

NIGHTMARE

HORROR & DARK FANTASY



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EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

NIGHTMARE

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FROM THE EDITORS

Editorial, November 2014

John Joseph Adams

Welcome to issue twenty-six of *Nightmare!*

In case you missed it last month, in October we published *Women Destroy Horror!*, our special double-issue celebration of women writing and editing horror. Guest editor Ellen Datlow presented original fiction from Gemma Files (“This Is Not for You”), Livia Llewellyn (“It Feels Better Biting Down”), Pat Cadigan (“Unfair Exchange”), Katherine Crichton (“The Inside and the Outside”), and Catherine MacLeod (“Sideshow”) and reprints by Joyce Carol Oates (“Martyrdom”), Tanith Lee (“Black and White Sky”), and A.R. Morlan (“. . . Warmer”). And not to be outdone, our guest nonfiction editor, Lisa Morton, solicited a line-up of terrific pieces—a feature interview with *American Horror Story*’s producer Jessica Sharzer; a roundtable interview with acclaimed writers Linda Addison, Kate Jones, Helen Marshall, and Rena Mason; a feature interview with award-winning author Joyce Carol Oates; and insightful essays from Maria Alexander, Lucy A. Snyder, and Chesya Burke.

The issue is available now in both ebook (\$2.99) and trade paperback (\$12.99). For more information about the issue, including all the stores (ebook and otherwise) in which you can find them, visit our new Destroy-related website at DestroySF.com.

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In other news, *Nightmare* is now available as a subscription via Amazon.com! The Kindle Periodicals division has been closed to new magazines for quite a while now (and has been since before *Nightmare* launched), but by employing some witchcraft we were able to get the doors unlocked just long enough for us to slip into the castle. Amazon subscriptions are billed monthly at \$1.99 per issue and are available now. To learn more, please visit nightmare-magazine.com/subscribe.

Also: If you love *Nightmare* and have a subscription—whether or not it's via Amazon—if you wouldn't mind leaving a review over on Amazon, that would be really great. Positive reviews on the subscription page will go a long way toward encouraging people to try out the magazine. It doesn't have to be much of a review, just a few words and a rating is totally fine—and much appreciated!

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With our announcements out of the way, here's what we've got on tap this month:

We have original fiction from David Sklar (“Rules for Killing Monsters”) and Maria Dahvana Headley (“Who Is Your Executioner?”). For reprints, we have work from Karin Tidbeck (“Rebecka”) and David Morrell (“For These and All My Sins”).

In the latest installment of our column on horror, “The H Word,” Stoker winner Eric J. Guignard talks about some up-and-coming trends in horror writing. We’ve also got author spotlights with our authors, a showcase on our cover artist, and a feature interview with Leslie S. Klinger.

Our issue this month is sponsored by our friends at Egmont USA. This month, be sure to look for *Amity* by Micol Ostow. Read an excerpt in our ebook edition or learn more at egmontusa.com.

That’s about all I have for you this month. Thanks for reading!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor-in-chief of *Nightmare*, is the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy*, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the bestselling editor of many other anthologies, such as *The Mad Scientist’s Guide to World Domination*, *Armored*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, and *The Living Dead*. New projects coming out in 2014 and 2015 include: *Help Fund My Robot Army!!! & Other Improbable Crowdfunding Projects*, *Robot Uprisings*, *Dead Man’s Hand*, *Operation Arcana*, *Wastelands 2*, and *The Apocalypse Triptych: The End is Nigh*, *The End is Now*, and *The End Has Come*. Called “the reigning king of the anthology world” by Barnes & Noble, John is a winner of the Hugo Award (for which he has been nominated eight times) and is a six-time World Fantasy Award finalist. John is also the editor and publisher of *Lightspeed Magazine* and is a producer for Wired.com’s *The Geek’s Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

FICTION

Who Is Your Executioner?

Maria Dahvana Headley

Five

Since we were little, Oona's collected Victorian photographs. A certain subset of people love them, but I got a library book of them once, just before I met her, and I've never not been appalled. I don't know what a book like that was doing lost in our local library. It's exactly the kind of thing that would normally have been removed by a logical parent. The book was death images, yes, but worse than that. These were all dead children and babies dressed in their best clothes and propped up for the last family photo. Held in their parents' arms, posed with their pets and toys, staring at the camera. It was like some sort of Egyptian funerary ritual, except much more hardcore. The thing about them was that everyone in them had to pose for a long time to make it through the film exposure. There's lots of accidental motion, lots of blur, and so the families look like ghosts. The dead children are the only ones who look alive.

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“Did you hear about Oona? Because if you did, and you didn't call me, I don't know who you are anymore,” the voice

on the other end of the line says.

The same rattle Trevor's had in his voice since we were seven, a sound like tin cans tied to the back of a wedding day junker. It's been a while since we've spoken. Since I've spoken to anyone, really. I tried to start over with new people, but I was still the same person and it never works the way you think it will.

Trev and I faded out in a record shop a few years back, arguing over Kate Bush for reasons that are now difficult to recall. Kate Bush wasn't really the problem. The problem was the way friendship can tilt into more than friendship for one person, and less than friendship for the other. Trevor and I have a history of cheater's matinees in crappy un-airconditioned theaters. Back then, we watched superhero movies together, the three-dollar shows where no one we knew would be hanging out. Sometimes I reached over and put my hand in his lap, and sometimes he put his in mine. We were having an affair, but neither of us could commit to a bedroom. Instead, it was his fingers inside me, and my hand on him, both of us watching the latest incarnation of Spider-Man like nothing was happening below our waists.

We were trying, as we'd been trying for years, to not be in love with Oona.

"What about her?" She and I have history too, but not the history I wanted. Probably she's gotten married or is happy or had a baby or something. I'm expecting a *New York Times* announcement, her with something handsome beside her, a

grinning, sports-playing something, and Oona, her yellow eyes and long red hair. She looks—has always looked—like a tree on fire. She's six foot two and covered with freckles. One time she and I were naked, and I drew the constellations on her with a Sharpie. All there. Next time I tried it, they were gone. There were new configurations but not the ones I'd mapped.

It's getting to be time again for weddings and babies. This is the second round after the first marriages. Trevor's been divorced a couple years now, and I'm single again too after trying to settle for a woman in Georgia who got pregnant by sperm donor and then said, witheringly, "you always act like you're so smart, but you're not as smart as you think you are. You're fucked up. You're in love with her, and you should stop lying about it."

She was four months pregnant and I hadn't noticed. I didn't know she wanted to have kids with me, and she didn't, it turned out. She wanted to have kids without me. Now I'm back in the city, avoiding my roommate. My life, what there was of it, has dissolved like Kool-Aid in a cup.

We're all thirty-seven, Trevor and Oona and me, and we've known each other since second grade. I haven't talked to Oona in years. Every time I see her name in my inbox, I delete it. After the last time I saw her, I'm better off alone. She messes with my head.

"She's dead," says Trevor, sounding astonished. "Oona finally died."

He says it like Oona's gone to India. I'm used to mishearing things like this. Every time I pick up the phone I think someone's going to announce a tragedy. I've been writing a lot of condolences, everyone of my parents' generation fizzling out, and a fair number of mine too, suicides and cancers, car wrecks.

"She did what? Who did what?" In my head, I'm looking frantically at a slideshow of the Taj Mahal.

"Oona," he says. "What the fuck? Oona died. Where are you?"

I take a moment to try to be this person, in this world, where Oona isn't. "On my way wherever you are," I say.

"Around the corner from your place, in that bar. The shit one."

I didn't know he knew where I lived. "Are you drunk yet?"

"I ordered for you. Your ice is melting."

• • • •

I walk in, and there he is. His hair long and dark, his face gaunt. Goatee pointing off his chin like he's a cave ceiling. He's got on a t-shirt that I recognize, an anatomical drawing from the 1700s, a memento mori, a face pared down to the skull on one side, handsome and bearded on the other. Trevor has the whole bottle on the table, and when I look at it, he shrugs.

"To Oona," he says and raises the bottle at me.

"To Oona," I say and pour my own bourbon down my

throat. For a minute, we sit in silence. But then:

“You know what I’m going to say.”

I’d rather he didn’t.

“Is she really dead?” Trevor insists. “Where is she, if she’s not? Is she back there?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “How would I know? We don’t even know where *there* is, not really, Trev. What do we know? Nothing.”

“Because,” Trevor says. “You know why I’m wondering.” And he sings it, against the rules, the first time I’ve heard it in years. “*Dead girl, dead girl, come alive.*”

“Christ, Trev. Fucking don’t,” I say. My skin is covered in buzz. I feel like I’m full of tiny brainless insects, my body a sack of wings and antennae. My stomach lurches painfully, like something inside me’s trying to get out.

“How?” I ask him.

“Obit didn’t say,” he says. “I called. Her mom wouldn’t tell me. She was in Indonesia somewhere, collecting beetles. She got some kind of weird entomology job. Fuck,” Trevor says, and sighs. “The last time I saw her, something bad happened.”

“Don’t,” I say, again. “Please. I don’t need to know any more stories about Oona. I know what she was like when she was weird.”

But Trevor can’t help himself. “I was sitting at a bar,” he says. “Six o’clock on a Tuesday. Bar was empty except me and the bartender. I heard this sound.”

“Stop it,” I say. “I don’t want to talk about Oona

anymore.”

Trevor looks at me. “I tried to tell Bridget about it, and you should have heard her. ‘Always been in love with Oona,’ she said. ‘You think that woman’s mouth is magic. You want a witch, Trevor,’ she said.”

I look at Trevor. He blushes.

“She wasn’t wrong. So, I hear this noise, and I’m trying to figure it out, when something crawls over my foot. Big black bug. Like, huge. Size of my middle finger. And more of them coming. A whole row of them. Each one of them perfectly in line with the next.”

“You always did like dive bars,” I say, trying to shut him up.

His fingers corkscrew awkwardly into mine. I can feel the clammy creeping from me to him and from him back to me.

“I bend over, and she’s under the bar, crouched down. Oona. Not Oona now. Oona then. She looks up at me, and she makes this face, this so-Oona face. And I’m freaking out, and the bartender’s freaking out on me because he can’t see the bugs, and he can’t see her either. The last thing I see as he kicks me out into the street is Oona, her braids, the corner of her mouth, and then she turns her head and she’s gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?”

“Like she folded up.”

“She didn’t fold up. Oona was still around. I got emails.”

“Did you open them?”

I shake my head.

“They weren’t from Oona. They’d be spam, win a vacation to somewhere, free car, lend money to the lost. Jumbles of numbers, lists of lines from things.”

“But she was around,” I insist. “Her mom talked to my mom. She grew up. You know she did. Come on. We both slept with Oona.”

“She was like an animal,” Trevor says. I wonder how much he’s been drinking. “An animal that might bite your face off.”

He fumbles in his jacket. “I brought something,” he says. “I know you don’t want to see it.”

We used to be special. Now we’re grown-ups, and this is what you learn. Special children turn into fucked up adults. You can’t even use the word magic now. Back then, we said it all the time, like we’d fallen into something amazing, like what had happened when we were seven could only be a good thing.

“Something went wrong. I don’t know if it’s ever going to be right.”

He brings a snapshot out of his pocket. Faded, from the ’80s. I don’t have to look. The three of us the day we met. Oona’s in the middle of the photo. She’d lost a front tooth. Yellow dress. I’m in a dirty t-shirt printed with a buffalo, and Trev’s shirtless. We’re on the steps of the trailer my mom lived in back then. It was the first day of summer, and we’d met at the swimming pool line, but they wouldn’t let Trevor in because he didn’t have a suit. Oona, who was already in her

swimsuit, took it off and stood there naked. She said, “I don’t have a suit either.” It took about two seconds for us all to get kicked out, including me, because I’d seen Oona, and so I took my suit off too.

In the picture, both Trevor and I are blurred. We were jumping.

“Look at her, Zell,” Trevor says, and there’s something in his voice that makes me want to shut my eyes. “Look at the picture. Tell me I’m not crazy.”

I look over Trevor’s shoulder instead, out the door of the bar, from the dark and into the cold, bright January street. I see a girl walking past. Pale yellow sundress. Long red hair. A hitch in her step that I know. Except that this girl isn’t thirty-seven. And as she passes, she presses her fingers to the glass and looks in at me.

“Trev,” I say. “Trevor.”

“This is the only one she was in, and now she’s gone,” Trevor says, shaking the photo at me. “So maybe she’s really dead.”

The window explodes inward.

Four

“Kagome, Kagome?” Oona asks me and laughs. “All kid’s games started as adult games. That’s not more creepy than the normal ones.”

“I think it’s creepy,” I say. “Who Is My Executioner isn’t an adult game. It’s not a fucking game at all. Why would you

need to know who your executioner is? You need to know what your crime is. You need to know who accused you. The executioner isn't the point."

"Maybe you want to know who's capable of actually killing you," Oona says, sitting twist-legged in front of me in a blue bustier and a pair of ridiculously short cut-offs. "Like, maybe they're your lover, Zellie. Maybe you know their secrets."

We're twenty-seven, and I'm sleeping with her for another round of probable heartbreak. She's midway through a dissertation on children's games, and everything about it makes me miserable. Oona knows all my secrets. I don't know hers. I only know she has them. She's been mostly normal lately, mostly Oona, this gorgeous eccentric, charming enough to sidestep the fact that she's professionally a scholar of creepiness. This has always been true. She can do better than pass, most of the time. There's a thin line between out of control and spectacular.

I'm in love again, considering tattoos of Oona's name because here she is, her hair in long copper braids, each one interspersed with black lilies she's bought somewhere. She's not goth. The flowers are alive. We're in a coffee shop she likes, a place hung with bad art and someone in charge of the playlists who chooses Alan Lomax recordings of field songs. I hate it. Slave songs played over a backdrop of cappuccino steaming. Oona's always been like this. It makes everyone else skeeved out.

Oona collects horrible things. I regret ever introducing her to the pictures of the dead, but that ship's sailed. Her walls are covered in them now, all beautifully framed. It's only when you look closely that you wish you hadn't. There's one she's had blown up. Black beetle on a little blonde girl's face, right at the corner of her open eye, like a tear.

"It's about a beheading, maybe, or about a woman in a cage. Anyway, it's Japanese," Oona says. "And it might not be creepy. It might just be sweet. Translators disagree and so does everyone else."

She shows me the game, even though I should know better than to play with Oona. She doesn't play fair. "You're the oni," she says. "The demon who gets killed."

She blindfolds me in the park with a long red scarf she's uncoiled from around her neck. She recruits a bunch of kids, and the group runs around me, Oona singing in Japanese:

"Kagome, kagome

Kago no naka no tori wa

Itsu itsu deyaruru

Yoake no ban ni

Tsuru to kame ga subetta.

Ushiro no shoumen daare."

I don't know the words to the song and can't see the kids. I don't want to do any of this. Old history. Bad history. The kids don't mind. It's blind man's bluff combined with ring around the rosy, except no one falls down. When—through some silent signal—Oona ceases the ring running around me,

I'm supposed to stand up. After that, she hasn't given any instruction.

"I'm standing up now," I say, but I don't hear anything. Not even laughing. It's daylight, and we're in public, this day in July, but I feel like I'm lying face down on cold ceramic tile. "I'm standing up."

"Who's behind you?" I hear Oona ask. I can't tell where her voice is coming from. "Who's your executioner?"

I feel breath on my neck, and I feel something else, something I've never been able to describe, other than that there's a sudden weight in my hands and a lightness in my skull. A spinning feeling. I see, for a second, myself as a tiny child, and then my same self, ancient. I see my head falling from my shoulders and into a basket.

I'm gagging, choking, and I tear off the blindfold only to find all the children gone. Oona's always had a way with kids. I spin around. No one's there. The park's empty.

Oona's always insisted she doesn't remember what happened when we were little.

"It was just a normal day," Oona always says, her eyes flashing gold. "Whatever you think happened, it didn't. I don't know why you always bring it up."

Now Oona laughs from above me. High in a tree, she sits on a branch, her bare feet dangling down.

"Kagome, kagome," she sings.

"The bird in the basket-cage."

*When, oh when will it come out, in the night of dawn,
The crane and turtle slipped,
Who is it in front of behind?”*

I look up at her. I'm sweating, like I've played another childhood game, a dizzying prelude to a blinded hunt. Her boyish body, her long white throat, her thighs in her cut-offs. Oona's head is blazed out by the sun behind her, and for a moment it's like it's gone. The way I'm seeing her is not the angle I should be seeing her from. I feel like I'm looking up from too low, and from behind myself. I feel like I'm on the ground, and I start to turn to see what's there.

The next moment, I'm down on my hands and knees, puking in the grass.

“You're so sensitive,” Oona says, holding back my hair, her fingers on the back of my neck, and I shiver. She got down from that tree faster than she should have. I didn't hear her land.

There's something boiling inside her, a kettle left on the fire. I raise my head to look at Oona, and what I see is not Oona but something else.

“Who's your executioner?” Oona says. “Come on. It's just a game.” She runs her fingers along my thigh, and it's like I'm being flayed. The air is full of black dots, a swarm of beetles, then gone.

I take off running out of the park, my feet bleeding, and I don't stop running 'til I get to my mom's extra bedroom,

where I stay for the next three weeks, losing my job, falling apart, dropping out of the grad school I sold my soul to get into.

That's the last time I see Oona.

Three

We're seventeen. We're at the prom. I don't do prom. I'm wearing fishnets that I ripped with safety scissors and then sealed with nail polish. I didn't want them to disintegrate. They're my only pair. Otherwise I'm inappropriately dressed. I should have tried to look pretty. I already don't belong here. Me and Trevor are the only people of any color at this school, unless you count white as a color. My family came from Veracruz. His came from China. His people believe in ghosts and so do mine, and every time Oona comes around, my mom is like: *Out*. But that's partially because Oona's a high-end drug dealer's daughter with a fancy house and all the cars anyone could want. My mom thinks they look like a funeral procession.

Oona's in magenta, and it doesn't suit her. Her red hair clashes, and she looks strangely old. Her mother took her to a salon and got her hair done into a high topknot full of bobby pins and hairspray and fluffy silk flowers. Her neck is like a too-thin stalk for a peony, and her head keeps sagging. She's got vodka in her water bottle. Periodically she looks at me and grins, her eyes lined in silver. She's been not okay lately.

"She's gonna puke," says Trev.

“No, she’s not,” I say. Oona is known for her iron tolerance.

Trev and I are the least of her interests tonight. We’re watching from the edge of the dance floor as Oona leads the dance. She’s the prom queen, of course. Oona is everything at once, and the daily Oona is nearly perfect. It’s only that sometimes things slip. People have short memories. Oona is mostly sweet. Mostly charming. Mostly beautiful. When she’s not, people think it’s them who’ve gone nuts, not her.

She neglected to bring a date, and so she’s supposed to get a king out of the crowd. Somehow no one got elected. I don’t get it. Neither does Trev, though I look at him, and he looks at me and shrugs, and I think I might know something about where the ballots went. Every boy in the room is circling her.

“Walk around me ’til I choose one of you,” she tells them. “I guess we need a king if we’re doing this stupid thing.”

Oona’s kneeling. She puts her head in her hands and sings.

*“Poor Jenny is a-weeping,
A-weeping, a-weeping,
Poor Jenny is a-weeping
On a bright summer’s day.”*

I don’t even know where she learned that, but this is classic choose-a-husband stuff, so I hate it. I’d rather do something involving jump rope. At least that would mean the husband needed a skill. She’s shut the DJ up, and we have no

Nirvana, no “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” Just Oona.

She does the next verse herself, standing up and looking down at the place she was. Boys shuffle nervously in their stupid-looking tuxedos. I have a wrist corsage provided by Trevor. It’s made of weeds. He has a matching one. We both hate ourselves.

*“Why are you weeping,
Weeping, weeping,
Why are you weeping,
On a bright summer’s day?”*

She kneels down again and puts her head in her hands. Her hair’s stiff, a crest of red bone standing up from the back of her neck. I hate her. I don’t.

