

# CATHARSIS

How Many Ways Can One Expunge Their  
Demons Through Murder?



An Anthology of Horror

by

Tish Jackson

Copyright © 2020 by Tish Jackson

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

ISBN: 978-1-952337-14-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 202016686

Printed in the United States of America

By the I Street Press

First Printing, 2020

*Jackson Press*  
Sacramento, CA 95660

[www.jacksonpress.net](http://www.jacksonpress.net)



THE JACKSON PRESS

# DEDICATIONS

**I want to dedicate this book to myself. Congratulations Me!  
We did it!**

**Also, a shout out to my awesome Mom who fueled my love of horror from the very beginning and always encouraged me.**

**Thanks to my wonderful siblings who loved me no matter what crazy stuff I did...who watched all the crazy movies with me (Remember BasketCase?! That movie was wonderfully awful) and cheered me on all day every day.**

**Special thanks to my best friend Aisha!**

**And to all the members of my family, blood and otherwise, whose consistent support gave me the sorely needed self-confidence to finish this project. Love Y'all!**



# Table of Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Foreword .....                            | 1   |
| MUTHA IN MALAWOU.....                     | 2   |
| CHEATERS .....                            | 22  |
| ***WARNING*** .....                       | 33  |
| CONSENT .....                             | 33  |
| ***WARNING*** .....                       | 42  |
| DESTINY .....                             | 42  |
| TWYLA.....                                | 66  |
| THE LOVE OF A ZOMBIE IS EVERLASTING ..... | 82  |
| DEMONWEED .....                           | 94  |
| AN ACCIDENT WAITING TO HAPPEN .....       | 115 |



## Foreword

*Once upon a time there was a brown girl who loved horror. She was delighted to find it loved her back. When life circumstances did not turn out the way she wanted, horror provided her the justice she was denied in real life. The trials of high school bullies were mitigated by books with nerds triumphing over evil clothed in adult attire. Finding out her uniqueness did not allow conformity within groups, the girl found solace in reading scary stories that celebrated differences. The girl was thankful for the gifts her friend horror had given her, helping her cope and grow without bitterness; it was a given that she would do her best to spread horror to others. So, she began to write. The girl told stories that executed the karmic wheel on cheating boyfriends. Her zombies did their best to be capable of true love. When the nightmares were particularly bad, Cthulu tales wreaked vengeance upon the world in her stead. When real life let her down, Horror always had her back. The girl grew into a chameleon and navigated the world of corporate America while on the inside she saw vampires and ghouls. She maintained a happy visage; people commented on her glowing personality, not knowing the dark depths inside her. For it was Horror that allowed her to be happy through all that had befallen her. Horror reminded her it could always be worse. So, she embraced it as it had always embraced her.*

## Mutha In Malawou

The President of Malawou was good at deception. Usually it involved deceiving someone else--not himself--but the principle was the same. Convince the party involved that what they knew to be true is in fact not true--a fallacy, a product of misinformation or even a hallucination. Simple delusions were harder to sell, but when a person had talent, white could turn into black. Bingu va Muthatisa was talented.

The current President of Malawou, a small African country bordered by Zimbabwe and Mozambique, was steeling himself to move back into the presidential palace. His bags had been packed by his personal servants and lay by the door of his common home. The rest of his entourage was on the floor below, giving orders to subordinates. In reality, they were waiting on him. Muthatisa knew this, but the knowledge did not make him hurry. When he was ready, he would call someone in to retrieve his things and escort him to his cavalcade. It was good for servants to wait, Muthatisa mused. It taught them patience and more importantly, that they were not in charge. That things did not move according to their schedules.

Ah, but why was he kidding himself? Muthatisa knew his hesitation had nothing to do with humbling subordinates and everything to do with his own reluctance to return to the Palace.

After the rumors had gotten out about secret exorcisms being held at the palace, Muthatisa knew he had to exert some damage control. He denied statements that quoted him as saying the palace was haunted. He viciously "encouraged" the Catholic priest who blessed the house to recant previous remarks; instead of an exorcism, it was a blessing for the presidential abode. Mutha had three reporters jailed for their failure to kill the story. Unfortunately, his efforts had been mostly futile. Malawou's haunted palace made news all the way across the pond in London. Mutha was incensed that his country--or he himself--had become some sort of pathetic ghost story. It was hard enough to be seen as a powerful country after having only been independent for fifty years. Muthatisa felt such stories about Malawou made them look childish and superstitious. With that kind of reputation hanging over his head, it was hard to negotiate with Westerners who made jokes of his fears in the news.

However, it was time to stop procrastinating. Mutha sighed and stood up. He was the President of a proud African nation, by God, and it was time for him to start acting like it! He had to lead his people by



example. It didn't matter what kind of strangeness inhabited the palace, Mutha must return there to prove his fearlessness. This would not only effectively silence the media and his critics about this ridiculous ghost story, but also infuse his constituents with pride and valor. The only problem was that the ghost story was not so ridiculous.

Muthatisa walked outside his door and put on his presidential demeanor like an invisible royal cloak that he hoped would hide his insecurities.

“Guard! I am ready to leave. It is time we returned to our rightful place in the world. Bring my things and ready yourself.” Mutha turned and stalked away, never looking back to see if his instructions were being followed. As a leader, he believed that if you expected to be followed, you would be. He was in his element, which allowed him to ignore the fact of where he was headed.

\*\*\*\*\*

When Muthatisa was finally given the presidency after the hotly contested election, he vowed to do many things he felt would endear him to the leaders and people of Malawou. He promised to bring wealth to the nation's economy by attracting big business to build factories and invest there. He intended to bring the two political parties together through the building of that wealth. What else could unit two enemies but money? Muthatisa also decided to use the 300-room mansion built by Malawou's first president Kamzu Bindi. The palace had never really been used, which seemed a shame to Muthatisa. His predecessor Mabuto Malazzi had refused to live in the palace when he was elected after Bindi, claiming he was disgusted by the symbol of greed it represented. Muthatisa agreed in spirit; he would have never built such a monstrosity himself. Not to mention the cost of maintaining such a huge abode. And air conditioning? Ridiculous. However, it was built for a king - a President - and it should be used as such. At least that was Muthatisa's thinking in the beginning.

After being endorsed by his friend Mabuto, Muthatisa rode to the head of the Malawou on a political wave of goodwill. His promises of economic wealth for everyone were received as good-intentioned, if not outright realistic. But to most, it was the thought that counted. Muthatisa tried to bring the main political parties together, but didn't find out until after he was elected that the factions already had one thing in common - payoffs. When his advisors first started coming to him with bribe money to push certain bills through upcoming legislation, Mutha was surprised. The ease with which it was done implied a

familiarity that spoke volumes about the previous regimes. At first unsure about how to proceed, Muthatisa put all requests on hold, citing a wish to thoroughly explore each request. But as weeks passed without any progress, officials began to quietly grumble about the new administration. Muthatisa didn't want to be beholden to anyone, and getting caught up in a bribery scandal was exactly what he was trying to avoid. But before he had decided what to do, Mabuto paid him a visit.

“My good friend, how are things going for you?”

Mutha had just finished his breakfast and was going over his notes when his visitor was announced. He figured this was a perfect opportunity to ask about the culture of payment plaguing his government.

“I am good, very good! Well, considering the state of affairs you left me in! The country is damn near starving except for your rich cronies. And now they expect me to continue selling them all our reserve crops.”

“But the price is excellent Mutha, is it not?”

“The price is not the point, Malazzi! I was serious about developing the country! I want Malawou to become a force, with power in the world. It can be done; we have the natural resources. We should be exporting more and importing less. But to do that, we need the manpower to work. And for manpower, we need to feed our workers. I simply cannot afford to indulge the fat cats if I want to fulfill my vision!”

“Well, you can raise the price if you want, friend...”

“No, I'm talking about denying them all together. “

Malazzi laughed heartily and said, “Well, that will upset them royally.” He laughed again at his pun then clapped Mutha on the shoulder in a show of camaraderie. “Whatever you wish, my friend. I am behind you in whatever you decide. Maybe we can make a joint speech declaring what is best for Malawou. It may take some time, but maybe they'll come around. At any rate, you will have the unending support of the masses.”

Muthatisa was surprised, but happy to know he would have his friend and predecessor's support.

“Well, I am so glad there will be no acrimony between us on the issue--too bad it won't be the same with the Senate, eh?” Muthatisa laughed again. “So, I can still have my assistant Malani send your invitation to my opening ball in Lilongwe, excellent. It would please me much if you were in attendance.”

But at this statement, Malazzi frowned and turned sharply to Mutha.

“You said Lilongwe? Where are you having this ball?” But it was obvious to both that Malazzi already knew the answer and it was not a welcome one.

“You know I am moving into the Palace in Lilongwe for my term! I’ve mentioned it surely!” Mutha protested weakly to Malazzi, not knowing why he should even have to.

“Mutha, that palace is an abomination to the people of Malawou.”

“No, Malazzi it is an abomination that such a monstrosity sits idle! Now, I would not have built such a place myself. But the way it has fallen into disrepair...all the money Bindi spent to build it--”

“Yes! Built with the blood of Malawouans he sacrificed! Mutha, you know the treachery Bindi committed in that place.”

“It is horrible, I agree! But is it not it worse that it sits there unused? That the sacrifice of Malawou goes unacknowledged? As if it were in vain?” But Malazzi looked at Mutha with an unreadable expression and could not bring himself to speak so Mutha continued.

“Malazzi, think of it. I will bring back this opulent eyesore to the beauty it was intended to be! It will become the presidential seat of Malawou. We will use its extravagance to woo western investors out of their money. It’s halls and kitchens will persuade dignitaries to send business our way. You know it takes greatness to attract greatness. We can use Bindi’s folly to improve the country we both love so much!” Mutha looked Malazzi in the eye while pleading his case. Yet he wondered why Malazzi was so opposed to the place.

Malazzi finally replied. “Yes, and all the while you get to live like a big man, ordering the little people about your mansion while you have maids draw your bath and you sleep on satin sheets,” Malazzi sneered. “This is really about your wanting to be rich!” Malazzi was so vehement about what he was saying that spittle flew from his lips and his hands gestured angrily.

Though truly baffled by his friend’s animosity towards his living quarters, Mutha was done trying to placate him.

“I don’t know why you hate the Palace, Malazzi, whether it’s some vestige of anger towards the Bindi regime or your own attempt to be noble through all the bribes you’ve given and taken, it has no bearing on me and my administration. However, if you would like to enlighten me, I would be happy to hear your reasoning. Though I doubt it will change any part of my mind on the manner.”

Malazzi stared at Muthatisa with anger for several seconds, arms straight at his sides and hands clenched in fists. It appeared he was deciding whether to stay or stomp out. He did not appreciate Mutha's dig at corruption within his presidency. But finally, he sighed and sat down to address his friend earnestly.

"You are partly correct, my friend. You are right about my lingering feelings for Bindi and the evil he wrought during his term--most notoriously the creation of the Palace at Lilongwe." He ignored Mutha's raised eyebrows at his labeling of the palace as evil and continued. "But you are wrong about my motives. For the record between us, I have no need to assuage any feelings of guilt about things that took place during my term. Everything I did was for the people of this country, and I would not do things differently even if I could. But it seems there is much you don't know about this country we both love so much, including Kamuzu Bindi. I did not ever plan to speak of this with anyone else about these things during my lifetime. But we are indeed friends. And you are taking on the biggest responsibility of your life. Therefore, I must give you an opportunity to see the truth."

Mutha's face went from one extreme to another throughout Malazzi's statements...from stern attentiveness as he began, to consternation at the mention of evil and finally amusement at Malazzi's characterization of his term. Mutha finally settled into curiosity, wondering about Malazzi's assertion that there were many things he didn't know about Bindi and even Malawou. However, he made no attempt to stop or interrupt. There was obviously a story coming and he was content to hear it.

Malazzi stood up and began to pace the area between the two men slowly, as if movement would help him get the story out.

"Before Livingstone and even the Yao came here, the people of the Chewa lived here in peace with the land. They honored Mother Malawou with fertile crops and ceremonies of thanks. As such, Malawou provided for her children. But when the Ngoni came here to escape the wrath of Shaka Zulu, they were angry and embittered people. The things done to them by the Zulus created hate in their hearts and that showed in their actions. Rather than learn the ways of the Chewa, they chose to loosen upon them an unholy anger. They did not want to exist in peace. They wanted to kill and maim as their own had been killed. In warlike groups, they descended upon the communities of the Chewa with spears and clubs. They used the same strategies that Shaka's warriors had used on them and they still worked well. Bands of the Chewa were systematically massacred by the invading Ngoni tribes.

“However, the Chewa were not just simple farmers. They quickly realized the situation was dire for their survival and began to fight back. At first in their village and then on the move, they attacked their killers.” Malazzi stopped in front of the window, looking out at the clear afternoon. His voice was quiet and as he looked out, Mutha could see he was clearly caught up in his story.

“The Chewa heart was big, but the Agnoni hate was stronger. Many more Chewa died than Agnoni and many of the Chewa settlers began to leave the fertile area around Lake Nyasa to avoid annihilation. That should be the end of the story. However, it is not. Some of the Chewa did not believe that they would be allowed to retreat in peace. Some felt the Agnoni warriors would pursue them no matter how far they retreated from their home. These...people believed the hatred inspired by the formidable Shaka Zulu had to be exorcised.

“The daughter of a Chewa shaman had been massacred in a raid by Agnoni warriors, and her father was wracked by grief and anger. He felt he could not live without avenging his child’s rape and mutilation. This chief could not be satisfied with just killing the men responsible. This, he surmised, would do nothing to stop the slaughter of his kind. There would only be another bloodthirsty group of warriors to start the killing again. This time, being more bloodthirsty than before.

“This man was a high shaman leader of the people and had worked hard to practice only good with his life and his knowledge of the afitti. But one must always acknowledge the mirror side to all they do, and this man gathered all his knowledge of the dark side--to eliminate the Agnoni.”

Malazzi paused again and Mutha noticed beads of sweat rolling down his forehead before he wiped them away with the back of his hand. He seemed to be strained. Mutha laughed nervously and said, “Why are you so agitated my friend? Are you afraid the afitti will come to punish you for speaking of them?”

Malazzi whirled to look at Mutha quickly. “You think this is a joke, my friend? You think I’m telling this story to amuse you? This truth is a disgrace to the Malawouan people!”

“But what is so horrible, Malazzi? A Chewa chief gets revenge on the warriors who killed his daughter. I don’t blame him actually, but these stories are a dime a dozen in Malawou, throughout Great Africa herself! Why does this story make you sweat so?”

“Because the Chewa chief slaughtered his own people for their blood! Mothers, elders and children alike. In front of the Agnoni to show how far he would go for revenge. But also, as a sacrifice to a demon god. This chief pledged the lives of the Chewa to the god if it

would only destroy the Agnoni as well.” Malazzi took a deep breath, as if getting that part of the story out had been the hardest part; now air moved easier through his lungs.

“He lined up seven generations of Chewa and forced them to wait for the Agnoni hunting party coming their way. He conjured up the demon afitti with promised entreaties more vile than a decent man could repeat. He then performed some of those acts to keep his promise...” Here Malazzi’s narrative trailed off. His breath hitched, and he looked at Mutha with wet eyes.

“He did the unspeakable to his own people, Mutha! In order to kill another group of people. It was insanity that spilled the blood of two tribes and conjured up the afitti in the name of revenge. The site of such blasphemy does not rest easily, indeed it continues to be cursed today. It stands on the land a foolish Bindi built a three hundred-million-dollar palace on. It is Sanjika Palace.”

Mutha looked at his friend’s haunted expression and teary eyes but said nothing. He could see that Malazzi was dead serious about the story he’d just told but was unsure how to tell him he didn’t believe a word of it. However, he didn’t have to.

“I see Muthatasa, that this lesson on Malawouan history is too much for your Catholic sensibilities.”

“It is true that the Church does not believe in the afitti or curses, but I believe that every story must begin with a piece of the truth. I just...cannot know where the truth is in this story, my friend.” Mutha waited to see if Malazzi would respond to that, but he only sat looking into Mutha’s disbelieving face. Mutha tried again.

“So, you are saying cancel the elaborate ball I have prepared, and definitely do not move into the palace in Lilongwe--because it is haunted by demons? Because of something some Chewa chief did over a hundred years ago.”

Malazzi nodded but did not elaborate.

Mutha said, “You never even said, what did the chief do that was so horrible? I mean what could have happened then that would affect things now?”

“He made them eat each other. Piece by piece. Alive. While the Agnoni watched, terrified. For as soon as they stepped into the circle the chief had created, they were unnaturally immobilized and forced to do as the chief bid.”

“Wait...what?! You’re saying they were cannibals! What? Okay, who ate whom exactly?” Mutha was disgusted but confused. Cannibalism was a big taboo in his culture and its accusation was never taken lightly. As much as westerners tried to depict Africans as flesh-

eating savages, that was rarely the case. And as far as Mutha knew, Malawou had had no instance of such heinous activity. Could Malazzi be correct?

“Malazzi, are you sure of this? Where did you read about this?”

“This is not in any book. It is not recorded in any history. No one wanted to, it is too shameful.”

“Then how did the story get out there? How do you know it is true, that someone didn’t just make it up?”

“Because not everyone was...killed that night. Several Agnoni warriors saw what happened to their tribesman and the people they were planning to kill. They were at the back of group that came upon the Chief. They were able to see the Chewa slicing one another and then chewing against their will. It was said their eyes ran with tears while they ate each other but were so enslaved they could not stop themselves. The Agnoni warriors watched this atrocity until their own hands began twitching. As the Chewa chief chanted louder, they turned their weapons on each other. Those not killed outright began to eat. And the two warriors at the back of the pack ran for their lives...and their souls before the Chief could witch them too.

Mutha snorted a bit, but not as emphatically as he would have before.

“Those are the witnesses? Two crazed men from hundreds of years ago? Even if there was some sort of massacre, the real story was probably changed many times through the retelling. Who knows what the real story was! But I highly doubt it was this gory tale of abominations you just tried to scare me with.”

Malazzi laughed bitterly at his friend’s words. “So, you are scared, then at least? Then I have done my part--I have given you the warning. Do not live in that palace for it is cursed. The ground it was built on emits evil like a beacon. Bindi built there on purpose, to use that dark energy to his bidding. Why do you think Bindi did the horrific things he did? Don’t do it, Mutha. Cancel the ball. And for God’s sake, do not invite other people there!” Malazzi stood and straightened his jacket, prepared to go. He walked toward the door while Mutha sputtered behind him.

“Wait! You can’t just drop such a bomb on me then leave! So, all this happened where the Palace now stands? So what? Malazzi, wait! Who even told you this crazy story?”

Malazzi stopped at the door and turned back to his friend one last time. “As far as witnesses, the best one there could possibly be has carried the story down through the generations of his family. Its truth

cannot be debated. The Chewa chief himself keeps his horrific legend alive.” With that, Malazzi walked out the door to Mutha’s solarium.

Mutha stood in shock, full of questions, but unable to get them all out at one time. He was left wondering who was really crazy...Malazzi or himself.

\*\*\*\*\*

How foolish I was, Mutha reflected. He’d had a perfect opportunity to get more information from Malazzi in the very beginning of this whole mess. He wanted to believe if he had gotten the whole story, he would’ve done things much different. Not been so stubborn. And blind.

“And ignorant!” Mutha said aloud to himself. The servant carrying his suitcases down the staircase looked at him in puzzlement. But Mutha never elaborated and the servant returned his gaze to the steps. He did wonder briefly if the stories in the papers about ghosts plaguing the president were true and hoped he would not be targeted while in his service. President Mutha was so caught up in his thoughts, he never noticed his servant’s expression of consternation. Had he not been schooled in hiding his emotions, a similar look would have graced his own face. Mutha was trying to be practical about going back to the palace. What would need to be done there? The cleaning was done for the most part, it needed only touch ups. The ball invites had already gone out, and the number of guests estimated. But had the correct amount of food been ordered and delivered? Had the decorations arrived? Most importantly, had all 300 rooms been cleansed by the priest? It didn’t make sense to pretend otherwise; that was the most crucial detail to be completed. The last time the priest only cleansed the guest areas and not all the bedrooms. And then had the audacity to shoot his mouth off to the press about it. If he thought he could keep him quiet, Mutha would’ve had him flogged and fired! But that would have given him enough incentive to spill everything to the media, and no future retraction would be forthcoming.

Deep in thought, Mutha reached the last step and stood there for a minute thinking of the damage the priest could do to his fledgling presidency...and of the damage he’d like to do to the priest himself. At the current time such a thing was impossible, but he planned to emulate the treasured elephant in this regard; his memory of the betrayal would be long and unforgiving. He soothed himself with the thought that things had been handled as well as they could have been thus far. The priest had taken back his ignorant statements to the press; the reporter Rafe Tenthian had been sufficiently chastised with a small stint in jail



for telling the story, and there had been no refusals to the ball invitations. Apparently if the dignitaries of Africa believe in Tenthian's story, it wasn't enough to scare them away. Or maybe they wanted to see the ghosts firsthand. Even Rafe, sent an invitation while still in jail as a goodwill gesture, had accepted. Mutha figured even with the several months in jail, this story was probably the best thing that ever happened to Tenthian's career.

"Sir? Your car is ready." Mutha looked up, shook out of his thoughts by the voice. He gave the Walid helper a grunt of acknowledgement and moved toward the white vintage Rolls Royce he used. Now was not the time to second guess himself, Mutha knew. It was time to buckle down and show his strength. Though he now believed in them, Mutha refused to be scared of any ghosts.

\*\*\*\*\*

Over the next two weeks, Mutha tried to talk to Malazzi again, but he always seemed to have just left the building or taken another phone call. In the beginning, Mutha tried to rein in his paranoid thoughts of being avoided. It was entirely possible that Malazzi was talking to reporters about the ongoing corruption cleanup; it was all over the news and the intimations towards his own term as President had to be refuted. Though, as Mutha thought after one instance of being rebuffed by a secretary for that reason, it really was Malazzi's fault. He had allowed the corruption to happen on his watch, so technically the media was right in its wild assumptions. But Mutha did not wish to see his friend maligned regardless, and respected Malazzi's duty to defend his honor. However, it didn't explain why Malazzi hadn't called him back...nor sent back his RSVP for his upcoming ball. If it wasn't for the strange things he'd been experiencing, Mutha would have left it alone.

Ever since he'd been back in the Palace, Mutha couldn't help but think about the strange story his friend had told him. Ancient cannibals and witch doctors? It sounded fantastical at best and Mutha couldn't see how or why it would affect the Palace. However, the tale had haunted him all the way back to the mansion. He would harrumph to himself at the idea of believing such nonsense, which would cause Walid to ask, "Yes, Your Presidency?" The last thing I need, Mutha thought, is to have this fool running to Tenthian saying I'm talking to myself.

The worst part is that Malazzi's story had Mutha seeing and hearing things...around corners and under chairs, down corridors even. In that dead hour of the night when everything was still, Mutha had started

hearing inaudible cries of what he thought were terrible expressions of incredible pain. The first time, he had foolishly looked under his bed fearfully, half expecting to see the feral red eyes of a demon conjured up by that crazy tale. When there was nothing but dust to be seen, Mutha was slightly embarrassed at his gullibility, but vastly relieved--until he heard scratching coming from the wall behind the bed. It was the middle of the night--early morning--and Mutha could hardly bring servants in his rooms to investigate vermin in the walls. The fact was that Mutha knew the palace had never had a rat problem. He didn't know if that was due to the extensive fumigation he'd ordered before he moved in. Even then, exterminators hadn't seen hide nor hair of rodents or insects anywhere in the palace. That was strange in and of itself, considering how long the place had been empty. Regardless, Mutha was still hearing something.

When the scratching began behind the wall, Mutha reached hesitantly and snatched his pillow away from the headboard. With that going on, there was no way he was sleeping with his head to the wall. He considered trying to move the four-poster bed away from the wall altogether but did not relish the thought of his bare feet on the ground. Just because he didn't see anything under the bed didn't mean it wasn't there--and wouldn't bite him. He felt silly, but not silly enough to test his disbelief. Mutha bundled the covers in the middle of the bed to create a small barrier between his folded legs and the wall. He contorted his body to lay sideways, similar to the fetus position. Mutha refused to think about how weak he appeared in that one moment. No one else could see him after all, and he would simply deny any allegations, if there were any.

Mutha spent the next week huddled in a corner of his bed at night. He'd had it moved away from the wall, giving no reason for the change in décor to the help. But it didn't stop the noises that kept him from sleeping after midnight. Mutha did have his wing of the palace searched for vermin but of course nothing was found. Then he began to think he was the victim of an elaborate prank. Could someone have set up an audio machine somewhere in the walls, in response to that damnable reporter's story? However, he could not question anyone about the situation without sounding like a man gone mad--and of course, his most likely suspect would not answer his phone calls.

Every night around 1:00 am the scratching sounds in the walls would start. Even if he had been able to sleep somehow, those nails-on-blackboard sounding emanations would have woken him up immediately. Starting out as light as whispers, the scratches soon sounded as if they were leaving deep gouges behind the wall. It didn't

sound as if they were attacking plaster either; it sounded wet and squishy, and Mutha tried not to think about what those sounds reminded him of. He simply sat straight up in bed, back straight against the headboard, watching the wall in front of him. He kept his dressing robe and night shoes on in bed, in case he felt he would have to run.

When it seemed as if the claws of the scratchers were finally going to come through the wall, the wailing would begin. Mutha didn't bother to cover his ears; although it was loud enough for anyone in that wing of the palace to hear, no one ever did. And Mutha would hear every ululation whether he wore earplugs or not. Plus, it was always better to hear what was going than be in the dark--literally. If the screamers ever stopped sounding hopeless and started sounding more threatening, he might think about it.

