dead as the thing continues to drag him across the city.

We now know the creature is not a human wearing a special suit. The question is whether it is an alien being or some kind of genetic monster. It does not appear to be of high intelligence, but its path across town to city hall could indicate that it is looking for the centre of government, perhaps to make demands of some sort.

Below we see a convoy of police cars following it . . . and a group of costumed Halloween partiers joining it as it makes its way into the adjacent square. An advance team of police officers has already cleared children from the area and the creature now appears to be ignoring the government offices and heading over with the partiers to the main square.

Police are moving into the area to surround it now and it has halted . . . we can see it looking around at approaching police . . . some kind of yellow light brightening in its large eyes.

The glow is now enveloping its entire body. The force appears to be weakening it . . . the thing is slipping to its knees. Yuck, it's vomiting and the repulsive green liquid is spilling like a flood.

Wait, the glow is expanding . . . a sphere of transparent light is now surrounding the creature . . . and the liquid isn't vomit, but some kind of alien thing.

The partiers have moved away and the police have opened fire now, but the bullets aren't getting through. One task force member is moving up to the force field. He's touching it . . . and an explosion has thrown him back.

Gross . . . unholy, that thing has turned the cop's body into pumpkin mush and disappeared. Jeeze, why can't we filter out these scenes?

So I guess that puts an end to most theories. We now know

that the alien terrorist has no apparent motive other than to kill.

Here's something just in -- we have a report from our geographical information system. It has traced the creature's strange path around the city and is projecting its target destination. That destination appears to be . . . my God! That monster is headed for us at the Live Satellite Eye building!

This is Greg Manson and CBC Toronto's new Live Satellite Eye reporting. The alien monster has now arrived out front of the building, and against all advice reporter Jack Livingston and a camera crew are going out to try and communicate with it. Their belief and I think it is a mistaken belief, is that the creature is an alien being and wants to make some sort of statement.

Jeeze, I can't believe it. The thing is waiting there under the theatre marquee across the road and Livingston is walking up to it like he is going to interview the mayor.

Damn. Nate. Can't you fix that sound feed? We can't hear what Livingston is saying. Wait, here it is.

“ . . . can you tell us why your kind has come here to Earth?”

“ Yeet ... krevichth ... Our eyes watch. . . yours are watching. Yeet.... ”

Oh no! It's got Livingston! and it's

This is Greg Manson and CBC Toronto's new Live Satellite Eye reporting on behalf of the revolting aliens now controlling our planet – Happy Halloween, People of Earth, surrender now, Yeet. Watching. Krevich orch. . . . kritvetch - ict

Halloween carnage.com

A Walking Dead Man Tale

These were the cleanest butchers Jason could imagine.

Petite and cruel with snow-white smocks, bloodless faces and pale gloves - scrubbing bleached corpses spread out on gurneys of shining stainless steel.

Rich red blood flowed and beaded like mercury in neat rivers on the polished marble slab. It skinned, started to congeal and pulse like veins - arteries that seemed about to explode. The image became pounding in his head, and he woke up, feeling his eyes popping with agonized pressure.

A splitting headache, a horrible drug-cocktail hangover, he opened his sore eyes to a vision of blinding white fuzz. It spilled into his mind like a rush of nauseating fever and he rose in dizziness and the reek of his own perspiration.

Jason grabbed the remote and fell back in his chair. As he hit the button, he saw the fuzz vanish from his wall screen, then the preset programming started functioning and the channels spun and opened on a scene of floodwaters.

Waves, debris and flotsam rushed toward him and became memory returning - last night, Halloween, the square, the rowdies, the blasting music, the wine, the dancing, the laughter, the girl he'd kidnapped and locked up in the basement before passing out at the TV. She was blond, voluptuous. Her image rose in his mind with unquenchable thirst, and like a zombie ordered by his master he rose, went to the kitchen and swallowed half a bottle of Coke.

His head cleared somewhat as he sat back down and his eyes went to his gold watch. 3 p.m. - he'd been out for 12 hours solid.

On the screen the floodwaters were still pouring. The scene

pulled at his mind and grew soothing. Then he saw something red and dark rising in the rushing murk - a corpse - grotesquely swollen, a snake of black blood drooling from a ghastly face. There were more of them drifting like hideous whales. Detached arms, legs and torsos tumbled out of the foam. A woman's hair billowed in the deeper water, revealing a medusa's visage of worms and staring eyes, and then the scene suddenly switched to the image of a Reaper swinging his scythe and a deep voice saying - "Stay tuned for more."