“Come on,” says the DJ. “What kind of prom plays fucking madrigals?” He makes a nervous attempt at something else, but the something else is Alanis Morissette, and so it gets shouted down.

*“I’m weeping for a loved one,
A loved one, a loved one,
I’m weeping for a loved one,
On a bright summer’s day.”*

“Shut up, Oona,” Trev says, mournfully as Oona starts spinning, her eyes shut, her topknot swaying like she’s going

to break her own head off.

*“Stand up and choose your loved one,
Your loved one, your loved one,
Stand up and choose your loved one,
On a bright summer’s day.”*

I see something moving out of the corner of my eye near the doorway of the gymnasium, near the photo backdrops. We got our picture Polaroided there earlier, me and Trev and Oona, looking all wrong together, a trio of suspicious class hierarchy, the popular girl being nice to the weirdoes, the weirdoes embracing the popular girl, and even as we got shot, I knew it was a trick. Oona was the weirdo, not us. Trevor and I were tag-a-longs, as always.

“That’s strange,” said that photographer, squinting at Oona, who smiled at her.

“What’s strange?”

“The pretty one,” said the photographer. “You’re not showing up very well.”

“Am I not?” said Oona as though this wasn’t something she knew already.

“Maybe it’s the glitter,” said the photographer, looking bewildered. “We’ll do the real one. That’s twenty bucks for the wallet prints.”

The wallet prints won’t turn out.

Oona, her eyes shut, reaches out her hands and grabs a kid

named Steven. He's tall and gawky, taller even than Oona is.

"Hey," he says.

"I guess you're the king," she says.

"I can't believe you picked me."

"It wasn't me," she says. "I was spinning. The spinning picked you. That's how the game works. It's like spin the bottle, but I'm the bottle."

"Are we going to kiss, then?" asks Steven and manages a grin. He's out of his league beyond belief.

Oona takes a paper crown from one of her attendants, and puts it on his head. He looks knighted. He stands taller. The foil shines, and it's horrible for a second. I see Trevor cringe too. Blade, I'm thinking, but then it's just a crown made of craft paper and staples.

Oona takes a step back from Steven and looks at him quizzically for a moment.

"Pretty," she says and then takes his hands in hers and dances as she sings.

*"Shake hands before you leave 'er,
You leave 'er, you leave 'er,
Shake hands before you leave 'er,
On a bright summer's day."*

She lets go of Steven's hands, and I feel Trevor flinch. Something's moving over by the photo backdrop. Something small and fast, a flash of yellow, long red braids. Holding

hands with someone else, this person tall and slender, same hair, but this hair caught up in white-streaked snarls. The somethings are spinning, running, flying around the edge of the room.

I look back in time to see Oona kiss Steven very properly, very gently, on the mouth, and him, dazzled, kiss her back.

“Oh no,” says Steven. He lifts his hand to his mouth. His eyes widen.

Steven starts coughing, and Oona leans toward him. He doubles over. A crowd around him. He coughs harder. People are closing in on him now, worried, patting him on the back, and he begins to choke something up. People start screaming and backing away, a chorus of *Oh my gods* and swearing, the music the DJ’s put on ringing over the whole thing, a crazy chorus of beat and bass as Steven falls to his knees.

“Somebody call an ambulance!” someone yells.

Steven’s coughing up black beetles, a torrent of them, all wings and legs. Thousands of them, legs tearing and twitching at each other, chitinous crunches underfoot as people freak out and climb onto the chairs, run from the room in their high heels.

Oona’s right beside him, but Steven’s not looking at her. They’re swarming out of his nose and mouth. Oona’s scared. She looks around frantically, and as she does, we all see it, Steven stops breathing.

Nobody’s breathing. The people left in the room are all just frozen, staring, me and Trev included.

“Help!” Oona yells, but no one moves.

He falls forward, and the crown tilts off his head and crumples on the ground.

At the corner of my vision, I see the redheaded girl and the white haired woman shift back into the bouncing gleam coming off the disco ball, and all the beetles are gone with them, the floor covered in black confetti.

Someone laughs nervously, and Steven stands up looking stunned, and Oona’s there beside him, her spine straight, herself again.

“King and Queen,” she says, and maybe only Trev and I can hear her voice wobbling. “There you have it, ladies and gentlemen.”

“Are you okay?” I ask her, even though she looks like she is. She looks fine.

“Nothing happened,” she says.

I watch a beetle crawl from the inside of her fist, very slowly, up her arm and into her dress. She reapplies her lipgloss. Her hands shake.

On the photo wall as we leave the prom, there’s a fully developed Polaroid of me and of Trev, with Oona between us looking like a smudge of light, and inside that the faintest outlines of a little girl looking straight at the camera, her eyes glowing.

Trevor and I each take her hands and we go out to Trevor’s car, borrowed from his grandfather. We ignore the sweetish smoky smell. Oona’s fingers lace into ours.

“What was that?” I ask her.

“That was nothing,” she says. Her eyes reflect headlights, and then she gets out of the car and takes off running down the highway, five miles from anywhere. We follow her. Her magenta dress, her corsage, her heels, one by one, her bra, her underwear, center of the road. She gets home. I call. Her mom answers. Oona’s sleeping.

I’ll sleep, eventually. All of high school is a process of forgiving Oona for moments like this, but we’re not even sure it’s Oona who’s the problem. Maybe me and Trev are the problem. Maybe we just love someone who’s crazy. That happens. Me and Trev sit in the car listening to Nine Inch Nails, a pile of Oona’s clothes in the passenger seat.

“I hope this gets better sometime,” says Trev.

“Which ‘this’ do you mean?” I ask him.

“All this.”

“Everything?”

“It’s never getting better, is it?”

“It might.”

We look at Oona’s clothes. They’re still there, even if Oona is gone. Later they tell us that somebody slipped LSD in the punch, but they never figure out who it was.

Two

We’re seven. Oona’s on the ground in the middle of the trailer park, surrounded by window blinds not usually opened. The trailers face inwards around a central core where there’s

nothing planted. I sometimes find bits of old toys here, little things in the ground. There's not much to recommend it beyond the fact that it's an open space no one wants to deal with, and so it's available. We play here like crazy. This is where I learned to do a backflip. This is where my neighbor taught me to square dance, and where I learned to identify birdcalls. It's a piece of dirt but it's my dirt.

I brought Trevor and Oona here, showing off my powers. Oona's not allowed to do anything. Her parents live in a different part of town where there are driveways. My mom, when Oona says her last name, is impressed and also not. "I've heard about your dad," she says.

Oona's yellow dress is spread on the ground. She doesn't care about it, and I'm desperate to be like her. She already trampled it at the swimming pool. It's still wet. My own t-shirt is nothing nice. It came from Salvation Army, but the thought that dirt on it might become permanent is always a thing in my household, my mom crying over stains. Oona's dress seems to ask for the dirt of the world. This dirt especially likes it. It's all over her in a minute.

We're playing a game. I learned it from my friend who has a trampoline at her house. Not a friend, really, but a birthday party I got invited to because everyone did. Someone's mom had rules. In the original version, a person sits curled in a ball, eyes shut in the center of the trampoline, and the rest of the party bounces around her, chanting the words to the game.

Deadgirl, deadgirl come alive, come alive at the count of five. One, two, three, four, five.

The dead girl bounces up and keeps her eyes shut while she jumps around trying to grab someone. You try to keep the dead girl from getting you.

We eat cheese sandwiches, and I teach the game to Trevor and Oona. No trampoline here, but it can be done in dirt. I'm dead first. I curl up, and Oona and Trev run in circles around me, singing out the words to the game. I'm smelling the ground, hot and dry, and under that something chemical that burns my nose. I stand up blind, and start hunting for them. It only takes me a second to grab Trevor because he can't stop giggling.

"Dead girl," he says weakly because he's laughing too hard to talk.

"You must be bad at hide and seek," says Oona.

Then Trevor's dead, and he can't get either of us because we're better at it than he is. Oona's moving fast and I keep looking at her, and finally I'm looking at her so hard she turns around and says "what?" and then stumbles and cuts her knee on something.

I see something, a firefly, maybe, a bright flare, and then it's gone, right into the wound, but it disappears. Maybe it wasn't there. She dabs at her knee, which is bloody.

"Ow," she says. "Sharp."

I catch a glimpse of something that looks like an old knife

and feel the dirt where she fell for whatever cut her, but there's nothing.

Trevor grabs her. "Dead Girl," he shouts, triumphant.

I see a glint just for a second, the firefly, maybe, but not from outside Oona. Her eyes are almost all black, and then they aren't. I see them glow, a brightness, and then black again. I could yell for a grownup but they're not home.

She licks her finger. She shuts her eyes and curls up. "I'm dead," she says. "So now you get to be alive."

She might need a Band-Aid. From where I'm standing, I'm seeing blood soaking into the dirt, but Oona waves her hand. Her eyes are still shut.

"Run around," she insists.

We do. I keep looking at that blood. The dirt is wet. I feel like I see something crawling up out of it. I feel like I see the firefly under Oona's skin, making its way somewhere. Oona seems pale, but she also seems like it doesn't hurt. There's a clacking sound, and I don't know where it's coming from. Like wings rattling against one another. I look up. Nothing.

We circle her, and Trevor starts chanting. "Dead girl, dead girl, come alive."

I join him. "Come alive at the count of five."

Now together: "One." Oona's face is turned toward the ground, and her shoulders are hunched inside her yellow dress.

"Two," and the sky has thunderheads. Oona's totally still. I want to start laughing, but I don't.

“Three,” and a dog’s barking. The last light’s on Oona now from the sun coming down, and I hear a screen door slap itself against a doorframe like a mosquito killed on a thigh.

“Four,” and Trevor’s jiggling high-kneed behind Oona and then around in front of her. She’s still as a statue, and for a second that’s what she is, a marble girl, hard-skinned and smooth and waxy as a plum. There’s a smell, an oven smell, and then a cold smell, a dark blue-green smell, and I feel my bladder give.

Trevor doesn’t notice. He’s swooping and bouncing and Oona doesn’t notice either, because she’s getting up.

“Five,” Trevor shouts, but Oona’s already off the ground. Not Oona. Someone else, unfolding like a newborn calf, awkward arms and knees all folded up. Red hair to her waist. Ragged yellow dress. Pale speckled skin and wide eyes. I look at the ground. Oona’s gone.

“Dead girl,” the lady says, and looks at me. Her lips are parched. She’s filthy. She raises her hand to her mouth and coughs, and I’m stuck in front of her as she gags on bugs. The whole world’s full of bugs suddenly, all kinds, and I don’t know where they’re coming from, but I can see them coming out of the sky and up from the dirt too, all in rows and then in a rush as quick and glittering as water. Beetles and moths and lightning.

“Where’s Oona?” I ask the lady, but she doesn’t answer me. In the sky around us, something’s ripping like nylon stockings, running down from the center of the dark.

Brightness rolling casually from behind the black. Holes all around us. Lightning bugs disappearing into them, a blink, a blink.

I feel her hands on me, on my shoulders, and she's looking down at me as her head rips off her shoulders and falls. I'm a basket. I'm a hoop. I put my hands up to cover my face, and I catch her crown of braids. One of my fingers sticks in her mouth and I feel her teeth in my skin. Another in the corner of her eye, and I feel it give, swishing wet, a ripeness.

"Oona!" I'm screaming, and I'm holding this dead thing, and I move my hands, trying to drop it, but I can feel her skull. I can feel her jawbone and the sockets of her eyes, and she's dead.

I look at the ground and it's covered in a carpet of dying lightning bugs.

The head in my hands says something, but she can't even talk. Her tongue is thick and garbled, and my hand is in her mouth, and when she looks up at me, I see one of her eyes is missing. I can't move. I can't scream anymore. The sky is ripping open. I see ambulance lights and someone on a motorcycle. I see a fishhook gleaming. I see a pile of bodies. I'm seeing all these things and also I see my own skinned knees in front of me, and my mom is nowhere.

A dark hole in a pale face, a mouth around my hand, bugs crawling out the corners, dirt everywhere, and blood, and then it's done. There's a flash of light brighter than the bugs.

Trevor's standing behind me with a flashlight, and all the screen doors are opening, and Oona's on the ground in front of me, a flickering image at first, fetal position, dress torn, and all around her this woman, a bigger version, who looks at me, her eyes screaming, glowing, and then she's gone.

"Don't," she says, but she's not saying it to me. The sky zips itself like the back of a dress.

Oona sits up. She looks at us and at my mom and at all the parents in the circle, who wonder why I screamed. I look down at my hand. I wipe it on my t-shirt.

"Do I come alive now?" she says and laughs. "You look weird."

There's a stripe of red on my buffalo t-shirt. There are teeth marks in my finger. When I go to bed, I find dead lightning bugs in my shoes. Everyone says we have a big imagination. Oona doesn't say anything.

We didn't really know her, and now we don't really know her more. We're invited to her birthday. She turns another age. We're invited to all her birthdays. Her dad doesn't notice us. We ride in fancy cars. We get bikes. We eat hamburgers. Oona never shows up in school pictures. Oona never shows up on videos. Sometimes I see the lady outside the school, waiting, but if I look at her, she's gone.

Sometimes I pull the book from under my bed, the one full of dead girls, pictures of them in their fancy silk dresses, but I don't look at it. I just pull out the library check-out card, and then I put it back in. My name isn't even on it. Nobody

knows I have it. Nobody knows anything.

I don't think it was my fault.

I think it was my fault.

One

The window explodes behind Trevor, and I watch it happen. A swarm of insects filling the bar so there's nothing to it but wings, and all of them on fire, glowing with captured sunlight.

The little girl steps over the sill. The bottoms of her feet are black. She's been walking dead for thirty years, and beside her I see another Oona, and another still, this one old, all of them walking through that window.

Trevor turns. I look at his neck. There's a piece of glass in his skin. I lift my hand, wondering at the piece of glass in my arm, and blood around it, pulsing out calmly to a beat. I see myself from the wrong angle, and then I see Trev from the wrong angle. I see dirt below me, me pitching into it, downward.

We're surrounded. All the Oonas are in the bar with us, and there's something about them, the way their hair is braided, the way they hang for a moment by their necks and then tilt forward under the blade, the way we're everywhere at once, an execution on a hillside somewhere, Oona's head shaved, a basket to catch it, and an execution in a prison somewhere, Oona's head hooded, and an execution on a street somewhere, a little Oona and a car slamming its brakes

on, a grave full of beetles, a little Oona in a Victorian dress, a little Oona made of light, her whole body glowing and then dark, glowing and then dark.

Trev and I are on the floor in a landscape of glass and both of us on our knees.

“Who’d we bring back?” I ask him, because we tangled time back then, thirty years ago, and the Oona that was with us that day is not the Oona we’ve ever seen again. I’ve known it and Trev’s known it too, and now we’re going to die knowing it. We’ve seen her sometimes, glimpses of the original, but she’s wired together with something else, an Oona full of centuries worth of dead girls, all held in one body, all moving at once. I’ve tried to puzzle it out: thirty years of antennae and wings, thirty years of insects crossing centuries, flying fast. No one would listen to me when I tried to talk about it. I stopped trying. I thought I might end up shouting, trying to tell strangers. No one ever believed that something came up out of the dirt. No one ever believed she was a nest full of spirits, and I tried not to believe it either.

I try to be ready to go. I try to be ready to skip back in time, to die over and over, to be whatever it is Oona needs me to be.

Trev’s looking over my shoulder at her.

“Who’s your executioner?” says Oona from behind me. “You catch your own head in a basket and spend the rest of time carrying it around with you. You get murdered in Mexico and dropped into the dirt and no one ever finds you. You get

beheaded for being a witch in Massachusetts. You walk through a jungle with a basket on your head. You fill a basket with bugs. You die in a pit in Indonesia, shot for selling them to the highest bidder because the beetles all contained god and you blackmarketed them.” She pauses. “I did that one time. Maybe that’s how this started.”

She leans over me. “You shake hands with your lover before you leave her. How about you, Zellie? You used to love me. Do you still love me?”

She coughs. A lightning bug on her tongue.

This Oona’s not the little girl Oona, but the ancient Oona, her body full of bright, her eyes dark.

“Where is she?” I ask. Trev’s choking and a little bit of blood is coming out of the corner of his mouth.

“There’s no Oona left,” she says. “We filled her up.”

But there’s a flash in those eyes, a thirty-year-old circle of dirt. The ancient Oona looks at me, her head tilted, black wings running down her cheeks. The thirty-seven-year-old Oona looks at me too, and at Trev. She leans forward and picks him up. She blows into his mouth, and in her breath appears a black butterfly. Trev gulps.

“Oona?” Trev asks. “Are you in there? I’ll take the rest of them.”

“Let’s go home, Oona,” I say. “Dead girl, dead girl,” I say, and I struggle to my feet. “Come alive.”

There’s a blurry motion and for a bending moment, there are nine of us in the room, three children, three adults, three

old people tilting to our graves.

I grab Trev's hand, and Trev grabs mine, and another mine, and another Trev takes another me. We ring around the Oonas and the room fills with light, with glowing and dark, with blurring motion.

Trevor leans in. He's a broken man in bad shape and he doesn't give a fuck about fear. He kisses Oona, and the room bends. I lean in. I kiss another Oona, the old Oona before me, and the floor tilts. The little ones stand together in the center of us all, children, smaller than I remember being. We're both kissing blurs.

"Dead girl, dead girl, come alive," I say into the ancient Oona's mouth.

"Five, four, three, two . . ." Trev says into the little Oona's ear. We are both the dead in the picture, but we've been good as dead since we fell in love with someone who wasn't living. We have nothing to lose.

"One," we say together.

I see my executioner, and I see us all weeping for a loved one. I see a basket, and I see myself in it, my own head, my own hands. I see an Oona, naked and dead, and beneath her body a litter of shining insects carrying her over the forest floor, moving their treasure to a mound of dirt. I see an Oona swarmed by tiny gods, all with their wings humming, their mandibles clacking. I see a living, breathing Oona in our arms.

Someone flies into me, and someone flies into Trevor, filling us with the dead. Our bellies, our bodies. We carry the

lost. We share the burden.

But on the floor, there's a circle of dirt. And curled in it is Oona, asleep, like a volcano erupting, like a yellow iris blooming, her hands full of old knives, rusted with centuries of exposure to the elements.

She opens her eyes.

“When did we get so old?” she says, and outside it's bright, and gold, and summer.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maria Dahvana Headley is the author of the upcoming young adult skyship novel *Magonia* from HarperCollins, the novel *Queen of Kings*, the memoir *The Year of Yes*, and co-author with Kat Howard of the short horror novella *The End of the Sentence*. With Neil Gaiman, she is the *New York Times* bestselling co-editor of the monster anthology *Unnatural Creatures*, benefitting 826DC. Her Nebula and Shirley Jackson award-nominated short fiction has recently appeared in *Lightspeed* (“Give Her Honey When You Hear Her Scream,” “The Traditional”), on Tor.com, *The Toast*, *Clarkesworld*, *Nightmare*, *Apex*, *The Journal of Unlikely Entomology*, *Subterranean Online*, *Uncanny Magazine*, *Glitter & Mayhem* and Jurassic London's *The Lowest Heaven* and *The Book of the Dead*, as well as in a number of Year's Bests, most recently *Year's Best Weird*. She lives in Brooklyn with a collection of beasts, an anvil, and a speakeasy bar through the cellar doors. Find her on Twitter @MARIADAHVANA or on the web at mariadahvanaheadley.com.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the [Author Spotlight](#).

Rebecka

Karin Tidbeck

The outline of Rebecka's body is light against the scorched wall, arms outstretched as if to embrace someone. The floor is littered with white ashes. Everything else in the room looks like it did before. A kitchen table with a blue tablecloth, a kitchenette stacked with dirty dishes. A wrought iron bed, which I am strapped to.