\*\*\*\*\*

During the day, Mutha finished up preparations for the upcoming ball. What he had expected to be a tricky situation, considering the opposition to the event documented in the press, was surprisingly trouble-free. When ordering food for the dinner, he didn't have to haggle the price with vendors, because he was given a discount. Flower stores offered their product easily 10% below market price, without the usual government markup. When meeting with the manager of the seating supply company, the man was all too happy to offer the free labor of his nephews to complement an almost absurdly low price for tables and chairs. Mutha was so puzzled that he spoke before he thought.

"Why do you charge so very little? The price of such a request has not been so low in tens of years! Explains yourself now." The vendor shrank back, the smile falling off his face as if it fell off a cliff. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out for several seconds, as if fear had shrunk his vocal cords into oblivion. Mutha realized he had come on too strong and took a step back to try again.

"I appreciate your generosity in pricing, kind sir. It shows your patriotism and willingness to support your government in these times. But I must ask for the source of such generosity. Doesn't such a low price lower your profit? How will your nephews survive if they continue to provide their labor for free?" The vendor was quick with his answer.

"Oh, they do not work for free for everyone, Honorable President. This is something they do especially for the party."

"Forgive me my ignorance, but why do you care so much about a party you will not be attending?"

At this, the vendor looked up at Mutha with disgust on his face. Mutha could read the expression like a newspaper with a glaring headline. **ARROGANT POLITICIAN BELITTLES WORKING MAN--AGAIN.** The vendor clamped his mouth shut with an audible snap and looked Mutha in the eye, daring him to say something else equally demeaning.

“Sir, I will double the generous price you have quoted me, if only you will explain the significance of the upcoming ball. Why would you all sacrifice your livelihood for this event? Please!” Mutha’s voice broke on the last entreaty, betraying his desperation for answers. The vendor didn’t miss it, either. His eyes narrowed at the opportunity to squeeze someone in a different income bracket.

“You would double my price, President? Ah ha ha, how nice for you, to help the poor man in the street! Does that make it alright to taunt me with a party I cannot attend, then offer me money?” The small rotund man seemed to grow taller; his chest swelled with each word.

“Fine then, I will arrange for you come to the party! Just tell me what I want to know!”

“Ah ha ha, President! You just dig a deeper hole for yourself, it is funny to watch, no? So, you offer me a chance to watch you spend the money earned on the back of my countrymen, to watch you throw it away on cakes and drink. No No No, Politician. I do not want to be present at such destruction. You could offer me ten times my normal price, and I would not go to your party. In actuality, if you knew the truth, you would not want to go to your own party!” The vendor started to cackle so hard he began coughing in his glee.

Mutha looked aghast at the man’s struggle to breathe through his amusement. He could not think whether to pat him on the back or slap his face for insolence. His curiosity dictated he do the former, to get an answer to his question. But the man backed away from Mutha’s touch as if it was diseased. He kept laughing, punching his own chest to encourage his lungs to work.

“Party! Party! Look at the Party President!” The vendor stumbled away, leaving Mutha staring behind him incredulously.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mutha sat in the Honorable Chair, head bowed while trying to stop the trembling he felt in his hands. The lack of sleep and the dreams--no, nightmares--that came when he did sleep were taking their toll upon him. When he allowed himself to be ridiculed by a common street vendor, things were out of control. First, one of the servants should

have been handling such a task, not the President of the country indeed!! And then to be spoken to in such a way, laughed at...the memory made Mutha cringe in remembrance.

Mutha returned from the market happy to embrace his anger instead of the fear he'd previously felt. It was much more gratifying to find to his ego, to wonder why the lowly merchant felt he could intimidate the President of the country. Mutha entered the chamber where the ball was to be held and looked around. It was beautiful. There were still servants running around putting up tapestries and assembling tables. However, the mood amongst the servants was not a happy one, but somber instead. There was none of the usual joking and camaraderie as the workers went about their tasks.

He took a deep breath and rubbed his face with his hands. This was not acceptable of the man in charge of a great country on the verge of relevance. Bingu va Muthatisa was a great man! Yet here he was, sniveling like a spoiled child whose party was ruined.

“Well not yet, because the party is tonight, and I will NOT let my coming out be ruined by anyone...including myself!” Mutha physically swallowed, imagining his irrational fears going down his throat, to be subdued forever into nonexistent. He stood up and strode towards his bedroom, just last night the most dreaded room in the palace. But at this moment, Mutha was determined to put all those ghosts behind him and get in a nap before the party started. Everything in his whole life was determined by mind over matter. He made his mind up to ignore the history of his people, the anguished cries of the murdered, and the warnings of his former good friend.

And in direct response to his insistence on ignoring the warnings, as Mutha fell asleep, the dead began to rise.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mutha stood in the middle of the ballroom, a glass of champagne in each hand. He reigned on the mini dais he had built there, so he could be among the guests and yet above them. The President looked down upon the people in the crowd, unable to believe this day had finally come to pass. This was all he had wanted all his life; being recognized for his love for his country. This might not be the most important speech he would ever give, but Mutha planned for it to be the first of many. However, as he looked down on all the brown faces watching him earnestly, waiting for him to begin speaking, the words to his prepared speech escaped him. Suddenly, whatever he had been about to say about the palace, his presidency, himself, and the country was gone. It was

replaced by a fogginess that clouded his thoughts. A haze crept up on his vision, and the people below him grew blurry. His stance wavered slightly, as he attempted to regain his composure and he sensed the susurrations of the crowd wondering at the long pause that was quickly turning into an awkward hesitation. In the back of the room, Mutha saw his former friend Bakili Malazzi standing near the door. He was shaking his head sadly at Mutha. Mutha couldn't tell if he was angry about the party or at him, but before he could wonder further, Malazzi abruptly turned and walked out. Looking back, it seemed to Mutha that his sanity went with him.

Instantly, the mumbled voices he'd been hearing from the guests turned rhythmic. The words were at first unintelligible, but they shaped themselves into a drumbeat that Mutha quickly recognized as a heartbeat. He looked to the musicians, but even through the haze affecting his vision, he saw they were not playing any instruments. The heartbeat of a drum continued, swelling into his ears unwanted. Mutha then looked at the glasses in his hands, at the left glass then the right. I must have been drugged, someone must have put something in my drink, why else would I be hearing these things? Why can't I see properly? The mumbled voices turned into low moans and groans of pain, the same sounds he'd been dreaming of since moving back into the palace. Mutha moaned himself, distraught; this was the wrong place to be having an episode! His breakdown would be reported all over the country in days, everyone at the party would tell. As a gesture of goodwill, he'd even invited the reporter he jailed after the exorcism article. Of course, he would just love to print a story about the new president's breakdown in the haunted presidential palace! 'New President of Malawou now can't speak in English or Chewa...!' Mutha groaned again, and a chorus of groans followed him.

Then he saw something even more disturbing: behind each guest, a shadow was rising from the floor. It was a grey insubstantial smoke, like an elongated balloon and it drifted right behind each person. Once each shape pulled free from the floor, they hovered as if gaining strength. Mutha's mouth fell open completely and he simply could not believe he was hallucinating to such an extent. This was his ball! His coming out party! The shadows were starting to solidify, and Mutha knew things were getting worse. The guests themselves didn't seem to be able to see the shadows, but they were clearly there. Mutha could see flowers on the tables move as a wraith brushed past it; the curtains swung ever so slightly as another one moved by. And they were turning into human shapes. As Mutha had deduced, these were not shadows.

The knowledge he'd been trying to suppress ever since he'd started hearing the scratching at night came to the forefront: these were Malazzi's spirits coming alive. Smoke came together to form faces, hands, muscles. Even worse, weapons materialized with the wraiths. Several of them had spears and bludgeoning sticks. As the drumbeat got louder, Mutha could not hear the guests, but he knew what he would be hearing soon: screams of the dead and dying. Part of him wondered if they would also begin to eat each other as well. Would his Cabinet cannibalize themselves in front of him?

The worst part for Mutha was that he absolutely knew there was a wraith of his very own drifting right behind him, solidifying into a nightmarish killer like the ones he saw around him. What was his own wraith holding behind his back? An axe? Machete? Mutha truly did not want to know. He felt just as incapable of moving as he was of speech; he could not move to save his life...literally. He was frozen in terror and that increased his guilt. Since Malazzi had already run for it, he was the only one who knew what was about to happen and he couldn't warn anyone...and he was the President! His job was to protect these people, and he was going to fail them spectacularly. He saw Goodall Gondwe whispering furiously to his wife, while his eyes never left Mutha's face. There was a mask of concern on top, but underneath Mutha saw the malicious look on the finance minister's face at Mutha's perceived gaffe. If you only knew, Mutha thought. Gondwe's wraith had sharpened up to become what Mutha recognized as an Akafula tribesman. The man was short and skinny, with sharp features that twisted into a horrible visage. In his left hand he carried a large club that looked impossibly heavy. Mutha could see the figure flexing his right hand, as if testing it out. This worried Mutha even more (if that could even be possible) because it indicated these things were thinking! And what was the thing testing its hand for? This was not going to be good at all.

He saw his Minister of Foreign Affairs Joyce Bindi tittering behind her hand not-so-quietly; and saw her wraith tittering too...but with a spear in one hand and a small knife in the other. He had heard she was trying to undermine his rule in small increments; Mutha took a small pleasure in the wraith's presence behind her. At least someone in this room would be getting what was coming to them! And then felt immediately guilty at the thought. Mutha looked around the room again, noticing that the guests still did not see the misty figures, even those right in front of them. They drank wine and watched him with curious gazes, wondering at the delay of the festivities. It felt as if an hour had passed since he'd seen Malazzi slip from the room and the first

wraith had appeared. In his mind, he knew it had only been a minute or two. In his heart, it felt like all his life. He looked down again at his glass and frowned, where were these thoughts coming from? He hadn't felt anything like this before! Yet, Mutha felt a rising certainty that his whole life had purposely led up to this moment. As if...as if his destiny was to encounter these wraiths. But for what purpose, Mutha wondered. What had he ever done to deserve such a punishment? To watch his people die in such a manner as these ghosts planned?

As his guests, the most important people in Malawou watched, Mutha finally decided to meet his destiny. He was the President of Malawou! He had a duty to confront Fate. He turned around to face his own wraith.

And there stood his own Malazzi spirit, a short, stout, big-bellied man. He was covered by a loincloth and sweat, which gave his shadow-skin a greasy look. His legs bowed outward, creating a powerful barrel affect, with arms held akimbo. Unlike the other wraiths, this one held no weapons of murder in his hands. However, his visage was scarier than any machete or spear to Mutha. His almond-shaped eyes held no warmth, although they crinkled with glee. The broad nose flared wide enough that Mutha thought he could see things moving around inside them. The wraith's grin, however, was still the worst of all. His lips were rubbery and smeared with a thick, viscous substance Mutha didn't even want to think about the origin of. They were spread across teeth shaped like upside-down triangles and appeared sharp as nails. Was this the ancient Chewa chief? As Mutha stared, his own wraith became more substantial like the other ones. He saw the resemblance with himself and knew this was his ancestor, here in present time. It still did not speak, but the hands began to rise, filled with kwacha of every denomination. Slowly, the wraith raised his hands, grinning wider and wider, to the point of absurdity. His face almost seemed to split in two, the edges of his mouth damn near reaching his ears. With great deliberation, the wraith began to shove the money into his mouth. He chewed the kwacha with his knife teeth, as if they were the most succulent fruit and the wraith was starving. And the kwacha bled with each bite, streams of red running down the wraith's mouth and face. The paper crumpled like money, but the blood ran as if from flesh. It was the blood of his people, Mutha knew. He was hypnotized at the sight. It was like he was watching his country's livelihood being devoured before him. Equal parts terror and disbelief held him immobile, even while he heard the crowd's murmuring grow louder--along with the sharpening of steel against steel. Mutha's wraith raised his hands again with a new batch of kwacha within them. This time, he



slowly raised one hand to his own mouth, and raised the other to Mutha. Mutha knew it was his own turn to partake, to eat his country like some animals eat their young. To gorge himself upon the lifeblood of the thing he held most dear. Malawou.

It was the same thing his cabinet had urged when he first took office. Bribes, payments, handouts, gifts of cash...his initial reluctance was not enough. It was only a matter of time before he gave in, and then he too, would feast upon the country, like its ancestors were feasted upon by its enemies. As the hand filled with kwacha moved closer to his face, Mutha closed his eyes and swayed. All he ever wanted was to prove his love for his country, to bring to life his vision and make Malawou the greatest place on the continent. To be forced to eat his own dream was almost a fate worse than death. He now understood Malazzi's warning. Malazzi knew him better than most people. He knew Mutha would not be able to continue the tradition of raping his own people. I bet he didn't know how spectacularly my meltdown would be, Mutha thought. Even with his eyes closed, he could sense the hand in front of his mouth. He could smell the copper dripping from the notes. And underneath, he could smell acrid smoke, what some might call brimstone wafting up his nose. Mutha's heart did not want to eat, yet his mouth opened of its own volition. He felt the fat fingers of his wraith insert themselves between his teeth. How strong they were! Mutha could feel the rough pads of the fingers; he could taste the blood dripping from the kwacha. The notes were crammed into his mouth, and immediately, the blood began to run down his throat. He began to choke, and the wraith began to laugh. Mutha still could not move, could not spit it out, could not defend himself nor his country. Still the wraith laughed, as he cut off Mutha's air supply with kwacha. He did not waste time wondering how a ghostly figure could be strong enough to choke him with anything, he only tried to draw a breath. But his every inhalation was replaced by a stream of blood, flooding his windpipe.

When Mutha fell, he began grabbing his throat. The guests, who had been thoroughly confused by Mutha's interrupted speech, ran to his side when he hit the ground. He seemed to be choking, but there was nothing obstructing his airway. Goodall Gondwe dragged Mutha to a sitting position and tried the Heimlich Maneuver in case whatever was lodged in his throat could not be seen. He gave several violent thrusts to Mutha's midsection, but Mutha's eyes never opened and he never moved a hand to help himself. After the fourth heave, something flew from Mutha's mouth: a clotted piece of paper. Goodall's wife picked up the paper, which turned out to be a twenty kwacha note, all wadded up. It looked as if it had been dyed red in color, but she could not tell

how or why. It was, however, too late to save Mutha. The medical professionals could not resuscitate the President of Malawou. But if you had asked Mutha, he would have preferred death to the future he saw for himself at his first and only gala at the Presidential Palace.

## AFTERWORD:

*I wrote this story after seeing a news report online about this incident. True story. There was an article that the real president of Malawi had imprisoned a journalist for writing a story about him having the Presidential Palace exorcised by a priest. Apparently, he did have a priest come to bless the palace and the priest went about telling people that the president thought it was haunted. The journalist---Tenthian, I remember—heard that, wrote a story and promptly earned 30 days in jail. I think he also had to write a public apology once he was released stating he made the whole thing up. I was so taken with the idea the story immediately began bubbling up into my consciousness. What if this story was true? What if the President was right and the palace was haunted? Voila.*

## CHEATERS

*~You're being very difficult, Cassandra. I'm starting to think you don't want to be healed.*

*~(no response)*

*~I know you feel responsible, but--*

*~I AM responsible!*

*~You can't keep blaming yourself. I understand you feel you don't deserve forgiveness, because you feel what happened to Joe and his friend was your fault.*

*~It was my fault. My fault.*

*~But no one else blames you! Not Joe's family or friends. Not the police; you were found not guilty by reason of insanity. And of course, I don't blame you. But I do want to help you. Don't you want my help?*

*~Yes, Dr. Hall. I want your help, really!*

*~Don't you want your old job back, your old life?*

*~I guess so...*

*~Of course you do! You can have your life back! You only have to reach out and grab it.*

#

I should have known better that last time. I mean really, it's my own fault. Technically, I brought this massive load of guilt upon myself. Though my current therapist says that I must try – really TRY – to move beyond blame—apparently, that's the first step towards healing. As if any sane person really wants to be healed these days, anyway. You must be half crazy to get along. Be Healed! Like I was

some non-walking handicapped wheelchair bandit on Jerry Falwell's now defunct televangelist show. I mean what do these people do after the show? Yes, I'm HEALED! Thank you Jerry Falwell! (Thank you easter bunny! Same thing, isn't it? Make believe, fantasy life?). Even if it was real, and some guy was really healed on one of those shows, what would they even do with their new life? I mean let's be real here—disability or any other form of government assistance would be instantly cut-off, which would result in eviction from Mom and Dad's. They'll be ecstatic at having the trailer to themselves. Now the ex-wheelchair bandit is a walking, able-bodied bandit. After spending his whole life cosseted, he's thrust out into the world with no skills, no money, no Life. He probably ends up homeless on the streets begging for spare change. Only who wants to give a healthy, hearty, walking individual some of their hard-earned money? Nobody, that's who! Why can't they get a job like everyone else? So, the ex-wheelchair bandit needs a racket. And he gets another wheelchair—nothing as fine as the one he spent the last ten years in, no, this one is strictly manual without the benefit of motorized anything. He mentally and physically paralyzes his legs, to make a new living, a new life the only way he knows how. He ends up right back where he started, without the use of his legs—with the added burden of hating Jerry Falwell and God with every fiber of his being. And how can you get along without God?

Now I'm not in a wheelchair—physically that is. But my therapist, Dr. Jerry Hall, does bear a striking resemblance to the televangelist, and sometimes our sessions (sermons) can turn into an almost religious pep talk. That's how much Jerry—I mean Dr. Hall fully believes in the psychobabble. His earnest, shining pink face seems to almost beam his belief out at me, as if I can be healed! through osmosis, using the sheer force of his will. Which of course makes him totally blind to the truth—that everything I've said is true and it really happened. Which brings me back to my original statement—this whole debacle is entirely my fault.

#

I met Joe for the first time while I was on a temporary job at a convention. For me, there was this instant attraction during our first introduction, which surprised me. I had once again sworn off men, especially after what happened last time. Plus, Joe was not the type of guy I usually dated—he was nice. I mostly like them skinny with bouffant hair, and he was the exact opposite—far from skinny and just about NO hair to speak of. But he had the sweetest smile and a banging goatee, which is always exciting, if you know what I mean! During that first week, we chatted each other up at every opportunity. I made

excuses to go to his office and thought up possible topics of conversation. I learned that Joe had a disposition that matched his smile (sweet as pure cane sugar) but was only in town for work. He actually lived across the country but kept a house here since he traveled back so often. Joe asked me out on his last day in town, and of course I couldn't say no. I should have said no. I wish now I would have. Maybe things wouldn't have turned out so badly.

I have a bad track record when it comes to the opposite sex. To me, they have always seemed to be a perpetual mystery; way different from the images my rose-tinted eyes send to my fevered brain. I used to believe that I was born with abysmal taste in men and that's why I always picked losers. I'm starting to think that the truth of the matter may hold more sinister connotations.

Anyway, that first night out together, Joe was a complete gentleman, and we had a great time. We laughed, played and danced the night away. He dances worse than I do, and that was really endearing to me. In the morning, when it was time for him to catch a plane home, we shared a sweet clumsy kiss that lit a fire in my blood. He said he would keep in touch and I hoped so because that first night was so great...

Well, I guess that first night really doesn't matter, does it? It's all the nights, accumulated as a whole and averaged out like some sort of complex mathematics problem that really makes the difference. And after a year, I unfortunately didn't have a lot of positive nights to put into the love equation. Joe came to my city often and at first, I was flattered. However, I never got the home number to the house in town, which invites suspicion. I had checked his ring fingers for that telltale tan mark, but there weren't any. That just meant that he wasn't seeing someone else legally. Also, an alarming amount of our conversations contained references to Joe's ex-girlfriend—who I was starting to suspect was more like current. Granted, they were generally negative statements about how “cracked up” she was, or how she ruined his credit with wild spending habits. But when I asked him tough questions like why he didn't have a phone in his house because of credit problems but could get a cell phone (which is usually a LOT harder to get with a negative credit rating) or why his car was still in his ex's name, his lengthy inadequate responses began to take on a stuttering quality. Soon conversations started to blur into a loud white noise filled with my silent contempt; all his murmurings began to blend into one big ass LIE! And I wanted to scream at him to STOP but he wouldn't, just kept going on and on like I was stupid and can't tell the difference between the truth

and a lie and I just wanted to stand up and STRANGLE the lies, throw him down and STOMP on it CUT him to PIECES—

When you find out you're in a one-sided love affair, there's always anger. What they don't tell you is that with the anger, comes the shame. First there's the "why do I always get the assholes, the bums, the LIARS?" Shame is such a magnificent isolator, too. The shame doesn't allow you to confide in friends. It inspires a great reluctance to see the look on a friend's face when you attempt to expose your folly in its entirety. See, what people forget is that it's the SHAME that forces battered wives to allow themselves to get beaten to death. For some women death is better than facing the problems that brought them to that point, to avoid the look of pity on other folks' faces. If someone else tries to bring it up first, or probes too deeply into your current love life, you turn on them fiercely like a cur protecting her puppies. You explain yourself by saying you can handle it yourself. But in reality, "handling it" would mean you'd have to stop hiding the truth from yourself. You must acknowledge that once again, you've allowed yourself to be used, soiled, sold way too short, foiled again by the thinnest of veneers. That you gave up that special part of you, part of the essence of yourself, part of what makes you--you. Now this low-down dirty LIAR gets to take this piece of me with him, like a gift—a stolen gift that was meant for someone else, someone worthy. It's really hard for me to deal with that kind of stuff, misrepresentation, and fake facades LIARS...I just couldn't deal with it anymore.

That's why I had to stop dating before.

Finally, the time came with Joe when the anger grew so thick around my head that I couldn't smell the sour tang of self-humiliation that had held me captive for so long. Joe had cancelled our last two dates, and had failed to make today's phone appointment, which was supposed to hold some sort of apology and explanation for his recent behavior. So that afternoon, I pulled out my address book, consulted his card and memorized his address. It was truth time.

#

*~Why do you think you want to hurt members of the opposite sex?*

***~I don't know. They're all assholes, anyway.***

*~You know that's not true, Cassandra. You know lots of men that aren't--like that. So, think, why do you think you want to harm them?*

*~(no response)*

*~Cassandra? (pause) You must do some work if you want to resolve this. Now--*

*~Because they hurt me, okay! They hurt me, so I fucking hurt them. Fuck them!*

*~Okay, that's good, that's very good. They hurt you, they've made you feel pain?*

*~Hell yeah! I was angry and pissed off to the extreme.*

*~Dig a little deeper, Cassandra, go underneath the pain. Is there anything else they made you feel? Was there something other than pain? Tell me, Cassandra.*

*~(no response)*

*~Work with me! What is under that hurt feeling? Fear, pain, anger maybe?*

*~(no response)*

*~Tell me--it is okay to tell me. I'm safe, Cassandra. What is it? What do you really feel?*

*~(whisper)*

*~Speak up, Cassandra, I can't hear you.*

*~Pleasure.*

#

I had planned on a final confrontation, where I give this excellent, Academy-Award caliber speech on how REAL men are supposed to treat women. I planned to explain to Joe how he failed miserably at Women 101, and how soon Karma would catch up with him eventually. In my mind, I planned out how it would go, and how I would be safely freed to find a good man. As I let loose of all the poison and pain his rejection (and let's face it, ladies and gentlemen, when you get to the end of the tootsie roll pop, that's what you got left...) had caused me, I would grow taller and straighter while Joe steadily shrunk with each



word. Soon, in my daydream my 5'6" frame majestically towers over Joe, because I would be standing on Righteous Indignation! In reality, I exited the freeway and turned down Joe's street. Mentally I drop the last of my verbal bombs on him, swivel on my stiletto heels (dream shoes) and glide out the door on my Injured Party carpet, leaving Joe huddled in a corner—a weeping, blubbering mess. However, as I pull into his condo complex to fulfill this dream, I see a car already parked in Joe's spot. I know it's not his; not only is he one of the cheapest bastards alive and refuses to pay management for covered parking but he only drives a cherry red BMW in his fantasies. I told myself it's possible the driver of the vehicle was in the wrong spot and was visiting one of the neighbors. But as I get out and walk past the car, I see one of those yellow triangular "Baby On Board" signs stuck in the back window. That sign chilled my heart and I refused to think about what it might mean. My daydream was rapidly turning to ashes—I was supposed to be the only female in this scenario. I mean, it might be hard to glide around on an Indignation carpet if another woman is already on it going the opposite way. I strengthened my resolve and kept going. I gave myself credit for standing my ground and continuing to the door. I wanted to do this, have it out for once and for all. I needed this! It would represent closure. Right.

Now here's where Dr. Hall and I disagree on the turn of events. I believe that's because he wasn't there; if Jerry had been inside that living room, he'd probably be a patient here too. The main point is, I walked into a scene that had a traumatic effect on me. It was kind of my fault, since I didn't knock at the front door like a regular person. I simply tried the knob—I knew it would be open, and it was. I walked down the hall to the entrance to the living room and froze at the sight in front of me. Joe was on his knees dressed in his Sunday best, placing a huge diamond solitaire onto some Other Woman's finger! She was smiling and nodding, so the answer was apparently yes. They were so enthralled with each other that they hadn't even noticed me. By the time both heads turned to see me, it was too late, for all of us.

When I saw Joe there, in the middle of the room, his face all sweet and glowing at some other Chick I almost stroked out and died myself. Love music was emanating from a hidden speaker, and the lovebirds swayed to the beat. I could see the ring box on a table next to glasses of what looked like champagne. The whole scene told me that Joe never intended to call and issue any kind of excuse. That was just too much. I knew he was a liar, but to catch him PROPOSING to another woman while he was dating me! He must have been seeing her the whole time he's been seeing me, maybe even before. It's bad enough to know

you've been used, suspecting that he was cheating on the side. But to know that he's asking someone else to spend the rest of her life with him while still dating you! Joe couldn't even be bothered to dump me. Even after meeting me, knowing and supposedly loving me, he still chose someone else! The whole time, I was nothing but a poor unwanted second choice, not even worth being dismissed.