He checked his control and saw that he was tuned to web TV - halloween.carnage.com. This was the web channel he'd programmed to play on Halloween. It'd been listed on his e-reader's ads; the offbeat video and text channel from a cult created by weird end-of-the-world people. People that were pissed at corporations, nations, city governments and others who refused to cooperate in preparing for the end coming at Halloween this year. They'd set up a worldwide video network and web site, vowing to broadcast explicit footage of any Halloween disaster as a way of informing the public as well as those who wouldn't listen.

And wow! What a success! They already had beautiful footage of the dead in a dam burst in Africa. He couldn't figure out how a bug in some computer chip could pop a dam. And he really didn't care how it had happened. He just hoped there would be more because he needed more - always more carnage - because after all, he was Jason, the Friday the 13th copycat killer.

A swig of Coke and the screen flickered back to the Reaper and stage thunder and lightning. "It seems some of our modern American prisons did not properly test their digital locking systems for Halloween errors," said the Reaper. "Let's take a look at this exclusive footage from Maryland and see what this can mean."

Silver flashed as the scythe swung and an image zoomed in to fill the screen. Some kind of prison, bars, Plexiglas and a muscled and grinning psychiatric patient wrestling with a

guard over a shotgun. The madman knocked the gun free and managed to slam his opponent into the wall so hard that blood flew like spittle from his lips. Still, the guard recovered and stumbled forward, only to find that the man had seized the gun. The trigger clicked, the camera view spun and a spray of shot, blood, bone and brains showered the screen. Through the dripping gore Jason saw a long hall and more armed prisoners running. "Did you check your locks?" the Reaper said as his face reappeared on the screen? "Here's an instant replay to remind you of what might happen if you didn't."

"Holy shit!" Jason suddenly said as he flew to his feet in fluid motion. "I've got one of those digital locking systems on the cell."

Hurrying to the basement door, he stumbled down the steps and through the cobwebby gloom toward the light of a dim florescent lamp. He reached the cell and saw his captive crouched on the cold cement behind the bars. She looked up, her face and hair soaked in tears. Quickly passing her, he went straight to the door and the lock.

It held firm so it appeared he wasn't a victim of the Reaper's Halloween bug. He was about to turn away then it occurred to him that perhaps the bug only set in after the lock was powered down and powered up again. Reaching over he hit the wall control panel, only to find that the battery clicked in and the lock didn't power down. Opening the panel he yanked out the battery and powered down. The lock clicked open, and he powered up and it clicked closed. He tried it a few times and as he was finishing the girl suddenly began to wail.

Jason turned and faced her.

"How long are you going to keep me here?" she said.

Her face was red, her hair matted with dirt. Jason felt aroused as he stepped up to her and stared, and then he stepped away from the cell to a row of lockers. "I'm going to keep you here with the others," he said.

"What others?"

"These others," he said, and then he opened one of the lockers, revealing a withered skull, moldered body parts, hair and bones hanging inside.

She began to scream hysterically and he felt torn between her and web TV. Due to his hangover he decided he'd rather sit around and watch the latest on the tube.

"Later," he said, ignoring her sobbing as he walked away.

The Reaper was back on TV with footage of rioters and arsonists in Los Angeles, where an earthquake had added its weight to Halloween power grid outages. The dead littered the highways, and what appeared to be satellite coverage showed foggy images of marauders gunning people down on the roadsides. Jason stared intently as the camera zoomed in on a big man impaled on the spikes of an iron fence.

Minutes later a grisly scene of battered bodies flying from a train wreck sent lovely shivers up Jason's spine. He saw the big wheels suck up a body and shower stewed tomatoes on a fleeing woman. A creaking noise from the house made him jump. "Damn, is this good," he muttered. "It's even scaring me."

"Say, I wonder what's happening in this area?" he thought. "Maybe I should go outside and see if the social order has broken down. If so I can get moving with a new scene for my home movie, Friday the 13th episode Jason 1313, *The Toronto Massacre*." Thinking further, he decided it was a great idea, then he heard another creak and as he rose something smashed into his head. Blood magma showered in his mind, a second crunch followed and everything went . . .

Silver flashed as the scythe swung and the image of an empty neighbourhood and a small Toronto house zoomed in to fill the screen. The Reaper grinned morbidly as the camera view switched to the interior and focused on a bloodstained corpse slumped in a lounge chair. Its skull was smashed and brain matter had leaked like vomit over the forehead. A

metal hook had bit through the crown.

"Here's a Halloween error that could happen to you," the Reaper said. "Another lock failure, only Jason's lock was Halloween end-of-the-world compliant. He just forgot to put the backup battery back in and power fluctuations allowed his victim to escape. So don't forget to power things back up after those tests. Otherwise Halloween spooks might come early for you and leave you in a bad situation."

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