I ended up here because I was Rebecka's only friend. As such, I used to clean up after her half-hearted suicide attempts: blood from shallow wrist cuts; regurgitated benzos and vodka; torn-out overhead light sockets and doorjambs that wouldn't hold her weight. She would call me in the wee hours of the morning: *Get over here, help me, I tried again, I screwed up . . .* and I would go over there to nurse her and hug her, again and again. What was I supposed to do? I wanted to tell her to do something radical—jump from the West Bridge, throw herself in front of a train—just to get it over with. But I didn't have the heart. I don't know why I remained her friend. It's not like I got anything out of it. It was the worst kind of friendship, held together by pity.

• • • •

I remember the phone conversation we had the day before

her first suicide attempt. It was a slushy Saturday in March. I was in my pajamas on the sofa, watching two sparrows fight over a lump of tallow that hung from the balcony rail. We were talking about something inconsequential, clothes and sizes I think, when she suddenly changed the subject.

“The Lord,” Rebecka said over the phone.

“Hallowed be His name,” I said reflexively.

“Sure. The Lord,” she said. “He punishes people, right?”

“Is that a trick question?” I said.

She was quiet for a moment. Then: “I did something.”

“What?”

“I went to the Katarina Church and spit in the baptismal font.”

“You did what?” I must have shouted; the birds took off.

“Spit in the baptismal font. I thought that might get His attention.”

“Rebecka, that’s insane. People have been fried on the spot for doing stuff like that.”

“Yeah, that was sort of the point, wasn’t it?”

“So what happened?”

“Well, He showed up.”

I waited for her to say she was just pulling my leg, but she said nothing, just breathed down the line. “He showed up? How?”

“Uh,” she said, “it was really bright. I had to cover my eyes.”

I looked outside. Melting icicles on the windows and rain

gutters that glittered in sunlight unbearably bright after the foggy Stockholm winter. “Uh-huh,” I said.

“But He said He was okay about the font,” she continued. “He said that some people have to be allowed more mistakes than others. That they’re damaged and don’t understand.”

“Did you get a chance to ask Him about the other stuff?”

“No. He left after that. I’ll have to come up with something else.”

“Rebecka,” I said, “you can’t make Him change His mind.”

“I just don’t want to feel like shit. Is that too much to ask?”

“We can’t expect Him to take care of everything,” I said. “After all, we had to take care of ourselves before He came back.”

“But there were psychologists then,” she said.

“Yes.”

“And there aren’t anymore.”

“No, I guess not.”

“Because He cures everyone and . . . how was it . . . ‘lifts the darkness in every soul.’ Except me. So what am I going to do?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s a task you have. A test.”

“I already went through my damned test. I can’t deal with all this crap.” She hung up.

The string of attempts with pills, razor blades, and ropes started after that. She would call me after every attempt. I took her to the hospital the first few times. After making sure

she didn't have any life-threatening injuries (and she never did), they sent her home with a priest in tow. Eventually, Rebecka wouldn't call me until a day or so after she'd done something. Then I'd visit to clean up the mess while she hid in her bed.

The Lord tells us we must have patience with our fellow men, especially those who are being tested. Rebecka was being tested. Around the time when I had just met her, she had been raped and tortured by her husband, rest his soul. She had never recovered.

• • • •

“People who hurt others are the ones with the best imagination,” Rebecka said.

We were walking along the quay from Old Town to Slussen, watching the commuter boats trudge across Lake Mälaren. It was November. There were no tourists waiting for the boats this time of year, just some pensioners and a kindergarten group in bright snowsuits. I didn't mind the cold, but Rebecka was bundled up. We each had a cup of coffee, Rebecka occasionally pulling down her scarf from her face to take a sip. I couldn't help but look at her scarred lips as she did so.

“I don't follow,” I said.

“Would you get the idea to cut a pregnant woman open with a breadknife and take the baby out?” She was talking through her scarf again, voice muffled.

I shuddered. “Of course not.”

“Or poke someone’s eyes out with a paper clip?”

“Come off it.”

“Three days, Sara.”

Of course. This was what she was on about. Karl.

“He used everything he could get his hands on.”

“I know, Becks. You’ve told me everything.”

She went on as if I hadn’t said anything. “You couldn’t imagine the things he came up with, not in your worst nightmares. Get it? And you know something else?”

“What?” I said, although I knew what she was going to say.

“How could He let it go on for three days before He decided to do something about it?”

“He did deal with him,” I said, as I usually did.

“Yeah, after three days. Why did He wait so long?”

“I don’t know.”

We were quiet for a while, sipping coffee.

“And I’m still here,” Rebecka said. “It’s like I’m being punished too.”

“I don’t think you are,” I said. “You’re not being punished. He doesn’t do that. Like I said before, maybe it’s a test.”

We went through the motions like that, until I said I had to go home and dropped her off at Slussen, where she would take the subway.

• • • •

She didn't take the subway. She tried to throw herself in front of it. It was in all the morning papers: Rebecca jumped from the end of the platform so that the train would hit her at full speed. The driver later told reporters that he'd had a sudden impulse to brake before he was supposed to. The train had stopped a meter from where Rebecca was lying on the tracks.

"Maybe now you'll believe me when I tell you," she said across the kitchen table the following day. "Listen, I'm ashamed for all the times you've had to come and clean me up."

"It's all right," I said.

"No, it's not. I know you think I'm a coward who's afraid to really go ahead and kill myself. I know you wish I could make up my mind and either die or start living again."

I couldn't meet her eyes then.

"It's always been for real," she said. "It really has. I can't sleep through a single night without waking up because Karl is there. He's standing at the foot of the bed, and I know he's about to do all those things to me. I want it to stop. I want to sleep." She looked at me. "Every time I went for my arms with the razor they stopped bleeding. Every time I took pills and alcohol I started throwing up. I never once stuck my fingers down my throat. I promise. I just started throwing up. And if I didn't, absolutely nothing would happen even though I should be passing out."

"So what are you saying?" I said.

“It’s getting worse. I don’t even get injured anymore. I swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills yesterday, you know?”

“And . . . ?”

“They came out the other end this morning. Whole. The Lord is fucking with me.”

“Don’t swear,” I said.

“I’m telling you. The Lord is fucking with me. I hate Him. He won’t take the nightmares away. Or the scars, all the scars. But He won’t let me kill myself either. It’s like He wants me to suffer.”

“Rebecka, we’ve been through this one before.”

“Would you stop taking His side all the time?” she shouted. “I’m your best friend!”

“Rebecka,” I said.

“I know what you’re going to say. He’s not my nanny.”

“That wasn’t what I was going to say.”

“If He thinks I’m supposed to deal with this myself, He could have just not come back in the first place. That way I would have known what to do. But now, this is the way things are. And I really don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“Me neither,” I said.

• • • •

The next time Rebecka called it was early morning.

“You have to come over,” she said. “We have to talk.”

I took the bike over to her apartment, expecting to see another scene of a failed suicide attempt. Her face was pale

under the scarring when she opened the door.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” I said. “I’ve taken the day off.”

She let me in. There wasn’t anything on her or in the apartment to indicate she had done anything to herself, just the usual mess. I sat down by the kitchen table while she poured tea. The blue tablecloth was crusted with cup rings. I traced them with a finger.

“You had me worried,” I said. “What’s going on?”

“I’ve realized what I have to do.” She put a steaming cup in front of me and sat down in the opposite chair. A smoky Lapsang smell wafted up from the cup. Rebecka rested her elbows on the table and leaned towards me.

“I’m serious about not coping anymore,” she said. Her tone was matter-of-fact. “I want to die, Sara.”

“I don’t want you to,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

“I really don’t want you to.”

“Well, it’s not for you to decide anyway.” She took a sip from her cup. I didn’t know what to say, so I drank my tea. It was sweetened with too much honey.

“I suppose you’re going to tell me,” I said eventually.

“The Lord isn’t going to do anything,” Rebecka said. “I know that now.”

There were white dregs at the bottom of my cup.

“Rebecka, what did you put in my tea?” I said.

Her face was set, almost serene. “I’m going to make Him

listen,” she replied. “I’m going to do something he can’t ignore.”

• • • •

I was naked when I woke up in her bed. My wrists and ankles were tied to the bedposts. Rebecka was sitting on a chair beside me, a toolbox at her feet.

“I love you,” I said.

“I know,” she said.

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To learn more about the author and this story, read the [Author Spotlight](#).

Rules for Killing Monsters

David Sklar

When we started playing *LandsBetwyxt*, Jerry was all about killing monsters. But Amy was in Drama Club at Hematite High, where we went to school, in the Upper Peninsula, near Lake Michigan, on the dateline, and for her it was about interacting with people we met in the online game. Me, I wanted a chance to not be Jim. I guess I knew even then that there was something wrong with who I was, but I hadn't yet put it together.

But Altram the wizard wasn't who I wanted to be. So I scrapped him and made Kilbert the Rogue. And when he wasn't it, I created Ursula—a half-elf ranger with a green cloak and bright red hair. I didn't tell Jerry she was me. I didn't plan to tell Amy either, but one time I slipped up and called her Amy instead of Katressa on the road to Eldrytch Castle.

“do I kno u,” Amy asked, “outside of game?”

I didn't know what to say.

“well?” she asked.

“it's me jim,” I admitted.

She didn't respond.

“is that ok?” I typed.

“good job,” she typed back.

“what do u mean?”

“your dressed like a person,” Amy said.

“huh?”

She went on: “usu when a guy plays a girl shes in a chainmail bikini or sparkly lowcut gown. a set of pixels to see, not a person to be.”

I nodded. Of course, she couldn’t see me nod, but I knew what she meant. One guy talked about his character in the third person, even in dialogue boxes. Vannati thinks this. Vannati wants that. Ursula was different.

“shes not vannati,” I typed. “or, um, im not. :)”

“lol,” Amy answered.

And Ursula wasn’t like Vannati. Other players didn’t treat me like a boy. They flirted with me, asked to meet me in real life. I flirted back when they weren’t too creepy.

Some guys assumed I wouldn’t be much use on a quest because I was a girl. I was proudest of that—it meant I could fool them even if they didn’t want to be fooled. Or that’s what I thought. I didn’t realize the truth underneath until Ursula died.

We were clearing a nest of chimaeras from the mountains of Tazgref to save the village of Kremiss from their nightly raids. I had taken my eye off my health bar to shoot down the one attacking Katressa, and I didn’t see the other one charging me from behind until it was too late. And I watched myself fall forward on the rocks, still clutching my bow.

And I just sat there, staring at myself, dead, on the screen, as it faded to black.

When I'd died as Altram the Wizard, it was more like losing at cards. When Ursula died, I felt it—she took me with her when I watched her fall. I remembered, as if out of nowhere, my father spanking me for wearing my mother's shoes when I was too young to understand why it bothered him. That was how it felt when Ursula died.

• • • •

The path back from the Deadlands was unchanged. In a monochrome background, dressed only in a shroud. Dodge the Bone Eaters; get to the River. Keep enough on my Willpower bar to hold together the driftwood boat until I got back to the Living side. It was the same as before. But this time was different. This time it mattered if I made it back.

After that, I flirted more openly, with Kwentin the Druid and Kalino the Bard, and once with a Paladin. “what r u doing?” Amy asked in an aside.

“roleplaying,” I answered.

Ursula found her way into my real life, too. I stopped dreading deer hunting with my dad. I told him I wanted to learn how to hunt with a bow.

He said, “I guess we'll make a man of you after all.”

I just smiled. I felt bad about letting him think that, but he got me the bow.

I bought a green hooded parka at the Army Surplus Store. And I practiced my archery every day in the back yard.

The State of Michigan was writing permits that year for

antlerless deer because of a deer population explosion in the U.P. My father refused to shoot a doe. Said it just didn't feel right. But me, I got up before dawn, when my father was still asleep, and I went out of the cabin in my parka and tracked a doe. My feet made almost no sound as I walked across the powdery late November snow, and I watched the doe browsing for acorns and fallen leaves below the bare oaks.

She was beautiful in that light. She stood there chewing, and I nocked an arrow, admiring the beauty of her tight muscles, the faint white spots on her tawny haunches. I pulled back the bowstring and took aim. I knew exactly where her heart was, for I heard it beat in me. And I let fly.

She let out a yelp and fell to the ground, stirring for a moment, a cloud of white powdery snow in the air around her as she struck the ground. I ran to her side, the old twigs cracking beneath my boots.

I walked up beside her and put my hand on her chest. Her heart was still beating. I was ready for her to thrash her legs, like I had once seen a buck do, that my father had shot. But she did not thrash.

I felt her heartbeat slow, through my fingertips. *Mercy*, I remembered. I drew my knife and slid it across her throat, so her death would be quick. And then I waited with her, my hand on her side, and felt her heartbeat slow down until it was only my own pulse in my fingers. Until she was done. And her big, brown, glassy eye stared out at no one.

I took off my mitt and put a finger in her warm, dark

blood. And I drew a tear beneath the outside edge of my eye.

I heard my father's footsteps behind me on crunchy twigs. He didn't try to be quiet; the hunt was done. And I knew what he would say before he said it, and I braced for him to shatter the moment's beauty as he clapped his hand on my shoulder and told me, "Son, you're a man now."

And the courage it had taken to kill the deer was less than it would have taken to say *No. No, I'm not*. So I said nothing at all, but clung to the shred of the moment as the sun rose on us, my father standing in the snow in his hunting jacket and boots, and me kneeling next to the deer with her blood on my face and hand.

But it was more okay than it should have been because he was very far away, cut off from the deer and from me by the cold air between us, and by the blood that rushed in my ears and muted the distant sound of his voice.

• • • •

After the kill, I got bolder.

The doe was hanging from a tree in my front yard when I went back to school. I had helped my father gut her and hang her to drain, and the mix of things I'd felt hadn't quite resolved. I mean, a part of me still felt weird that I had killed a living creature, that I had allowed myself to love her and take her life. But there was a magic in that, also, like it brought me closer to a world that wasn't real and to a person in that world who was more real than I was. The reality of it buzzed in me

—not like I was buzzing, but the feeling buzzed like a swarm of bees inside me.

Tingling, I walked off my normal route and went past Amy's house as she stepped outside. "Amy!" I called to her half a block ahead of me.

She turned. "Hi Jim." She waited. I caught up.

"I want to go out as our characters," I said.

She said, "What?"

I said, "I want us to dress up as Ursula and Katressa and go out to a party or something this weekend."

She didn't answer right away.

I said, "It's all right if you want Katressa to look human. You don't have to give her blue skin or pointy ears."

She said, "You know that Ursula's a girl, right?"

"Of course," I answered. "She's my character."

"And you want to dress as her?"

I nodded. "Uh-huh."

"Why?"

"Because she's me."

"No, Jim," Amy said. "You're you. Ursula is a character in a game."

"I know," I told her. "But that's not how I feel. Because right now she's more *me* than *I* am."

"Oh shit," Amy said. "I've heard of this. I didn't think it would happen to anyone I knew."

"I know," I told her. "I was kind of stunned when it happened to me."

She said, “My mom warned me not to play these games online.”

“What?” I said.

“She said she saw a news story when she was a kid,” Amy went on, “about people getting so hung up on the game that they lose touch with reality.”

“What?” I said. “Amy, that’s not—”

“I can’t believe I ignored her,” Amy said, “and I let myself drag you into this.”

I stopped and took her by the shoulders, and I looked into her face. “That’s not what’s happening,” I told her.

“But you just said—”

“It’s not about swords or monsters or magic,” I said. “It’s not about getting away from the world. It’s about something Ursula taught me about who I am that I didn’t see until I played her in the game.”

“Okay,” Amy said. “I think I understand.”

“Thank you.”

“You want to be heroic. You want to feel brave.”

“No!”

“You *don’t* want to be brave?” Amy asked.

“Well, yeah, I guess I do,” I said. “But that’s not it.”

“You mean,” she said, and let the words hang there. I nodded and waited for her to catch up.

“It’s about wanting to be . . .”

“A girl,” I finished for her. “I think I’m a girl.”

“Are you sure?” Amy asked.

“I think so,” I nodded.

“How can you *think* so?” Amy asked. “Isn’t it just something you *know*?”

“I—” I stopped to look at my shoes. “This is the first time I’ve talked about it. To anyone, you know? But yeah, I’m sure. I think I’m sure. I mean, in the woods, there was no doubt. I was Ursula there, when I shot the deer.”

“You bagged a deer?” Amy asked.

“Yeah, but—”

“Good for you!”

“Yeah,” I said. “But now I’m walking to school, and it’s hard to believe that anything is real. I mean, I feel like I’m failing science, you know, or like science is failing me, because there’s observable facts and there’s truth, but somehow I know they’re not the same.”

Amy didn’t say anything then, but stood there facing me with the kind of a smile that comic book artists draw when they want you to fall in love with the heroine’s whimsy.

“Did that make sense?” I asked. “Am I raving?”

Amy touched my hand. “Thank you,” she said.

“For what?”

“For telling me first,” she said. She reached forward and hugged me. “It’s an honor. I feel honored that you trust me.”

I hugged her back.

“Ah, shit,” she said.

“What?”

She pulled back to face me. “I’m kind of crushing on you

right now, but I guess now that's not going anywhere." She kissed my cheek by the side of my mouth, and I felt a stirring that seemed kind of wrong, like it was outside where it should've been inside, but mostly I wished I had breasts of my own to press against someone the way I felt hers against me.

"C'mon," she said, pulling out of the hug and leading me by the hand. "Let's go to school."

• • • •

We didn't go out that weekend. Amy had to teach me stuff. Basic stuff like how to walk. How to talk. What to do with my hands. And she had to figure out my makeup. Ursula doesn't wear makeup, but I needed makeup to look like her, and without it I couldn't become who I knew I was.

So I practiced being Ursula. Amy didn't try to be Katressa—not the same way. She worked a little blue into her eyeshadow and on her cheekbones, and she wore a blouse that was a bit more fluid and let down her hair. She didn't darken her hair, but she styled it so that it feathered back like Katressa's and flowed a bit more. And she made two things. She made a ring for me that looked like the one that Ursula wore, with healing properties, and she made herself a necklace with a sparrow bone at the center to replicate the Amulet of Elantha, which Katressa had taken from a Necromancer she defeated. It gave Katressa power over the dead.

I changed at Amy's house and went out as Ursula on Friday and Saturday nights. And I would walk into places and take charge. If I walked into a party, people noticed. No one knew who I was or where I came from, but they wanted to know me—wanted to get closer. I told different stories when people asked where I came from—I was from Houghton, from Calumet, from Grand Marais, or visiting from Green Bay. I didn't bother to try to keep my story straight, and it didn't matter. The boys who shoved me into lockers during the week were the moths to my flame.

• • • •

Jerry got burned as well. He'd seen Ursula at a party, and he told me in biology class how he wanted the nerve to talk to her.

"She's out of your league, man," I told him, cutting open a starfish's leg.

He nodded, did not even ask how I knew that when I wasn't there. "What can I do?" he asked. He opened his sketchbook and started to draw the ridges inside of the leg.

"I don't know." I shrugged. "What is—what is it you like about her?"

"She's so confident," Jerry said, without hesitation. "When she walks into a room, she fills the space."

Wow, I thought. I knew it felt that way to me, but it was good to hear Jerry say it.

"Jim?" he asked, waving a hand in front of my face.

“So be that,” I told him. “What you like in her, find it in yourself.” I continued the incision to the center of the star and peeled back the skin.

He laughed awkwardly. “You want me to walk into a room,” he asked, waving his arms around in a caricature of showing off, “and say, ‘Hey, everyone, look at me’?”

“Is that what she does?” I asked, hoping my voice didn’t sound hurt. I put down the scalpel.

He shook his head. “No. No, she doesn’t. She just—the glow is there. It’s inside her.”

I nodded. “So find it in you,” I said, poking his bony chest with the tips of my fingers.

He got kind of small. “D’you think it’s there?” he asked.

“You’ll be surprised,” I told him. “Look for a small, shining thing inside yourself that knows it belongs.”

“Small, shining thing,” Jerry repeated, tentatively, contemplatively.

The bell rang. I put Saran Wrap on our dissection tray, and I put the tray on the shelf, and we went to fifth period.