Right then is when I first felt that tickle. That's always how it starts for me, signaling disaster ahead. I stood in the entryway of that room, watching the man I'd loved for 12 months propose to somebody else in front of me. My shock was almost palpable; it was hard for me to breathe, but unfortunately my vision was not at all impaired. They were clasping hands and smiling at each other, and their failure to even notice me was infuriating and I hated them at that moment. How dare they refuse to acknowledge me—DARING to not see me! And I felt that feeling again, much stronger, in the small of my back, a strong warmth that rolled up my spine, leaving wild pleasure in its wake. It spread all over my body, making my fingertips and toes tingle. My whole body, every cell, every follicle was ALIVE with the feeling. It centered itself in my groin, and I started to get hot. The smell of pheromones being released by my sexual excitement must have finally alerted Joe and his woman (fiancé) to my presence; their heads both turned toward me at the same time, not understanding but somehow realizing there is DANGER (Will Robinson!) afoot inside their house. I can see that they don't comprehend the source of the threat (surely not this woman standing in OUR home, she's unexpected, but has no weapons, doesn't look scary) eyes blink stupidly but fear swims there, pupils dilating nostrils flaring, searching WHERE? Where is the monster, the maniac with the AK47, the source of danger that has raised alarms buried so deep in the subconscious they don't even know what's been triggered. Then my body catches fire--EXPLODES and something (death) flies from me and streaks toward them and smacks them visibly. I wanted to pull it back (what is that?) walk away, STOP but it was too late, and I could feel my body starting to react, that special wetness flowing into my cotton panties, making me sticky. Joe and his BITCH (realize who they was fucking with) are shaking, vibrations of my pain at being lied to and used ripping them apart, invisible waves of some cosmic energy causes skin to slough off, falling to the ground with a small plop, chunks of epidermis staining the carpet, until the muscles and tendons of their bodies become fully exposed, then they too are hit by (something), causing them to disintegrate, joining the chunk of flesh already on the ground.

As each layer of what they both had been disappeared under the force of my will, I got more excited. I was faintly disgusted at my reaction. What I was seeing was terrible, horrific even—shouldn't I be screaming or vomiting, I wondered? How was this even happening? Instead, my nipples got harder and I could feel my labia swelling, engorged with blood; my vagina was contracting, clitoris was peaking. It was the most intense sexual experience I'd ever had, and I started shaking too, frozen in place but starting to moan as I felt release coming upon me. Joe and the Girl had no flesh left on their skeletons, which were hard for me to look at (GUILT) and starting to dissolve itself, pieces of bone marrow and chips of bone landing on what wasn't covered by their previous human detritus deposited there. All that remained of my former lover and his former fiancé was bloody jelly and at that moment I came ferociously, like an act of nature; Mt. Saint Helens or Vesuvius exploding in my pussy and like Pompeii, my vision started to go black. I couldn't get enough air. I was passing out with the pleasure and DAMN it felt so fucking good and I started falling forward (Oh Shit! No!) towards that pile of jelly-flesh, the pleasure center of my brain overloading hips bucking as I fucked my rage and my rage fucked me.

It was the best orgasm I ever had.

#

*~Now let's talk about what really happened to Joe.*

***~I told you what happened to him!***

*~Cassandra, you know what you told me is an impossibility. How can you get better if you won't be honest with me?*

***~I told you that I killed him; how I killed him.***

*~You want me to believe you killed Joe without touching him? That you killed him with your mind?*

***~No, not with my mind! Damn, are you even listening to anything I'm saying?!***

*~Yes, yes, I'm listening, just - explain again.*

*~I killed him with some other part of me, my--my madness or anger or something. My emotions, I think. I killed him with my emotions; it was like, emotional murder.*

*~Hmm, your madness, huh? (writes)*

This has happened to me before, and each time my sexual gratification got hotter and stronger from the incidents. The injuries to the ex-boyfriends in question got worse each time, too. The first time, my high school boyfriend only dealt with a bad sunburn and severe dehydration after dumping me for not putting out. He was released from the hospital the next day. But he told everyone in town that I was a witch and had put a death spell on him. That pretty much ruined any future dates for me until I escaped to college. There, I caught my guy hitting on my roommate at a party. I felt that tickle coming on, and the cheating bastard suffered third degree burns on 90% of his body and was rushed to ICU. In the confusion, no one saw me pass out, crying in the ecstasy of his misfortune. I tried to stop dating permanently then, because I don't really like hurting people. But I'm just not made to live alone, I need companionship—and anyway, my next boyfriend hit on me first. He's now in an irreversible coma. The two whores I caught him sexing in my bed apparently visit him every week, I hear.

But usually I never hurt the women! I mean technically they never lied to me, they never cheated on me and therefore owe me no loyalty. If they're okay being the Other Woman, fine—that's their business. My anger usually focuses on the lying, cheating men. But I guess the shock of finding Joe and her together like that, planning to get married right in my face... was a little too much reality at one time for me. But I'm sorry, I really am. I said so in court at my sentencing. Especially about her. She was just unlucky, I tell myself. I don't want to obsess on those memories; flashes of the "Baby On Board" sign, and the face of a frightened toddler, peeking around the edge of a couch, watching its parents fall apart silently.

My therapist Jerry tries to reassure me that I'm not some crazed succubus-like creature, dispensing my own twisted justice to those I despise as I literally cum all over their dead bodies. Or in their dead bodies, in this last case. That the orgasms are getting stronger (better) each time this happens is what worries me. What if I start killing men not because they hurt me, but just for the orgasms? What if I already am?

According to Dr. Jerry Hall, therapist extraordinaire, the whole thing was a sort of self-psychosis brought on by disturbing events. Of

course, it was assumed by the courts that after catching my cheating boyfriend proposing to someone else, I killed them both in a fit of temporary insanity. They say I tried to dissolve their bodies with household cleaners, though they don't know which ones since they didn't find traces of any. The fact that I told them what really happened and refused to testify at my own trial got me a mandatory 18-month stint in the psych ward I'm currently residing in. But why testify when I know no one will believe me? Dr. Hall says I should focus on the lack of control that led to me killing the couple, not on the method of death. I disagree. I don't know of anyone else who can kill cheating boyfriends with their minds—or vaginas, for that matter. And what does it say about me, that the destruction of a man I once loved can send me into paroxysms of pleasure? I asked Dr. Hall about that, but I think he's a bit uncomfortable discussing the sex aspects of my problem. His pink face gets shinier and he tends to lick his lips a lot. He gets flustered when I call him Jerry and can't meet my eyes. I think he may have a slight crush on me. Now that I think about it, he does have some thick nice lips for a white guy. I wonder if he uses those in bed? Maybe if Dr. Hall—I mean Jerry—gives me a hands-on example of what a normal sexual relationship should be like, I could be healed faster. He seems like a nice guy...the type of guy that would never cheat on me, I can just tell...

## AFTERWORD:

*I wrote this story after a broken date with a guy I met when I moved back to Las Vegas. That was my second time but I was still pretty naïve to the way things worked there. If you have lived there, then you already know what I mean. Anyway, this guy didn't really do anything horrible to me, we'd only had lunch a couple of times. But I was expecting more and when I didn't get it, this story came as a form of my own mental revenge. I thought it was interesting because so often women have a problem achieving orgasm; wouldn't it be interesting if she got one---during murder? Muuuahahahahahaha!*

### **\*\*\*WARNING\*\*\***

**THIS STORY HAS RAPE TRIGGERS. IF THIS IS AN ISSUE,  
PLEASE SKIP THE STORY.**

## **CONSENT**

The woman moaned and increased the pressure on her clit. She relished the touch of herself upon herself; nobody could do it better. She lay naked in her king-size poster bed, legs splayed wide on black satin sheets, which clung to her sweaty body as a result of her strenuous gyrations. Eyes closed, she ran the full length of her index finger over and over her clitoris, occasionally dipping lower into her wet vagina for more lubrication. Her other hand was occupied manipulating overly sensitive nipples. The woman's face was contorted with the pleasure of being so close to her orgasm when the gloved hand clamped across her open mouth.

The woman's eyes flew open at the unexpected touch. I mean, she was masturbating, not exactly a contact sport! Her mind was still enveloped in a sexual haze, so she didn't immediately comprehend the import of what she saw--two eyes floating disembodied within the night of her bedroom. The penetrating black eyes did not blink but studied her intently as if awaiting a response. When the woman's eyes adjusted, she could see the edges of a ski mask covering a face, the shape of a nose and a generous mouth underneath the fabric. The woman looked down at the hand over her mouth encased in black leather and began to understand that this was an intruder. An intruder in her house, in her bedroom! An intruder who came in while she was masturbating, no less--how embarrassing! But this man was in her house, damn near in her bed with his hand over her mouth. What could he want? Please no, not rape...but damn, she was just doing it to herself; he probably thinks he hit the jackpot and hit upon some hot ass, she thought.

With his free hand the man mimed taking his hand off her mouth. He used his mouth to parody a silent scream, and then slapped his hand back over his mouth. Looking at the man's eyes bulging in pretend panic, the woman thought he looked rather comical trying to tell her to be quiet. Still, she made no move to escape and slowly nodded her head,

assenting that she would not scream. Didn't they always say not to anger an assailant? The man, however, did not move. His eyes drilled into hers, as if he could divine her future actions through her frightened gaze. She tried to send the thought to her eyes: I swear I won't scream, please don't kill me, Mr. Man! She tried to hold his stare without blinking while imparting her message mentally, but his stare was akin to a robot's. She just couldn't compete and began blinking furiously—which was just when the man started to move.

I knew I should have lit some candles, the woman mused belatedly. It was hard to see someone dressed in all black in a pitch-black room. The eyes locked onto hers never moved, and the hand over her mouth did not. But she could feel the bed shake minutely at the stranger's silent movements, though it wasn't enough to broadcast his intentions. Was he reaching for a weapon? Was he going to kill her now? The woman's thoughts started panicky feelings that precluded the forbidden shriek. Before she could draw enough breath for the scream, the hand was gone from her mouth and her sight totally disappeared. The woman on the bed was too surprised to finish her scream. The death she'd suspected was coming had been exchanged for a blindfold—silk, by the fabric's movement against her face. Pretty pricey for a criminal, she thought. Okay, being killed—at least right now—was obviously not in the cards. Who breaks into women's bedrooms and blindfolds them with silk scarves?

The man wound another length of material over her eyes again, effectively blocking out any chance to see. The woman said, "I won't scream; just tell me what you want from me. The man froze, momentarily silent then slowly secured the knots restricting her vision. Then the woman felt the man draw away and she automatically lifted her head, sightlessly trying to track his movements - only to find her head secured to the headboard. Apparently, the ends of her blindfold were somehow fastened to the iron grille behind her, so she could only lift her head an inch or so off the mattress. Just as the panicky feelings started coming back, she felt the man draw something against her left ankle then his hand encircled her foot. As she tried to draw her leg back and drew breath for an ear-splitting scream, the man preempted her. "I thought you weren't going to scream", he said. It was the woman's turn to freeze at the sound of the man's voice. It was a deep, mellifluous baritone and wasn't it just a bit familiar? No, the woman argued with herself, she'd never heard that voice before - had she? Maybe it was the chills it sent down her spine that were familiar. Could he be an old boyfriend that went horribly awry? Boy, there were a couple of those



back in the day, but the woman couldn't believe an old lover would do something this weird. Though if one had, maybe they wouldn't be exes. HA! The woman could not deny such a scenario had been played out in many a fantasy of hers; held captive by a mysterious, sexy stranger who first put her at ease only to ravish her repeatedly at his leisure. But the fact that it seemed to be happening...

While the woman tried to work possible identities out in her head, the man quietly went about his business, tying off the woman's left foot to the end board. He then went for the woman's right arm, and as soon as he grabbed it, the woman let go of her mental debates and decided to put forth some physical ones. She snatched her arm back and began punching and kicking wildly with her free limbs. Unfortunately, the insurrection was brief. The man lithely jumped on top of the woman and pinned her arms to the bed with his knees. He seemed impervious to the kicks to his back; he didn't react to them at all. He pulled another scarf from somewhere and began to bind the woman's arm again. He asked her "Aren't you going to scream now? Haven't you wondered why I didn't gag you too?" The woman's eyes moved rapidly underneath the scarf, but she declined to answer, instead trying to attempt to wrap her free leg around the man's neck. She was envisioning a quick karate move where she could choke him unconscious with her leg muscles; all those anime cartoons should be training enough, right? The woman only got halfway there before the man grabbed her foot and immobilized her. She could almost feel his amused grin (and wondered just what was so funny, her pathetic attempts to hurt him?) as he asked, "Is that a proposition?" The woman immediately blushed and was wet at the thought of the mystery man's face buried between her thighs. If only he hadn't caught me pleasuring myself, the woman agonized. Meanwhile, the man finished tying off the woman's extremities and was silent. She couldn't tell what he was doing, if anything. Her thoughts went back to rape—will he, or won't he? Here she was trussed to her own bed, naked, spread-eagle—what else could be going on? But except to tie her up, the man had barely touched her. Nor had he physically hurt her even when she tried to attack him. Weren't rapes supposed to be about power and violence? There was nothing like that here so far. The man's few words were affable, if not downright teasing. He spoke as if he were speaking to a friend...or lover, the woman's mind whispered.

When she heard the first whisper, she thought it was her subconscious again. The second whisper was clearly the release of a zipper, and she became alert once more. He was getting undressed! "Why are you

taking off your clothes?” the woman said harshly. “Are you going to rape me? Are you a rapist?” The man, however, did not deign to answer her inquiries. I don’t know what I could do to stop you, tied up like this but whatever, the woman thought. She clearly heard him drop his shoes onto the floor, and step away to place them elsewhere. He’s probably a folder, she thought and wanted to laugh. I’m about to be raped by the neat freak rapist, and then did laugh out loud. Okay, stop it! You’re hysterical, she told herself. Bullshit, this kind of ridiculous character could not be allowed to victimize her! The woman began to scream, “Help! Rape! Fire!” repeatedly. The words, while a bit contradictory were loud and clear. She got out almost four repetitions before a gloveless hand slapped itself over her mouth. The man got on top of her and he was now naked except for the ski mask still covering his face. The hand over her mouth was strong, pinning her effectively to the mattress as well as silencing her. Any sheet or cover that temporarily separated the two naked bodies was quickly jerked away by the woman’s captor. The man laid himself rigidly on top of her, unexcited and frozen, though his breathing remained even. He pulled the bed linen back up over their bodies, as if they were lovers. She could feel the heat coming off the man’s body; under the blankets the temperature felt 100° and rising. With such a heavy body weighing on her and a huge hand covering half her face, the woman started to feel claustrophobic. She started breathing faster and she knew hyperventilating was next but she just couldn’t pull enough air into her lungs with two nostrils, she needed her mouth free, more air; she imagined her mouth wide open gulping down huge gulps of H<sub>2</sub>O but alas it was just a dream. In real life she felt her heart pounding and face turning red, blood vessels in her lungs started to burst from lack of air; one by one they exploded, one small explosion of bloody cells at a time and here she was, dying quietly, silently suffocated by the Tidy Rapist!

Just when she began to think he was the Suffocating Serial Killer and not a rapist, the man removed his hand from her mouth. Oh Joy! Her dream came true! The woman dragged in one great gasping breath before her mouth was covered again—this time by the man’s lips. He’s serious, the woman thought, he’s going to rape me. She felt the man’s moist hot breath mingling with hers and though she’d expected something rough and forceful, feather kisses and a teasing tongue were very unexpected. What kind of rape is this? She wondered and tried not to respond. The man was propping himself up with one hand and was gently running his other up and down her open legs—like a caress. Guess it’s been longer than I thought, the woman reflected, because this

feels more like foreplay to me right now. As if he'd heard her thought, the man raised his head and said, "why don't you scream rape now?" The man's hand continued to glide up and down her open legs, skimming over the tops of her thighs, moving down to her knees then back up again. She could feel her legs tremble a bit at each passing; with every movement she expected a finger to suddenly snatch at her, no pun intended. And now that he mentioned it, why hadn't she screamed? The man replied, "This isn't going to be a rape, you know, you want this." The woman could feel him staring at her as if he were trying to look through the blindfold to get into her subconscious and see all her thoughts and desires. But the woman stuck out her chin and would not be swayed. "I don't care how good this dick is, unless you have permission it's called RAPE!" The woman screamed the last word to force it into the man's brain.

He chuckled benignly and went back to work nibbling on her lips, then moving to her face and neck when she tried to bite him. She felt the man prop himself up atop her spread-eagle body and began exploring her body in earnest. "You know you want this," the man whispered, "you know you want me," over and over. He kissed the ear he was chanting into, licking the rim and probing the inner ear wetly. The hand that was brushing her legs moved to her belly and lay flat, fingers spread as he explored behind her ear and side of the woman's neck with his lips, licking her in one spot, nipping the skin gently all the while repeating his mantra of desire. The woman tried not to believe it. Somehow, he knew just where to suck on her neck, when to bite and where to lick. The man massaged his way down her thighs, caressing the insides of her thighs but not yet touching her sex. "It's not time yet," the man whispered, "You're not ready." Then those scintillating fingers would switch to the other leg, moving normally down but creeping ever so slowly up the insides of her thighs tickling her and damn she loved that! How could the man know that? At his quiet laugh, the woman wondered if she was crazy or if he was really reading her thoughts. She halfway expected an explanation from the man, but he said nothing except, "you want this, you want me". As he moved his mouth to her shoulder, licking and biting the woman realized the man was right. She was horrified to feel that act-right juice oozing from her. Can it be called rape if I come, she wondered wildly. The woman could now feel the man's thick penis coming erect on her thigh. As he made his way down her body with his lips, he moved himself against her in tandem. And ooh his hand stopped teasing her thighs and finally began to open her up. Well-manicured fingers gently probed the woman's nexus,

opening the folds of her labia and it was so wet down there his finger slid around like a kid on a playground, dipping into her dripping sex then back up and around her clit, caressing it like the hot button it was. When the man finally put his mouth on her nipple, the woman moaned so loudly she startled herself. Stroking her in both places, being unable to move, the woman knew she was completely under the man's control—physically. The man positioned himself, so his dick could rub against her pussy and grabbed her breasts with both hands. “Now tell me you don't want this dick!” The man pressed them together and lathered the nipples with his tongue and grazed his dick across her wet snatch, hitting her clit every time and she felt like her nerves were on fire. “Tell me!” the man instructed again, “SAY it! You want me to put this dick inside you?”

Hmmm, is that what this is about—ownership, the woman thought. Well, he may have control of her body, but she still had control of her mind. She pressed her lips together tightly to indicate her disobedience, though she wanted to scream, More! Maybe if she stopped responding, he would lose interest and go away. Instead the man raised his head again and asked, “Need more persuading?” The woman knew her lack of response was only encouragement for the man to do more. She knew what was coming next. Shame and guilt swept over the woman for wanting what should be a horrible experience. But oh, when the man put his lips on hers, and opened her up she lost it. It felt as if her whole body was in his mouth, hot and wet; he licked every crevice of her in long slow sweeps suckling at her clit until that wet earthquake hit her and she came—all in his mouth. Ooh yeah, the woman was grinding her pussy in his face and he licked licked licked it, and asked again, “Do you want this dick now?” But the woman still said, “No, please—at least use a condom”; the man ignored her and put that thick dick inside her. She was wet and ready, and the man was big and wide. He was moving inside her just the way she liked, hard and slow, hitting that spot, rubbing that already ready clit, biting her neck and he never missed a spot. Over the man's hard-working shoulder, the woman heard her bedroom window curtain flapping into open air; the view directly faced the bed—is that how he got in? Had he been watching her night after night, listening to her moans and urgings to an invisible lover? The thought was eerie, and the woman felt chills down her back that, for once had nothing to do with sexual excitement.

Every time he thrustured into her (which he did very well, almost perfect, as if he'd had a manual on how to fuck her) the scarf binding her right arm tore just a little bit away from the bedpost. Luckily, the woman

thought, I'm right-handed. As the man rode her, the woman raised her hips to meet him and her body responded despite her mental instructions. She couldn't help herself; she could feel the orgasm building within her with each stroke, all up in her and he was still thumbing her nipples and biting her neck—and all the while the scarf just tore, tore, tore. The man's thrusts became wild and erratic as he approached his own climax. While the man shoved himself into the woman, she clenched her vaginal muscles in a weak effort to control him but that just seemed to excite him more. The man began to mutter, "She wants it, she wants me" in a low guttural voice always evident before a man's ejaculation.

But damn, he was not alone; the woman could feel the waves she knew would shake her body down to its very last compound coming very soon. And when that wave hit, the woman's body turned to jelly and was instantly wet with sweat. It traveled to the man inside her, shaking him too. He rammed himself inside her one last time and bellowed, shot a hot load of cum in her quivering quaking pussy. Like Providence, the man's final thrust completely tore the scarf from the bedpost and the woman's right arm was suddenly free. As her second orgasm passed through her, the woman's free hand disappeared off the bed. The man, frozen in place during the release of his seed, could only watch as the hand reappeared with a small shiny extension. Too late, the man tried to rear back but was caught by the bright blade – once, twice three times across the face. The man couldn't even scream, he was so shocked at the turn of events. The woman quickly cut away her blindfold, so she could see the man who just gave her two orgasms against her will. The man's hands were trying to hold his face together through the ski mask; one slash had split his nose in half and barely missed his left eye. Pieces of material from the mask lay in the open flesh and the woman ruminated that it was going to be hell getting that off. The cut skin flapped off his face while gouts of blood flowed through his fingers. Now the man began to keen loudly, probably because it hurt too much to scream outright. The woman saw the blood and flesh – getting all over her sheets, damnit! – and shouted, "Get OFF ME!" She brandished her weapon, an old-fashioned shaving razor she'd gotten at a flea market. She always kept it in her mattress for certain emergencies. The man was in too much pain to even hear the woman, so she drew both feet back and kicked her assailant in the stomach, knocking him to the floor. She wasted no time cutting the remaining scarves to free herself and jumped off the bed to get to a phone. She kept her weapon up and ready, just in case but all the confidence had been sucked out of the man.

He lay in a fetal position, clutching his face. The hands that were caressing her to distraction a short while ago now pressed themselves against the wounds on his face that still cried great red tears. The man emitted a high-pitched loud whine but could formulate no pleas for mercy.

The woman looked down at the man, who was looking particularly pathetic at that point. She bent down to whisper in the man's ear, grabbed his flaccid penis and placed her blade at its root. "I don't care how good you were, motherfucker. You don't EVER get to touch me--or any other woman--without my permission. You're lucky I don't cut this off." She yanked his shrunken dick, then let it go. The woman grabbed the phone by her bedside on shaky legs and began to dial. "Help, 911? Please send the police – hurry! I was just attacked by a rapist! He's lying bleeding on my bedroom floor."

## AFTERWORD:

*This one is pretty dark, right? Yeah, I know. I agonized over this story a lot. I obviously wrote it in a state where I wanted to cut somebody's dick off ha ha. The rape factor however was problematic. It was one of those questions---what if? What if a lady was already masturbating, pleasuring herself when a rapist broke in? And what if it was because he'd been watching her for some time, knowing her habits—and what turns her on? Would her body still react to what she'd already been doing once the rapist took over? Basically, it was a separation of the woman's intellect from her physical body, which is a whole other Sigmund Freud conversation. Sort of like how many people dissociate from their physical body when being attacked, but with erotica and razors.*

**\*\*\*WARNING\*\*\***

**THIS STORY HAS RAPE TRIGGERS. IF THIS IS AN ISSUE,  
PLEASE SKIP THE STORY!**

**DESTINY**

She never figured this would happen to her. She was the best in the business, and never failed at any mission. Hell, she was so good, she was thinking about starting a training program for the fresh Iowa farm girls. Hooking wasn't for everybody; it takes a certain kind of person to take getting rammed by different guys every day, but Destiny considered herself a seasoned pro. With the perfect temperament (general disgust and contempt for all male kind), the right tools (excellent tits and a well-documented WAP), Destiny cornered the high-class sex market in Las Vegas. Formerly Samantha Colton from Northern California, she started out as a naïve hustler and worked her way from renting hourly rooms for her clients to demanding home ownership for fantasy fulfillment. Now Destiny had her own stable of fresh girls, allowing her to pick and choose when she wanted to work. In the last year, she'd only fucked four guys and cleared a quarter of a million dollars for it. Two of them were prominent politicians that liked a little leather and lots of submission. The other two were a famous gay couple from Sin City looking for variety for their variety show. She earned every bit of the money though and had the tapes to prove it.

This particular scene had sounded more her style; entertaining a multibillionaire and his wife seemed like fun. It wasn't often that men brought their wives to parties like this one; usually the spouse was kept tucked away in some backwoods mansion waiting for photo opportunities. But the extensive background check run by her company's private dick affirmed that Racella St. John was the actual wife. No history of "bad" behavior was uncovered – bad meaning anything like grievous bodily harm or death. You'd be surprised how many people were into snuff stuff. Necrophiliacs were not the kind of clients Destiny liked to party with. The St. Johns had thrown a couple public parties, and besides being hung over and sore, the participants had no real complaints. Although wifey was allowed to watch,



participation in the activities was taboo. None of the sex workers admitted to even touching Mrs. St. John, much less getting it on with her. Destiny had heard through the grapevine that the money couple was into some really freaky shit, actually headed up by the Misses. When she pressed for details--as in what kind of shit, no real answers were forthcoming. And the piece of answers she got were vague and hazy. As if the participants had entered a mental fogbank that obliterated any descriptions that could be understood by mere mortals.

“It was so weird...the taste...loved the way it felt...I can see her!”

Destiny assumed the ‘her’ was Mrs. St. John, but as the guy uttering the scattered phrases was way past out of it, she would never know.