But Jerry didn’t seem to find that small, shining thing within. The jocks stopped beating up on me, even in my school-day clothes. But Jerry got it worse. And they teased him for liking a girl out of his league. I caught Colin Younckers and his friends knocking Jerry’s books onto the floor between fifth and sixth periods one day. “Leave him alone!” I shouted, but nobody listened to me when I was dressed as Jim.

“She’s better than you,” Colin YOUNCKERS said, kicking Jerry on the side of one knee.

“You’re dirt to her,” Scott Lindala said, knocking Jerry against a wall of lockers with a fist to the upper back.

“She doesn’t even know you exist,” said Jared Nordquist, kicking Jerry’s math book down the hall like a hockey puck.

“You’ll never have her either,” I said to them.

“What?” said Colin YOUNCKERS, turning to notice me at last, his eyes wide with the fear that I was right.

I felt the deer’s heart beat in me. I was the prey. But I hid my fear. “You’re beneath her, too,” I said. “Why else would you bother pestering Jerry?”

I watched a shame wash across his face. Watched it try to sink in, like water into rock, and I wondered if it would take.

“Faggot,” Jared said.

“He doesn’t know shit,” Scott added.

And then it was on. Colin lunged at me, and I turned and bolted, ducking in between Mary Vinton and Kelly Sjordgren. And I ran, hearing Colin and his friends behind me, barreling through, knocking over the people I’d ducked past and around.

I was still faster—until I wondered if my agility would give away my secret. Can Jim move this way? It was only a moment. But it was enough for Colin YOUNCKERS to get a hold of the back of my shirt. I was toast.

I let my shoulder crash into a locker so loudly that Mr. Soderbergh came out of his classroom and asked, “What’s

going on here?”

“Nothing,” said Colin YOUNCKERS.

“I tripped,” I told him. “I’m kind of clumsy.”

“Okay then,” said Mr. Soderbergh, and he stood there, just to be sure.

“After you,” I said to Colin and his friends.

They kept walking the way we’d been running. Colin stared at me as he walked on but then shrugged off his doubt. I doubled back to Jerry, who had finished picking up his books. “Are you okay?” I asked him.

“I’m okay,” he said. “Are you crazy?”

I nodded. “Maybe.”

• • • •

That night I went online and gamed angry. It was the second time Ursula died. I shut down the computer and saved coming back from the dead for another day. That weekend was when *I* died for the first time.

• • • •

It was Saturday night. Amy was doing the makeup for *Twelfth Night*. She’d had time to help me change, but after that I was on my own. I was on my way to a party out on CR 28 when I heard a brutal noise, and I found Colin, Jared, and Scott pushing Jerry into a snowdrift, saying, “Where’s your boyfriend, Jerry?”

“Leave him alone,” I commanded, afraid my voice would crack with real worry.

“This is none of your business, Ursula,” Colin said.

“Of course it is,” I answered. “You hurt another person, a girl wants to know. Who’s to say you won’t do the same to me?”

“No way we’d do that,” Scott Lindala said.

“Oh, really?” I answered, and let my eyes talk, scanning the three of them against the boy who couldn’t take even one of them in a fair fight.

“Never,” Colin said.

“Then let him be,” I repeated.

They backed away, mumbling vaguely. I walked up to Jerry. “C’mon,” I said, reaching my hand down to help him up. “Let’s get you home.”

“I hoped you would be here,” he said.

I ignored that and helped him up, and he tried to kiss me.

“Jerry, back off,” I said as I pushed him away.

He looked at my face and he recognized me. Then, without a word, they all did.

I ran for my car.

I outran them easily, but they caught me as I was opening the door.

Colin bashed my head against the frame as the others caught up. And then . . . well . . . I don’t want to talk about what happened then.

• • • •

The Deadlands were as I remembered them. All black and white, and yet so bright it was hard to see. But I had never known how cold it was there, dressed in only a shroud.

I walked over rocks and dead grass that looked like a photograph overexposed, like it was caught within the moment of a flash. I ran just to keep me warm, although it was not like my body made its own heat in that place—more like I just outran the cold. And the form I had there—not a body, but a form—it was meant to run. I ran past bones that grew from the ground instead of trees, through mists that whispered sounds that were not words, though I wanted to come closer to hear what they said. I ran across shadows cast by nothing at all, which wavered like the ripples on a pond as I went past.

I saw the Bone Eaters, too, of course, skeletons put together all wrong, crawling on all fours, scavenging those who could not make it back. I outran them easily, but I had to pace myself, because I didn't dare run out of strength to run. If I died here—if I died and stayed dead—there would be no one left to avenge me. There would be no reckoning for Colin and his friends.

I came to the river, swirling mists above rough stones, and I wove a boat from the driftwood on the shore, fitting the worn-down edges together like a jigsaw in three dimensions. I rode it across the river, the boat held together by my will, the boat slowly dissolving as it spanned a chasm of fog full of angry fishes and tentacle things.

As I reached the far shore, all that remained of my boat was two planks. I stood on them like skis until the ends of them tapped the land. I bent my knees for just a moment and jumped with both feet.

Jim would have stumbled. Jim would have lost his balance as the planks slid backwards in the water when he jumped.

I did not slip.

And then I was back.

In the hospital room, I looked over my body in the bed. No one stood vigil. The life support monitors beeped, but I did not know how to read the numbers or the lines.

Something of the Deadlands clung to me, like I had carried back a bit of that world when I returned. I put my old body back on like a suit of clothes, and I sat up in bed.

I ached all over. The places they'd beaten me hadn't healed, not completely. And there were other things wrong with this body, too—the things that had always been wrong. But I needed to be in it again to finish this. If the parts were wrong, they were wrong, but I couldn't concern myself with that now.

The beeps on the monitor grew stronger and more even. I found the switch and turned off the machine, then I pulled the leads off of my chest and my fingertips. I looked around for clothes, too, but all I found was two vases of flowers—from my parents, from Amy. Nothing from Jerry.

I cinched up my hospital gown at the waist, to cover my butt, and went out in the hall. Walking through the hospital at

night was like my journey through the Deadlands, colorless and way too bright and almost nobody there. The nurse on the hall was making rounds, but he had his back to me as I passed.

An old man's ghost crossed my path in the hospital halls. "Excuse me, miss," he said. "Could you help me with something?"

"You're dead, old man," I told him. "Move along."

I wandered the hospital like I was exploring a labyrinth in the game until I came to a white room full of lockers. I found a set of scrubs and put them on, and I shaved the stubble off my face with a disposable Lady Bic. The shoes in the locker didn't fit, but another locker had a jacket, which I put on before I walked out into the snow.

• • • •

It was still dark when I got to Amy's house. I entered through an open window and went up the stairs to her room. I let her sleep because I did not want the real world to intrude. I did not want her to be responsible for what I was about to do. I found my boots, my cloak, my ring, and other clothes in the place we kept them in the back of Amy's closet where her parents wouldn't look. I didn't bother with makeup but trusted the night and my will to shape my face. And before I left I took the Amulet of Elantha—the necromancer's necklace that gave Katressa command of the dead. And I put it on.

“Jim?” Amy mumbled as she stirred in bed.

“It’s just Ursula,” I said. “Go back to sleep.” I cast Restful Slumber on her so she would not stir.

Dressed for adventure, I stepped out the window and leaped silently down, bending my knees as my feet touched the grass.

Then I went home and grabbed the key from the fake rock, and I got my bow and my hunting knife.

And then, before sunrise, I went to wait in the wooded lot that Colin and his friends cut through on their way to school. In a town this size, you get to know where people live and the paths they take. A town this size would remember a triple homicide for years. My toes hurt from before, when I walked in the snow without my shoes. I climbed a few feet into a pine and waited, an arrow nocked but not yet drawn.

They were deep in conversation, talking low:

“My uncle’s a lawyer. He has a practice in Green Bay.”

“I don’t think Jerry’s gonna talk. He doesn’t want word getting out about him and his *boyfriend*.”

“He tried to kiss him.”

I took aim and fired and pinned Jared’s hand to a tree.

“Aargh!” he screamed.

“Are you all right?” Scott shouted.

“Hey, watch out!” Colin shouted in my direction. “You could’ve killed us!”

“Did you see where it came from?” Scott shouted.

Colin shook his head.

I fired an arrow over Colin, so close the feathers brushed his hair.

Scott turned and ran. I shot him in the butt and he stumbled, bawling, sprawled out on the ground.

“Please don’t hurt me. Please don’t,” Scott bawled, reaching back to pull the arrow from his butt cheek.

I dropped to the ground, nocking another arrow. “It’s better to leave it in,” I said. “That way you won’t bleed to death until after I finish your friends.”

“Jim?” Colin asked.

“Jim’s dead,” I told him. I took aim at Scott’s other leg. “You killed him.” I shot an arrow in Scott’s thigh. He howled in pain.

“What are you doing?” Colin shouted.

I pointed an arrow straight at Colin’s face. “What does it look like I’m doing?” I drew back the bowstring.

“Okay, okay,” Colin said, stepping backwards. “Let’s not do anything crazy.”

“Crazy?” I said. “You mean like beat a kid to death because you don’t like the way she’s dressed? You mean crazy like that?”

“He,” Colin *corrected* me.

I shot him in the shoulder.

“Agh!” he screamed as the arrow hit. “Are you nuts?”

“I’m dead,” I told him, drawing an arrow from my quiver slowly.

Colin ran at me. I put an arrow through his foot. He

stumbled forward right in front of me.

I kicked him in the face. “I’m dead,” I told him. “You killed me.” While he was still stunned from the kick in the face, I put my toes under his shoulder and flipped him over onto his back. “Are you a gamer, Colin?” I asked as I put my foot on his throat and pressed down. “Have you played *LandsBetwyxt*?”

He gasped for breath.

I pressed my foot down harder. “There are monsters in the game,” I said. “You know they’re evil, so it’s okay to kill them.” He grabbed my ankle and tried to push me off, but his hands had no strength.

I pressed down harder, and he began to gasp for breath.

“And they’re things that don’t belong in the world. Things like bats with the heads of dogs, or ancient kings who don’t know they’re dead.”

His gasps were airless motion now; I saw his mouth move but no sound came out.

“And I wonder,” I said. “Do you see me as a monster?”

Colin’s eyes pleaded for mercy, but they could not focus on me.

“Do you think I’m something that shouldn’t exist?” I asked. “Is that why you killed me?” I let my foot up just enough so he could breathe.

“I—” he began.

I dropped from a standing position, slamming my knee down on his throat. “Or are *you* the monster, Colin?” I

shouted. I put my hand against his chin and pushed his head back. I could tell he wanted to answer, but I didn't want to hear. "I'm not a monster, Colin," I told him. "I'm just living my life."

I pushed his chin up farther and put my hand over his mouth. I caught his nostrils between two fingers and held them shut. I saw the terror in his eyes. I felt him struggle, but the fear in his face was not enough to make amends.

I gripped his airway tighter, felt his chest rise and fall without hope, with no air going into his lungs. A shadow crossed the side of my eye as I held him down. Jared came at me with a large stick, and I sidestepped him without looking up. As the stick struck Colin in the face, I grabbed Jared's collar and flung him to the ground.

I think Jared hit his head on a rock. He bled from his head wound into the snow. Colin tried to get up then, when I was distracted, but it was too late. He had no fight left.

"Now where were we?" I asked as I sat down on Colin's chest. I gripped his throat beneath the chin and pushed his head back so he couldn't breathe.

"I asked you if you were a monster, Colin," I said. He convulsed beneath me. "But you're not a monster, are you? You're something worse—because you had a choice. Nobody programmed you. Nobody coded you. You were a living person with free will, and you *chose* to kill me. And that's not okay."

And then I let go. And Colin lay there, no longer

breathing. I stood up, then, and watched the spirit rise from his limp form.

“You monster!” Scott shouted somewhere behind me, too far away to matter.

I laughed. I laughed long and loud. Then I realized he meant it. And he had a reason. But he was wrong. I’d had a choice, too.

Jared’s head wound bled into the snow. The real world was coming back. A world without magic or monsters or quests. A world where evil is always a choice, and I’d just killed a guy.

It was coming back fast. But it wasn’t there yet.

“Are you sorry?” I asked Colin’s ghost. “Do you regret what you did to me?” I realized I was crying because I felt the tears in my throat.

And Colin’s ghost stood there, looking lost. Looking at me like he didn’t understand what had just happened.

If he’d said anything at all then, I don’t think I would have believed him. But his bewilderment showed me a trail of regret that led back before my death.

Gripping the Amulet of Elantha, I opened my lungs and breathed him in. Felt his life force fill my chest and course through me. Through all of me. Felt him in my lungs and in my fingertips, completely subsumed.

Then I knelt down and I put my mouth over his, and I breathed his spirit back into his flesh.

I leaned forward, then, and whispered in his ear, “I’m a

woman inside,” I said, “but I still have to work at being a lady. And you, you’re not a monster. You have a choice.”

I laid my hand on Jared’s head and cast Minor Heal so he wouldn’t bleed out. Then I retrieved my arrows, using the Heal spell to close their wounds and leave no trace. Colin sat there, blinking. Scott cringed when I laid hands on the puncture wound in his ass. But he was silent, like a rabbit afraid to flee, as I stood and walked away in the falling snow.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Sklar grew up in Michigan, where the Michipeshu nibbled his toes when Lake Superior was feeling frisky. His work has appeared in such places as *Strange Horizons*, *Ladybug*, and *Scheherazade’s Façade*. Publications in 2014 include the anthology *Trafficking in Magic/Magicking in Traffic* (coedited with Sarah Avery) in May of 2014 from Fantastic Books, and the October re-release of David’s debut novel, *Shadow of the Antlered Bird*, from Eggplant Literary Productions. David lives in New Jersey with his wife, their two barbarians, and a secondhand familiar, all of whom he almost supports as a freelance writer and editor. For more about David and his work, please visit davidwriting.com.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the [Author Spotlight](#).

For These and All My Sins

David Morrell

There was a tree. I remember it. I swear I'd be able to recognize it. Because it looked so unusual.

It stood on my left, in the distance, by Interstate 80. At first, it was just a blur in the shimmering heat haze, but as I drove closer, its skeletal outline became distinct. Skeletal: that's what struck me at first as being strange. After all, in August, even in the sun-parched Nebraska panhandle, trees (the few you see) are thick with leaves, but this one was bare.

So it's dead, I thought. So what? Nothing to frown about. But then I noticed the second thing about it, and I guess I'd subconsciously been reacting before I even realized what its silhouette resembled.

Stronger than resembled.

I felt uneasy. The tree looked like a menorah, a giant counterpart of the candelabrum used in Jewish religious services. Eight candles in a row. Except in this case the candles were barren branches standing straight. I shrugged off an eerie tingle. It's just a freak, an accident of nature, I concluded, although I briefly wondered if someone had pruned the tree to give it that distinctive appearance and in the process had unavoidably killed it.

But coincidence or not, the shape struck me as being uncanny—a religious symbol formed by a sterile tree

ironically blessing a drought-racked western plain. I thought of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

For the past two weeks, I'd been camping with friends in the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming. Fishing, exploring, rock climbing, mostly sitting around our cook fire, drinking, reminiscing. After our long-postponed reunion, our time together had gone too quickly. Again we'd separated, heading our different ways across the country, back to wives and children, jobs and obligations. For me, that meant Iowa City, home, and the university. As much as I wanted to see my family again, I dreaded the prospect of still another fall semester, preparing classes, grading freshman papers.

Weary from driving (eight hours east since a wrenching emotional farewell breakfast), I glanced from the weird menorah tree and realized I was doing seventy. Slow down, I told myself. You'll end up getting a ticket.

Or killed.

And that's when the engine started shuddering. I drive a secondhand Porsche 912, the kind with four cylinders, from the sixties. I bought it cheap because it needed a lot of body work, but despite its age, it usually worked like a charm. The trouble is, I didn't know the carburetors had to be adjusted for the thinner air of higher altitude, so when I'd reached the mountains in Wyoming, the engine had sputtered, the carburetors had overflowed, and I'd rushed to put out a devastating fire on the engine. In Lander, Wyoming, a garage had repaired the damage while I went camping with my

friends, but when I'd come back to get it, the accelerator hadn't seemed as responsive as it used to be. All day, the motor had sounded a little noisier than usual and now as it shuddered, it wasn't just noisy, it was thunderous. Oh Christ, I thought. The fire must have cracked the engine block. Whatever was wrong, I didn't dare go much farther. The steering wheel was jerking in my hands. Scared, I slowed to thirty. The roar and shudder persisted. I needed to find a mechanic fast.

I said this happened in Nebraska's panhandle. Imagine the state as a wide rectangle. Cut away the bottom left corner. The remaining top left corner—that's the panhandle, just to the east of Wyoming. It's nothing but broad, flat, open range. Scrub grass, sagebrush, tumbleweed. The land's as desolate as when the pioneers struggled across it a hundred years ago. A couple more hours into Nebraska, I wouldn't have worried too much. Towns start showing up every twenty miles or so. But heading through the panhandle, I hadn't seen a sign for a town in quite a while. Despite the false security of the four-lane interstate, I might as well have been on the moon.

As a consequence, when I saw the off-ramp, I didn't think twice. Thanking whatever god had smiled on me, I struggled with the spastic tremors of the steering wheel and exited, wincing as the engine not only roared but crackled as if bits of metal were breaking off inside and scraping, gouging. There wasn't a sign for a town at this exit, but I knew there had to be a reason for the off-ramp. Reaching a stop sign, I glanced

right and left along a two-lane blacktop but saw no buildings either way. So which direction? I asked myself. On impulse, I chose the left and crossed the bridge above the interstate, only then realizing I was headed toward the menorah tree.

Again I felt that eerie tingle. But the shuddering roar of the engine distracted me. The accelerator heaved beneath my foot, sending spasms up my leg. The car could barely do twenty miles an hour now. I tried to control my nervous breathing, vaguely sensing the tree as I passed it.

On my left. I'm sure of it. I wasn't so preoccupied I wouldn't remember. The tree was on the left of the unmarked two-lane road.

I'm positive. I know I'm not wrong.

I drove. And drove. The Porsche seemed ready to fall apart at any moment, jolting, rattling. The road stretched ahead, leading nowhere, seemingly forever. With the menorah tree behind me, nothing relieved the dismal prairie landscape. Any time now, I thought. I'll see some buildings. Just another mile or so—if the car can manage that far.

It did, and another mile after that, but down to fifteen now. My stomach cramped. I had the terrible sense I should have gone the other way along this road. For all I knew, I'd have reached a town in a minute. But now I'd gone so far in this direction I had to keep going. I wasn't sure the car could fight its way back to the interstate.

When I'd first seen the menorah tree, the clock on my dashboard had shown near five. As I glanced at the clock

again, I winced when I saw near six. Christ, just a few more hours of light, and even if I found a garage, the chances were it wouldn't stay open after six. Premonitions squeezed my chest. I should have stayed on the interstate, I thought. There at least, if the car broke down, I could have flagged down someone going by and asked them to send a tow truck. Here, I hadn't seen any traffic. Visions of a night spent at the side of the road in my disabled car were dismally matched by the wearying prospect of the long hike back to the interstate. I'd been planning to drive all night in hopes of reaching home in Iowa City by noon tomorrow, but if my luck kept turning sour, I might not get there for at best another day and likely more, supposing the engine was as bad as the roar made it seem. I had to find a phone and tell my wife not to worry when I didn't reach home at the time I'd said I would. My thoughts became more urgent. I had to—

That's when I saw the building. In the distance. Hard to make out, a vague rectangular object, but unmistakably a building, its metal roof reflecting the glint of the lowering sun. Then I saw another building, and another. Trees. Thank God, a town. My heart pounded almost as hard as the engine rattled. I clutched the steering wheel, frantically trying to control it, lurching past a water tower and an empty cattle pen. The buildings became distinct: houses, a car lot, a diner.

And a service station where I lurched to a raw-nerved stop, my hands still shaking from the vibrations of the steering wheel. I shut off the engine, grateful for the sudden quiet, and

noticed two men at the pump, their backs to me. Self-conscious about my beard stubble and my sweat-drenched clothes, I got out wearily to ask directions.

They had their backs to me. That should have told me right away that something was wrong. I'd made such a racket pulling up it wasn't normal for them not to turn, curious, wondering what the hell was coming.

But they didn't, and I was too exhausted for my instincts to jangle, warning me. Stiff-legged, I approached them. "Excuse me," I said. "I guess you can tell I've got some trouble. Is the mechanic still on duty?"

Neither turned or answered.

They must have heard me, I thought. All the same, I repeated louder. "The mechanic. Is he still on duty?"

No response.

For Christ's sake, are they deaf or what? So I walked around to face them.

Even as they pivoted to show me their backs again, I gaped. Because I'd seen a brief glimpse of their faces. Oh my God. I felt as if an ice-cold needle had pierced my spine. I've never seen a leper. All the same, from what I've read, I imagine a leper might have been less ugly than what I was looking at. *Ugly* isn't strong enough to describe what I saw. Not just the swollen goiter bulging from each throat like an obscene Adam's apple. Not just the twisted jaws and cheekbones or the massive lumps on their foreheads. Or the distended lips and misshapen nostrils. Worse, their skin itself

seemed rotten, gray and mushy. Like open festering sores.

I nearly gagged. My throat contracted so I couldn't breathe. Get control, I told myself. Whatever's wrong with them, it's not their fault. Don't gape like a six-year-old who's never seen someone malformed before. Obviously that's why they didn't want to look at me. Because they hated the disgusted reaction, the awful sickened stare.

They faced the door to the service station now, and I certainly wasn't about to walk in front of them again, so I repeated, "The mechanic. Where is he?"

As one, they each raised their right arm and pointed horribly twisted fingers toward the right, toward a gravel road that led out of town, parallel to the interstate miles away.

Well, damn it, I thought. I'm sorry about what's happened to you. I wish there was some way to help you, but right now I need help myself, and you two guys are rude.

I stalked away, my head beginning to ache, my throat feeling raw. A quick glance at my watch showed seven o'clock. The sun, of course, was lower. If I didn't find a mechanic soon . . .

Across the street, on the corner, I saw a restaurant. Perhaps too kind a word. *Greasy spoon* would have been more accurate. The windows looked grimy. The posters for Pepsi and Schlitz looked ten years old. BAR-B-CUE, a dingy neon sign said. Why not shorten it, I thought, to BBC, which if you change the C to G stands for botulism and bad gas?

And why not stop with the jokes? You might be eating

there tonight.

That's almost funny now. Eating, I mean. Dear God, I don't know how long I can stand this.

. . . So I walked across the dusty street and opened the fly-covered creaky screen door, peering in at five customers. "Hey, anybody know where—"

The words caught in my throat. My mind reeled. Because the customers had already shifted, turning, with their backs to me—and *these* had humps and twisted spines and shoulders wrenched in directions nature had never intended. In shock, I hurriedly glanced at the waitress behind the corner, and she'd turned her back as well. The mirror, though. The goddamn mirror. Her face reflecting off it seemed the result of a hideous genetic experiment. She had no jaw. And only one eye. I stumbled back, letting the door swing shut with a creak and a bang, my mind still retaining the terrible impression of—it couldn't be—two slits where there should have been a nose.

I'll make this quick. Everywhere I went, growing ever more apprehensive, I found monsters. The town was like a hundred horror movies squeezed together. Lon Chaney's worst makeup inventions almost seemed normal by comparison. The island of Dr. Moreau would have been a resort for beauty-contest winners.

Jesus.

Eight o'clock. The eastern sky was turning gray. The western horizon was the red of blood. I wondered if I'd gone

insane. A town of monsters, no one speaking to me, everyone turning away, most pointing toward the gravel road that headed east out of town.

Appalled, I scrambled into the Porsche, turned the key, and the rest hadn't done the car any good. If anything, the engine roared and shuddered more extremely. Stomach scalding, I prayed. Although the Porsche shook and protested, it blessedly managed to move.

A town, I thought. Maybe there's another town a few miles along that gravel road. Maybe that's why they pointed down there.

I rattled and heaved and jolted out of town, switching on my emergency flashers, although I didn't know why since I'd seen no traffic. All the same, with dusk coming on, it didn't hurt to be careful.

A quarter mile. Then half a mile. That's as far as I got before the engine failed completely. It's probable that only one cylinder was working by then. I'd hear a bang, then three silent beats, then another bang and three more silent beats. With every bang, the car crept forward a little. Then it finally wheezed and coasted to a stop. The motor pinged from the heat. A Porsche doesn't have a radiator, but I swear I heard a hiss.

And that was that, stuck in the middle of nowhere, a town of horrors behind me, an empty landscape ahead of me, and an interstate God knew how far away.

With night approaching.

On the prairie.

I've said I was frightened. But then I got mad. At my luck and the guy in Lander who'd "fixed" my car, at me and my stupidity for having left the highway, not to mention my failure to think ahead when I was back in town. I should have bought some soft drinks anyhow, some candy bars and potato chips or something—anything to keep from starving all night out here in the dark. A beer. Hell, considering the way I felt, a six-pack. Might as well get shit-faced.

Angry, I stepped from the car. I leaned against a fender and lit a cigarette and cursed. Eight thirty now. Dusk thickened. What was I going to do?

I try to convince myself I was being logical. By nine, I'd made my choice. The town was only half a mile away. Ten minutes' walk at most. If that stupid BAR-B-CUE had stayed open, I could still get some beer and chips. At the moment, I didn't care how revolting those people looked. I'd be damned if I was going to spend the night out here with my stomach rumbling. That'd be one discomfort too many.

So I walked, and when I reached the outskirts, night at last had fallen. The lights were on in the BAR-B-CUE; at least my luck hadn't failed entirely. Or so I thought, because the lights quickly went off as I came closer. Swell, I thought in disgust.

The place stayed dark.

But then the door creaked open. The waitress—a vague white shape—stepped out. She locked the door behind her. I

almost asked if she'd mind waiting so I could buy some food. Naturally I assumed she hadn't seen me. That's why she surprised me when she turned.

I blinked, astonished. In contrast with the way the town had treated me, she actually spoke. Her voice was frail and wispy, the words slurred, suggestive of a cleft palate or a harelip. "I saw you," she said. "Through the window. Coming back." Maybe I imagined it, but her whispered cadence sounded musical.

And this is important, too. Although we faced each other, the street had no lights, and the darkness had thickened enough that I couldn't see her features. For the first time since I'd arrived in town, I felt as if I was having a normal conversation. It wasn't hard to pretend, as long as I forced myself not to remember the horror of what she looked like.

I managed a shrug, a laugh of despair. "My car broke down. I'm stuck out there." Although I knew she couldn't see my gesture, I pointed down the pitch-dark road. "I hoped you'd still be open so I could get something to eat."

She didn't answer for a moment. Then abruptly she said, "I'm sorry. The owner closed a half hour ago. I stayed to clean up and get things ready for tomorrow. The grill's cold."

"But just some beer? Potato chips or something?"

"Can't. The cash register's empty."

"But I don't care about change. I'll pay you more than the stuff is worth."

Again she didn't answer for a moment. "Beer and potato

chips?”

“Please.” My hopes rose. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

“While you spend the night in your car?”

“Unless there’s a hotel.”

“There isn’t. You need a decent meal, a proper place to sleep. Considering the trouble you’re in.”

She paused. I remember the night was silent. Not even crickets sang.

“I live alone,” she said, her cadence even more musical. “You can sleep on the sofa in the living room. I’ll broil a steak for you.”

“I couldn’t,” I said. The thought of seeing her face again filled me with panic.

“I won’t turn the lights on. I won’t disgust you.”

I lied. “It’s just that I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“No trouble.” She sounded emphatic. “I want to help. I’ve always believed in charity.”

She began to walk away. Paralyzed, I thought about it. For sure, the steak sounded good. And the sofa. A hell of a lot better than sleeping hunched in the car.

But Jesus, the way she looked.

And maybe my attitude was painfully familiar to her. How would I feel, I wondered, if I was deformed and people shunned me? Charity. Hadn’t she said she believed in charity? Well, maybe it was time I believed in it myself. I followed her, less motivated by the steak and the sofa than by my determination to be kind.

She lived three blocks away, on a street as dark as the one we'd left. The houses were still, no sounds, no sign of anyone. It was the strangest walk of my life.

From what I could tell in the dark, she lived in an old two-story Victorian house. The porch floor squeaked as we crossed it to go inside. And true to her word, she didn't turn on the lights.

"The living room's through an arch to your left," she said. "The sofa's against the wall straight ahead. I'll fix the steak."

I thanked her and did what she said. The sofa was deep and soft. I hadn't realized how tired I was until I leaned back. In the dark, I heard the sizzle of the steak from somewhere at the back of the house. I assume she turned the kitchen lights on to cook it, but I didn't see even the edge of a glow. Then the fragrance of the beef drifted toward me. Echoing footsteps came near.

"I should have asked how well done you like it. Most customers ask for medium rare." Her wispy voice sounded like wind chimes.

"Great." I no longer cared if she was ugly. By then I was ravenous.

In the dark, she cautiously set up a tray, brought the steak, bread and butter, A.1. sauce, and a beer. Although awkward because I couldn't see, I ate amazingly fast. I couldn't get enough of it. *Delicious* couldn't describe it. Mouthwatering. Taste bud-expanding. Incredible.

I sopped up sauce and steak juice with my final remnant of

bread, stuffed it in my mouth, washed it down with my final sip of beer, and sagged back, knowing I'd eaten the best meal of my life.

Throughout, she'd sat in a chair across the room and hadn't spoken once.

"That was wonderful," I said. "I don't know how to thank you."

"You already have."

I wasn't sure what she meant. My belly felt reassuringly packed to the bursting point.

"You haven't asked," she said.

I frowned. "Asked what? I don't understand."

"You do. You're dying to ask. I know you are. They always are."

"They?"

"Why the people here are horribly deformed."

I felt a chill. In truth, I had been tempted to ask. The town was so unusual, the people so strange, I could barely stifle my curiosity. She'd been so generous, though, I didn't want to draw attention to her infirmity and be rude. At once, her reflection in the mirror at the BAR-B-CUE popped up terribly in my mind. No chin. One eye. Flat slits where there should have been a nose. Oozing sores.

I almost vomited. And not just from the memory. Something was happening in my stomach. It churned and complained, growling, swelling larger, as if it were crammed with a million tiny darting hornets.

“Sins,” she said.

I squirmed, afraid.

“Long ago,” she said, “in the Middle Ages, certain priests used to travel from village to village. Instead of hearing confessions, they performed a ceremony to cleanse the souls of the villagers. Each member of the group brought something to eat and set it on a table in front of the priest. At last, an enormous meal awaited him. He said the necessary words. All the sins of the village were transferred into the food.”

I swallowed bile, unaccountably terrified.

“And then he ate the meal. Their sins,” she said. “He stuffed himself with sins.”

Her tone was so hateful I wanted to scream and run.

“The villagers knew he’d damned himself to save their souls. For this, they gave him money. Of course, there were disbelievers who maintained the priest was nothing more than a cheat, a con man tricking the villagers into feeding him and giving him money. They were wrong.”

I heard her stand.

“Because the evidence was clear. The sins had their effect. The evil spread through the sin-eater’s body, festering, twisting, bulging to escape.”

I heard her doing something in the corner. I tensed from the sound of scratching.

“And not just priests ate sins,” she said. “Sometimes special women did it too. But the problem was, suppose the sin-eater wanted to be redeemed as well? How could a sin-

eater get rid of the sins? Get rid of the ugliness. By passing the sins along, of course. By having them eaten by someone else.”

“You’re crazy,” I said. “I’m getting out of here.”

“No, not just yet.”

I realized the scratching sound was a match being struck. A tiny flame appeared. My stomach soured in pulsing agony.

“A town filled with sin-eaters,” she said. “Monsters shunned by the world. Bearable only to each other. Suffering out of charity for the millions of souls who’ve been redeemed.”

She lit a candle. The light grew larger in the room. I saw her face and gaped again, but this time for a different reason. She was beautiful. Stunning. Gorgeous. Her skin seemed to glow with sensuality.

It also seemed to shimmer, to ripple, to—

“No. My God,” I said. “You put something in my food.”

“I told you.”

“Not that foolishness.” I tried to stand, but my legs felt like plastic. My body seemed to expand, contract and twist. My vision became distorted, as if I peered at funhouse mirrors. “LSD? Was that it? Mescaline? I’m hallucinating.” Each word echoed more loudly, yet seemed to murmur from far away.

I cringed as she approached, growing more beautiful with every step.

“And it’s been so long,” she said. “I’ve been so ugly. So long since anyone wanted me.”

Reality cracked. The universe spun. She stripped off her uniform, showing her breasts, her . . . Her body was . . .

Despite the torture in my stomach, the insanity of my distorted senses, I wanted her. I suddenly needed her as desperately as anything I'd ever coveted.

Passion was endless, powerful, frantic. Rolling, we bumped the tray, sending glass and plate, knife and fork and steak sauce crashing down. A lamp fell, shattering. My naked back slammed against the sharp edge of a table, making me groan. Not from pain. I screamed in ecstasy.

And just before I came with an explosive burst, as if from the core of my soul, as if after foisting her sins upon me she needed something from me in return, I felt her drawing me close to her, down, ever down.

She moaned and pleaded, "Eat me. Eat me!"

I lost consciousness. The Nebraska state police claim they found me wandering naked down the middle of Interstate 80 at one o'clock in the afternoon two days later. They say I was horribly sunburned. I don't know. I don't remember. All I recall is waking up in the hospital in Iowa City.

In the psych ward.

The doctors lie. They claim I'm not ugly. Then why have they locked me up and taken the mirrors away? Why do the nurses flinch when they come in with guards to feed me? They think they're so smart. Despite the thick wire screen across the window, at night I see my reflection. I don't have a chin. There's only one eye. In place of a nose, I've got two

flat, repulsive slits. I'm being punished. I understand that now. For all the evil in the world.

I used to be a Catholic, but I don't go to church anymore. When I was young, though, learning to go to confession, the nuns made me memorize a speech to say to the priest in the booth. *Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. My last confession was . . .* And then I'd tell him how long ago, and then I'd confess, and then I'd finish by saying, *I'm sorry for these and all my sins.* I am, you know. I'm sorry. Except I didn't commit them. The sins aren't mine.

My wife and children come to visit. I refuse to let them see me. I can't bear to look at the sickened reaction in their eyes.

How can a sin-eater get rid of the sins? That's what she said to me. *By passing the sins along, of course. By having them eaten by someone else.*

I've known for several weeks now what I had to do. It was simply a matter of pretending to be calm, of waiting for my chance. I hope the guard wasn't badly hurt. I tried not to hit him too hard. But his head made a terrible sound when I cracked it against the wall.

I've been very clever. I've stolen three cars, and I've never kept one long enough for the state police to catch me. It's taken me two days to return.

That's why the tree's so important. It's my landmark, you see. Remember the off-ramp had no sign. The tree's all I had to give me direction.

But I'm puzzled. Oh, I found the tree all right, its branches

in the shape of the menorah candelabrum. And it's so distinctive I can't believe there'd be another like it. But I swear it had eight upright branches then, and it was bare.

But now it's got nine.

And leaves have sprouted.

Dear God, help me. Save me.

I pressed the accelerator to the floor, racing along the two-lane blacktop. As before, the road stretched forever. Doubt made me frantic. I tried not to glance at the rearview mirror. All the same, I weakened, and my ugliness made me wail.

I saw the building in the distance, the glint of sunlight off the metal roof. I whimpered, rushing closer. And I found the town again. Exactly the same. The water tower. The cattle pen (but it's full now). The service station, the BAR-B-CUE.

I don't understand, though. Everyone's normal. I see no goiters, no hunchbacks, no twisted limbs and festering sores. They stare as I drive past. I can't stand to see their shock and disgust.

. . . I've found her house. I'm in here waiting.

In the hospital, the doctors said I was having delusions. They agreed my initial suspicion might have been correct—that some chemical in my food could have made me hallucinate, and now the effects of the drug persist, making me think I'm ugly, distorting my memory of the trip. I wish I could believe that. I even wish I could believe I've gone crazy. Anything would be better than the truth.

But I know what it is. She *did* it. She made me eat her

sins. But damn it, I'll get even with her. I'll make her take them back.

I've been writing this in her living room while I glance hurriedly out the window. In case something happens to me, so people will understand. It wasn't my fault.

But she'll come home soon. Yes, she will. And then . . .

I hear a car door. On the street, someone's stepping from a station wagon.

Oh, sweet Christ, at last.

But no, it's not one person.

Two. A man and a woman.

And the woman isn't the one I want.

What *happened*? Did she leave?

They'll come in. They'll find me.

I don't care. I can't bear this anymore. I have to pass the sins along. I have to . . .

I found a knife in the kitchen. See, I don't know the words. I don't know how to put my sins in the food.

But I remember the last thing she said to me. I know how to do it. I have to use the knife and a fork and make them—
Eat me.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Morrell is the critically acclaimed author of *First Blood*, the novel in which Rambo was created. He holds a Ph. D. in American literature from Penn State and was a professor in the English department at the University of Iowa. His numerous New York Times bestsellers include the classic spy trilogy *The Brotherhood of the Rose* (the basis for the only television mini-series to premier after a Super Bowl), *The Fraternity of the Stone*, and *The League of Night and Fog*. An Edgar, Anthony, and Macavity nominee, Morrell is the recipient of three Bram Stoker awards from the Horror Writers Association as well as the prestigious lifetime Thriller Master Award from the International Thriller Writers' organization. His writing book, *The Successful Novelist*, discusses what he has learned in his four decades as an author. He lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the [Author Spotlight](#).

NOVEL EXCERPT

Egmont USA Presents:

Amity

(novel excerpt)

Micol Ostow

*Please enjoy the following excerpt of the new novel **Amity** by Micol Ostow, coming this month from Egmont USA:*

When Connor's family moves to Amity, a secluded house on the peaceful banks of New England's Concord River, his nights are plagued with gore-filled dreams of demons, destruction, and revenge. Dreams he kind of likes. Dreams he could make real, with Amity's help. Ten years later, Gwen's family moves to Amity for a fresh start. Instead, she's haunted by lurid visions, disturbing voices, and questions about her own sanity. But with her history, who would ever believe her? And what could be done if they did? Because Amity isn't just a house. She is a living force, bent on manipulating her inhabitants to her twisted will. She will use Connor and Gwen to bring about a violent end as she's done before. As she'll do again. And again. And again.

Inspired by a true-crime story, Amity spans generations to weave an overlapping, interconnected tale of terror, insanity, danger, and death.

Prologue

Here

*Here is a house; bones of beam and joints of hardware,
stone foundation smooth, solid as the core of the earth,*

nestled, pressed, cold and flat and dank against the hard-packed soil and all of its squirming secrets.

Here is a house; sturdy on its cornerstones, shutters spread wide, windowpanes winking against the speckled prisms of daylight. Weather-beaten slats of knotted siding, drinking in nightfall. Tarred shingles surveying star maps, legends shared in the pattern of dotted constellations above.

Here is a house; not sane, not sentient, but potent, poisonous, drenched with decay.

Here is a house of ruin and rage, of death and deliverance, seated atop countless nameless unspoken souls.

Here is a house of vengeance and power, land laid claim by wraiths and ciphers, persistent and insistent, branded and bonded and bound.

Here is where I live, not living.

Here is always mine.

Now

Dear Jules:

The Halls moved out of Amity today.

She told me. Amity did.

Like a bat out of hell. Or bats, I guess, seeing as it was the four of them—Mr. and Mrs., and the kids, Luke and Gwen. Who aren't really kids, you know, with Gwen being

exactly my age—our age—and Luke barely a full year older. Not quite twins—not like us. But close enough, right?

Anyway: Gwen. I could tell Gwen was different right from the start. Something about the light in her eyes told me that she had ways of seeing that were . . . well, you know, different from normal people.

I liked that about her. Of course. I like different.

It reminds me of me.

But Amity? Well.

Amity doesn't care much about different. Amity doesn't care much about anything, does she? Amity just wants what she wants.