The guy she got that from was a space cadet anyway; a couple of months ago he landed in some kind of asylum after a bad drug trip. But from all accounts, Destiny was more than willing to spend a full 48 hours with these folks for a million dollars. Especially the woman, Racella. The society page picture Destiny got from the dick showed a lithe attractive woman with an appeal that touched Destiny right down in her soul—her clit, that is. Thanks to a stepfather with lots of fishing buddies, Samantha Colton—the little girl Destiny used to be--had never liked men personally; the non-intrusive gender was more her speed. Just from that one picture of Racella, Destiny would have gladly fucked the billionaire’s wife for damn near free. Alas, work was work and she was forced by good business ethics to pleasure the man too. And charge a hefty fee for it.

Samantha never met her sperm donor; he ran off months before she was born—nine months before, in fact. Sam’s mom Flo (short for Florence), a former Las Vegas showgirl-turned-street walker was less than surprised at her pimp’s sudden defection from the team. Actually, it was the only time she’d gotten away from a pimp without getting the crap beaten out of her. Flo’s daughter grew up with a bunch of play daddies who ignored her if she was unobtrusive, which was the best she’d ever hoped for then.

Around her seventh birthday, Sam’s mom discovered cocaine, and its counterpart crack, and within months things took a disturbing turn for the worse. It started when a day before payday, Sam was traded for dope by her mom. Flo figured hell; it was about time. Samantha had two more years of innocence than she’d had; her daddy started her when she was five. She told the dealer no penetration, only oral work, figuring

she should save something for later for the next time she came up short on cash. The dealer obliged and restricted himself to frequent hand jobs and fellatio sessions until Sam's mom came back two days later with the money owed. She was impressed that he kept his word and soon the dealer became Sam's new play daddy Frank. Frank would fuck anything that moved, any day, at any time, in front of anybody, especially since he was a frequent client of himself. Sam's mom was in hog heaven with regular dick and steady blow. Sam's feelings were of no consequence to either adult, and she was barely noticed unless she was in the way. Frank would demand hand jobs sometimes when customers came by, saying, "Business transactions make me horny." Sam's mom would usually cackle in amusement at beloved Frank's antics, but nothing more. To her, this was a normal childhood her daughter was getting--hell, better than normal. At last the little brat had real food to eat and decent clothes to wear. Flo felt everybody had to pay for room and board.

Frank did keep his original promise to Flo and didn't rape Sam until she was 13. He'd waited patiently for her pubic hair to grow in; he often said he didn't like 'bald pussy' because it made him feel like a child molester. But on one of his many fishing trips, a new member of the crew asked about Frank's stepdaughter. The buddy reminded him that kids these days started early, and he could easily lose his place in line to some junior high-schooler. The very thought of someone beating him to the punch was infuriating and Frank mentally readied himself to remedy that situation ASAP. It never occurred to old Frank that any of his buddies might be smarter than him, or that one might try to manipulate him for their own reasons. As one might have guessed, Sam's coming out party was on a memorable fishing trip with Frank doing the honors and his buddies sampling the goods too. After that, Sam was often coerced--with a black eye or split lip--to attend all Frank's fishing trips to service him and his friends. Even now, the smell of fish made Destiny vomit uncontrollably.

After surviving Flo, Frank and friends, the average suck and fuck seemed like a dream. It allowed Destiny to approach her work clinically and with clarity. She easily mastered the average john's demands until she'd firmly established herself as the premier madam in the metropolitan area. Everyone knew not to fuck with Destiny and her girls because there was no hesitation before castration at unwanted violence. The sheep of the world thought her unfeeling, but folks in the business understood; once you've been a victim, offense is the only defense. Once, Destiny accidentally beat a man into a coma with a meat

tenderizer (the nearest hand utensil) because he offered her some blow. Destiny'd had enough drugs in her former life as Samantha and didn't go near them anymore. Ironically enough, the guy's name was Frank. Of course, money can't fix everything, but it can fix a lot and Frank #2 was quickly carted away to a private medical facility to recuperate in anonymity. He was a lowly member of the Genovese family, but to assuage Italian honor, Destiny gave a special performance for Gianni Genovese. Afterwards, the old Don invited her to beat any of his men whenever she had an urge.

\*\*\*\*\*

So, after such an extensive career in the biz, a thorough background check on the St. Johns and their surroundings, and extremely careful preparations (down to the removal and disabling of all possible weaponry), how the hell did she end up in this fucking predicament? First, there were not supposed to be any other knives, blades or cutting utensils of any kind in the suite. She'd had it checked before the arrival of the St. John's. Yes, she'd been a little distracted by the appearance of Mrs. St. John (please call me Racella, she'd said; I'll call you anything you want, Racella! Destiny thought) entering the doorway like an ethereal wraith. Tall and lithe with long wavy auburn tresses flowing down her back and tapping her ass with every step, Mrs. St. John's face was perfectly proportioned. Cat green eyes shown above a pert nose and full ruby red lips. Destiny's gaze wound down to a graceful neck, high breasts and a tapered waist that widened out again in hourglass-shaped hips that tapered down to slim calves clearly outlined by a chic maroon velour pantsuit.

However, Mr. St. John was a fricking horror to look at. His flesh was wrinkled and spotty like an old blanket someone had dropped into the dirt repeatedly. The rheumy quality of his pupils made the color hard to distinguish; they were sunken into a skeletal-like visage. The mouth was a cruel slash at the bottom of his face with thin lips that looked as if they'd never stretched into a pleasing grin. Sparse white strands drifted about the crown of his head, creating a weird halo effect that made him look sickly and lifeless. A black turtleneck covered a thin, weak torso from which two sticks that turned into arms upon closer inspection stuck out at each side, ending in gnarled fingers that were a startling white against the black cotton.

This withered body was enclosed within a very wicked-looking cage of steel on wheels. The dirty black blanket didn't quite cover the

wheelchair's silver spokes, which shined sharply as if they were wire thin and could garrote careless fingers. The headrest of the chair was of course black and reached an extra 2 feet into the air further than necessary, imitating a Bela Lugosi-style cape. Needless to say, this was not what Destiny had imagined the thirty-year-old billionaire to look like, no matter what his excesses. All the descriptions she'd gathered made St. John sound like an able-bodied pervert who took pride in his appearance. The man in the wheelchair didn't look like the young licentious man described to her by private investigators.

“Okay, Grandpa is NOT getting himself some young snatch by playing switcheroo here. That isn't the St. John I signed a contract with; this old fucker is not part of the deal!” She made her statement strong and no-nonsense. She braced herself for a fight, verbal or physical and made sure her feet were set. Yet the St. Johns made no response whatsoever except to continue their slow progress through the room towards her. The ghastly chair looked worse up close and Destiny thought she could see faces in the silver panels, contorted into grimaces of agony.

“What kind of game are you rich fuckers trying to pull on me? Cuz I don't do geriatrics for what you're paying me!”

Mrs. St. John just smiled, but the man in the wheelchair suddenly began to cackle. Apparently, the geriatrics remark was the funniest thing he'd ever heard because his attempt to laugh loud and long was prolonged. His wild cackle ended in a drowning gurgle that broadcasted his lung's struggle for air. And for a second it seemed like his beleaguered lungs couldn't win; the gent's face had turned an ugly puce color before he finally dragged in some oxygen. A normal person would probably feel the urge to move forward and check the individual's health, but Destiny's natural reaction seemed to recoil, as if whatever was wrong with him had risen from his diseased lungs into the air about them and if she got too close, she could catch it.

Destiny was trying to collect herself when Racella St. John began to speak. She couldn't tell you what, if anything, Racella St. John said because the sound of her voice seemed to be a trigger of some kind that threw regular existence into a whole new realm. When Racella opened her mouth, her lips moved, but what came out was a kind of hum without words; a verbal summons that twisted reality into a hallucinogenic fantasy. The air around Racella's head began to shimmer--no, undulate ever outwards like ripples in a lake, and the spaces within the ripples began to change. The room décor changed from average hotel

furnishings to red velvet chairs and a 4-poster bed covered in red lace; the room was soon reminiscent of an old bordello. What used to be white carpet darkened dramatically to a dark maroon weave the color of dried blood. The blackout curtains also turned the same color, extending from the ceiling to the floor.

But it was Racella herself who had changed most dramatically. While the air moved all around her, she began to--change. In the real world, Racella had been stylishly attired in the chic pantsuit; in the delusionary world (which was beginning to appear more real than the real world) she was dressed in her God-given birthday suit, long dark strands of her unbound hair flying around her body. Her hair was unbound and falling free in the moving space; the clips that had held it in place were simply gone. Destiny couldn't help but be intrigued, despite the surrounding weirdness. The long dark hair slithered around like it was its own organism, moving sensuously around the particular body part Destiny looked at; tendrils moved from below and encircled Racella's slender neck just as Destiny's gaze happened upon it. Her eyes slid down to the swell of a breast, and down to the pointed nipple and hair followed it stroking it like a finger, getting entangled in the areole then sliding down the waist and hips, lingering as Destiny looked her fill. Absently, she thought Racella St. John in the delusionary world bore a resemblance to a media-inspired vision of Eve, except for the rather lascivious look on her face. If she was Eve, the human race really was doomed from the start; something about Racella was simply terrifying and at the same time - pornographic.

Mr. St. John followed his wife, moving forward through the seemingly gale force winds that were altering reality. In the new world, Mr. St. John was still decidedly disgusting but no longer in a wheelchair. He crawled on his belly through the red shag carpet as if he'd been doing it all his, fluidly. Hell, maybe he had. In this world, he was still liver spotted and wrinkly, but those weren't age characteristics. Indeed, hatred and evil beamed from the center of a face that was now ageless; the mottled skin was leathery-looking and thick, topped with a hooked nose, large nostrils and bulging orbs; a thick almost tangible malevolence poured forth from the nose and eyes like faucets left on. This St. John had no hair whatsoever on his head, leaving his head bald. Where his hair was in the real world was a set of ridges and brows resembling a crudely drawn topography of the Rocky Mountains. It looked as if some horrific seismic event had gone off on his face, bulging the surface area of his head in effect.

However, there were two specific things about the man in the delusionary world that drove Destiny towards the brink of madness. First, Mr. St. John now had no mouth. He was mouthless—as in having no hole at the bottom of his face. As Destiny stared at the lower half of his face, a small movement proved her first observation to be incorrect. The streak of blood red shooting from a well-concealed slit above his chin was about the scariest thing she'd ever seen. The darting tongue was almost a foot long and garrote thin; it wavered through the air as if searching for her. The end was not forked like a traditional serpent's but single limbed with a wickedly sharp mini-talon at the end. The former Mr. St. John occasionally dug the talon into the ground ahead of him, aiding his progress across the velvet carpet. Apparently, to this creature, speech was unnecessary and so was the usual orifice; Destiny's eyes were repeatedly drawn to the freakishly smooth area below his normal looking nose, then down to the snake-talon emitting itself from the bottom of his face.

As mesmerizing as the sight of St. John's circus attraction face was, Destiny was still aware of the old man steadily coming near her. Destiny's mind moved a mile a minute. She looked around wildly for a drink from which such hallucinations could arise, but Destiny hadn't drunk anything. She didn't remember getting jabbed with a needle recently or an incident with a towel and some chloroform, which pretty much erased the possibility that this hallucination was induced. However, she was mostly worried about the fact that her reality was moving back and forth between what was real and loony toon land; and loony land was lasting longer than reality. That pattern meant she would eventually be stuck in that world permanently, a thought that filled Destiny with a near hysterical kind of fear.

First things first, Destiny repeated to herself to stave off the panic; first things --get the fuck away from freak-face here. Yeah the wife set it up, she's obviously the lure for the old man to get his jollies, they must have drugged me, yeah, had to be something I touched on the way in, the doorknob maybe...Destiny searched in vain for the offending knob as she backpedaled away from the pseudo-human-snake hybrid; however the delusionary world did not come equipped with doors or knobs to go on them and now the slipping was so bad Destiny couldn't have had time to get through a door in the rapidly disseminating real world even if she could find one.

Although the sight of Racella St. John naked and smiling was still inviting, her snake-like husband and the disappearance of the real world

didn't give her a chance to appreciate the view. She was barely aware of backing up until the wall hit her in the back and there was nowhere else to go. Windows in the newer hotels don't open wide enough to escape out of, and the St. John's had specifically requested a room without a balcony - presumably to avoid the paparazzi. The request seemed a bit more sinister to Destiny at the moment. So that basically left one option--finding a weapon. Which Destiny had already taken care of; one can try to prevent situations but sometimes shit happens and she never went on a job without protection. Unfortunately, her favorite defense blades were secreted in the bed's mattress--across the room, between her and the human serpent. And even if she could get over there safely, who's to say her blades even existed over here, in the dementia dimension? Okay then, plan two--negotiation.

"What do you want from me?" Destiny yelled at them. Damned if she'd allow herself to be cowed by this situation; the only thing that scared her was dead now, and even in this freaky situation she didn't expect old Frank and his fishing buddies to show up to harass the old Samantha Colton.

"Look, what is going on? I can't give you what you want if you don't spell out the rules," The man-serpent, however declined to respond through the impossibly small slit in his lower face area and slithered up to her feet; Destiny danced away from that forked tongue in Racella's direction. He--It--made no sounds, but its head bobbed a little more and the eyes crinkled in a way that suggested laughter.

Racella, previously the meek-and-mild wife began to solidify as the scene around them slowed to a stop in the place where Mr. St. John was the serpent from Hell. The bordello room was now the department of operations whether the troops like it or not, the funky red velvet and 4 poster bed were staying. Here, it was easy to believe the Park Meridian Hotel and outside world was the hallucination. After all, seeing is believing. Destiny desperately didn't want to be locked in the room with these people (well, maybe with the woman, but not him) more than anything, but felt helpless to escape. She thought, though, that Racella might be the key to the whole situation and tried appealing to her.

"Please, Mrs. St. John, why are you doing this? Please! Take me back; I know you have the power! I was looking forward to our arrangement and I can't fulfill my part of the bargain with all this—" "Destiny waved her arms around wildly—"going on.""

Racella, naked, turned to look at Destiny and the room went still.

“No, Samantha, you have the power. You called us here, and you brought us here. In a manner of speaking, of course. None of this could be possible without you. And please,” Racella mocked, “call me Racella. Mrs. St. John is such a mouthful.” She smiled at Destiny as if the circumstances around them were normal and everyone had a snaky spouse.

Destiny, however, was in a state of shock. How did this woman know her name! Nobody knew her real name; she’d had it legally changed years ago and arranged the death of the real Samantha Colton on paper. She’d fucked hundreds of guys, spent thousands of dollars, and too many shrink hours to make her childhood disappear for it to come rushing back in a moment of insanity. Okay, Destiny thought, maybe she misheard her, and she said something else, not Samantha and she didn’t mention a last name, maybe it was a case of mistaken identity—

“Ms. Colton, it is you we want. And yes, I can read your mind but no, that not how I knew.”

At that, Destiny could not speak, let alone think. Her secret identity wasn’t a secret anymore. What. The. Fuck. She’d already killed that little girl and all her problems. How could she be back to haunt her again? Fear for her safety left Destiny’s mind in light of this new tragedy and she simply could not get her mind around it. The thoughts of Samantha Colton’s problems swirled around Destiny’s head, but her mind refused to acknowledge them, to get around them, like a mouth around a juicy burger, biting and ingesting the contents but Destiny’s mind did not currently have the capacity to eat that particular burger. This particular burger was too big, too wide; the circumference was out of whack and Destiny just could-not-grab-ahold.

She closed her eyes against a flood of memories she didn’t want to see, but it wasn’t enough to keep them away, so Destiny began to shake her head, as if she could throw them out but that wasn’t enough. She couldn’t stop the images and moaned in a futile protest--Why? Then she felt hands touch her, soft gentle fingertips caressed her sweaty brow and the childhood pictures stopped coming, disappearing like a puff of wind and once again she could remember nothing. Destiny was so grateful she cried like the baby she could not remember being and was



glad. She opened her eyes and of course it was Racella, it had always been Racella, hadn't it always her; never anyone else, how could it be otherwise?

“Shhh--yes, it's me, I'm here and your time has come, my darling, we have come for you.”

At the “we”, Destiny snapped her eyes open. She had momentarily forgotten about Racella's snake-man/husband still lurking about on the floor and moved as if to look for him but Racella quickly placed her hands on each side of Destiny's face and turned her head, so she could only see herself reflected in Racella's eyes.

“You called us, and we came for you...”

The spell of calm her touch brought worked itself on Destiny once more and she allowed herself to be led to the bed. Racella sat her down and said, “Relaaaaaaaaaxxxxxxxxxxxxxx...” drawing out the word so long it seemed to drone on and on into Destiny's consciousness. Destiny was suddenly prone, looking up at this beautiful woman she loved so much because she had made the past go away. Racella sat down next to her and began to disrobe her, untying the robe's sash and dropping it to the floor. Destiny's protests were mild and easily overcome by Racella's assurances that everything was alright and as it should be.

Destiny found she could believe that as long as Mr. St. John (in any incarnation) stayed the hell away from her. She could not see him from her vantage point on the bed, but knew he was somewhere below, licking the floor with that tongue. She could have had sex with him in the real world, but here? After seeing what he really was, Destiny felt she would go out of her mind if he even touched her. That inspired other thoughts about what he--it really was. Human? Animal? Spirit? If it could even be classified by such criteria, what did it want with her? Destiny wanted absolutely no contact with the abomination crawling around on the floor. Racella's earlier love spell could not overcome the revulsion his otherworldly visage inspired.

Racella wasn't currently dispensing any love; she methodically undressed Destiny while barely touching her bare skin, showing no emotion. She lifted Destiny's torso to pull her robe and gown down to the waist, replaced her on the bed then rolled the garments off her body. As Destiny lay there naked and beginning to shiver, Racella stood over her looking somewhat triumphant.

“She is ready.” Racella intoned, a bit cryptically as far as Destiny was concerned. Ready for what? Destiny began to struggle from the blanket of calm that laid over her; she was too used to being in control herself to feel comfortable in a situation where someone else held the reins. And just who was Racella speaking to, decisively announcing Destiny’s status? She could have been speaking aloud to herself, but as she still made no move toward the bed to join in Destiny’s kind of festivities, the prospects looked grim. Destiny fought to pull her body to an upright sitting position to take a better survey of the room. Mainly, to see where he was. But she heard him before she saw him.

“She is ready for me?” The sound of that voice froze Destiny. She wondered crazily; did I really want to see him? When he sounds like that? St. John sounded as if some sort of flesh-eating cancer had gnawed away his vocal cords and the remaining blood and tissue was bubbling up into his throat. Destiny could almost visualize the torn ruin when a bit of reality inserted itself—St. John had no mouth! Regardless of how bad his voice sounded; he shouldn’t be able to make sounds at all. There was no mouth on the slithering thing below.

Destiny closed her eyes; the situation was too crazy. She didn’t want to think about how she was hearing St. John’s death rattle, didn’t want to think about that thing in her head reading her thoughts. But how else could she hear a man who shouldn’t be able to speak?

“You know why Samantha. You have opened your mind up to us! You asked us to come in and see what’s inside you, and here we are, ready to give you everything you ever wanted. Do you not remember begging to be heard when you were a child? Asking that someone listen to your pleas for mercy, crying for anyone to rescue you from the pain that overwhelmed you...well, we were there, Samantha! All the time, listening to your every word, trying to find you to take away hurts you should never have had to feel. We heard those cries, absorbed the misery and despair that has marked your very life, and tried to make it better. Remember that first fishing trip with Uncle Frank?”

Destiny squeezed her eyes shut even tighter and began shaking her head back and forth. She’d spent a lifetime of trying NOT to remember anything about Frank or fishing. Unfortunately, there were always events that broke through her consciousness, but there were a lot of things that she was happy to be clueless about. The first trip with Frank was a big one.

There hadn't always been a mental fogbank in Destiny's mind when she thought of that trip, and she knew it must be because of the two freaks in the room with her. She could barely recall Frank's face, and wasn't that strange? She'd spent years trying to forget that face unsuccessfully, but now she probably couldn't pick him out of a lineup...were the St. John's sucking her mental dry? Is that what this whole thing was about?

"Samantha, on the day of your first fishing trip with Frank, what happened?"

What happened? What happened? What happened? The words floated through Destiny's mind like a feather on a breeze. She remembered the boat she was gang raped in. She recalled they dirty brown planks spotted with her blood. She remembered the feel of the boards on her back, scratching gouges in her skin, then digging into her hands and knees. She recalled the feel of wetness on her skin, spray from the water on her face; other people's fluids on her body. She remembered hearing high and wild distorted laughter. She remembered the pain of her body submitting to the will of others, but most of all she remembered the pain inside of her that she knew would never leave her memory. The pain of not being rescued, of never being safe and never knowing a safe love.

The memories engulf the woman who was the girl Samantha. She opened her eyes, expecting to see Frank. Her recollections seemed so real. But she saw the St. Johns instead. The woman Racella in all her beauty and the man, the worm the thing squirming on the floor beneath them. But the fear she'd felt earlier at seeing their metamorphosis was gone. The memories brought her back to reality.

She knew them

They knew her

They were her

I know you, Sam said. You are me; I am you. Racella nodded, smiling brightly as if everything was fine, as if they were on a picnic and the sun was warming her face. Because in a way, she was. Racella St. John was the woman Sam wanted to be in her mind. She was beautiful, not dirty. She was rich, therefore safe. The money would keep her so. And she had a husband so old, so decrepit; he could never have sex with her. Racella was the part of Sam's self that stayed safe from Frank.

She turned her gaze to Mr. St. John.

The old man who turned into a snake.

He too, was she.

He was all the disgust she felt for herself, for allowing herself to be used. His squirming hideous countenance portrayed the deepest darkest hatred she reserved for the girl who could not stop her own pain. The girl who could not escape. The girl who must have asked for it. Deep down, she must like it! She must want to be hit and hurt like that. Why else did it keep happening? Why hadn't she tried to tell anyone?

The usual platitudes didn't mean anything. The child that was Sam Colton didn't care about abuse syndrome or statistics. She only knew that her mother knew that Frank liked to touch her like a grown woman and didn't care. She never tried to stop him. She never acted like it was bad or that she even cared at all. She acted indifferent about the relationship between her child and her man. She only took notice when she wanted one of them to do something for her. Oh yeah, it was always about Flo. When Sam was little, her mom used to say she kept her because she wanted to start over, to "bring some happiness to her life." But as Sam got older, and her mom got crazier, the story began to change. First Sam was "a part of me" so Flo felt she could have Sam do whatever she wanted whether it was suitable for a child or not. As she grew older, it got worse. Flo began to seem angry that Samantha wasn't abused and tortured as she was at a young age. Whenever Sam achieved in school or made a new friend, she was ridiculed by Flo. Finally, Flo began to bring men home, as if to flaunt them in front of her daughter. The mother started to recreate her own tragic childhood for her daughter. With a parent so fucked up, how could Samantha avoid being just like her? She must have the same kernel of dark perverseness, inherited from the same defective genes.

This was the origin of the worm. He was the defective gene, the disgusting part of her that made her a victim.

He was She.

At this revelation, reality flooded back into Destiny's mind. The briny smell of the sea water was no longer just a memory. It seemed to be real.

The sharp pain of lit cigarettes biting into her skin was not in the past. The pain was just as hot and excruciating as if it were happening right then. She tried to sit up, but rough hands held her down on the damp planks, fingers biting cruelly into her flesh.

Destiny bucked her eyes open, trying to see what she felt and smelled. For a minute she could only see the red brocade room around her, Mrs. St. John smiling benevolently down at her and the slick slimy top of Mr. St. John's tail, wiggling obscenely as if all this was giving him jollies...and wasn't it though? Isn't that why there were here?

She did not pray for a fall down the stairs or a head bonk on the kitchen counter. Simple death would not be enough to satisfy the little girl sitting in the boat. Having him die, without shame; without some taint of the evil he'd done--incomprehensible. An accidental death would turn Frank into a hero, a man who married a woman of dubious character and raised her daughter as his own. A man cut down in the prime of his life--Destiny couldn't stand the thought of his praises being sung at the funeral after all he'd done to her.

So young Samantha Colton prayed for her stepfather's destruction. She'd had enough of Frank and his fishing buddies and their idea of fun. The little girl Destiny had been ignored the God that allowed her to live through this ordeal; that God was merciful, and she did not want any mercy for Frank. Sam called all the dark spirits she'd ever heard of or sensed or imagined, to take the source of her pain and eat it. She prayed to the great god Pan, the war god Ares, the great goddess Kali...she commanded Cthulhu, Candyman, Freddie and Jason, the Loch Ness Monster, the Legend of Sleepy Hollow...

Little Destiny prayed for all the evil energy she could summon, and she prayed it into Frank's destiny. She willed his destiny to be very short, intersected brutally by her death wish. Destiny raised her arms to be the perfect conduit to collect the energy and indeed, the sky did darken a little and the wind picked up slightly. Her hair ruffled in the stronger breeze, and with it went her last inhibitions about--murder. Because in that moment, with her arms held high, her lips beseeching dark spirits, Destiny knew that if the spirits didn't do it, she would. With her own hands. Happily. She raised her head at the acknowledgement, and grinned. Her pupils had opened so wide her eyes looked opaque. And the deal was made. The wind swept around her, then through Destiny and she agreed silently to the terms: in 20 years' time the debt would come due and she would pay it.

And now the time had come. Samantha had gotten her wish and she would pay for it.

“So, who are you? Agents or owners?” The least they could do was identify themselves.

“Interesting question, agents or owners indeed. What do you say, husband? Are we mere mail carriers or eccentric owners come to collect in person?” Racella laughed as if the very idea was silly. However, Destiny pressed the issue and asked again.

“At least tell me who you are?! Who am I --uh, supposed to be surrendering to?” Destiny couldn’t quite bring herself to admit defeat. However, Racella and St. John were there to remind her.

“Oh, you’re definitely surrendering, my dear,” Racella drawled. John the Snake Face gave an accompanying hiss, letting his tongue loll about Destiny’s feet.