Twenty-eight days. Barely a month. That's how long they lasted, the Halls, at Amity.

Exactly the same as us.

—Connor

Part One: Arrival

Ten Years Earlier

Day One: Connor

It was hot on the day we moved in, brutally hot, in that way that makes you feel almost crazy, sweat dripping into

your eyes so bad you're practically blind. When we first pulled up in the van, Amity glimmered so you could almost see the ripples of heat with your own eyes, like a mirage plunked down far outside a tiny New England town. It wasn't a day for heavy lifting; only a crazy person would have tried moving all on their own, in that kind of weather.

But no one ever said that Dad wasn't completely insane.

Even being so close to the water, the sun was near unbearable. When Jules whined, Dad fixed her with one of his looks. Dad was never known for his patience. Not like me. I can be very patient. When it's useful, I mean.

Normal people would have hired movers, professional guys, to get the job done. But Dad said, "Why would I pay hard-earned money when we've got four pairs of hands among us?"

Yeah. Four pairs, so at least he wasn't expecting Abel to do much lugging.

Abel was only six, but you kind of never knew with Dad.

I just hoped that even then, even little, my brother knew he was getting a pass. Dad wasn't much for passes. This was definitely your onetime-deal kind of thing.

There were no onetime-deal passes for Jules, or for me. Seventeen, I wasn't an athlete at all—team sports rubbed me the wrong way—but I was strong enough.

Strong enough for some stuff.

So there we were on moving day. Jules whined, Dad glared, Abel mewled, and Mom worried. And I hitched my

shorts up and wrangled a box marked “fragile” in six different places. It made a clinking sound as I hiked down the drive and past Mom, who made a face at the tinkle of shattered glass.

Our first day in Amity, and things were already all falling apart.

Mom had bought this sign, I remember.

Seriously, it was the stupidest thing. Like so stupid, I mean, that you almost had to feel all sorry for her for even having it. For, like, going into a store, and seeing it, and thinking, *Yes, I want that, I should have that thing*, and then paying real, actual money to own it. I can’t even tell you. I didn’t even know where you could find something stupid like that, a sign for a house.

“Amity,” it said: this fake etching on a cheap, shiny, little fake wooden plaque. She must’ve had it made up special, which made the whole thing even dumber. I didn’t know anyone whose house had a name. It was the kind of thing you’d see in a movie, like if someone were rich or whatever. But no rich person would buy something tacky like this.

We weren’t rich. I mean, we weren’t poor. Which I guess meant we were in the middle. Probably from the outside it looked like we were doing better than we really were. That was Dad’s thing—making sure we looked like we were doing better, doing well. God only knew what his sketchy “business” deals were. He had to sell off the Ford dealership downstate real quick, and I knew some neighbors had their own theories about his work. None of them were all that flattering.

But even with Concord being a little speck on the map, the kind of small town even small-town people are bored by, it was pretty, sort of. Like respectable. The kind of place you could maybe put down roots, not the kind of place you rushed to, all cowering in the dead of night, your stuff piled sky-high in the back of a pickup, no forwarding address left behind.

Concord was a respectable town, one of the oldest in the country. I guess Dad picked it thinking some respectability might rub off on us.

Also, the house came cheap. I didn't know why at the time.

I didn't care much about things like what a house cost, but I had to admit that Amity was nice. It was pretty big. Much bigger than our old place. In Amity, my bedroom was connected to Jules's by a bathroom we had all to ourselves. That bathroom felt like a real, big-time luxury after sharing just a single john with Mom and Dad for so long. It had one of those ancient bathtubs with the heavy iron claw feet that looked about a hundred years old. Jules thought it was cute but I thought you had to wonder how many people had soaked their bones in a tub that old, and where those people were now. And Abel's room was way down the hall, so for the first time in forever Jules and I wouldn't be woken by him at the unholy crack of what-the-sweet-living-Jesus every day.

On the third floor, there was a room I hoped for a second would be a den or something, like for me and Jules to hang out in, especially since Dad wasn't one for sharing the old

remote in the family room. It would've been nice to have a space of our own just to, you know, be in. But Mom said it was going to be her "sewing room," like we were living in a fifties sitcom, so that was that. Never mind that I couldn't remember the last time I saw her sew. Jules was always trying to get me to go easier on the old lady anyway.

Hanging that sign from the mailbox was Mom's first and last sitcom moment at Amity, it turned out. And she never did spend any real time in that sewing room.

I remember moving day, and her linking the plaque through some hooks that'd been in the mailbox before we even arrived—I thought it was funny or just dumb luck or something that the hooks were already in, like they'd been waiting for us. Dumb luck didn't come easy to Mom. Or me, or Jules, now that you mention it. Any of us. But Mom smiled as she slipped the cruddy little sign in place, and then stepped back, holding a hand flat over her gray-green eyes to shield them from the sun.

Amity. It was ours now.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Micol Ostow is the author (or ghostwriter) of over forty books for teens, including Egmont USA's family. Her graphic novel, *So Punk Rock (and Other*

Ways to Disappoint Your Mother), was named a 2009 Booklist Top Ten Arts Books for Youth Selection, a Booklist Top Ten Religion Books for Youth Selection, and a Sydney Taylor Notable Book for Teens. Amity is her first horror novel. She received her MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from the Vermont College of Fine Arts and lives in Brooklyn, New York. She teaches a popular young adult writing workshop through MediaBistro.com.

NONFICTION

The H Word: Horror Fiction of Tomorrow

Eric J. Guignard

A time-honored adage amongst writers of the macabre declares, “True horror is timeless.”

Things and ideas that scared us centuries ago still retain the same deep-seated dread our ancestors faced: anything threatening us that is beyond our understanding or our control. Whether this be a repulsive creature or a psychological fear of abandonment, loss, or death, certain fears are hard-wired into our collective psyche. For the most part these don’t change, nor do the means to incite those fears. What *does* change are the nuances of those fears and the tools to either reconcile or manipulate that which terrifies us.

Those nuances and tools are what interest me. Horror writers are faced with a litany of new technologies, social upheavals, changing belief systems, and scientific advancements to influence our writing. What will be considered cutting-edge *tomorrow*? What will be topical? Relevant? In vogue?

The publishing industry is changing, as are literary demands and reader tastes. And, like any creative enterprise, it’s easy to become stale or associated with antiquated ideas or clichés. I thought I’d explore some predictions about what I

think horror authors will (and in some cases *should*) be writing about over the next decade. These conjectures are not directed at publishing or marketing strategies, but rather artistic subject matter. What will be the big genre-shifts, the future winners in pop culture, and what will be the moldy-oldie tropes that are buried and forgotten?

Like the weather, there's no certainty in these forecasts, but if conditions continue, here's what we might expect of where horror fiction is heading:

The Future of Horror Is in Pushing Boundaries

What's been done already has been done well and done often. While audiences don't mind encountering the same storyline executed in a fresh perspective or with a new "twist," the writers most likely to find success will not be those content with cookie-cutter fiction, but those who strive to find new ways to scare their readers. This does not imply a rush toward gore and "torture-porn" (which I believe is experiencing a backlash that will likely continue), but rather challenging our beliefs, testing presupposed limits, and experimenting with original subjects.

The term "pushing boundaries" doesn't have to offend people, but it means taking risks. Consider Gregor Samsa's beetle transformation in *The Metamorphosis* (Franz Kafka) and Winston Smith's slow-build realizations in *1984* (George Orwell). Pushing boundaries also doesn't have to be as

abstruse as *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski. Authors like Tim Powers and Jack Vance have successfully bent genres and included unexpected elements in their storylines, mixing with abandon equal parts adventure, history, social theory, and the supernatural. When something is unexpected—and it works—that fosters the fun, the excitement, in writing and in reading.

Horror in Technology

Although using technology as a cautionary tale or as a mechanism for nefarious purposes is nothing new in writing, what keeps it prevalent and exciting are the modern *advances* that permeate our lives. Internet, cars that drive themselves, three-dimensional printers: What once was science fiction is now fundamental and ordinary. The machines of today and tomorrow provide unlimited new fodder in terms of consequence, advantage, or misuse.

Further, technology poses questions that writers are forced to address. Who now can suspend their disbelief when a character gets “lost” on a back road shortcut and there’s no explanation as to why they can’t call for help on their smartphone? Trying to research a riddle? It’s not like the pre-nineties, meeting characters in a wonderful atmospheric library scene; people today use Google from their home. The world is plugged into GPS, tracking, and remote presence. Looking for the next avant-garde horror idea? Start exploring

the latest social media and virtual relationship web sites. The creeps will never end . . .

Technology also allows new usage as a *medium* for writing. Creepypasta posted a great story in mid-March about using Google Maps as an entirely new channel for a horror story (You can read it at deathandtaxesmag.com/216822/is-this-creepypasta-story-about-google-maps-the-future-of-horror-fiction.)

Environmental Horror

Environmental horror applies to any story in which an element of nature takes on a speculative aspect with potentially deadly consequences to humans, such as overpopulation, climate change, diminishment of resources, science gone awry, etc. Often the catalyst for tales of Apocalyptic/Post-Apocalyptic/Dystopian Horror, this sub-genre promotes the greater good of environmental awareness and often serves as a platform for real warnings about misusing Earth's resources.

Whether you agree or disagree with the debate over environmental concerns, these issues make headline news and incite conversation which, in turn, spurs creative ideas. Examples of environmental horror (AKA eco-horror) include: *Hothouse* by Brian W. Aldiss (1962); *Garbage Man* by Joseph D'Lacey (2009); and *The Ruins* by Scott Smith (2006). Be on the lookout for many more.

Elevation of Lovecraftian Horror and Influence

Creator of the Cthulhu mythos, author H. P. Lovecraft bred this sub-genre that chronicles “cosmic horror of the unknown.” Recurrent themes are guided by the belief that human minds cannot possibly comprehend the perilous mysteries of the universe which is, at its core, alien and malevolent. Frequent elements include protagonists who use science and logic to attempt to unravel these mysteries but then most often lose their sanity as the mysteries of the cosmos are too much for the human mind to comprehend.

Lovecraftian Horror has steadily been growing in popular culture over recent decades, particularly since the 1980s, and shows no sign of slowing. References to Cthulhu and “the Deep Ones” are found in movies, comics, video games, music, clothing, and more. Writers continue to turn out new fiction incorporating characters and ideas of this shared universe, and some of today’s most famous horror authors cite Lovecraft as a major inspiration, including Stephen King, Ramsey Campbell, and Brian Lumley.

For further reading: apex-magazine.com/the-improbable-inevitable-domestication-of-the-great-old-ones-hp-lovecrafts-iconic-influence-on-21st-century-fantastic-literature-and-culture.

Weird Fiction

The transition from conversation of Lovecraft to the sub-genre of “weird fiction” is a natural progression, as the two styles have overlap. The difference is that Lovecraftian fiction tends to be pessimistic, dependent on atmosphere, and stresses fear that is in the absence of normality. “Weird Fiction” tends to cross several sub-genres and may blend psychology, the supernatural, and pure whimsy, though it often still presents a dark outlook.

A subset of Weird Fiction includes “Bizarro Fiction,” which is a growing cult classification encompassing elements of satire, absurdism, the grotesque, and pop-surrealism in order to create subversive works that are as strange and entertaining as possible.

The draw of weird and bizarro fiction is that it’s fresh. In an industry bloated with regurgitated ideas, these stories are stimulating and original, while at the same time still seeming very personal. Often experimental, the downside is that weird fiction can come across as artsy or bombastic at times; some of it’s brilliant, some of it’s dreadful. But what is evident is that this sub-genre is gaining traction within mass markets, particularly ebooks, and reinforces my belief that the future of horror is in “pushing boundaries.”

Some better known proponents of Weird Fiction include Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, Laird Barron, China Miéville, and Simon Strantzas. A great source for your introduction to “The Weird” is here: weirdfictionreview.com.

Familiar Monsters and Tropes

Another writing adage says, “Everything old is eventually new again.” When looking forward to writing trends, it’s also necessary to look back at history, as well as to understand “timing.” We see familiar monster tropes on a regular basis, and their rise and fall in popularity is sometimes cyclical.

For example, vampires may be considered “out” in terms of popularity, while zombies are “in.” Nancy Kilpatrick wrote a smart essay a few months back for “The H Word” explaining this in depth: nightmare-magazine.com/nonfiction/the-h-word-and-then-the-zombie-killed-the-vampire.

A backlash over vampires seems to have begun after the *Twilight* series (books and movies) with the exception of adoration still found in fan fiction and Young Adult. Prior to vampires, the hottest staple in horror writing was serial killer fiction in the 1980s, such as the *Hannibal Lecter* books by Thomas Harris (1981 and onwards) and *The Pet* by Charles L. Grant (1986), culminating with *American Psycho* (1991). Prior to serial killer fiction was religious horror, particularly demonic possession, exorcism, etc., such as *Rosemary’s Baby* by Ira Levin (1967); *The Exorcist* by William Peter Blatty (1971); and *The Omen* by David Seltzer (1976). Prior to that was Mad Scientists (science gone awry); Killer Animals;

Mummies; and leading further back to the rich gothic and ghost tales of the Victorian era.

Of course, all these tropes are still used today, but we see certain trends in what is most popular in mainstream media. Personally, I think zombies are soon to fall out of favor. There's only so much saturation in pop culture we can stand before tiring of its cause célèbre. New "popular" monsters will take their place in the future and witches/witchcraft may be a forerunner. Although witches have had small hits in fame throughout the nineties, I believe there's a larger future for them, particularly coming off the success of television shows such as *American Horror Story: Coven* and *Witches of East End*. I also predict a continuing rise in Paranormal Horror (i.e. not paranormal romance, though that too remains huge), which is the crisis involving intangible monsters (be it ghosts or psychological fears) or any psychic phenomena such as faith healing or telepathy.

Oddly, cannibalism is another horror subject I've been coming across more frequently lately, though I lack the imagination to envision a meteoric rise in this taboo. Lastly, I believe there will be a move toward horror in historic fiction, with an emphasis on atmosphere and events during the first half of the twentieth century. There's a common wonder and nostalgia associated with the lives of our parents and grandparents and also a sense of natural horror at events they had to endure like the Depression, World Wars, and communistic Cold War fears of nuclear attack.

Material Effects

Although this next trend isn't specific to horror, I thought it important to note. Over the past few decades, the average length of horror books for adult readers has been about 80,000 to 100,000 words. Set by market conditions and consumer expectations, the list price is affected by printing costs (paper, ink, etc.) and other considerations such as shelf space and even reader genre-preferences. With the popularization of ebooks (roughly twenty-five percent of publisher sales, per the Association of American Publishers), printing costs and shelf space considerations are no longer an issue. The e-medium influences the reader's expectation; reading digitally tends to be done in shorter time spans, and ebooks offer convenience, cost savings, and free up physical space.

A recent trend is the reduction in average length of novels to correlate with digital preferences. What this suggests is that if the word count declines, plots may become more succinct, action sped up, and an overall lessening of exposition and development. A 50,000 ebook may price the same as a hundred thousand word ebook; there's no cost incentive to include more material.

However, that very cost incentive is now found instead in the resurgence of serialized books or episodic novels. Breaking up that same hundred thousand word novel into

four novellas at 25,000 words each enables publishers to charge readers a bit more over the course of release. Also, reader interest shows an uptick in a series and heightened loyalty is captured. Genre stories will be affected with greater stress on developing setting as part of “worldbuilding.” Although generally used in terms of science fiction or fantasy genres, worldbuilding in horror is simply developing the “rules” of a fictional universe, even if it’s as mundane as inventing a hardware store in Chicago where one doesn’t currently exist. Worldbuilding in an episodic series develops consistency between books and brings the reader back to a place they’ve been familiarized with.

Diversity in Voice

Lastly, and most importantly, I foresee a rise in diversification amongst horror writers with increasing output/popularity for underrepresented authors in terms of race, gender, and sexual orientation. With plentiful exceptions, horror writers do tend to be middle-aged Caucasian men. Today’s market begs for equal representation, and that’s a good thing. Authors tend to write about experiences unique to their own heritage, so if the scribblers who reach publication are all of the same ilk, that can lead to a very homogenized—and stale—reading experience. Greater diversity in authors’ backgrounds leads to greater diversity in subject matter, character motivations, setting and context, hopes, fears, and

conflicts.

And when I say that the future of horror is the pushing of boundaries, that truly begins *here*, even if those boundaries should have been pushed a long time ago. Audiences today want fresh perspectives and an evident response is to promote fresh voices.

Further Reading:

- Women in horror: sfsignal.com/archives/2013/10/mind-meld-favorite-women-in-horror
- LGBT in horror: darkscribemagazine.com/dark-fiction-roundtable/the-fear-of-gay-men-a-roundtable-discussion-on-the-new-queer.html
- Writers of color in horror: carlbrandon.org

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric J. Guignard writes dark and speculative fiction from the outskirts of Los Angeles. His stories and articles may be found in magazines, journals, anthologies, and any other media that will print him. He's a member of the Horror Writer's Association and the International Thriller Writers. Recent magazine publications include *Buzzy Magazine*, *Beware the Dark*, and *Stupefying Stories*. He's also an anthology editor, including *Dark Tales of Lost Civilizations* and *After Death* which were each nominated for the Bram Stoker Award. Read his novella, *Baggage of Eternal Night* (nominated for the International Thriller Award), and watch for many more forthcoming books,

including *Chestnut 'Bo* (TBP 2015). Visit Eric at: www.ericjguignard.com or at his blog: www.ericjguignard.blogspot.com.

Artist Gallery

Jeff Simpson

Jeff Simpson is a concept artist and illustrator living in Montreal Canada, currently working for Ubisoft Montreal. His previous clients include Eidos Montreal (*Deus Ex Next Gen*), Ubisoft Montreal (*Assassins Creed: Revelations*, *Assassins Creed: 3*, *Assassins Creed: Unity*), Universal Pictures (*Snow White and the Huntsman*), Lionsgate (*The Last Witch Hunter*), MovingPictureCompany (various films to be announced), The Mill (VFX concept for several advertisements), Wizards of the Coast (*Magic The Gathering*).

[To view the gallery, turn the page.]



















Artist Spotlight: Jeff Simpson

Marina J. Lostetter

Welcome back! You were *Nightmare's* very first cover artist, all those years ago. Okay, so we're a young magazine and it was only 2012, but lots of things can change in a couple of years. How do you feel you've grown as an artist since we last saw you?

It's cliché to say but I think I have matured, looking back at my older stuff. It's scary to see the mistakes in old work . . . but what's even scarier is perhaps seeing something I really like and completely forgetting I did it! Working in the videogame and film industry has made me a bit jaded about genre work, so my personal stuff has started to become more experimental and personal.

You've done a few illustrations for *Magic: the Gathering*, and your first card (Bloodcrazed Hoplite) was released in May. Are you a *Magic* fan? How did this job compare to others you've had? Were there any unexpected hurdles or pleasant surprises?

I collected *Magic* cards as a kid/early teen . . . loved them. Eventually video games kinda took over, but all these years

later even the *smell* opening a booster pack releases some pretty heavy nostalgia-packed dopamine. It's a pretty fun job to do on the side. They seem a lot more specific now about what they want. Looking back on those old cards from the '90s they seemed kinda all over the place in terms of styles. I guess it's gotten so big that they had to rein in some consistency/world building or whatever. I kinda miss seeing those wacky-looking cards that totally didn't fit in with the rest though; they were fun.

What typically separates your personal work from your professional work? What are some differences in your style or process? Do you take different mental and emotional approaches?

It depends on the project. I've been lucky enough to work on some games/films where the director lets me kinda roam free and explore, like in my personal work. Others have been extremely specific and not in line with my style at all, but I will always try to push expectations a little bit even on a bland project. For now though, I'm doing well enough to choose projects that sound like they will allow me to be a little more personal with the work. My personal work has an extremely inefficient process, so it's not always well suited to professional work where time/pressure is always a huge factor.

What inspired “Bellona,” the image appearing as this month’s cover?