Destiny remembered the rest; the brutal murder of Frank, the words written on the wall in his blood, the decapitation and mutilation of his body in their living room; the police station, the foster homes and finally the institution where she grew up. She remembered watching with satisfaction how maligned Frank was in the press when the naked pictures of her were found in his car. How each of the participants in the boat that day were mysteriously murdered in similar fashion, each on their next birthday...and worst of all Destiny remembered the prices the dark gods had charged, to grant her heart’s most evil desires...her life. Her soul.

She remembered thinking dying at 33 wouldn’t be so bad since her life for five years old had been so horrific. All of the hitting, slapping and substandard living, that was bad, but the worst was the rejection of those who supposed to care for her, even if they couldn’t love her. How her mom would hug her and pinch the shit out of her and laugh, how she never protected her from the men she brought home, how little Samantha never got a new dress, but Momma always had her booze. She knew it wasn’t supposed to be like that for little girls, based on what she learned the few times she attended school regularly. Other little girls had new dresses and parents that picked them up from school and gave them lunches and dinners and breakfasts...things Destiny never got from her mother.

So, when she came home after the gang rape on the boat, she said nothing to her mother. She grabbed a few things and left the house to stay in the park for a couple hours to get away. She told the police she had to get away from Frank because of what he and his friends had done, but in the back of her mind she knew something was going to happen. Because she asked for something to happen. She curled up under her favorite tree and waited. When she felt like it was time to go back, she walked slowly back home until she saw the police lights swirling across the crooked address numbers of her house. She saw her mother gesturing frantically while uniformed men tried to lead her into a police car. When Samantha approached the scene, the cops quickly hustled her into another car and drove her to station. Samantha told them about the abuse, the rape and leaving the house. She told them she didn't know what happened after that, and she truly didn't. She wasn't there. She didn't do anything or ask anyone to do anything. Hell, she didn't have any friends to do anything for her. The cops drilled her pretty good, but in the end, they had to release her to CPS custody. As the other fishing trip participants came to bad ends, the ice around Samantha's heart became deeper. When her mother's time came, and she was raped and disemboweled with a bayonet by a dealer high on meth and PCP, the transformation from Samantha to Destiny was complete. She had nothing left to fear. She left her current foster home and struck out on her home, working the streets until her ruthlessness brought her the financial security to start her own stable. And by this time, the events that led to her life as Destiny had become the foggy ideal, she'd now grown used to.

She realized that her time was up. She sold her soul for revenge when she was 13 years old and the time had come to pay the piper. Destiny opened her eyes, to face what she knew was inevitable.

She realized it was all at an end. She knew she had never been loved really. She saw that she became a hooker because it was all she knew. It had been the only time she was ever shown any affection. She looked at the room around her, which her mind chose to see as a bordello, because where else would a girl like her be? Where else would a life such as hers end?

But what of the St. Johns? Who were they? Real or imagined? Humans that were experts in hallucinogens? Evil demons that committed murder in exchange for young souls? Or figments of her lonely, sad imagination? A better question was what did it matter? Regardless of the truth, in her mind Samantha got what she wanted: Frank dead,

freedom from her mother and now, two people who wanted her more than anyone else ever had.

As Destiny came to terms, Racella smiled and stroked her forehead.

“Yes, dear. We love you more than anyone you’ve ever known, more than you can imagine. We believe it is too much of a tragedy for no one to be loved or wanted. So, when you called for help, for JUSTICE, we gave you what you wanted. We provided a balancing of the scales. In return you simply have to give us the most important thing you have...yourself. Your essence. What makes you YOU. Look at Mr. St. John. A pitiful creature, is he not? Slithering around on the floor, decrepit, bald...he is the worst of what is human. But with your help, he will change. He will become that handsome devil you read about in the paper. He can be that debonair lover you expected. But you, Sam, are the only one that can make that happen. He needs you! No one else. You are the only one that can make him whole again. But he cannot take what he needs from you. You have to give it freely. You must offer it to him and it will be sweet ambrosia. But if he attempts to take it from you, it will be like poison. This is the most important thing you’ve ever been asked to do. And really, it’s also the easiest thing you’ve done. All you have to do, to make it happen, to fulfill your ultimate purpose in all your life...is to LET GO. “

After this soliloquy, Racella sat back, breathing hard. She looked at Destiny to see the effect her words had had. Destiny stared back, amused. She could see the unspoken question in her eyes...did it work? Did the spiel do its job? Did she get the girl to do what she wants? The funny part is that Destiny had made the same speech herself, many times over. Pulling unsure girls and boys into the life. How many times had she convinced people to do something they really didn’t want to do with the very same speech? Let go. Just do it. Nike. All that. And once again, here she was—the victim. Something she swore she would never be again.

The worst part is that after getting rid of Frank, destiny could see she had become him. She coerced innocents into sexual favors. Granted, she never hit or hurt, but she damn well brought her fishing buddies. She convinced those kids fresh off the bus to let go of their morals and fuck Destiny’s fishing buddies for money. Just as Frank had pimped her out to his friends, she had done the same. As she looked into Racella’s face and noted the hoarse breathing of Mr. St. John somewhere below her, she acknowledged who she had become. She



had tricked herself into believing she was better than her abuser because she didn't use force and gave the appearance of free will. But the truth was that destiny was the spider and once she got them into her web, those poor kids were stuck. Who else could know exactly what to say to break a person than one who has been broken—repeatedly? Because of what she'd been through, Destiny was an expert. And boy had she used it. Instead of using her time to do good, to really help kids like she had been, she instead turned them into herself. She turned them into the thing she hated.

And to now. Her new pimp Racella St. John. Because that's all this beautiful woman was. She pimped for a monster, but a pimp is a pimp is a ... Considering who she was pimping for, she seemed to very good at her job. Question was, as Destiny was a not-so-bad pimp herself, was she going to allow herself to be pimped or not?

She thought back to her past and her present and didn't want her future. It was bleak to say the least. Time wasted. Did she even deserve a future at all? Destiny didn't really think so. Being a pimp wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

“A pimp?” Racella asked, frowning.

Destiny laughed at the look on her face, realizing she had actually spoken out loud. Racella worried her speech hadn't done its job. The irony was that it had. She lowered her eyes, letting her fake lashes sweep along the top of her cheekbones, in her best imitation of demure.

“I understand now. You gave me my heart's desire, Frank's destruction. Now, I must pay the price for that gift.” Without looking up, Destiny could feel Racella's face split into a triumphant grin. The forehead strokes began again, a bit faster. In anticipation, Destiny thought.

“Good, good” crooned Racella Destiny could feel her motioning with her other hand and knew what was next. HE was coming. The price of blood and murder was always high. In this case, it was also supremely grotesque. She tried to brace herself to endure its touch but knew she couldn't. Even without looking, she dreaded it.

“I am ready, Mrs. St. John. What do I have to do?”

“Just lay there, honey. Be still. John will do everything. All you have to do is let him...” Racella stopped as Destiny laughed out loud.

“John! How appropriate!” Of COURSE his name was John. It was all too perfect, really. She stifled her laughs and waited for the end to begin.

When she felt the bad pressure change, she knew the human snake was coming for her. Racella’s hand upon her brow became more of a police hold rather than a comforting stroke. Destiny felt its bald hairless head nudge between her feet, forcing her legs open. Out of reflex she tried to close the, which was another chortle-worthy irony, but Racella admonished her.

“You have to let him in, dear. Open yourself up to him, give him that essence of yourself willingly.”

So, Destiny clenched her teeth and relaxed her legs. The john of all johns eagerly pushed them apart and slid along her legs up her calves to her knees. Destiny could not believe this was happening to her; she did not allow people to put their mouth on her sex. She was the supreme one and that was a rare privilege bestowed upon a very select few. The most uncomfortable act would be the only way out. Again, as if inside her mind, Racella tried to sooth her.

“It’s okay; this is the way it has to be. This is the most powerful place on the body and you were right to guard it. Now it is time to let it go and release yourself to him.”

Of course, Destiny thought. But she knew that Racella could only see so much. She could not see all the way inside her.

So, she squeezed her eyes shut again, letting the john approach her pussy. She felt his hot breath on her lips and her few pubic hairs she left there quivered. The monster john didn’t have lips, but Destiny felt his snake proboscis probe her, looking for entrance. Despite her disgust, she felt her warm liquid begin to pool there, and felt the slightest suction. She almost opened her eyes to look because she was not in the least aroused. Her nipples were flat with unexcitement. Her breathing was slow and controlled, helping her keep the nausea down. Yet still the liquid formed, and then she realized snake’s tongue was pulling it from her. This was her essence, the thing he needed to transform himself. And Destiny knew it was time. Time to let go, as it were.

She clamped her legs around the john’s head, so he was trapped there, although he didn’t seem to mind as he didn’t struggle to get away. Indeed, Racella got excited herself, and started stroking Destiny’s

forehead again. Destiny could hear her breathing go shallow and ragged. Did she also feel some physical benefit from this process? But destiny let go of that thought and began to concentrate. She focused on franks' many assaults on her person. She recalled in minute detail being passed to others for their pleasure. Mostly though, she brought to mind the many betrayals of her mother. She remembered the slaps and kicks. Being sold to the drug dealer for days at a time. No hugs. No kisses. Being yelled and cursed at. The constant rejection whenever she got enough courage to ask for affection. Every time she was met with disdain it scarred her inside. And destiny brought all those scars and hurts and abusive memories and flooded her body with them. She didn't quite understand where her essence came from, but she imagined shoving all those feelings into the snake's mouth.

"Hell No, John! No, I DON'T give myself willingly! I don't want to give you my essence; I don't want to give you any-damn-thing! Noooo!" Destiny screamed out loud. "I never wanted to give any of your anything. Not Frank, not his friends, and not YOU! Not then, not now. You may take it from me, you may even feel it is owed, but I renege. I do not offer anything of myself willingly! I decree that every suckle of my essence that you have taken into yourself will turn toxic in every cell of your being. POISON! You take from me the poison of every bad thing that has ever happened to me!" Destiny knew she had wasted her life, and even turned into the same monster she'd been ravaged by. But if it was her time to go, the least she could do was take another predator, another pimp out with her.

She may have ruined many, but at least she was human! If she can do away with at least one bit of evil in the world, maybe she did have a tiny bit of redemption. When Racella said she must give herself willingly or she would be poisonous, another irony was born. Destiny had never really had an opportunity to give anything of herself willingly. If his was to be her only chance to make up her own mind, she would choose to say NO.

And the sounds she'd hoped to hear came: choking. The hand on her forehead began to clench and Racella yelled "Nooo..." But it appeared to be a little too late... Destiny opened her eyes and saw the snake convulsing. He was turning black. Not a big improvement over the previous mottled gray, but he still didn't look too healthy. His proboscis however was still inside her, and the liquid-turned-poison was starting to work its black magic on her too. The hand on her head was still there but was starting to feel far away. The slap Racella gave her to make her

“Stop whatever it is you’re doing!” had no effect whatsoever. She opened her mouth to say something smart---maybe along the lines of Racella not being such a great pimp after all...I mean, who tells their victims how to destroy them? But her mouth had frozen, her tongue didn’t work. She did see that the snake man had stopped shaking and before her vision started going fuzzy, she saw it exhale one last glut of air. He stopped moving and from Destiny’s paralytic vantage point, she didn’t take another breath. As her sight darkened for the last time, she thought satisfactorily, another one bites the dust.

## AFTERWORD:

*Ok, so I know. Yes, this story was written around the same time as **Consent**. Lots of against your will themes were running around in my head during this writing period. I would say that I was in a perpetual fog of mild anger all the time. This time, it was a sex worker who got into the business after being abused as a child. But instead of all the feel-good stories abounding in the early 2000's, this victim decided to victimize others. She saw no redeeming qualities in herself, and in my mind (at the time) if you weren't on the right side, you deserved hell. So, Destiny caused her own hell, because she'd been through hell already and chose to embrace those demons rather than fight them.*

# Insomniac Blues

I'm awake; I hear noises  
Is that my bedroom door opening?  
I chase the Sandman because I need my sleep  
But I think I hear someone calling me.  
I freeze, I listen, maybe I'm dreaming  
Still my room has never felt so eerie.  
Then a rustle of the bedclothes  
My 8-year old blood turns cold.  
The hand on my leg is very bold  
Promising to show me things I don't want to know.  
Eyes squeezed shut, I fold my legs under my gown  
Closing any holes that hand might get around  
But he finds his way in, he always does  
Violating those secret places I only touch in the tub.  
My tears fall down on the inside of me  
Lest somebody hear my shame, my painful secret.  
When it becomes too much, I send myself away  
Where I sleep safely all night until the next day.  
Finally the monster withdraws, done for the night  
But I can't relax until the door closes tight.  
I'm still frozen, I still listen, it could be a trick

Sometimes he likes to come back to lick.  
When I'm sure the dark no longer moves,  
I mourn the sleep I was forced to lose.  
Even now, with sleeping aids I try to use  
I permanently suffer from the Insomniac Blues

## TWYLA

The man and the little girl walked up the steps of the attraction, avoiding the puddles on the stairs. The recent rain had been long and strong, leaving droplets of water everywhere including in the middle of each stair. The carnival mirror house was an old one, with rickety floorboards that sank in different spots, making it easy for the water to collect itself. Tammy had seen them far down the fairway, a tall figure holding the hand of a little person. Close to the entrance, she couldn't make out any details but here they were, at the Mirror Funhouse.

The man was tall and skinny, at least six feet but not much more than 200 pounds. His charcoal colored skin contrasted nicely with his red shirt, matching the interior of the funhouse perfectly. Yet the shirt hung off his shoulders emptily with enough space for another set. The cuffs were frayed at the edges, but clean. His dark brown khakis hid the mud stains at the bottom of his pants well, but they were also worn-looking. The man's features were strong, with full lips the same color of his skin. High cheekbones complemented almond shaped eyes of nut brown, framed by naturally arched brows. The broad nose fit the middle of his face with perfect symmetry. He would be considered ridiculously handsome for an old guy, Tammy thought, if it wasn't for the infinite sadness and fatigue he projected. He was definitely over 50 years old, but she couldn't guess his age after that. He was probably a Grandpa taking his granddaughter for an outing.

The little girl, however, was a jewel. Her baby skin was the color of brown sugar with a golden hue to it; her complexion was clear and unmarked like a baby's. Her dark eyes were deeply set eyes into her face but seemed to twinkle with sparks of light, and her lips kept a continuous grin, showing tiny little baby teeth at the top and bottom. Her full cheeks begged to be pinched and were unblemished to the naked eye. Her sandy colored hair was twisted into fat strands all over her head. They were long enough to brush past her shoulders and moved as the child swung her head around to look at Tammy. She looked to be around a year old and took the steps with the man slowly but surely. Her patent leather shoes clicked softly on the worn wood, and he led her around the puddles. They stepped into the archway and Tammy couldn't hold back her smile; the girl was so cute she couldn't help it.

"Oh, how sweet is she! Hi sweetie pie! What's your name honey?" She bent down to address the little girl directly and the girl grinned even



bigger. The man smiled too, but tiredly, as if he'd been through this before and was not impressed. Still, he answered.

“Her name is Twyla. She says she is 11 months old.” He stood there while Tammy held her arms out to the girl, who obligingly walked into them with no hesitation. When Tammy picked her up, the little girl gave out a high-decibel giggle. Tammy felt a shiver run thru her body at the sound. However, the girl smelled like sweet baby, a combination of powder and lotion that wafted under her nose like heaven. It dispelled the moment of unease she'd felt at the giggle and she resolved to give the pair a free trip through the ride. How could she not? The girl was just so damn cute! She hefted the girl onto her hip, classic toddler carry position and Twyla wrapped her around Tammy's neck. Her red and white crinoline dress tinkled as she moved; there were bells inside each layer. The red and white layers alternated, and she resembled a Christmas dream to Tammy. Holding the child, Tammy's every dream of motherhood came rushing back.

“Your daughter is just adorable! Go ahead and take a turn through the funhouse, on the house. It's on me and I promise I won't tell anyone!” She expected the man to happily acquiesce and take the little girl through; and truth be told she felt a quick pang at giving little Twyla up. However, she was wrong again--on both counts.

“No, she is not my daughter. It appears that she is now your daughter. That is what we came here for.” Tammy didn't understand what the man was talking about; her daughter? First of all, who doesn't want a free carnival ride, as much as the tickets cost these days? Her second thought was that she might have to call CPS for an abandoned child in a second--and how could any sane person give up a child so wonderful? She hugged the girl a little tighter and turned her flashing brown eyes to the man.

“What is wrong with you mister? You can't just leave children at a carnival, it's just as bad as leaving them on the side of the road! You don't know me or any of the people here!” The man accepted her rebuke quietly with no argument, but he did not look ashamed or desperate, as Tammy would expect. He still looked unbelievably tired, but now also expectant. His lips parted slightly as if he was going to speak, but no words came out. He walked a step closer to Tammy and his eyes fastened on hers. She wasn't sure what to do if he tried to come at her; the girl was his after all and it was his right to take her back if he wanted.

But he doesn't even want her! Tammy's mind argued. He was trying to give her away!

"No Miss, I do not give such as her away, she is her own to give. She alone decides her fate. Or those within her do, and she does not dispute. But it is an exhausting ordeal, and not for the faint-hearted. You look as if you are up to the task. You may, in fact, be the one." At this, the man cocked his head to the side, as if listening for some sound that others could not ascertain. Tammy even looked up at the tattered red walls, as if she could see what he was sensing. She tried to make sense of what was happening, but all she could understand was the little girl she was holding needed help. The man acted like he was going to desert the girl and leave Tammy holding the bag, so to speak. What the hell was happening here?

Then the little girl, Twyla, looked up at Tammy with guileless eyes. Tammy was instantly bound by that look of trusting innocence. The look made her want to not call CPS, not call anybody, and keep this treasured child for her very own. The fact that she was only 19 with a summertime carnival job and trouble paying for her dorm room at the state college did not register. If asked, she could not have said how she planned to care for a child on her own, but looking into Twyla's eyes, she would have committed her life. She'd heard the term before, but now here she was with the 'gooey insides' related to holding a baby. The difference is that it didn't make her want a baby of her own; she wanted this baby, this girl child. She looked at Twyla, then at the man, and this time asked out loud, "What the hell is happening here?"

The man was not disturbed by her outburst; he actually nodded as if reassuring himself of something he had determined all along. He looked around the room rapidly, and then rested his eyes back on Tammy. He spoke earnestly and quickly as if time was short and he had somewhere to be.

"You are well prepared for what's to come, young miss. See, I've been taking care of Twyla for a long time and I understand exactly what you're feeling right now. But I am going to give you more information than I ever had when I was first ... burdened with her." He paused and then said the word burden again and that upset Tammy for the first time since this escapade began. Children were not a burden! (Spoken like a true childless teenager).

"This burden is not for the weak--"the man started.

“Hey! You stop calling this baby a burden!” Tammy’s eyes went wide, and she angled her body away from him as if the man’s words could harm the child she held. But the man just smiled and closed his eyes in what seemed to be relief.

“Yes, it has happened. The transfer has been made. You already have the protector instinct they inspire. I remember all too well when it happened to me, those many years ago. The lamps had just been lit on Chartres Street and I was going to meet my lady. Was gonna ask her to marry me that night, sure was... Oh, she was a beautiful little thing. Tiny waist with the face of a doll but had a laugh as big as bull gator. She worked for a grocer in the Vieux Carre and I wanted to catch her before she was off. But I missed her, you see. I met the child instead. She called to me and I could not break away. Those eyes...” The man trailed off. His eyes were still closed, reminiscing about what, Tammy could not say. The child in her arms gave another giggle as if understanding the time, the man was describing but did not turn around to look at him. She burrowed her face deeper into Tammy’s neck, which made Tammy think maybe she should call CPS, if only to report the man’s possible abuse of such a sweetheart.

“It was a woman who held her then, an old, tired crone of a woman. She dragged her by the tiny little hand, walking so fast the child’s body could not keep up and the woman had to periodically lift her in the arm by the arm to set her back on her feet. I spotted them as soon as they came around the corner from Conti Street, you see. Almost as if it was planned; as if they knew I was coming. As if I was prey, and they were the hunter.”

Tammy thought that was a horrible thing to say about a child, especially how he met her. But she remembered seeing the man and child across the midway, way before they got to her ride. Another shiver went down her back like an icicle.

“As they passed me, the witchy woman picked her up again by the arm and bumped me as they passed. On purpose, no doubt. Being a man of some morals, I halted her with a finger and asked her why she dragged the child so. The woman’s hair was unkempt, and her clothes were ragged--much as mine are now, probably. But the child was dressed immaculately. She had on a miniature pinafore, much as was the fashion in that day. It was spotless and pressed to perfection. When the crone stopped, the child looked up at her and gave a smile so bright and shiny, I swear the lamps dimmed in response. I had never seen a more

beautiful child--nay, beautiful face altogether! I instantly forgot about meeting my lover and future wife. To this day, I cannot even remember her name. The spell is that powerful. All I could think is why was this woman treating her child in such a manner, how could this be allowed? The woman was dirty, and the child was a jewel. Little did I know...that is what being with the child does to you. Rather quickly—I had her but a week when I stopped washing. All my energy went into tending to the child. Her power forces you to discard any concern for your own well-being in order to keep up the façade; the façade of beauty, because isn't that what it's all about? The beauty of the child is what draws you in! How else would she get her victims, if she was a bedraggled, unattractive child? Ah, but you will find out soon enough, true? Even though I am describing your future nightmare, your grip on that--thing, has not lessened. Indeed, even as I speak, it grows tighter, your knuckles are almost white, your arm is tensed...I wonder if that is really your grip on her, or her grip on you? “

Tammy's eyes locked with his for a moment, realizing what he said was true. But even though she disliked the man more and more every minute, she did not let go of the child. She was almost unsure if she could let go if she wanted to, but it was not an option she wanted to exercise. Something made her want to hold onto the girl for dear life and doing so was all that mattered at that moment. The story the man was telling was of no consequence; she was beginning to believe was severely unbalanced. But on another level, she was riveted. She could not have walked away from him and his narrative. Who was the old woman? What happened to her, as the man had the girl now? Clues, the front of her brain told her. I am waiting for clues to his identity, so I can report his negligence to the police. There may even be something more sinister going on, the way he kept talking about the girl's appearance; he could be a pedophile. She had to report him...didn't he say Vieux Carrie? However, in the back of her mind, the most primitive part that acknowledges the deep Id, the survival instinct above all else, was listening to every word as it was meant to be--a warning.

“As the woman passed me, I was compelled to grab her arm to stop her. Rather roughly, I'm ashamed to admit—but I obviously was no longer myself.” The man threw his head back and laughed loudly, but Tammy was disconcerted to also see a big fat tear fall from his left eye and roll down his cheek; so quickly she almost wondered if she'd imagined it. Except the tear track remained, glistening on his ashy black skin.

“Why you mishandling that poor child, witch?” My newly manufactured concern for this unknown child knew no bounds, or so I thought. I felt little guilt about being so rough to the woman, but she did not care. She gave me a smile of gratefulness that I did not understand then. The woman did not even try to say anything, and I did not give her a chance before reaching for the girl. Twyla immediately let go of the crone’s hand and eagerly grasped my outstretched one. I kept one eye on the crone as I did so, preparing myself for a protest that didn’t come. She didn’t even seem to care that the girl was gone from her. She said, ‘Thank ya, kind suh. I was awfully tired draggin’ that one trew th’ streets. She sho is a handful for one such as me, yes. She so strong and I’se gotten so weak! I thought she might plumb run me into the ground, yeah. But here you is, just as gentlemanly and chiv’rous as advertised. Now you’se go on and take that there gal, have at her! I’se done my penance. She’s your cross to bear now.’ At that, the old woman cackled.

‘Cross! Ha! What a funny that was! That little devil can’t get near no cross. W’ld burn her to death, it wuld.’ This last was said quietly, all laughing done. Her tone was real dark, and if I had half a mind, I’d have been scared myself. I thought she was plumb crazy then, laughing, then muttering, just rambling while she dragged an innocent child along the walkway. Innocent! What a fool I was. Now I see the truth.” The man looked down and his mouth moved at the corners, concealing an emotion he could barely hide.

Tammy looked at him and could not believe he was about to cry. Really?! He was abandoning his child, and he was crying? How in the heck could he expect her to feel sorry for him, when he was committing the worst act a parent ever could? As another tear rolled down the man’s face, Tammy felt sick. She wanted to kick him for being so callous but knew her first objective was to keep the girl safe.

“But I vowed, all these years, that I would not trick the next victim. I would give them an honest chance to see the truth, like I did not. The old woman tried to warn me, in her own crazy way. But the spell the child puts on you is so strong, you can barely remember your own name, much less hear what someone else is saying. IT’S NOT FAIR!” The man suddenly screamed. He looked up at Tammy with murder in his eyes. But his gaze was directed towards the precious bundle in her arms. His face was contorted, and now liquid spilled from his bottom lip in frenzied anger. His hands were clenched into fists, and he leaned

forwards as if to grab the girl. Tammy wanted to move; she knew she was moments away from danger, but she was frozen to the spot.

But the moment passed; the man leaned back, and crisis was averted. He loosened his hands again and went back to looking homely. The man took a deep breath like it was his last, and this time he looked directly into Tammy's eyes.