I did this after my first trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I think I came across a painting of a Hellenistic goddess (sadly I can’t remember which it was!) and was inspired to do my take on a warrior-goddess. I wanted her to actually look intimidating, powerful, and less angelic and sexual as is so often done.

Is there a location you find particularly inspiring—perhaps a place you visit often, or a far off destination you hope to visit one day?

That would definitely be the west coast of Canada, where I was born. I love cold, rocky beaches, misty mountains and dark forests. It’s usually terrifying, rainy, and brutal but I love it.

What scares you the most?

People, of course!

What do you imagine scares the figure in “Bellona” the most?

Herself.

In your 2012 interview you said that you would love to one day have a personal art book or a gallery show. Are these still goals you're working toward?

For sure, though I've been doing too much commercial work recently to put anything substantial together. Still working on it!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marina J. Lostetter's short fiction has appeared in venues such as *InterGalactic Medicine Show*, *Galaxy's Edge*, and *Writers of the Future*. Her most recent publications include a tie-in novelette for the *Star Citizen* game universe, which was serialized over the first four months of 2014. Originally from Oregon, Marina now lives in Arkansas with her husband, Alex. She tweets as @MarinaLostetter. Please visit her homepage at lostetter.net.

Feature Interview: Leslie Klinger

Lisa Morton

While most horror authors are content to create chills, a handful are more interested in studying exactly how those chills are manufactured. **Leslie Klinger** is one of the genre's most significant nonfiction experts. Although he began his nonfiction career annotating Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales, Les has since become a major figure in the art of nonfiction horror, providing annotations for *Dracula*, Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, and (released in October) twenty-two stories by H. P. Lovecraft. Next up for Les is an *Annotated Frankenstein*, which—as with all of his books—will not only include his far-ranging and insightful notes, but also a stunning collection of illustrations. Les has also edited anthologies of vampire and mystery stories, and by day he is an attorney who lives and works in Los Angeles, California.

Let's talk first about how one becomes a professional annotator. You started by just annotating a few Sherlock Holmes stories for fun, right?

Yes, it began as a kind of test for myself. I became hooked on Holmes through the original Baring-Gould *Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, published in 1967, and I dreamt that

someday I might be the one who would update that book when I retired. In the mid-1990s, I had some time on my hands and decided to give it a spin, see what it would be like to update the annotations on a few stories. I showed them to friends whose opinions I valued, they liked them, and a monster was born!

After you finished your three-volume annotated Sherlock Holmes, you decided to tackle *Dracula* next because, as you put it in the preface to your *Dracula*, you were “so immersed in the Victorian world.” What is it about that time and place that fascinates you?

It’s an era that we think we know because it’s close to us in time and we’ve seen it in so many movies, but it’s full of surprises. I say that the Victorian era was the birthplace of all of the great revolutions of the twentieth century—civil rights, women’s rights, technology, the rise of the middle class—and if we want to understand the twentieth century, we need to examine its roots.

You’re an expert in both Sherlock Holmes and Dracula, and yet those characters seem almost complete opposites, with Holmes representing intellect and Dracula, passion . . . but do those characters actually have more in common than meets the eye?

The main thing that the characters have in common is their *size*—both are larger than life and both have captivated readers for more than a century. Of course, they walked the streets of London at exactly the same time, and their stories reflect many of the same cultural and historical issues. Doyle and Stoker were friends and moved in the same literary circles, so this is no surprise. The characters also have intense fandoms, and this too fascinated me. The vampire fans are little less visible than Sherlockians (today, anyway) but as cycles rise and fall—e.g., the *Twilight* films or *Sherlock*—they come out of the dark!

For *Dracula*, you spent two days with the original manuscript, which was part of the collection of Paul Allen. That must have been like having a cocktail out of the Holy Grail.

It was an amazing experience, being able to examine so closely the creative process. The manuscript (actually, a typescript, possibly typed by Stoker himself) has handwritten emendations by Stoker and his editor as well as notes by Thornley Stoker, Bram's brother, a doctor whose advice Bram sought. The coolest part of the manuscript was the parts where material was actually typed and *pasted over* other material. Handling the manuscript permitted me to hold those pages up to the light and read the “pasted over” material, something no one else had ever done! I tried to indicate every

significant change in my footnotes.

I've been able to have a similar experience with Sherlock Holmes stories as well, examining manuscripts, though there are many missing ones. Conan Doyle's manuscripts are much less revealing, however; either he did little editing or, in some cases, I suspect that the "manuscripts" are actually "fair copies" of manuscripts that he discarded.

Why wasn't *Dracula* immediately a huge hit upon its first publication in 1897?

As in the case of *Frankenstein*, some critics found the story "disgusting," and certainly Stoker was not known for writing high literature. I think it simply took time for readers to discover that there was more to the book than a simple, sensational tale. It didn't fail—it went through multiple printings—but it didn't achieve real prominence until—surprise, surprise—it was a successful stage play and film.

Why does *Dracula* continue to fascinate us more than a century after its release?

While it's not the first vampire story, it's the first full-length story, and unlike the previous prominent tales (*The Vampyre*, *Varney the Vampire*, *Carmilla*), it focused equally on the vampire and the vampire-hunters. By depicting the

latter, it achieved a level of suspense never reached before, allowing the reader to place themselves into the minds of these people who slowly learn that they are facing a monster.

We're also fascinated by the vampire itself—a creature that defies death and perhaps, at least in *Dracula*, invites some sympathy for its “outsider” status. As one friend remarked, who wouldn't want to have the strength of twenty men, a hypnotic power over other people, and live forever?

You've taught college courses on *Dracula* via UCLA Extension. What's the first thing you'd want students to know about the Count?

The “truth” about Dracula—that is, I want them to put aside their (mis)conceptions that arise from the films and popular culture. Probably most importantly, Dracula was *not* Vlad the Impaler!

Talk a little about “the Icelandic edition” of *Dracula*.

The first foreign-language edition of *Dracula* was the Icelandic edition, published in 1901. It's important because it included a preface written by Stoker, probably in 1898, in which he identified the Harkers and Dr. Seward as real persons who were his friends and suggested a connection between Dracula and the Ripper murders. I've included it in

my edition, though it didn't appear in English until 1986!

Nearly all of the works you've annotated have had previous annotated editions. Is that ever intimidating for you? Or do those earlier works inspire you and provide a good jumping-off point?

It's certainly intimidating when the previous annotations are as good as the ones that preceded mine (and there are *three* previous annotated *Dracula* editions), but I've only done an annotated edition where I thought I could do something better or significantly differently. For example, while the Baring-Gould *Annotated Sherlock Holmes* is a treasure, it was almost forty years (now almost fifty years) out of date in terms of references to the scholarship, plus it presented the stories in an eccentric order. In the case of my *New Annotated H. P. Lovecraft*, while the two slim volumes done by S. T. Joshi and colleagues are excellent, the annotations there present solely the editors' own original comments and don't reference a large body of other Lovecraftian scholarship. Also, I wanted to add a large number of illustrations and "pop culture" material omitted from those volumes and expand the number of annotated stories. In the case of my *New Annotated Dracula*, no one had referenced either Stoker's notes or the manuscript, and I wanted to include a great deal of material about the text itself. Of course, I owe a great debt to the previous annotators. I

always say that I had three large advantages over Baring-Gould in preparing my *Sherlock Holmes* annotations:

- 1) The Internet (and computers)
- 2) The publication of the brilliant DeWaal bibliography listing 25,000+ Sherlockian items
- 3) I got to start with Baring-Gould's edition in front of me!

For both your Holmes and Dracula annotations, you begin with the conceit (known in Sherlockian circles as “The Game”) that the fictional characters were actually real, and the Arthur Conan Doyle and Bram Stoker were really nonfiction authors who just changed a few names. What do you, the annotator, gain from this approach?

Playing the Game allows me to justify spending a good deal of attention on the problems of “authenticity”—that is, whether the things described by the author could have really happened. Only great writers like Doyle and Stoker can pull this off. This in turn provides much more historical detail and, I think, enhances the verisimilitude of the original story. And it's grand fun to study such things as the tide and lunar tables to consider whether Stoker accurately described them!

Do you follow that notion at any point in your Lovecraft annotations?

Lovecraft himself said that a successful story had to have the elements of a *hoax* in order to make the horror effective. So yes, I did devote some attention to considering how well he pulled off that hoax, examining in detail places, events, and the science he used in his stories.

Were you ever tempted to write your own novel about a real vampire interacting with the author Bram Stoker?

Tempted, but never seriously—writing fiction is a talent that I’m not sure that I possess. It’s awfully intimidating to see that blank page in front of you!

You’ve mentioned that you think Jack Palance is the most accurate cinematic portrayal of Dracula, but what about some of the other characters? Who’s the best Van Helsing? Renfield?

I’m a bit of a purist here, and Edward Van Sloan and Dwight Frye (from the 1931 *Dracula*) remain my favorites, although Pablo Alvarez Rubio from the 1931 Spanish-language version of *Dracula* is also fine as Renfield. Although I love the work of Peter Cushing in general, and especially his Sherlock Holmes, he always seemed lacking to me as Van Helsing. Van Helsing strikes me as a bit mad and certainly as an outsider, neither of which qualities is conveyed

by Cushing in the Hammer films.

Neil Gaiman's been present through much of your career, first as a fellow Sherlockian, then providing the introduction for your *Dracula*, and finally, of course, as the author of the source material for *The Annotated Sandman*. Did Neil approach you about the latter volumes, or was it your idea, or someone else's?

Neil and I had joked for years about doing *Annotated Sandman*, and he'd always said, "Let's wait until I'm dead." One day he called me and said, "You know, I'm starting to forget why I wrote some of those things. We'd better do this. I'm calling D.C." He did, and they said yes, and the rest is "history."

Were you ever hesitant to step into the world of a living author?

Oh, yes, I was very nervous about suggesting things that someone in authority (that is, Neil) might disagree with! However, it was very exciting. I called some of what I did "reverse-engineering," trying to figure out what sources he'd used for some of the material. It was a thrill to be at his home, go through his library, and discover that I was right—mostly!

Did you ever ask Neil about something you were in the midst of annotating?

Absolutely, I tried out ideas on him. In some cases, he said, “Huh, I hadn’t thought of that, but if you think you can prove it, go for it!” In others, he steered me in the correct direction when I was at sea.

Graphic novels and comics can be incestuous, with cross-references to other series and characters. Did you ever worry about missing any such bits in the Sandman comics?

I was quite worried, but first (and I want to give credit where credit is due), there was a great deal of online annotation of the *Sandman* comics that appeared when they were first published, to which a large body of fans contributed. So I picked up a lot of cross-references from that. Neil also seems to have an encyclopedic knowledge of comics (among other subjects), and he was able to supply a few missing cross-references.

How did you come next to H. P. Lovecraft?

I actually pitched a number of other ideas when finally struck by the obvious choice: As in the case of Holmes and

Dracula, there is a large, devoted fanbase for Lovecraft's work, and that's exactly what the publisher wanted. I've always been a science fiction reader, as long as I can remember, and so the idea of exploring one of the founders of the genre sounded great. I really had read very little of Lovecraft, and it was a joy to discover how truly rich the material was. I built up an immense library of Lovecraft material (including a number of issues of *Weird Tales*) and dove in!

Why Lovecraft and not Poe?

I would love to annotate Poe's work, but unfortunately Liveright/Norton had already given the project to another writer, Michael Patrick O'Hearn, and he was well along with the project when I asked. I believe that the book will be out in the next two years. Liveright/Norton isn't the only publisher out there, but I love working with them, and they've produced such beautiful books. I'm doubtful that any other publisher would be as supportive as they've been, for all of my books for them.

There are Lovecraft fans and scholars who have studied the entire Cthulhu Mythos for decades. Did you ever worry about diving into that pool?

Of course. This is why I read *everything* and sought the help of lifelong HPL scholars like S. T. Joshi and Peter Cannon, who embraced the project and were immensely helpful.

Your Lovecraft volume covers twenty-two stories and still clocks in at almost 1,000 pages. Were there any stories you had to leave out just for space considerations that you regretted losing?

Oh, yes—"The Outsider," "The Terrible Old Man," "The Other Gods," "The Music of Erich Zann," "The Shunned House," and "The Rats in the Wall" were hard to leave out. In the end, though, I stuck with the stories that feature Arkham and Miskatonic U. The problem was that to add those stories would have meant another 200 pages, and that would have pushed the book up to \$49.95, not as attractive a "price point."

If you had access to Lovecraft, what one question would you most like to ask him?

It wouldn't really be one question—I'd like to speak with him about how the American culture has produced its own mythos, largely as a result of the "melting pot." I know that his antipathy toward those who weren't white folks from New

England was the product of his parents' mental illness, and I'd like to think that he was growing out of it as he matured.

How did Alan Moore come to provide the foreword for the Lovecraft volume?

A lovely story: Alan, I knew, was deeply interested in Lovecraft and was in fact writing his own graphic novel called *Providence*. I emailed Alan's daughter Leah Moore, who I met through *Dracula* (I helped Leah and her husband John with their wonderful *Complete Dracula* graphic novel and Holmes comic books) to ask her how to get in touch with Alan (who doesn't do email). I told her why, and eight hours later, she emailed me back, "He'd love to do it!" I had only meant to get his mailing address, but Leah pitched him for me! I was thrilled beyond measure that he agreed to write the foreword—he was my first and only choice.

For the Sherlock and Dracula books, you already had a considerable personal collection of Victoriana to refer to. Do you now have a home library that includes mythology, graphic novels, and mythos works?

Oh, indeed. Not only do I have everything that Gaiman has written, plus hundreds of other comics and graphic novels, I now have an immense Lovecraft library, almost 350

books, plus complete runs of several Lovecraft magazines (*Crypt of Cthulhu*, *Lovecraft Studies*). I really am not much interested in the Mythos stories, however. I also have a large collection of non-*Dracula* vampire material, plus Jack the Ripper material, and now a core library of *Frankenstein*-related books.

Why has Lovecraft proven so difficult to adapt to film?

Lovecraft's stories aren't the kind of horror tales that filmmakers like. They're more about psychological terrors than creatures that go bump in the night, and there's virtually no blood. I think they're tough to sell to audiences.

You're now working on an annotated *Frankenstein*. I would imagine that a key difficulty in annotating that work might be simply in knowing when to stop, given the gigantic wealth of material surrounding the book and its history.

You're right about that—there is a ton of academic material. I expect that I'll end up taking the same approach as I did with *Dracula* and *Lovecraft*, though, and while I'll try to indicate the existence of the academic scholarship, I don't plan to examine it in any detail. I'm much more interested in the historical and cultural background than considering

whether *Frankenstein* is a disguised tale of childbirth from the mother's perspective or an exemplar of Rousseau's theories of education, for example.

Are you going to approach *Frankenstein* as a real story?

Certainly I will examine the cultural and historical background and criticize the verisimilitude—the improbabilities in the story. I can't stop myself from doing that. However, I already have a lot of material about the text itself—the changes made to the original text by Mary Shelley and Percy Shelley as it evolved.

You've also worked as an editor, producing both volumes of previously-printed stories (*In the Shadow of Sherlock Holmes* and *In the Shadow of Dracula*), and new stories (*A Study in Sherlock*, co-edited with Laurie King). Do you enjoy working as an editor with living authors? Are there other projects you'd like to pursue as an editor?

I find anthologies a great pleasure, both assembling classic stories and teasing work out of writer-friends. Laurie and I have co-edited *In the Company of Sherlock Holmes*, another collection of new stories inspired by the Sherlockian Canon, to be published by Pegasus Books in November 2014, and we may well do a third volume—so many friends who want to

play in this sandbox! I've also just started a very different anthology with my dear friend Laura Caldwell, called *Anatomy of Innocence*. This will be true stories about *exonerees*—innocent people wrongly convicted and exonerated—told by major thriller writers working with the exonerees. Laura is the founder/director of the Life After Innocence Project at Loyola University Chicago, and this was her idea. I'm honored to be part of it! It will be published by Norton in 2016.

Have you ever considered writing something like a narrative history or critical study of an iconic character like Dracula or Sherlock?

You mean a real book? Actually, I have. Nancy Holder and I are trying to sell a book we call *Baker Street Chronicles*, a narrative history of the lives of Holmes and Watson, Doyle, and the major figures of the period 1850-1930. It's kind of a cross between an art book and a history text.

You've worked as a consultant on several movies, and I happen to know that you've watched the entire run of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* five times. Have you ever been tempted to write a film book?

I would love to do the *Annotated Buffy* one day, and Scott

Allie (editor-in-chief at Dark Horse) and I actually talked about how to do that with the comics. I also pitched the idea of doing an annotated edition of the Christopher Nolan *Batman* scripts but didn't get any traction.

By day, you're an attorney, and you're also very involved with several writers' organizations (including both Mystery Writers of America and the Horror Writers Association). You must have amazing time management skills.

And a very supportive wife!

Are you already considering an annotation project after *Frankenstein*?

We're talking about a big book called *Annotated Noir* that would consist of four or five classic *noir* novels (e.g., *Maltese Falcon*, *Big Sleep*) and maybe a classic film script. We're still putting it together, but it's something I've always wanted to do!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Morton is a screenwriter, author of nonfiction books, award-winning prose writer, and Halloween expert whose work was described by the

American Library Association's *Readers' Advisory Guide to Horror* as "consistently dark, unsettling, and frightening." Her short fiction has appeared in dozens of anthologies and magazines, including *The Mammoth Book of Dracula*, *Dark Delicacies*, *The Museum of Horrors*, and *Cemetery Dance*, and in 2010 her first novel, *The Castle of Los Angeles*, received the Bram Stoker Award for First Novel. Recent books include the graphic novel *Witch Hunts: A Graphic History of the Burning Times* (co-written with Rocky Wood, illustrated by Greg Chapman), and *Trick or Treat: A History of Halloween*. Also recent are the novellas *Summer's End* and *Smog*, and the novel *Malediction*. A lifelong Californian, she lives in North Hollywood and can be found online at lisamorton.com.

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS

Author Spotlight: Maria Dahvana Headley

E.C. Myers

“Who is Your Executioner?” contains many evocative, recurring images, particularly children’s games and Victorian death photos. What inspired the story, and how did you come to develop it around those themes and those specific games?

This story had a longish gestation for me. Usually I just write and release like I’ve caught a shiny fish, but this one took a while. I was sitting opposite my main collaborator in June 2013 when I happened across a reference to Dead Girl Come Alive. I was looking up the origins of Blind Man’s Buff for some reason, though I can’t now seem to figure out why. As we were both writing and therefore not supposed to be looking at the internet, I texted him a series of illegal OMGs. He’s the reason it got written, because he texted back his own illegal OMG series, and then thought for two seconds and told me the structure of the entire story. That’s how he is. I wish I had that skill because whenever he does it for me, it’s like I’m watching someone walk on water.

The games in the story are all Blind Man’s Bluff (Buff is the original name for it) variants from various places. Dead Girl (or Dead Man) is American, I think—usually it’s a trampoline game. Kagome, Kagome is Japanese, and Poor

Mary (or Jenny, or Sally) is English. They're all a little like Spin the Bottle, except that a dizzy, spinning person is the bottle, and doomed by fate to choose a mate, or (related?) to create the next dead girl. The game's been around since Roman times. I like the name of that version: Bronze Fly. The old Greek version is apparently called Copper Mosquito. It's a pretty tempting game, anything that only takes a blindfold to play.

The Victorian death photos are straight out of my own childhood. I found a book of them in an Idaho library when I was little. I'm pretty sure I've been ruined ever since. They were on a bottom shelf. There were no names in the checkout log. Unlike the narrator here, I didn't steal the book, but oh, oh, I thought about it. Not porn but photos of dead people dressed to appear living and as though they were part of family portraits? Yes, thank you. I think I was about seven and romancing Dewey 393—death customs—without supervision when I found it. Then I kept going back and hiding it in different sections, worried someone would find it and take it from me. It was my personal high holy horror book.

I've liked the same things since I was tiny. The games in this story are all related to horrifying subtext, as are the death photos. "Who is your Executioner?" I can't believe that's a line in a children's game. But it makes perfect sense that it would be.