“The girl is evil. She kills. She makes you kill! Your life will change forever and not for the good. But...you have a choice. Right now. Before it's too late, you can say no. I urge you to say no and step back from the edge. You cannot see it, but the edge of madness is right in front of you. Please!” The man pleaded with Tammy, his eyes getting watery again. “Please heed this warning! I selfishly fear the burden of guilt that awaits me if another person is trapped in hell, even if it gives me some measure of short-lived peace. I beg of you; fight the pull of the child you feel. Listen deep down inside yourself, and you will feel it! There is something inside you that is hesitant...that doesn't believe the thing clutching you around the neck is a child. That survival instinct, the one that has your bowels loose, your every hair standing on end--I can see them! It is REAL! Listen to it, girl. You don't want to give up your whole life for this thing. You have plans for your life, dreams and aspirations that don't include being a servant to a monster! SHE WILL EAT YOUR SOUL!” The man bellowed right into Tammy's face, spittle once again flying everywhere. She was too shocked to avoid the spray, but just as quickly the man backed off again. He looked down at the ground, then at the back of the child Tammy was holding. “As she ate mine,” he whispered brokenly.

The man's body followed his eyes and bent down to the sawdust-and-mud covered floorboards, moving slowly as if the descent hurt him literally and figuratively. He knelt into the grime as if he didn't even see it. Tammy did though and wrinkled her nose in disgust. She knew there was just as likely to be pee in that mud as rainwater and the sight of it soaking into the man's already raggedy pants was too much. As a matter of fact...

” This whole situation is too much...” she mumbled to herself as she took a couple steps backwards. The last thing she wanted was to be covered in that mess too.

Yet the man didn't try to touch her at all. He bent his body at the waist until he sank his forehead into the muck. He lifted his arms in the air, palms up as if in church. And the man began to pray aloud.

“Dear Lord, Heavenly Father, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth, right here in this moment Lord God, as it surely is in Heaven. Please God, give me the words, the strength, the capacity to save this child. This demon from the depths below your goodness has latched onto another innocent soul, and Oh Lord, I KNOW it is not your will that another soul be lost to its charms. I prostrate myself before you Heavenly Father and pray wholeheartedly that you give me the power to fight the demon, to convince the child to renounce its evil and help me in destroying its very being!”

The man prayed on, not stopping, seemingly not even to breathe. He exhorted the name of God in every incarnation Tammy had ever heard, and some she had not. Yeshua? Never heard of it! But what she did hear was the constant referring to the child as a demon, devil, and fiend of the first order. A feeling of protectiveness for the child washed over her in a wave, as if someone had thrown a bucket of love over her every time he said such a thing. That force made her want to run far away from the man, for the safety of the child, of course. It wasn't because his praying made her nervous in anyway. That would be ridiculous, right? Tammy assured herself it was a ridiculous thought. She'd been to her share of churches, where the women fell out and spoke in tongues, and the ushers brought the collection plates around three or four times, while the preachers stuttered “Hallelujah!” for twenty minutes. She actually liked church. But at the moment, the man's praying was, on some level disturbing her. Her stomach was upset, and she felt like she had to go to the bathroom. Tammy took a couple more steps backwards, instinctively. If this was just a bit of what this man had put the poor child through, then it was a blessing that he'd abandoned her!

Just at that thought, Tammy felt a sharp pain on her neck. “Ouch!” Yowza, that hurt! Did the baby just friggin bite her?! She looked down at the girl, whose face was still buried in her neck. Twyla did not look up at Tammy's exclamation. Her arms stayed tight around Tammy's neck and shoulders, and her legs encircled themselves around her waist to get closer. How did that happen? How did she not even move as the man yelled in Tammy's face, and the incessant prayers, and all the craziness going on around her? Twyla was old enough to understand that the man was not speaking niceties about her, but she didn't react in anyway. She had never even looked at the man since she ran into

Tammy's arm and got picked up. And sure, she was cute, but she was getting heavier as the minutes wore down. And she was a biter!

"Don't say that." Tammy heard the whisper of words as the child lifted her head a bit to speak.

"What, honey? Don't say what?" Tammy asked, but a chill ran down her back again, because she knew. The man also heard, and he stopped praying to look up at Tammy.

"I told you, yessss I told you. She is evil! The prayer hurts her! Weakens her power over you! I see the debate happening inside you. You are seeing clearly the danger you are in...fight her!"

Tammy shook her head, but unable to form the will to move in any direction. The child still held tight to her neck, unrelenting in pressure. She had laid her head back down on Tammy's shoulder and didn't move. Tammy looked up from the child she held at the man who said she was evil.

This time it was the man's turn to shake his head. He'd stop praying to exhort Tammy to fight the child and seemed to have lost his fire. Tammy saw him look up at the girl she held; his expression was tortured, and she was scared just looking at his face. Tammy could see the muck on his forehead, glops stuck to his cheeks. One clot on his ear finally gave up the ghost to gravity and plopped loudly back into the mud. The top of his head looked like someone had planted a muddy stamp in the shape of an oval on his brow; mud was smeared on his hairline and his eyebrows. But the fear in his eyes was scarier than a person burying their head in muck to avoid someone else. That fear went deep.

The man's eyes were buck wide, and they blinked rapidly as if they couldn't believe what they were seeing. But Tammy didn't see anything different. The girl hadn't moved, Tammy hadn't moved and no one else had appeared--that she could see. The man still knelt on the wet ground looking up at them. Tammy could see his hands shake. He started to say something inaudible; Tammy could only see his lips moving but not hear the words. But it didn't seem like the Lord's Prayer anymore. There was no fatigue or sense of resignation now in his demeanor. The way this man was acting, he expected a death blow to land upon him any second.

Tears began to fall from the man's eyes as he whispered unknown words. Then Tammy felt the child's lips begin to move against the skin



of her neck. The feel of lips against her skin made her shiver, especially as it was on top of the bite mark. The mixture of pain and ... creepiness was too much for Tammy to bear at that moment and shoved the girl to get her off her shoulder. She felt bad about treating a child in such a way but damn, she did just bite her! And all this family drama with Twyla and the man was not something Tammy wanted to be involved in. She didn't care about calling cps anymore. She just wanted the man to take his spooky kid, spooky self and just go the hell away. Don't go away mad. Just. Go. Away. Then she'd take a break immediately and smoke that half joint she had stashed in the glove box of her Fiat. At that very moment, Tammy was super over all of it.

However, Tammy's light shove against the toddler she was holding did not work. The child's body never moved an inch. Her arms still clasped Tammy's neck in an iron grip. Her lips still moved on tammy's neck and she could now match the sensations to the same words the man was whispering. He was saying the same thing the girl was saying! What – how was that even possible, Tammy thought? They should have to plan it, depending on what they were reciting. But the child was too young to have memorized whatever they were saying.

Tammy grasped the child's shoulders and pushed again to get space between her and the girl – to no avail. The child continued to murmur quietly and would not let go of Tammy's neck. Tammy bent over and held her arms out to the sides, leaving the child unsupported on her hip. Yet the girl did not budge. She hung from Tammy like a limpet clinging to a rock. Her legs were wrapped around Tammy's waist and hips even as she tried to pry them from her. Pulling on the foot and ankles of the girl also produced no movement. It was as if the girl was a warm-blooded statue, heavy as stone and just as impossible to move. The more she tried to pry the girl loose and was unsuccessful, the more her panic level rose drastically. What the hell was this about, some crazy ass kid hanging on her, biting her for shit's sake, with some crazy ass dude damn near rolling around in the mud praying and cursing her, the child, the world, who knew what?! Tammy whimpered and kept trying to pull at the girl. The girl still refused to let go, but then started talking louder. No longer whispering, the girl began speaking so Tammy could hear her. She still couldn't understand a word, as it wasn't in English. And although the girl didn't move, Tammy felt like the words being put in the air were ... doing something. Tammy didn't care what was happening really, as long as she was not involved. But with the crazy girl hanging onto her for dear life, Tammy couldn't get away.

The words dripped into her ear and her hearing seemed muted. The man's voice seemed to be far away, as if he'd started walking down the midway and his voice was getting fainter as a result. It felt like the words were coating her brain as well, changing her thinking, diffusing her panic into wisps that were easily dispersed.

Am I really being held hostage by a toddler and a homeless guy, Tammy wondered distractedly. The child was heavy and unyielding, not releasing her grip on Tammy's neck or ceasing her unintelligible litany of words. The man still had his head stuck in the mud – for the second time- and hadn't looked up since he told her to run. Guess he won't be taking his own advice, she thought. But then again, neither could she. She was stuck with a 20lb anchor around her neck that could recite...something. And it was just.... too much. Not something she could deal with. At that moment, right then, she was totally over all this shit. I mean, this was hardly in the Baker & Barnes Employee Handbook. This whole situation required some sort of managerial sanction. Tammy wanted to pass the buck like a motherfucker. Since the girl wouldn't let go, Tammy decided to go to the midway office with the girl hanging like an albatross from her body. She would tell them about the man still bowing in the mud at the Tilt-A-Whirl, have her manager call the police and remove herself from the whole thing.

Tammy took a couple steps towards the man, intending to go past him to the exit. Then the room spun. Then her legs stopped working. Well, they still worked, but they weren't listening to her. Instead of moving towards the gate, she stopped at the kneeling man. Her legs would not keep going. Tammy's legs then circled the man, stopping again behind him. What the hell, Tammy thought. Who is doing this? Whose body is this really? Tammy's traitorous legs bent at the knees, but thankfully not down to the mud. She stooped behind the man, who still chanted. Twyla was frozen in an awkward position and she couldn't believe she was still able to hold it. Finally, Twyla moved from her spot on Tammy's neck and moved to look directly into Tammy's face. She leaned forward as if to kiss Tammy, and as with her legs Tammy was unable to move away. Twyla opened her mouth and stuck her tongue out like any two or three year would. Except this toddler's tongue was unlike any other, proven when it rolled inward like a straw. Tammy disjointedly remembered a friend from elementary school that could roll her tongue, but of course it didn't roll in on itself to this degree -- or lengthen six inches. What did they call that ability? Was that like, double-jointed for internal organs? And just what was little Miss Twyla planning to do with that monstrosity of palate-tasting anyway? But

Tammy couldn't move so she had to wait to see what the little monster had planned.

As she thought that, Twyla grinned. Oh, so you're happy being a little monster, Tammy thought.

And Twyla smiled harder like she heard Tammy's thought. Then she jabbed her tongue into Tammy's nostril.

To Tammy, it felt just like she expected a tongue to feel—warm, wet and slightly muscle-y. It slid up her right nostril, and Twyla tilted her head a little to the right, as if to get the right angle. The tongue slid further up until it reached the top of Tammy's septum. The feeling was ridiculously disgusting and with each second, Tammy felt like she would scream or simply go insane from the feeling. Nothing should be that far inside a person without some sort of anesthesia involved, whether self-prescribed or medically supervised. Then Twyla's tongue couldn't move forward anymore by itself, running into a major bundle of cartilage and nerves that the fleshy muscle couldn't penetrate alone. Unseen by Tammy, a tiny claw extended from the end of Twyla's tongue, about the size of a small kernel of corn. It dug into the tender meat of her nose and pulled itself upward, moving inexorably towards her brain. She could feel the slime the child's 'tongue' exuded as it tried to create enough slickness to move thru Tammy's sinus passages. As she was frozen, she was powerless to stop it. There was nothing she could do. As it moved within her, it touches nerves she didn't know existed in her body. The sensation was unbearable, like fireworks going off inside her head. Each explosion caused by Twyla's tongue made her vision go as cloudy as her thinking. The sharp stab every time the tongue searched for purchase in Tammy's cranium felt like an earthquake and Tammy did not know if her physical body could take anymore without passing out. However, the thrall that Twyla had suspended her in was not allowing any sort of mercy from sensation. Tammy's eyes stayed open and alert, with no hint of closing. Her brain equally stayed alert, feeling every puncture and slide. What was she doing inside her head, Tammy wondered.

Finally, the girl withdrew. Tammy heard the plop as Twyla's tongue pulled out. She looked at the thing that held her prisoner somehow. Twyla's face was still cherubic, but there was a wry adult look reminiscent of cats and yellow birds in coalmines. And Tammy knew which category she was in. She couldn't physically feel her cage, but it was there alright. That look was older than anything Tammy had ever

seen before. The more she stared into Twyla's eyes, her sense of time ended because it felt like she'd been staring for hours.

The girl's skin was as smooth and unblemished like a photoshopped ad. Her chestnut brown hue was rich and deep giving her looks a luster that did not befit a child that young. Her perfectly arched eyebrows sat atop two widely spaced eyes with irises so dark she couldn't see the pupils. But the longer she looked, the more angelic countenance looked to be a façade. The corneas slowly yellowed as they would in a person of great age. Lines and fissures opened up around her eyes and mouth and then just – all over her face. It was like witnessing a time lapse photo except it was in real life, on a real person. Twyla's thick two strand twists started out bouncy, shiny and healthy looking. As Tammy looked, they withered into dull sparse strands that stuck out every which way all over her head. The lips pulled inward, showing teeth that grew horror movie-style as the gums shrank backwards; the teeth themselves seemed to get longer; then went yellow, then brown and finally went totally grey. As Tammy watched, some of them wavered and fell out. Teeth couldn't stay rooted in rotten gums and a shrunken, stinking mouth. The smell as the teeth decayed was fetid and vomit-inducing. But even as Tammy wanted to throw up, her prison kept her food down. Her inability to move apparently also extended to upchucking.

Twyla had turned into the hag; the crone the man had described when he told Tammy his story. She no longer looked the precious toddler; she looked like a 300-year-old pygmy mummy and smelled like it. Tammy could not pretend any of this was normal anymore. But the when the girl shook her legs in the universal child signal to get down, Tammy was willing to pretend. If the girl got down, she would overlook the wormy tongue to her brain and the neck bite and all this crazy shit. If she could just get home...hell, if she could just get to her car.

As if.

As if she could even move.

As if she had control of herself at all.

Twyla stood up looking at Tammy with her old lady gaze.

Tammy looked back at Twyla. Inside, she willed her body to move; to walk away from the pint-sized monster. She wanted to but wasn't even able to close her eyes to concentrate on making her limbs move. The mental effort made her feel like her brain was shaking with the attempt,

but nothing happened at all. Except that Twyla smiled again, able to feel Tammy's attempts at physical independence. She stood up on toddler tip-toes, pretending to try and reach Tammy's ear. She cupped her hand around her mouth as if to create a mini megaphone.

"You're my slave."

Her brain yelled, 'Hell No, you crazy psycho kid!' but of course no words came out. Tammy's lips did not even move. However, her hand did.

Twyla reached around and found a pocket in her belled dress and pulled out a straight razor. It had a pearl and shiny black handle. Tammy wondered what kind of material it was (obsidian); she'd never seen such a material before. Her mind whispered how surreal the scene was, with Shirley Temple child holding such a dangerous weapon. As if to illustrate her daydream to the fullest, Twyla snapped her wrist and unfolded the razor so Tammy could see the honed edge. The motion was clearly practiced and not new to the child; she obviously knew how to use the razor. The blade was polished to a glassy comparison. The black and pearly white handle was worn smooth in the spot where the handler's thumb and forefinger meet. It looked wicked to Tammy, like it had seen plenty of death. It felt like an evil extension of Twyla. When the girl held the weapon out to Tammy, her arm and hand didn't hesitate to reach out and grab it. The part of Tammy that was still her recoiled; she saw a blonde hair stuck in the swivel hinge of the knife that the prior cleaner had missed. The knife was a murderer. Its owner was some kind of monster. And now Tammy was somehow on the team. Her hand held the knife in her right hand, feeling its weight. Tammy's hand slid her fingers into the correct groove, knowing what was coming but physically unable to stop herself.

Tammy's left hand grabbed the forehead of the child's former caretaker. She yanked his head back even as he continued to chant, until it almost touched his back. She heard the creak of vertebrae as her right hand unhesitatingly drew the razor's silver blade across the man's throat. She sliced just under his Adam's apple, going deep and strong cutting through sinews and cartilage. Black blood spurted forward, sheeting the man's shirt and khakis but Twyla and Tammy stayed untouched as they were behind him. Tammy shoved the man's head and his body folded forward, his head slapping into the mud one final time.

Twyla nodded approvingly. She held out her pudgy little girl hand and Tammy quickly took it.

Inside, Tammy screamed at herself, at Twyla, even at the dead man in the mud. Only Twyla could acknowledge Tammy's efforts, and she just smiled sweetly up at her new mommy. They walked out of the carnival ride exit and into the gray skies together.

AFTERWORD:

*I know this is WRONG and I will apologize if she ever reads this, but I wrote this story about my daughter. When she was a toddler, the cuteness was ridiculous! Gorgeous, smart, engaging...man, she literally charmed everyone we came into contact with. Everyone fell in love with her instantly. I loved it; I mean what parent doesn't beam with pride when people are falling all over themselves to praise something you created? But the horror writer in me could never stop wondering: what if behind all this cuteness, this ovary-overloading love lies a truly evil being? What if her countenance hid a demon that used that cuteness to literally feed upon others? Who would be the most susceptible? EVERYONE! How could you defend yourself against such a hazard? YOU CAN'T! Andddd... cue the evil laughter....MUUUAAAHHHHHAAAAA!*

## THE LOVE OF A ZOMBIE IS EVERLASTING

Okay, so I'm a zombie. Does that make me a bad person? Don't answer that, reading public. The answer is no, it doesn't. I'm a woman looking for companionship like any other. I just prefer human flesh to animal flesh. Though it could be argued that we're all animals but let me tell you, there's a special flavor to Bob's Burgers that McDonald's doesn't have. Unfortunately, my palate preferences fill a lot of people with revulsion, some with outright hatred. As if vegans are any different with their radical diets. I'm still a person on the inside, for Pete's sake! That is, before I ate him.

I wasn't born this way; I used to be a normal red-blooded American just like everyone else in this country about ten years ago. In 2003, a biological agent escaped from a weapons lab in China, wreaking havoc on human digestive tracts. Sudden Irritable Digestion Syndrome, or SIDS swept the continent and spread like the Black Plague of the Dark Ages. It causes the digestive tract to reject all the usual forms of sustenance, from projectile vomiting to chronic diarrhea reminiscent of dysentery but worse. Within 48 hours a body that refuses even intravenous fluids gets too weak to support its own life systems.

The infected usually passed away in the next 48 hours and SIDS has a 100% mortality rate, so to speak. Let's just say that China doesn't have to worry so much about overpopulation anymore and leave it at that. Once SIDS victims succumbed to the disease, everyone thought death was permanent and they were buried and interned as usual. Some of course were cremated and saved the horror of waking up six feet under. Two months after SIDS first appeared (actually, escaped would be a better word) the first victims began to appear around nearby graveyards. The original Revitalized were thought to be homeless people with a bad case of rot and an insatiable appetite. However, when a delegate at the Embassy recognized a French tourist, an inkling of the truth was leaked to the ever-accurate National Enquirer magazine, assuring its absurdity. At first, authorities believed there had been a rash of misdiagnoses, and that these few lucky souls had escaped a fate worse than death. They would soon find out how untrue that was when the examining doctors were killed. Turns out those first victims were unlucky enough to be the guinea pigs of the medical association and were subjected to all kinds of experimentation and/or dissection; once dead they could not be killed again by conventional methods. Modern doctors refused to



entertain the idea that zombies could really exist, until a former DOD scientist came forward and announced that she'd been part of a secret trial that hastened the putrefaction process while creating unstoppable soldiers; their appetites were a troublesome byproduct. Apparently, the Chinese were trying to beat the US to the punch when the virus escaped from a secret lab in Beijing. Alas, before her story could be documented, the scientist was killed in a freak accident two days later; evidently a gun she didn't own accidentally went off and shot her in the head. You know how it is when one tells government secrets.

Anyway, the UN doctors worked off her statement and had their guinea pigs ingest a little putrid flesh, which the zombies liked just fine. The previously irritable digestion took the nourishment like ambrosia. The scientists also noticed that the buried victims tended to roam near their own gravesites. They seemed to be territorially connected to their original resting places. New victims of SIDS that hadn't died were given bits of flesh and blood to ingest, and though they were able to digest it, it sped up the zombification process and forced them to die sooner. But those who died and weren't laid to rest but used as test subjects came back as ferocious as the killing machines they were intended to be.

Two months before my wedding date, I was attacked in my home by a non-territorial zombie.

At the time, I was engaged to the most wonderful man, Ralan Johnson, the best lover and friend a woman could hope to have. We'd met in a cooking class and I never thought I'd soon be making him meals. After six months of serious dating and no infidelities (a feat in itself in this day and age) we moved in together. With AIDS and SIDS out there, we both felt safer ensconced in our little love nest and rarely went out. With the zombie population holding demonstrations to fight for equal right as former humans, walking down a street could become a life changing ordeal. So, we cooked or ordered in and worked from home. Ralan was a research assistant for Meatco, the leader in packaging recycled flesh for zombie consumption, a booming business. It may sound disgusting, but it cut down on zombie maulings considerably. Ralan worked via computer most days, analyzing the decomposition rates of new and used flesh. On the rare occasions he did have to go into the office, a car and bodyguard were sent to escort him to and fro. As Murphy's Law would have it, though, I turned out to be the susceptible one and I never even left the house.

A rogue zombie broke into our apartment one afternoon when Ralan was at work. An emaciated half-eaten zombie woman climbed into the bathroom window and jumped me as I was using the bathroom. I jumped up off the toilet and tried to run for it but didn't make it. My eyes saw that she'd been buried because her death raiment was still hanging off her body in tatters and her eyes were crazed and hungry. With my sweat pants around my ankles, I hopped to the doorway but the nutso caught me by the hair and bit a large chunk out of my neck. The bit of sustenance occupied her enough for me to break free, but the damage had been done.

The authorities came and took her away and sent a doctor to patch me up. Ralan came home immediately after my frantic call and the look on his face was tragic. His eyes were stuck to the Bindige on my neck, and his inability to meet my eyes made my heart sink. What can you say when your lover has just received a death sentence? The doctor gave us instructions on how to keep me as comfortable as possible during the transition. I have to give my love a little credit, he stayed with me as I regurgitated my very life onto the floor and held me even after I turned cold. However, he made it clear that once I died, our relationship would be over.

"I'm going to miss you so much," he cried to me one evening as I crept closer to death. "I know, I know. But you can come see me anytime you want. It doesn't have to be over, Ralan." The look on his face demonstrated how he felt about that statement. No matter my arguments or protestations of love, my fiancée could not see a future between us after my revitalization – the PC term. It was known by then that zombies could function in society if routed through the death process correctly but were still considered beyond the normal range of emotions. Which I can personally tell you is not true! I was definitely feeling the pain of my lover's loss as I entered the zombie state before he was even gone. Ralan's family encouraged him to place me into the Revitalize Museum, a kind of apartment complex for zombies, two weeks before my scheduled demise to "help start the grieving process." How rude is that?! It was obvious to me that they were trying to set the scene for my eventual replacement; they probably already had someone in mind. I believed that as long as we were careful, Ralan and I could still be together; keep lots of Meatco packets around and stay away from the rogues. Okay, maybe I was a little forward in my thinking, but if my heartache then was any indication, my love for Ralan was more than strong enough to survive the grave.

However, getting through to Ralan was one thing; convincing his parents were quite another. Near the end, I became so weak from the vomiting and diarrhea that I was immobile. As Ralan tended to me as best he could – while keeping all appendages away from my mouth – his parents would argue their point over my inert body.

“There is no way I'm letting my only son marry a ZOMBIE!” Ralan Sr. would say. “Can you imagine what people at the club would say?” Our happiness obviously came second to the opinion of his club cronies. Mrs. Johnson was more concerned with the possible aesthetics of possible future grandchildren. In her defense, the image of a half-rotten, flesh eating infant attacking one's tit with gusto was a little scary.

“Mrs. Johnson, Ralan and I could adopt children if the natural results worry you so much.” all I got was a derisive snort in my direction, so I tried again. “We really believe this is not an insurmountable obstacle! As long as I die correctly, I'll still be human and feel human, just in a different way. Why don't you believe that?”

“Ralan, tell her that zombies are not human, zombies are dead, and this family does not practice necrophilia! We won't have it.” Ralan's mom stopped talking to me after I got sick and would only communicate with me through a third person, as if she could catch my disease through conversation.

“Ralan, please tell your mother that I'm not dead yet! She can speak to me directly!” my anger gave me enough strength to sit up, only to see Ralan's mother turn her back to me. Ralan Sr. didn't have any problems disparaging me face to face, which was about the only time he stood up to his wife in any regard. I tried to plead with him anyway to get his support.

“Dad, this is racist rhetoric that you're spouting. I am being discriminated against because of a disease! That I had no control over contracting! If it was my color or sexuality you objected to, you could be sued. I know you're not that concerned with public opinion that you would begrudge your only son's love and happiness.”

“My dear, that's exactly what I object—because he is my only son and I do want him to be happy.” Ralan Sr. looked me straight in the eye and said, “From my point of view, your attempt to bind Ralan to you even after death is just selfish! How can you want to take away his chance for a normal life?” his eyes beseeched me to see his side, and I was

momentarily floored. Was I being selfish by insisting we could work it out? I thought it was just everlasting love.

“Ralan?” I lay back and looked at him, hoping for reassurance or at least acknowledgement that I wasn't way off base. What I got was an agonized expression and lack of eye contact. Instead of a declaration of love or some willingness to at least try and work it out, I was begged for forgiveness and got a hand squeeze.

“Oh, honey I'm so sorry, please please forgive me, I want to, I really do, I want to be with you forever; God forgive me, but...”. Yes. I got the ‘But’. The signal that all is not right with the world, the death knell of every relationship, the one-word way to say I don't want you anymore. The fact that my almost husband had caved in to popular thought crashed my will at that moment and I had to squeeze my eyes shut so I didn't have to look at his weak ass.

\*\*\*\*\*

The day I died I only wanted Ralan to be present. Since he was siding with everyone else, I was still a little disgusted with him, but I couldn't imagine not being with him. Of course, I banned his parents, who were only too glad to stay away those last couple of days. They did insist that their son wear surgical scrubs and a mask when he visited. To his credit, he took them off when he came inside. Since the day he told me we would not be together after I died, I refused to discuss my afterlife plans with him and tried to get used to the idea of being alone and craving human meat. The latter was easy to prepare for; I had a whole room stocked with Meatco products that Ralan had gotten with his employee discount from work. I was dying in my own house, so I would be territorially tied to a safe place. Ralan had already moved his things back to his parents' house and was amenable to letting me stay here; after all, as a human he could get any place he wanted.