What was your favorite game as a child?

I hated pre-existing games because I always lost. Written rules and team games seemed invented to spite me. I had no patience. Instead, I was a wild-eyed inventor of terrifying games for large groups of unlucky children seduced by my bossiness. There are reasons Oona is like she is in this story. When I was in grade school, for example, I invented a particular and very unfun game called Witch of Pinch, which was basically me walking around looking scary, knocking my fists together slowly as though I was a miniature mobster ruminating on a war between families. I convinced a lot of children that if I knocked in a certain rhythm, they'd die on the spot, and that only my mercy would save them. I was aggravatingly tiny, the shortest person in my grade, always. I had to work to get respect. The pinch part of Witch of Pinch involved my fingernails, and the tolerance of the skin of boys. I had a duo of tall girls who functioned as my guards. This meant that we patrolled the playground, me in the center, not walking, but holding their hands and doing a series of front flips instead. I was only active in creating nightmares for other children when I was allowed at recess, of course. For reasons that I now find, um . . . reasonable, as I was clearly a bad element, I was often kept in and forced to play *Battleship* with my male equivalent, a tiny farmboy genius who could not go outside due to allergies, and whose nose bled from competitive fury whenever we met across the Milton Bradley.

The names Oona and Zellie are unusual. How do you

choose names for your characters? Did they have any special meaning for you or the story?

Oona is because of Oona O'Neill Chaplin. I've always found her interesting—she was Eugene O'Neill's daughter, and she married Charlie Chaplin when she was eighteen and he was fifty-four. They had eight kids together. Imagine being the daughter of the most famous tragedian and marrying the most famous clown. The tragedian disowned her. Before she married Chaplin, she dated J.D. Salinger. What? Truman Capote said at some point that he based Holly Golightly on her. Double what? I mean. All of this is pretty intriguing, no? None of this bio ended up in the story, as I'm not actually writing about Oona Chaplin, but some of the extremes of her life did end up here. My Oona is both very charismatic and very worrying. She's interested in terrible things and simultaneously sought after. She's a dead girl, but a live girl at the same time. Zellie is named Zellie because I always have somewhere in my head a call back to my childhood obsession with Madeleine L'Engle's *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* and the many variations of a powerful, complicated female character named Zillah in that book. This story has some relation, in that it's full of might-have-beens. There are lots of time periods happening here. I may never get over my first reading of *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*. It's so dark, and the unicorn in it is not a pretty pretty unicorn. I got the *Wrinkle in Time* series for my eighth birthday. That book was especially a big part of the

brewing of my brain, perhaps because it says that with extreme focus of your brain, you might be able to change the path of the past. I judge it now, mind you, for the fact that the good people in it are, over centuries, blue-eyed. When I was little, I didn't notice the gigantop problems there and just got wooed. Now I notice.

This story jumps around in time as you relate the characters' past with Oona. Did you always have that structure in mind, and did you write the scenes in a certain order?

I wrote it in this order, present day going backward every few years. It was the notion of counting to five to bring a dead girl back to life, right there in the lyrics for the rhyme. So counting backward would do the reverse, presumably, and since I knew it was a ghost and resurrection story, I was interested in doing both things with the structure. That said, as I mentioned above, the structure wasn't all mine. The going backwards in time was my contribution, but the idea of five distinct moments over thirty-something years came from my editor/writer/braintrust guy. That said, though the structure's always been this, I've fought with what ended up in those moments. What do you remember if you see someone only every seven years or so? What are the defining moments of the narrative you share?

What work do you have out now or forthcoming, and what are you writing now?

The End of the Sentence, my novella with Kat Howard, just came out from Subterranean Press. That's ghostly horror, not quite like this, but it has similarities. And *Magonia*, my YA sky kingdom novel, comes out in May from HarperCollins. So excited about that! I'm working on a bunch of things. A couple sequels. A couple secrets. You know. I tend to have four novels in various degrees because I'm a distractible and suspicious thing and I fear accidental novel-fails. Lots of short stories will be out in the next few months too. I finished up a backlog of stalled stories and suddenly had a bunch ready to go out into the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

E.C. Myers was assembled in the U.S. from Korean and German parts and raised by a single mother and a public library in Yonkers, New York. He has published short fiction in a variety of print and online magazines and anthologies, and his young adult novels, *Fair Coin* and *Quantum Coin*, are available now from Pyr Books. He currently lives with his wife, two doofy cats, and a mild-mannered dog in Philadelphia and shares way too much information about his personal life at ecmyers.net and on Twitter @ecmyers.

Author Spotlight: Karin Tidbeck

Britt Gettys

“Rebecka” takes place in a world in which God’s existence isn’t questioned and people are aware of His influence on their lives, which could be considered controversial by some. Did you have any reservations regarding the subject matter while writing “Rebecka”?

Not when it came to religion, no. But then, writing about religion isn’t particularly controversial in Sweden. You’d have to go pretty far to stir things up. I didn’t consider this going very far. What I considered much more uncomfortable was the theme of abuse and the absence of redemption. Rebecka is a woman who experiences horrific abuse and never recovers, and her solution is to inflict the same horrors on someone else. To me that was much more difficult because of the risk of turning Rebecka into a stereotypical victim.

Did you study or research trauma theory while writing this piece, or did Rebecka’s psyche come to you naturally?

This was one of those rare stories that pretty much wrote itself. I didn’t do specific research, but I’ve always had an interest in psychological processes, so I did have some stuff in

the backpack already.

Do you think a person's ability to live and cope with psychological—or even physical—pain makes him or her a stronger individual?

I think there are a lot of clichés about trauma and how you're supposed to respond to it. "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger" carries with it the expectation that if something *doesn't* make you stronger, you've failed. Another one is that hardship is a gift/challenge/etc., that is, something you should be grateful for and *have* to learn from. While it's true that a lot of people come through a trauma or an illness stronger, countless others are worn down or broken. Many live and cope with pain but do so as very fragile people. Are they strong? What is "strong," for that matter?

Western culture has a very nasty victim-blaming streak and looks down on those who don't emerge strong and proud from hardship. We want to live in a just world where pain happens for a reason—either because you deserve it, or because it's a test. We can't deal with the fact that horrible stuff can happen to anyone for no particular reason at all, and that any reason or lesson is entirely fabricated by ourselves.

Much of your work, "Rebecka" included, involves psychological horror and subtly unsettling worlds. What

draws you to this particular brand of horror?

It's how my brain works. I just take notes.

Having been published both in Sweden and the US, have you noticed any differences in how horror fiction is received in those countries?

I don't know very much about horror's status abroad, to be honest. My own fiction hasn't been marketed as horror, except for a couple of appearances in horror-related anthologies. In Sweden, horror has enjoyed a status increase thanks to John Ajvide Lindqvist. His *Let the Right One In* opened the Swedish readership's eyes to the fact that horror is actual literature.

Are you working on any projects currently, and if so would you mind telling us a bit about them?

I usually don't talk much about prose under construction, but I can tell you about something else that's really exciting and is called "In a Coded Reality." I've joined a project by an experimental technology and theatre group, Scenlaboratoriet (The Stage Laboratory), on creating a neural feedback fairy tale. Basically it's an interactive story where the participants interact with mind-reading (yes, mind-reading) robots (yes,

robots) to affect the story's content and outcome.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Britt Gettys recently graduated from Pratt Institute where she obtained her BFA in Creative Writing. She currently writes for GeekBinge.com, reviewing television shows and discussing any geeky topic that strikes her fancy.

Additionally, she illustrates graphic novels, and her work has been featured in two Pratt sponsored exhibitions. An editorial intern at *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare Magazine*, Britt hails from Seattle, Washington, where she spends her time writing, cosplaying, and painting.

Author Spotlight: David Sklar

Lisa Nohealani Morton

**Tell us a little bit about “Rules for Killing Monsters.”
What inspired you to write it?**

A lot of things went into this story, but the main thing was reading a news article about transgender teens using online games to explore gender identity. At the time, I’d recently written a story in which a man takes on a female identity online for practical purposes so he could post things he perceived as “girly” without attracting attention. But it hadn’t occurred to me that an online gender swap could be such a powerful tool of self-discovery. So I wanted to explore that.

There was also an article I read, around the same time, about a transwoman who was fatally beaten by a stranger who found out she was transgender. And that’s something that happens far too often. I’ve written stories that explore gender identity before, but none that look quite so hard into the brutality and the hostility with which society sometimes treats people when they don’t fit the expected gender roles.

And then the third big piece was how videogames deal with death. Where it’s something you can come back from because you’ve invested time in this character, but there’s always some kind of journey or a cost. It was fun to write my own way back from the nether realms.

The main character experiences a revelation about her own identity by way of playing a game. Do you think games have a special ability (or perhaps potential) to facilitate self-understanding? Are there any games you find particularly effective in that regard?

I really want the answer to be tabletop roleplaying games, like *Changeling* or *D&D*. But really, the times when a game has taught me something surprising about myself or my friends, it's usually been a cheesier sort of game such as *Loaded Questions*, or that exercise where you imagine yourself walking in the woods and answer questions like, "You see a cup on the ground. Describe it."

Roleplaying games like *D&D* answer a deep-seated need for stories, which is something different but also vital.

Of course, as I mentioned earlier, there are true stories about transgender people discovering or coming to terms with their gender identities through online games, where it's safe to be whoever you want to be. I read recently that Robin Williams loved playing *World of Warcraft*. That really surprised me because he had this long and amazing career without ever making a movie that glorified violence, but it makes sense for the same reason it makes sense for transgender teens because, if you're Robin Williams, where are you going to go that no one will recognize you?

I've also read of people with autism spectrum disorders using online games to work through social issues.

The debate over whether supernatural monsters or humans are the scarier villains is a long-standing one in horror, and one that “Rules for Killing Monsters” touches on. Where do you fall?

That’s a tough one. The easy answer is that monsters are scary because you don’t understand them, while humans are scary because you do. I mean, if I’ve done my job in “Rules,” then when Ursula goes off, you understand why, and there should be a part of you wanting her to kick ass.

But I think the reverse is also true, that sometimes monsters are scariest when you can relate, and humans are most frightening when you can’t. One time I was staying with a friend in an upstairs apartment in a two-family house, and the landlady called in the middle of the night to rage at me that the boards were creaking when I walked. And she was furious about this, and distraught, and she would not listen to anything I said, but just kept going back to how I needed to make it stop. And I was terrified to go back to sleep, knowing that there was someone I did not know, right below me, who might have a key, who might have a gun, and who might fly into a psychotic rage because I’d gotten up to use the bathroom, and there was nothing I could do about it.

That’s also what’s going on with Ursula’s tormenters in the story, that they see someone who is beyond their understanding, whose wants and needs aren’t the same as theirs, and it terrifies them. Though I think in this case they’re

less afraid that she'll do something to them, and more afraid that they might find her in themselves if they look too deep.

By the same token, when a monster is inhuman, it becomes much more compelling if the writer can give you a window into the creature's mind; let you see, without anthropomorphizing, what the creature feels, what it wants, and so on.

What are you working on lately? Any upcoming publications you'd like to let readers know about?

At the moment, I'm working on a science fiction sitcom. I've got a few actors and a small camera crew, and a budget of, uh, nothing. And I'm having a lot of fun. You know, there's a lot of pressure on writers of science fiction and fantasy to respect the value of your own work, and not to send it to places that won't pay you or presses that take it on spec. And it's a good thing that writers are standing up for themselves, but I was surprised when some truly talented actors and videographers and other people were willing to come in and help me and make this thing happen without any assurance of being paid for their time. And now I'm working on a way to get from a couple of days of brilliant unpaid work to something that will be larger and more rewarding for everyone involved.

I'd like to say more about the project itself, but at the moment there's a major TV network that has an exclusive

look. By the time this interview is published, I hope to be able to talk about this show and where you can go to help make it happen, whether it's associated with a major network or with an Indiegogo campaign or making the rounds of smaller networks.

Best kind of unquiet dead: Liches, ghouls, or zombies?

Can I go with plain old ghosts? I love the idea of a spirit being trapped behind by unfinished business. And sometimes the self gets washed away, and all that is left is the effort to finish the task. There's a lot you can do with that. I once wrote a one-sentence ghost story, that I'm still very proud of, in *Safety Pin Review*.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Honolulu, Lisa Nohealani Morton lives in Washington, DC. By day she is a mild-mannered database wrangler, computer programmer, and all-around data geek, and by night she writes science fiction, fantasy, and combinations of the two. Her short fiction has appeared in publications such as *Lightspeed*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and the anthology *Hellebore and Rue*. She can be found on Twitter as @lnmorton.

Author Spotlight: David Morrell

Erika Holt

Someone told us that there's an eerie true-life background to "For These and All My Sins." Can you share it with us?

A couple of times, weird things happened to me that gave me ideas for stories. "For These and All My Sins" was the result of one of those eerie events. In the 1970s, to research a novel called *Testament*, I spent thirty-five days on a survival course in the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming. If anyone's curious, the course was conducted by Paul Petzoldt's National Outdoor Leadership School and trained its students in a variety of mountaineering skills. At the time, I lived in Iowa City, where I was a literature professor at the University of Iowa. After I descended from the mountains, I drove back home along Interstate 80, but my car developed engine trouble, and in the Nebraska panhandle, I had to leave the highway, hoping to find a mechanic. That's when I came to this very unusual, very scary town. What I saw there and how the town's residents reacted to me are described in the story. Even the tree that I describe was there. Of course, the plot is invented, but to this day, I often wonder how that town came to exist and whatever happened to it.

The title suggests a religious topic. Do you often explore religious themes or beliefs in your work?

“For These and All My Sins” is religious only in a medieval sense. But occasionally I do incorporate major religious themes—such as how religion has historically been associated with violence and mass murder, in ancient Rome, in the Crusades, the Inquisition, Ireland, the Middle East, etc. In 1985, I wrote what became an influential espionage novel, *The Fraternity of the Stone*, which dramatizes this topic. One of its characters asks, “How much killing does God need?” In another espionage novel, *The Covenant of the Flame*, I imagine that Mithraism, the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, survived into the twentieth century, which isn’t a stretch—because in Spain, the Basques have rituals that can be traced back to Mithraism two thousand years ago.

Is setting more important in horror than in other types of fiction? Do you think whether a particular story will be read as horror has a lot to do with tone and atmosphere versus plot?

Setting’s important in any story. It’s always a matter of how the location is used. In “For These and All My Sins,” the strange town is clearly essential to the narrative, and I had the advantage of bringing an eye-witness authenticity to my description of it. But whenever I discuss the essentials of

horror, I always invoke Douglas E. Winter's famous theory that genres are defined by the emotions they create. In that sense, thrillers are about excitement, mysteries are about puzzlement, science fiction is about awe, and so on.

Considered in that way, horror is about fear. It doesn't need to be "Oh my God, look at all the blood!" In fact, my own preference is for Val Lewton subtlety. I think the heart of horror is the reader's identification with characters who suddenly feel that they've stepped into a cupboard of reality in which something feels very wrong. That definitely happens in "For These and All My Sins." Several years ago, there was a Showtime anthology series called *Masters of Horror*. "For These and All My Sins" was scheduled to be part of the series. I wrote a script for it, but I could never satisfy the producers because their view of horror was blood flying while my view is based on a character always looking over his shoulder.

What is it about isolation that's so inherently scary?

I'm not sure it is. I'm an only child. I spent a year in an orphanage when I was three. My mother and stepfather fought all the time and pretty much left me alone. As a writer, I'm quite happy to be alone for hours and hours. It always puzzled me that I knew talented writers who didn't accomplish much because they were always on the phone and going to lunch and getting together with people. Then I

learned about the Myers Briggs definition of introvert and extrovert. An introvert is someone who gets renewal and refreshment from being alone while an extrovert gets renewal and refreshment from socializing. If I go out with friends two nights in a row, I feel exhausted while some of my friends are ready to socialize every night. I hear about prisoners put in solitary confinement and going crazy. In my own case, I suspect that as long as I was left alone and given food etc., I would happily lie on a bunk, close my eyes, and tell stories to myself.

You show a deft hand for pacing. Do you have any tips for writers on how to keep things moving?

Elmore Leonard once said that the secret to pacing is to cut out the dull parts. It's a humorous line, but I'm not sure it's helpful. How do we know what's interesting to someone else? I suspect that this is an innate skill in some people. In my writing book *The Successful Novelist*, I tell an old story about two prisoners in a penitentiary. One has just arrived, and an elderly inmate is showing him how things work. At lunch, an inmate jumps up and shouts "Forty-three!" Everyone laughs. Another inmate shouts, "Twenty-six!" Everyone guffaws. "What's going on?" the new inmate asks. His guide responds, "We've been here so long that we know everyone's jokes, so we just assigned numbers to them." The young inmate nods and jumps up, shouting, "Eleven!" No one reacts. "What's

wrong?” the young prisoner asks his guide, who responds, “Some people just don’t know how to tell a joke.” I think a lot of it has to do with our body rhythms. If a writer’s internal speed is thirty miles an hour, that’s how the story will come out. Years ago, Knopf released three novels by James M. Cain in one volume. It was called *Cain X Three*. I didn’t know anything about Cain at the time, but I was struck by something that Tom Wolfe said in his introduction, that reading Cain was like getting into a sports car that was up to eighty miles an hour before you could shut the door. So I tried to get myself up to eighty miles an hour before I started writing. The best texts for speed and efficiency are Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*. Reading Cain, I discovered what the standard was. Years later, I was flattered when Stephen King, teaching a writing class at the University of Maine, had only two texts: *Double Indemnity* and my own *First Blood*, which is heavily indebted to Cain.

What are you reading and/or watching these days?

For the past five years, I’ve been in Richard Matheson/Jack Finney mode. Taking an example from *Bid Time Return* (aka *Somewhere in Time*) and *Time and Again*, I’ve been trying to convince myself that I’m on the harrowing fogbound streets of 1854 London. In 2009, my fourteen-year-old granddaughter Natalie died from the same rare bone cancer (Ewing’s sarcoma) that killed my fifteen-year-old son

Matthew in 1985. To distract myself from unbearable present time, I fell under the spell of one of the most brilliant and controversial literary personalities of the 1800s, Thomas De Quincey, who was the first person to write about drug addiction in his notorious *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. He invented the word “subconscious” and developed psychoanalytic theories that predate those of Freud by half a century. He also invented the true crime genre in “Postscript (On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts),” his blood-soaked recreation of the first publicized mass murders in English history, the Ratcliffe Highway slayings in 1811. De Quincey influenced Edgar Allan Poe, who in turn inspired Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to create Sherlock Holmes. Trying to escape from my grief, I immersed myself (like a Method actor) in the atmospheric world of 1854 London. My first novel about Thomas De Quincey is called *Murder as a Fine Art*. It’s as much a horror novel as it is a historical mystery and a thriller. The goal of my intense research was to try to make readers believe that they are truly in that long-ago brooding universe. A sequel, *Inspector of the Dead*, will be published in March of next year.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erika Holt lives in the cold, white North (i.e. Calgary, Canada), where she writes and edits speculative fiction. Her stories have appeared in a number of anthologies including *Evolve Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead*, and *What Fates Impose*. She has also co-edited two anthologies: *Rigor Amortis*,

about sexy, amorous zombies, and *Broken Time Blues*, featuring 1920s alien burlesque dancers and bootlegging chickens.

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About the Editor

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor-in-chief of *Nightmare*, is the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy*, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the bestselling editor of many other anthologies, such as *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination*, *Armored*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, and *The Living Dead*. New projects coming out in 2014 and 2015 include: *Help Fund My Robot Army!!! & Other Improbable Crowdfunding Projects*, *Robot Uprisings*, *Dead Man's Hand*, *Operation Arcana*, *Wastelands 2*, and *The Apocalypse Triptych: The End is Nigh*, *The End is Now*, and *The End Has Come*. Called “the reigning king of the anthology world” by Barnes & Noble, John is a winner of the Hugo Award (for which he has been nominated eight times) and is a six-time World Fantasy Award finalist. John is also the editor and publisher of *Lightspeed Magazine* and is a producer for Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.