We didn't talk much. I was almost too weak for conversation by that point. Ralan took advantage of that and rambled on about past memories and how he was going to miss me; it was obvious that he was only too glad not to be asked any hard questions. I wanted to call him a lying leading-me-on bastard, but tears pricked my eyes at the thought of never cussing him out again. The thoughts I'd had of the two of us making civil rights history, proving that zombies can be loving productive members of society and don't have to eat their loved ones were very hard to let go of. I wondered if I would have the strength to

do those things without Ralan by my side and I shuddered. Would I let the loss of love turn me into a monster? Ralan saw me shivering and responded by laying another blanket atop me. “You look cold, honey.”

When I could feel the final veil starting to descend over my vision, I panicked a little and grabbed Ralan's hand to get his attention. I gave him the prearranged signal and drew my finger across my throat to say it was coming, and Ralan started to sob. I sighed and asked, “Are you going to stay until it’s over?”

“Yes, I promise I'll be here.”

“Ralan, I don't know how to live without you!”

“Shh, you'll be fine, I swear. You're the strongest person I know.”

“Can I come see you after? At least one time?” I could see his hesitation and wondered if he was thinking of me, his dying fiancée, or what his parents would say. “Just to say goodbye. I won't hurt anyone, Ralan, you know that.”

“I know you won't. I'll come by here, okay? Two weeks from today, I'll come just to make sure you're alright. Okay?”

I was so grateful at his words I could only cry knowing I would see him only once more. Then that old Trickster came and took my life away, leaving me with a huge hole in my heart and an inimical darkness all around me.

\*\*\*\*\*

I don't remember waking exactly, I only remember eating. When my faculties began to work once more, I was surrounded by several dozen empty Meatco packages that looked as if they'd been opened in a hurry. About an eighth of the stockpile Ralan had arranged for me had been decimated. Apparently, the hunger is so strong it brings on a fugue state and the body blindly attempts to feed itself whatever is at hand. I shudder to think what might have happened if I hadn't prepared properly; I can easily imagine breaking out of the apartment and attacking unsuspecting innocents in a frenzy. The hunger was so strong!

After finishing the half-consumed flesh I woke up with, I set about straightening up the food room, disposing of empty containers and gobbets of food strewn around the place. I then showered and changed, stopping every so often to devour another helping of human flesh, provided by my friend and yours, Meatco Packaging Plant. And Ralan. Contacting him, was still very important to me, but calling his parent's phone number up from my memory was impossible. I guess the Revitalized don't do numbers. Which was fine with me; I didn't want to take the chance that they might answer instead of Ralan and I knew that would open a whole new can of worms. So I packed a bag full of my new favorite snack and the door key (to make sure no other zombie came by and hit the jackpot) and stepped outside for the first time in my new incarnation.

I really didn't mean to eat Ralan's parents. I purposely brought an alternative source of food, so I wouldn't even be tempted. I even waited until I saw them leave the house, so I could be alone with Ralan. Munching on a Meatco packet, I watched them walk down the block before walking up the stoop and turning the doorknob. I was ecstatic to see Ralan standing in the foyer as if her were waiting for me) as soon as I came inside. I wasn't happy to see all the packing boxes full of his things around me, though. Ralan appeared to be frozen at the sight of me standing in the doorway. Maybe I came back to life a little early, which of course was what the boxes were all about. It was obvious even to a zombie.

"Ralan, I'm back. I came to see you like I promised." Ralan didn't move, stuck in some emotion that would not allow him to speak.

"Ralan, what's going on? Are your parents moving away?" I looked into the box nearest me because I was sensing the worst sort of betrayal. And of course the box was filled with knickknacks belonging to Ralan; his Meharry sweatshirt that I loved to borrow; a picture of the two of us on the coast in Galveston before the world erupted in disease and it was still safe to go out...I wondered briefly if this box was going or staying.

I stepped towards Ralan who still hadn't said anything but was suddenly able to move and quickly scrambled backwards on unsteady legs, tripping over boxes to land on his gluteus maximus. Seeing his things packed away eclipsed the pain I felt when Ralan almost broke his legs to get away from me.

“What’s this?!” I grabbed a poncho that I’d bought him last year and threw it at him. Instead of answering me, my previous pillar of strength sat on his ass and began to cry. I tore through the box, filled with remnants of our former life. I pulled out the picture of us in Texas and threw it at his head.

“Ralan, you were going to leave me, weren’t you? You promised-PROMISED! You said you were going to come see me at least once. Do you know how scary this is for me? And you were just going to leave me alone to--to live dead!” I cried bitterly, but no more than Ralan did, covering his face and sobbing loudly. However, his tears did not move me in the slightest.

I grabbed around for my bag of Meatco supplies; anger was bubbling up inside me and I needed to be masticating madly on something. As I looked around the room frantically to see where I’d laid it down, I understood how even cognizant zombies accidentally ate loved ones. I was so monumentally mad, that I feared for Ralan’s safety. The fact that he just sat on the floor crying like a lamb asking to be slaughtered didn’t help matters. Seeing my bag lying in the archway, I started for the door, wanting to get away from him before I would lose control. Unfortunately, Ralan’s parents got there first.

Looking back, I can just imagine what the Johnson’s were thinking when they saw me in their house. ‘The dreaded zombie scourge had ARISEN, found them and there was going to be hell to pay!’ Mr. Johnson had a roll of masking tape in his hands from the store; guess they ran out before they could finish packing. Mrs. Johnson was empty-handed, but her face wasn’t empty, it was full of disgust—nose wrinkled up and lips pulled back in an unattractive grimace as if she smelled something unbearable. Maybe she did, though I was pretty sure I’d taken a shower before I left. However, Mrs. Johnson didn’t get a chance to harangue me like she did constantly when I was dying. The previously uncontrolled anger I had experienced watching Ralan boohoo over his own betrayal broke loose from the feeble hold that had held it in check. I growled, “YOU!” and leaped on her. I jumped right onto her face and chomped on her nose and boy, did it taste good! I ignored Mr. Johnson’s attempts to pull me off his wife and continued chewing on her face, oblivious to Ralan’s piercing screams. I held my hands on either side of Mrs. Johnson’s face and tried to pull her nose off to swallow what was left, so I could start somewhere else. I do remember pushing her against the front door to close it and seeing her terrified eyes, broadcasting fear, pain and yes revulsion. I don’t

remember snapping her neck, only that she eventually stopped struggling and I started to eat her in earnest.

I awoke chewing on Mr. Johnson's testicles. Ralan was trussed up on the floor with masking tape, hog-style. His mouth was also taped shut and above that, his frightened eyes still leaked and seemed to beseech me for ...for what? I would never eat Ralan. His folks had asked for it for months, though. I swallowed the tasty morsel Mr. Johnson had unwittingly supplied and looked around. Mrs. Johnson's body lay in front of the door, wedging it shut so even if someone had tried to open the door they couldn't have. Her nose was indeed gone, as were her eyes and throat. I don't know which got eaten first, but for her sake, I hope it was the eyes. She was a bitch.

I assumed there was a struggle because the room was a mess; upended boxes were everywhere, and the belongings of the Johnson family were scattered all around me. Anything fragile had been broken and I wondered why no one had come over to find out what the hell was happening at the Johnson's. Lucky for me no one did; I'd have been carried off to the containment asylums for rogue zombies straight away. I was aware that my lack of discovery could change at any moment and began to take steps to get out of there ASAP.

I turned to Mr. Johnson, who in addition to having no balls, was wearing a red necktie minus the neck part. He obviously would not be making the Great Escape with me. Getting his manhood chomped on was pretty appropriate, considering he never had the balls to stand up to his wife. I still liked him though and don't really know why I attacked him. Probably because he was trying to save his wife. He should have looked at it as a favor.

That left Ralan, whom I was taking with me. I wasn't up for conversation with him at that point, so I left him all taped up. I mean, what can you really say when you just ate a man's parents? Not much, believe me. I really wanted to take Mr. and Mrs. Johnson to the graveyard and let them turn there, forever dooming them to the life they so abhorred, but I didn't have time to be dragging their asses all across town and whatnot. I kind of don't want to say what I did stay and do, but I moved Ralan to the back door, where he couldn't see into the living room area. But the reality is that Meatco packets are a bit like soymilk—just not as good as the real thing. I wouldn't have known what I was missing if Ralan had kept his promise to me. I would have never tasted—well, his parents. After that, Meatco was a poor substitute.



Who would have thought that those two racist assholes would taste so good? Okay, basically I just took some of Lois and Pete Johnson with us. Just think of it as preserving their memory; as I eat them, they kind of live on inside me, right? Ralan never has to know.

I took Ralan back to our apartment. That was actually the only place I could take him since I was territorially linked there by death. He's still taped up as I don't think he's ready to be released yet. After the first day, I did take the tape off his mouth, but he refused to speak to me. His anger is understandable, but I was angry with him too! If he had stood up to his parents from the get-go, the current tragedy of them getting what they deserved would have been avoided altogether. After the third day, Ralan did talk but only to tell me that he would never forgive me after what I did. HE would never forgive ME? Boy, did that ever piss me off. I'm kind of glad this whole situation occurred so I could see how flaky he really is. I mean what if we had gotten married? He probably would have pulled a similar stunt. So much for unconditional love.

However, I did decide to give him another chance. I was planning to love him for life, and technically I am still alive. And I still think it could work between us. Ralan of course took some convincing, but I tried using a little sex to get his mind going in the right direction. After all, he said he couldn't forgive me, not that he didn't love me. Full-blown sex was out of the question since I'd have to unbind Ralan for that, but the truth is that if you give any man head--under any circumstances--he tends to listen. I did get a little too excited during the maneuver, and accidentally gave him a little nip. But basically, I was as good as ever. I wasn't even a little bit hungry. Ralan started showing symptoms a couple days later, vomiting the food I tried to give him right up and complaining of stomach cramps. It wasn't on purpose, I swear, but isn't it funny how things work out? I think it can only bring us closer together, really! I've made him as comfortable as I can and will of course be right there for him. At least he'll have someone with him when he wakes up, which is more than I had.

I tried to feed him a Meatco packet yesterday, but he's still refusing meat at this point. I know that will change soon enough. I figure once he's weak enough, it should be safe to loosen his bonds without him trying to escape, so we can get ready for his change. I am a little worried about our food supply running low; it was only supposed to feed one zombie. I know we can get around that though, we'll just have to go out every now and then to replenish our stock. And of course, I still

have my secret stash, courtesy of Ralan's parents. Gosh, it's going to be so nice to have someone with me who totally understands what I'm feeling! I just can't wait.

## AFTERWORD:

*The first short story I ever really wrote. Well, I'd written some other stuff but nothing I felt was commercially ready for publication. Which I wasn't even thinking about when I wrote it honestly. I was just mad that the men in my life were not showing up how I wanted them to. I felt like I was doing my part to be the faithful girlfriend and these mofos were not doing their part. So, I wrote this story to exact the punishment I couldn't wreak in real life. Oh, and true-life tip: the dad in this story is really the mom and she deserved every nibble to the genitals I put in print.*

## Demonweed



She looked out the window again. Nancy yelled, “Craig!”

She slapped the blinds to the kitchen window closed and stomped off to find her husband.

“Craig. I thought I asked you two weeks ago—and again LAST week-to cut those crazy looking weeds out back!”

“I did, baby! You just— “

Nancy cut him off, and she could hear herself shrieking at him, her beloved husband. He really always tried to take care of her, but sometimes he was just clueless. Usually she didn’t mind that he could never get her wants and needs right. But in this case, her health was at stake. He knew that!

Was it possible?

Nancy abruptly turned around mid-tirade and walked out on poor Craig, whose mouth was left gaping open. She remembered a horror movie she saw where the killer hid his identity by wearing a gas mask. Nancy fervently wished she had one like that, just to avoid smelling the stink from the demon weed. She stared at the green vine-y strands that waved at her through the window. Each vine was at least 4 feet tall, with small tendrils sprouting from side to side. Each tendril was topped with a small green bulb, from which Nancy imagined ridiculously fertile seeds burst forth every couple days as the sucker never seemed to stop growing. How? Why? The weeds moved back and forth although the

day was still and hot with no breeze to speak of. They only moved to her, Nancy knew. They were speaking to her, taunting her with their presence. Her head felt cloudy just looking at the bulbs filled with pollen and God knows what else. Her nostrils and sinuses were inflamed at the thought of even going near that plant, but she had to get rid of it. If Carl couldn't or wouldn't do it, she would. As she did everything else.

&&&&&&

Nancy stared out the kitchen window, looking at the weeds.

She'd stopped listening to Carl once he'd said the weeds were gone. Why would he lie about something so obviously untrue? But that was Carl. Always lying needlessly, making up stories that no one needed to know. Doing too much and always ending up telling on himself. Nancy used to tell him to just stop lying because he was so bad at it. That was back when she still cared. Now she expected it. So there were never any surprises because he had proven his lying was consistent. He couldn't stop lying, but he also never tried to stop either. So there's that.

Nancy blinked her eyes against the bright sun in her face. The moist heat pressed on her skin like a live thing trying to get inside her and sweat prickled all over her body. She sat up, not realizing she had been laying down until she actually moved, then saw she was on the concrete. In the backyard. What the hell? Nancy's intention had definitely been to go outside, but she didn't remember doing that. What did she remember? I remember looking out the kitchen window at...at...

As her memory came back, Nancy scrambled backwards abruptly. The Demonweed! She came out to kill it. To pull it up from the root. To save herself from its destructive seeds trying to get into her sinuses and then into her brain. To do what Carl would not. However, that plan obviously got shot to hell as Nancy saw she was covered in the green weed but it was far from dead. Vines were wrapped around both ankles several times, to the point where attempting to stand up would result in an Abbott and Costello routine full of pratfalls. Nancy grimaced with distaste and stretched to pull them off, then saw her wrists were similarly tied up, with sticky vines extending from each wrist up her arms and curling into her armpits. The Demonweed had extended tendrils from each of the four major vines entwining her to envelope her hips, midriff and chest. What if I hadn't woken up in time? Would they have wrapped around her throat? Strangling her? Or worse, moving inside her through mouth, nostrils and ears until the weed infiltrated her

mind and took over her very thoughts and actions? As she thought that very thing, the vines moved. They slithered on her skin, as if confirming, Yup! We want to EAT you! CONSUME you! BECOME you!

Nancy began screaming.



&&&&&&&

Carl wiped Nancy’s brow with a cold face towel with one hand and held her back with the other hand.

“What were you doing outside in that heat?! Taking naps on the concrete, really?” Nancy could tell he was upset underneath the jokes, which made her upset.

“I was only out there because YOU won’t clean up the yard for me! You KNOW how bad my allergies are. You know that my sinuses are sensitive, that extreme amounts of pollen can affect my breathing. I have asked you a zillion friggin times to clear that damn DEMONWEED from the side say of the house, and everytime you you’ll do it and every damn day it is STILL THERE!” Nancy heard herself yelling again and mentally told her herself, quiet down. She didn’t mean to yell, not at all. She just wanted him to hear her. To understand that she was not upset over nothing, but that there were layers to this that he obviously was not getting.

Carl said, “Okay. I hear what you’re saying. To confirm— “Nancy rolled her eyes as he used therapy-speak. “You are saying that you want me to clean up the yard, to make sure the, the plants out there— “

“The Demonweed!”

“Okay yes the demon weed does not send pollen in the air because it is problematic for your allergies. Yes? Do I understand you right?” Carl cocked his head at her until Nancy nodded in agreement.

“Okay. Here is the thing, DEAR. Loved One. WIFE. There are NO weeds in the backyard whatsoever! Remember 6 months ago in December, we pulled all the plants out and covered the dirt in concrete so nothing would grow? Remember the fig tree was cut down too because weeds kept growing at its base, and your eyes would swell up? When I came outside and saw you making concrete angels and fighting the air, there again, were NO PLANTS out there. So I need you to stop accusing me of doing something wrong where there is nothing out there. For Real.”

Carl sat back, with a slight smirk on his face awaiting her response. Nancy watched him watching her like he knew something she didn't. Like she was in the wrong and she would realize it any minute.

“So what is this all over my clothes, what are these little round green dots full of pollen that are currently stuck to my shirt and shorts, that I am still picking out of my hair?” In demonstration, she plucked a few bulbs off her shirt and dropped them in Carl's lap.

“I don't know Nancy, why don't you tell me? Because I'm sitting here right in front of you and I don't see anything. You acted like you just gave me something, but there is nothing in my lap. I don't see anything on your clothes. I don't see any plants outside. So either we have a real bad miscommunication here, or one of us is seeing things that aren't really there and being cuckoo is not MY thing.” This time, Carl didn't even try to hide his smarminess.

Nancy understood what he was doing. Calling her crazy without actually saying it. Playing his favorite game, Hint. Hint that something was wrong with her, but not him. Well. Eff that. Nancy took a long deep breath in, breathed it out slowly, cocked her right hand into a fist and before Carl could remove the smirk, she used the knuckle part of her fist to remove it for him. Hard.

Blood spurted from Carl's bottom lip and he yelled, “Shit woman! What the hell is wrong with you?!” Nancy jumped up and pulled off the remaining vines that were still clinging to her then threw them at her husband.

“You know Carl, I don’t know for sure what is wrong with me, but I am starting to see YOU as a major symptom of it.” Nancy walked away to let him sort out the aftermath, as she’d had to do plenty of times.

&&&&&&&

Nancy was in the backyard, looking at the Demonweed crawling up the side of the house. The thatch had grown, covering the kitchen window which had caused her to come outside to view her nemesis. The sticky green creeper lined the edges of the window, as if seeking a way through the glue holding the glass in place. Nancy knew it was seeking her. For some reason, it wanted to hurt—no, to kill her. It wanted to be inside her, and take over. Nancy felt it went beyond her allergies; the tendrilly bush had a malignant vibe that came off it in waves. Its intention was to cause her permanent harm. Nancy could not explain how she knew. She knew she wasn’t crazy, and she knew she wasn’t wrong. Everything she felt was true, and she was no longer denying her intuition. For so many years, she had denied the secret whispers that told her the truth about her life, that gave her the answers she refused to hear. She didn’t want to know when Carl was cheating with some chick from the gym; she ignored the pointed looks from the receptionist towards Carl or her hand lingering on his bicep during training sessions. She ignored the sibilant hiss from her unconscious telling her that her boss was planning to steal the credit for her ideas and THEN fire her; she allowed him to present her ideas as his own and the only thing she did to prepare was take home all her belongings the day that occurred. Why?

As she stared at the manifestation of her attempted murderer, Nancy wondered why. Not why did the plant want to kill her, hell there were plenty of reasons she oughta be dead. But why all of her life did she choose to play ostrich? Maybe knowing that her time was limited, she felt the need to review her life and its choices. So many times she could have avoided the hurts of her life by just LISTENING to herself. For some reason, Nancy knew things all the time, things she should not be able to know if she were quote unquote ‘normal’. But even as a child, Nancy would not listen to herself. When she saw in her mind’s eye that her mom’s boyfriend was going to crash his car into the neighbor’s house instead of their own, coming home drunk as usual, Nancy told no one. She’d woken up with a scream, and surprisingly Nancy’s mom ran into the room, asking “What’s wrong baby?”. Tears streaming down her face, Nancy quieted and let her mom hold and soothe her as she had not for years but she never told her what she had dreamed. How ironic when Nancy had needed her mom to run to her aid so many nights she never



came, but when a premonition of her lover's death came to her daughter, she was Johnny on the spot to find out what was wrong. What she never knew was that they were tears of joy and a shout of happiness. When Devon ran into Ms. Sally's front porch and the rickety balcony above fell down and crushed his skull, Nancy grabbed some cookies and sat on the porch watching the parade of emergency personnel go by like a good movie with a satisfying ending.

That obviously wasn't a hardship but on the contrary, very enjoyable denial of her mind. However, when she'd had the foreknowledge of things that would hurt her, Nancy's response was the same. Why would she take the same route home when she'd daydreamed getting beat up by the school bully? Yet she did, walking straight from Mrs. Quinlan's class to the corner, crossing Don Julio to her block on La Cienega where Missy Franklin was waiting with some dim witted minions to make their junior high bones. It wasn't really that big of a deal; Nancy ended up with a busted lip and a few scrapes on her knuckles from misguided attempts at offense. Nothing compared to one of Mom's whooping, truly. The next day she was at school enjoying the attention from Missy's many enemies, who commiserated with Nancy how unfair life was and that she should now sit with them at lunch so they can tell her just how unfair it was every—single--day. Some days Nancy felt like getting those new friends was the actual punishment because man, those girls were super boring and so un-smart, Nancy felt she lost an iq point after a week of vapid conversation with the Missy haters. But in the end, she got the attention and sympathy of the person she'd been aiming for all along—Carl.

Nancy sat down in front of the plant that moved slowly past her kitchen window...because just like clouds, you could see it move if you were patient enough. As thoughts about her life flitted through her mind, the how's whys and what fors, she watched the Demonweed slither around the edges of the window sill bottom, then the sides and top. Maybe an hour passed before it finally believed it could not get in that way, Nancy saw and it simply kept creeping upwards instead. Inch by inch, the green carpet covered the kitchen window so thoroughly that after 2 hours, Nancy couldn't see into the house anymore. The sun had moved to the other side of the patio which confirmed her hypothesis that it took about 4 hours for the Demonweed to move about 4 feet. If she was numbers-inclined, Nancy knew there was some sort of mathematical algorithm that would break it down to the millisecond. Probably some earnest botanist had already made those calculations and entered them into some big book of creeper encyclopedias. Nancy did not feel as if she

had enough time to go gallivanting around the town libraries searching for validation of her opinions. She stared at the weed, and she felt herself begin to sway back and forth as it did, moving up her wall. No, this was no teen movie thriller where the heroine found the answer in an obscure tome from a used book store and vanquished the monster. There was no magickal grimoire to vanquish the Demonweed for Nancy. This particular foe was harder to kill than Monsanto in America's heartland. Her knight in shining armor was supposed to do that, and Carl wouldn't even acknowledge the enemy much less slay it for her. For all his sympathy—from junior high to today, Carl was never one for quick action or being hero-like. He didn't kill spiders, he called an exterminator. Once they thought there was an intruder breaking into the house and Carl refused to go downstairs to investigate, whispering vehemently to Nancy to dial 911. Those things seemed perfectly rational to Carl and he could not understand why his wife looked at him with disdain in the aftermath.

So Nancy sat outside, studying her enemy with a dollar store handkerchief tied over her nose and mouth. Her sunglasses shielded her eyes from the sun, but her shoulders legs and arms baked in the hot sun. her thoughts continued to move around the periphery of her problem, trying to solve other things rather than confirm the elephant in the room. That being staying alive. Determining how dangerous the weed is. Whether her husband was actively participating in her demise...through coincidence or planning, as a mastermind or minion. And even making minion a possibility opened another door to crazytown. How could the human being be a minion to a plant? Could the plant be controlling Carl? How would it do that? Nancy looked at the little green bulbs at the ends of all those stalks and imagined she could see them squeeze in and out by themselves. Sure, there could be some sort of plant pheromone that could have an effect on a human brain. The likelihood? Unlikely. Have stranger things happened in the world? Heck to her even? Definitely. However, it didn't ring true. Nancy didn't have any space alien vibes about the Demonweed. Just the malignancy it felt towards her personally. Which again, is kinda impossible as if it's not a space alien bent on human domination a la Invasion of the Body Snatchers, how is it projecting malignancy towards anyone? Ahhh, dilemmas of sanity, Nancy thought. She pondered again the thought of her husband being the mastermind of the whole plot. She mentally tried to envision him bring the baby version of the Demonweed home and planting in the cracks of the concrete on purpose. Could he have been out here watering that, instead of pretending to exercise? Maybe picking out some familial

relative of a man-eating plant like the Venus Flytrap, but one with other murderous talents. Nancy imagined Carl hunched over a table with a couple plants like some dastardly cartoon villain, absently cackling to himself while imagining her demise.

&&&&&

Nancy woke up to a slap of cold water to the face. Then the cold water was followed by an actual palm to face slap, which Nancy did NOT appreciate.

“Did you really just slap me in the face?!” she asked, but Nancy already knew the answer to the question. She just couldn’t believe it. Her husband Carl had indeed hit her in the face. She could actually see in his face that hope that she would hit him. Nancy saw his fists and shoulders bunch up in anticipation. But anticipation of what? Receiving a blow? Or delivering one?

“Oh, I see... you were TRYING to start to a fight!” Nancy said.

“No! Nancy, you scared the hell out of me! You didn’t answer the phone all day when I called and when I finally get home, I find you outside! With no frigging shirt, scratching on yourself—“

“But—“

“I was literally dialing 911 because I could not Find.My.Wife! I finally looked out the kitchen window and there you were.” Carl’s face wrinkled and Nancy realized that was his face of disgust.

“Half naked! No pants—“

“They’re Malibu shorts— “

“I DON’T CARE!!” Carl roared, spit droplets flying from his shaking bottom lip. Not from impending tears though, Nancy thought. It as pure unmitigated rage. Anger in a pure form. Locked in on a target and just letting it flow, she thought. And I’m the target. Hmmm.

“I don’t care to hear about the distinctions in your wardrobe as you laid outside on the ground in our background. Who cares? You didn’t have all your clothes on. You had heatstroke for God’s sake.” Carl shook his head at Nancy.

Nancy said, “So you mean to tell me that your ‘wife’ did not answer the phone all day— “

“I WAS calling all day!”

“But at no point did you ask anyone to come check on said wife,” Nancy said sardonically. “You didn’t call any friends or family members, didn’t call the policy for a welfare check. You didn’t even come yourdamnsself to check on your ‘wife’, while you trying to play all worried.”

At that, Carl’s face lost some of its anger and took on more of a petulant stance like a kid who just learned he isn’t getting dessert.

“Even better, when your shift was over at 6pm...even giving you the benefit of the doubt and saying you had to work overtime and left at 7pm—” Nancy could see Carl was about to interrupt and held her finger up to stop him.

“You’ve been calling all day and didn’t reach me, the ‘wife’ though you’re supposedly worried about me. And yet, you stay out all evening, and didn’t come home until whatever time it is right now—11:37pm it looks like. But you want to talk smack to me right now. Really, Carl? Really? Is that the story you’re trying to tell me right now? Is that why you felt justified in slapping me? Or were you just looking for an excuse to hit your ‘wife’?”

His petulant face took over altogether and Carl made a dismissive gesture with both hands as if to say, I’m done with this. He stood up and said, “Fine, you deflect from the real issue? You wanna make me the bad guy instead? Fine!”

“I don’t have to try CARL! You do a great job of that all by yourself! Spreading your seed amongst them diseased chicks like it’s the thing to do. Then wanna wonder why this marriage is barren. You ARE the bad guy, Carl. You always have been from the beginning.” Nancy stood up too, pulling her tank straps up, looking down at her disarray. “I was always the fool.”

“What are you trying to say right now, Nancy?” Carl asked quietly. He looked at Nancy intently. She couldn’t read his eyes like normal; they seemed opaque somehow. This. This was a moment Nancy knew, where things could change radically. Like life changing radically. She opened her mouth, and yet paused. She didn’t really know what she was

planning to say. There were words in her heart, that wanted to come out her mouth, but she honestly didn't know what they were. Nancy looked back at her husband, with something powerful on the tip of her tongue.

"I'm not trying to say anything Carl. What do you think I'm trying to say?"

But Carl refused to take the bait. He too, sensed an emotional ozone smell in the air, as if certain words were spoken there would be a physical manifestation of something. And like Nancy, Carl decided not to explore that phenomena and walked down the hall to the bedroom.

Nancy watched him walk away, her heart beating faster than normal for no apparent reason.

&&&&&&&

Going into the bathroom, Nancy realizes she was a bit of a mess from her latest backyard excursion. She grabbed a face towel and her peppermint castile soap and started to wash down a bit to get the sweat smell off her. She wiped down her face, neck shoulders and arms with the damp towel. The smell of peppermint wafted around her nose, waking her up a bit and soothing her at the same time. Nancy figured she'd get around to taking a shower later on but took stock of herself right then. Appears ol' hubby was correct, Nancy thought. She did have a touch of sunburn across the back of her shoulders and a small patch on her forehead. Wow, how long was I even out there, she thought absently. She opened the bathroom mirror cabinet and grabbed her shea butter aloe mix to rub into her skin. Nancy opened the jar slowly, watching herself in the mirror. She could see stress lines in her face; moving vertically down her brow. Others surrounded the corners of her mouth and on either side of her nose. Nancy wanted to believe they were laugh lines, but even before she smiled, she knew those lines didn't match the movement her face made when she was happy. However frowning at her visage looking back at her, the lip lines matched perfectly. She mimicked the argument with Carl earlier, pantomiming the yelling and screaming and what do you know! the forehead lines matched that expression exactly. Nancy laughed uneasily at herself, happy she solved the mystery but dismayed that the answer came from strife. The movie of her life was showing on her face and it was not a comedy, it was a dark drama. She hesitated on going darker in her thoughts, not willing to move to other categories.

Never would she admit it to Carl, but he was right. What the hell had she been thinking? Why had she stayed outside so long? What was she looking for? Nancy stared at herself. Where had that question come from, ‘looking for’?

“Was I looking for something? What could it be, in the backyard full of those damn weeds?” Nancy remembered the weed climbing up the side of the house, trying to get into the window...but her view was from the inside she’d thought...she felt like she was inside the kitchen watching the weed crawl around outside the window. But how could she have seen the weed moving up the wall if she wasn’t outside? That memory was vivid, too detailed to be a dream or some sort of hallucination, she saw those green strings attaching themselves to the stucco wall of her house. And how come she could not remember these things? Nancy knew she did not have early onset anything, there was no real reason her memory should be spotty. Yet she had to acknowledge, staring at unhappiness etched into her face, she had gaps. Gaps of ...reality? Consciousness? Nancy didn’t know the proper term but there was basically a bunch of shit she couldn’t remember from the last couple weeks and the issue was getting worse. And today’s episode, ladies and gentlemen, could have turned dangerous.

When Nancy woke up, she was in their California King bed alone. She reached over to Carl’s side of the bed, rubbing her palm over the indentation of his former presence. The space was cold to the touch, indicting he’d gotten up before the sun and left—or never slept there at all. She rolled back to her own side, not surprised. Very rarely was the indentation warm these days, or even used at all. Sometimes it was a blessing, giving her much needed space away from her life partner. Rarely though, she felt her husband’s absence from their bed so deeply the pain reverberated inside her like an evil boomerang ricocheting inside her soul, shredding her self-esteem into wisps and arousing all her abandonment fears she’d shoved away from her consciousness. Intellectually she was always glad he was gone; let him drive some other person crazy with his autocratic pronouncements and lackadaisical hygiene. But occasionally at times like these, she couldn’t hold up the tough exterior even to herself and she missed the man she’d married. The one who kissed her—really kissed her every day; held her when she was scared; celebrated her successes and cared about the things she said and thought.

But that man was long gone. Nancy hadn't seen that man in years. She knew that absolutely. No use pining for something or someone that didn't exist anymore. Nancy sat up, knowing why she was feeling so forlornly this morning.

A week later, Nancy woke up out of a dead sleep, standing upright. She stood akimbo, hands on hips and legs spread. As her consciousness kicked in from deep sleep to awareness, she saw she was standing at the foot of their bed, where Carl was still sleeping. Nancy's head was cocked to the side, watching her husband. Why was she here? She wondered. She did not have a history of sleepwalking yet here she was, somehow out of bed and waking up. Nancy admitted silently to herself what really unnerved her was---WHAT was she doing there? WHY was she watching Carl? Absently, Nancy scratched her shoulders lightly. They still stung from the sunburn she'd gotten from her earlier backyard excursions. She noticed she still hadn't moved, and really felt no desire to do so. Nancy felt supremely comfortable in her skin at that moment like she never had before, her hands on her hips felt like the most natural place to be—right at that particular moment in the frigging cosmos, Nancy's hands were right. Head tilted on its axis felt so perfect, she imagined her vision was improving as she stared at her sleeping husband; could she see his pores in the dark? Even her leg positioning did not feel awkward. On the contrary, it was the opposite of awkward—it felt strong; it felt powerful. Like threads of energy were traveling through her body and standing like that increased its flow throughout her being. Like she was some sort of conduit. But...a conduit for what?

Nancy frowned at that thought, but it wasn't enough to break the spell she was under. She sensed but did not look to see the moonlight coming through the window, landing on Carl's face in jagged pieces, refracted a million times through the cut glass of their bedroom. It seemed to Nancy, dreamily that this was some kind of metaphor; what should be the sacrosanct area of their union distorted something as benevolent as moonlight into daggers of (what?) aimed directly at her spouse's eyes, brain, neck; indeed Nancy could see Carl's pulse beat at his neck, as a large shimmer shaped exactly as a very sharp stiletto danced around it, as if waiting for the right moment to dart in and do some damage, some real good stabbing, right in the jugular where it counted—

And THAT woke Nancy right up for real--the very vivid image of Carl's neck opening up smoothly under the ravages of a knife, turning from smooth skin to chopped meat; his mouth open in a silent protest that never came, and Nancy's hand covered in red. But in real life, he was

not stabbed but sleeping. The light still shone upon his face, but it seemed a lot less menacing than it had while she was dreaming. She still stood at the front of their bed, watching her husband sleep the sleep of the guilty while she panted as if she'd run a marathon. Both hands were gripped into fists and muscles were tight. What scared her endlessly in that moment is that her left foot had moved and had taken a step forward towards Carl's side of the bed. Nancy ran.

&&&&&&

What in the world was she thinking! Nancy thought to herself. She was not into New Age-y stuff like crystal or tarot cards. Or energy conduits. And she did not have a history of sleepwalking, so what was that standing up by the bed thing about? Used to be, on the rare occasions she had a bad dream Carl would be there to wake her up out of it. Now she was having them and he was the one unknowingly in the nightmare.

She'd run all the way downstairs to the kitchen to get away from herself and now paced back and forth past the island as she waited for the coffee to brew. She was already up and there was no way she would be able to sleep after that episode. What was wrong with her? Nancy refused to believe she really planned to—in any way—hurt her husband. Her life was not an episode of Snapped waiting to happen. Sure, she'd been through a lot with that man, enough that maybe a lesser woman might want to poke some holes in him. But Nancy was not that woman. Maiming, maybe. That quick but mostly true thought made Nancy giggle against her will. Ha ha, a little snipped tendon there, maybe the loss of a couple of fingernails, nothing big. Wouldn't even need a ball gag if—Wait, again! Where did all that come from? Nancy stopped pacing, horrified at her own thoughts and how uncontrollable they seemed. Like really, what--. Nancy's eye saw she'd stopped in front of the kitchen window. She'd momentarily forgotten her original nemesis, but here it was, stuck again to her window, blocking the moonlight struggling to beam through the green fronds and vines. The weed, the plant, the damn allergy bringer, the killer! That was IT! Nancy began nodding her head as she stared at the weed, walking closer to really see it...Somehow the plant pollen or allergen is not just affecting her breathing but it was also having some sort of hallucinogenic effect upon her thinking. That was why she imagined stabbing Carl. That was why she'd been stuck in the sun for hours without knowing it...why she'd woken up standing over her sleeping husband all stalker-like...the plant was infecting her somehow. It wasn't Nancy at all!



This revelation made Nancy smile big even as she stared out the window at the weed. It was nice to be able to put the blame on something else, other than her subconscious. Knowing she didn't really have those violent tendencies, that she was sick, was a huge burden lifted off her mental shoulders. As a matter of fact, it was such a load off she should really be thankful the weed. Like she should do something for the weed, just for the thanks of it taking the blame for her. Maybe she would water it tomorrow before she made her doctor's appointment to find out what it was doing to her brain chemistry. After all, she should keep the plant healthy, in case the doctors needed a sample in order to make some sort of antidote serum. Nancy continued staring and nodding, as she mentally thought out ways to preserve and harvest the weed for later. Then realized that she could not she was not supposed to be trying to save the frigging plant, the frigging plant was trying to kill her! Nancy couldn't believe she almost fell under the plant's spell again. She was literally thinking of taking cuttings of the plant to grow in separate pots. When the whole point was getting Carl to cut it down in the first place, which obviously didn't happen. Nancy briefly wondered if the plant affected Carl's mental like it did hers; could that be why he kept saying he didn't see it? Then she quickly dismissed the thought, as from what she could tell, Carl didn't care about anything other than work and his "extracurricular activities". The demonweed was her problem, not Carl's and it was no use trying to determine his motives. What mattered was figuring out what the hell the plant was doing to her mind so she can stop it. But Nancy couldn't stop staring at the plant out the kitchen window, letting thoughts run through her mind like leaves in the wind. Was the plant damaging her brain? Did Carl still love her? Would he help her kill the weed? Can the weed even die? Would he leave her for his lover? Should she kill them both? Kill herself? Kill the demonweed? Will the weed kill them all?

&&&&&&

The last time Nancy came to, it was fully dark and she was outside watering the demonweed. It had grown impossibly high, covering the whole wall of the house around the window. Fronds extended into the dark air past the gutters, waving slightly while it looked for something else to attach to. Her shoes, socks and shorts were soaking wet, having been splattered with water for what seemed like a very long time. The concrete was black with moisture; Nancy's hand hurt from gripping the hose so tightly. She forced her hand to open, having to peel each finger back manually with the other hand. She fancied she could hear the creak of bones as she pulled each finger off the nozzle; like a skeleton would

after having been unearthed from a long burial. Once she got four fingers pulled back, she could finally release the hose and it fell to the ground with a large clatter, water still flowing onto the ground. Nancy looked around bewildered, wondering what the hell was happening to her. Why was she taking care of the thing that was trying to kill her? Although she could ask the same thing about her marriage. Had she been hypnotized? Could she have a brain tumor?

Nancy abruptly turned around and headed for the house. She turned off the spigot as she passed by and did her best to ignore the demonweed covering the doorknob and walked back into the kitchen. She knew finally what had to be done. The best part was that Carl wasn't there. Nancy walked to the garage door, opened it quickly and confirmed that Carl's truck was not there. She already knew once she'd entered the house that it was empty; her Spidey sense didn't detect another breathing being in the vicinity. Especially if you didn't count the tendrils of the demonweed she spotted coming into the house around the edges of the kitchen windows. Hmm, I see you found finally your way inside, so you can attack me more directly, Nancy thought distractedly. She wondered if Carl was involved in any of this, or if this is the weed's own doing, trying to murder her? But she kept moving; she didn't have time to look up recipes on YouTube. She had enough chemistry knowledge to know that bleach in almost any substance will blow shit up. But that was all secondary to the gasoline that she knew her husband kept in the garage. Carl was fanatical about keeping extra gas around just in case. As she reached around the back of the garage door for the can, she saw in her peripheral vision tendrils of the demon weed moving into her into the house through the kitchen window. She didn't think. She heard Teena' Marie's Portuguese Love playing on loop in her head as she moved. How apropos, Nancy mused, our frigging wedding song. She ran back to the kitchen and got 2 other buckets from under the sink. As she bent over, Nancy swore she could feel the demonweed tangling in her hair, but she kept going and ignored the yank she felt as she moved away.

She put some bleach in one bucket, filled it with gasoline and shook some Ajax in there just for spice. The concoction immediately went reactive, foaming up and stinking to high heaven. Nancy coughed but nodded to herself as that was exactly the reaction she'd wanted. She was going to take care of that damn weed once for all. Carl could go to hell for all he'd helped her deal with it, but Nancy finally realized this was par for the course. The crazy demon weed actually opened her eyes while it closed her airways and stifled her breathing. She finally saw

that this uncaring incompetent selfish-lover motherfucker couldn't spell fidelity much less practice, and all the prior years to her epiphany were wasted. Nancy had nothing to show for all the crap she tolerated from Carl trying to be the "good wife."

"No kids, no money 'cause his ass never had any so I ain't rich, no real assets. Motherfucker just drained me dry!" Nancy shouted the last part to the empty house as she created another bucket of combustion in the bathtub. Calling him a motherfucker felt good coming out of Nancy's mouth; for all intents and purposes, she'd mothered Carl to the death of their relationship. He never acted like an adult or took responsibility for anything in their real life. The only time he asked about money was when he didn't have enough for his toys; he never planned vacations, set up life insurance, and Nancy handled the whole process of buying their house.

"So, if I wanna blow this bitch up, I damn well can if I want to!" Nancy was feeling herself as she prepped to do just that---blow that bitch up.

Then she heard a car pull into the driveway.

The unmistakable sound of Carl's work F-150 rumbled through Nancy's brain longer than it probably really did, but her mind heard it echo through her consciousness like the truck was slowly rolling down a long hallway with hardwood floors and vaulted ceilings. Nancy had no idea what time it was, just that it was late. However, she still hadn't expected to show up right at that particular minute. She only had 3 buckets ready to go, but had planned to put one directly in the garage and then run the gas can around the demonweed lining the house in the backyard.

"Oh well, fuck it." Nancy felt a thrill roll down her spine as she cursed yet again. One thing about the demonweed, it definitely had loosened her inhibitions. Look at you, Nancy marveled at herself. You are cursing like a soldier and setting fire to a lie that never sustained you. Never mind inhibitions, Nancy felt like she was finally taking control of her life and it was about damn time. She ran outside with the gas and took 30 seconds to pour the remaining liquid alongside the edge of the house, covering the window where the demonweed was creeping in and the back door as well. She threw the gas can behind her and ran back into the house. It's like some crazy Price is Right game, Nancy thought and giggled a bit as she grabbed the bucket from the bathtub and put it in the middle of the living room instead. The one in the master bedroom and the office/gym on the other side of the house would have to do. Three

mini-explosions and automobile gas around the house should do it. Nancy ran back to the kitchen, and heard Carl's key in the door. She grabbed the grill lighter off the cabinet and frowned, as she heard a second voice with Carl's as the door opened. Who the fuck is that?

Carl walked in and motherfuck if it wasn't his motherfucking secretary! What the fuck?

"Nancy! I'm—I'm glad you're awake—what's that smell?" Carl broke off whatever he was going to say, as he saw wisps of smoke from the noxious concoction Nancy had made. He looked at the bucket sitting on their pearl white rug, then looked at Nancy looking ragged with damp wrinkled clothes and hair going all which a way. Then he looked at his companion. Nancy did the same.

Carl's secretary was a short breasty busybody woman who knew how attractive she was and was not shy about using that fact. She only wore light makeup on her clear olive hued skin, but she was happy to wear the brightest shade of red on her lips. She always wore her hair down and made a point to complete a hair toss at least once when around other people. The effect worked and she naturally drew the attention of anyone in the near vicinity, no matter where they were. Nancy had seen her flirt with every man at the last company picnic, using her helpless maiden act that seemed to always work with petite women. Everyone at the picnics—including her husband—fell all over themselves to get her whatever she needed: a seat, a drink, a plate, the lead in a spades game--whatever. Now this femme fatale that Nancy has long suspected of fucking her husband was actually in her house, coming there with said husband, with prior knowledge having been given to the wife in this situation.

"I MEAN--WHAT THE EVERLOVING FUCK IS SHE DOING HERE RIGHT FUCKING NOW!" Nancy screamed at both of them, so forcefully that spit flew out of her mouth. If she could see herself in the mirror, she knew her face was contorted into a grimace of epic proportions, similar to Mardi Gras masks but as if melted in a fire. It felt like her eyes were bulging out of her head and her mouth was so twisted it would fall off her face altogether; this must be what demons look like. Nancy could not comprehend what the secretary was doing coming into her house with her husband at night time like this was all normal. As if she'd been there before, as if this was a common occurrence, her being in this home.

Time was of the essence, but here she was, stuck dealing with some more bullshit that Carl created. The damn demonweed was literally overrunning the house; if Nancy didn't stop it soon, who knows how far it could spread? And it would certainly be the end of Nancy herself either way. She had to light the fuse, stop the weed and save herself. But the sight of this woman in her home threw her to say the least. She could see Carl's lips moving, hands gesticulating towards her, then towards the secretary. Nancy had no idea of what he was trying to say, and the urgency of stopping the weed's advance was pressing upon her. But she was still struck dumb by this other woman being in what used to be her sanctuary. Before she knew it, Nancy began advancing towards her while ignoring Carl. In my house, she thought, for real up in my house she is? I sound like Yoda now; Nancy thought and closed the distance. Both arms reached towards her neck when Carl intervened, pushing her aside and putting his body in between them.

But this ain't my first rodeo with YOU homey, Nancy thought and ducked low. She swung her right shoulder far left, elbowing Carl in the dick and sidestepping his inevitable fall to the ground. Unfortunately for him, his temple hit the ground before he could break the fall and thunked like a melon. Just like a man to protect his nuts over his skull, she mused as she grabbed the secretary's throat at last.

“So, I'm sorry, I was kinda busy when y'all came in, but exactly WHY the FUCK are you in my motherfucking house?” Nancy shook the little woman with each word. Her head bobbed around like a doll's and her eyes bulged like her thyroid was gone mad, but no words emerged from her open mouth. No matter, Nancy felt as she refocused on her original intent.

Y'all can just come along for the ride, then.” Nancy dragged the secretary towards the kitchen kicking Carl's still body as she went by. She saw a couple drops of blood pooling on the tile around his head, but that also didn't matter. Whatever, I got shit to do, and not this damn weed nor my cheating ass husband or his trifling trick is going to deter me from settling alllllllll this shit for once and for all!

Nancy held the matchbox up to the air in her right hand, watching her two captives dispassionately. Carl and his secretary watched her back, eyes frantically sweeping back and forth between Nancy and the matches. Speech was impossible as she'd stuffed some Bounty paper towels (they were the thickest) in their mouths then covered them with tape. It had been fairly easy to get Carl to capitulate to being bound with

the flex ties they'd kept in the hardware drawer—once she had the secretary in a headlock. Well, Nancy mused, maybe it was more the steak knife she'd held to her eye rather than the chokehold. He'd even put the ties on himself, begging Nancy over and over not to “do something she would regret.” Finally, she'd snapped back at him that if he'd held himself to the same standard things wouldn't be going down like this. Then Nancy nicked the secretary's check to let a little blood flow—just to show them both that the time for play was well over and that she was deadly serious.

Carl's face went gray and he shut up. The sensation of blood rolling down her cheek like a bloody tear did the opposite to the secretary; she decided to put up a small struggle. However, another jab under her ear brought that little rebellion under control right quick. When asked, the secretary confirmed she did NOT want to be stabbed and she voluntarily followed Carl into the land of the flexi-cuffs.

Now Nancy had them subdued there was nothing else to do ... but to do it. Light the match and drop it in the bucket filled with comet, bleach and gasoline. Watch the sparks fly, so to speak, Nancy thought. This will definitely kill the damn weed. She looked around her as she held the matchbook aloft. The demon weed curled around the chair legs of Nancy's captives, moving slowly enough to warrant a second take but definitely fast enough to see with the naked eye. Even know it seeks to take over my life, Nancy thought, watching it seemingly wind its way toward her. As usual, Carl didn't pay any attention to the thing's detriment to her, as the weed moved past his legs in Nancy's direction. Sadly, this did not surprise her. She realized he'd never taken care of her, throughout their time together; she always took care of him. Even though he'd never had allergies, Nancy fancied she saw him shy away from the piece of weed that floated past his face, relying on the back of the chair for support to waver through the air. His panicked eyes never registered it, but his body shifted away from the weed ignoring him to get to his wife. I'll bet that weed was just as toxic to him as it was to her right now. Sort of like some viruses worsen and become airborne, Carl allowing the weed to thrive in their backyard – after her repeated pleas to get rid of it – allowed its poison to grow stronger. Nancy took a step backward as the strand of demonweed came to her. She wondered in the back of her mind why she wasn't having any allergy attacks with the weed so close to her. But the forefront of her mind only sought to kill the thing that had tormented her for so long. Even as the weed finally reached her, and wound its way around her neck, wrapping itself around

her airway--once—twice— (fee times a mady, she thought crazily)  
Nancy sighed with relief Finally. She was free.

Nancy lit the match.

AFTERWORD:

*I know, I know but it's not about what you think! This is a newer story. Still full of anger, still carrying a theme of mistreatment of women. I mean, have you seen the news? #MeToo? How can a woman not be angry! But I threw a twist in there. Although she has every right to be angry in this story, what if that anger had really driven this woman crazy? So, she imagines a threat and acts accordingly, going overboard with it. And yet, is she really wrong? Just because she's acting paranoid doesn't mean "they" aren't really out to get her right? Right? RIGHT?!*



## An Accident Waiting To Happen

Khalil did not like that car.

The 2018 model sedan sat in the parking space closest to the attendant booth shining, looking very sporty and fast in the front. It was one of the most requested rental cars at nearly all of Corporate Car Rental global locations. Often compared to a cheaper version of a mix between a Chevy Camaro and BMW's 740, it was liked by grandmas and grandsons alike. Corporate was one of only two rental companies allowed to rent the vehicle to the public, helping keep them both at the top of the worldwide rental game.

However, this particular vehicle did not appeal to Khalil. He was an intelligent young man, working on his master's degree and managing this car lot in between classes. He did not consider himself superstitious at all, but he felt he had adequate common sense and that sense deterred him from ever getting behind the wheel of that car. Being the real tall dark and handsome brought him attention from women and men alike; but Khalil focused on school and work to avoid complications. His almond colored eyes matched his dark chocolate colored skin in a perfect color contrast and his melodic Tony Todd voice had swoon capabilities if he so chose. However, Khalil's most interesting trait was not visible to the eye.

The best part of being a manager is delegating, and Khalil made sure to delegate all duties requiring immersion in that vehicle to a subordinate. Driving it to the car wash, filling it up with gas, even getting the odometer readings were things Khalil was happy to do---for any vehicle other than this one. He made sure all his managerial requests were kept random, so when he delegated in situations like these it would seem normal. In actuality, Khalil had experienced this apprehension once or twice with other cars in his 4 years of working at Corporate. Those cases were much milder, more of a sense of unease rather than alarm. This car, though, was pure terror to him, way past alarm.

Feelings about inanimate objects he came into proximity with was not new to Khalil; he'd had such feelings since he was a toddler crying about baby rattles he didn't cotton to. Sometimes he just felt some kind of way around things, never people though. And it was nothing overt, he never experienced any blinding epiphanies or sudden flashes of insight with lottery numbers. Just a sense that floated through him

occasionally, like a whiff of decay when passing a garbage can. Or in more pleasant circumstances, the smell of sunlight and wildflowers (and what he would later realize was the intimate scent of a woman). He never made a big deal about his ‘feelings’ and downplayed it when other people mentioned his knowledge. It was a part of him, like being 6 feet tall or having psoriasis. And Khalil never disregarded his feelings.

The first time the new sedan came on the lot, another representative drove it in. He told Khalil that the car had a mind of its own. “I swear dude, I put on the right blinker and the wheel turned left instead. I tried to turn it back and looked for the driver assist switch to make sure it was off and couldn’t find it. But the wheel would not turn for me!” Khalil gave him the side-eye like, really? But the rep continued, saying the GPS went crazy too, saying ‘turn left’ over and over, which would have put the car into oncoming traffic. Khalil responded by simply raising his eyebrows and saying, “Glad you didn’t get into an accident!” and kept it moving, but he felt a shiver move through him slowly. He thought to himself, that’s why I never wanted one of those push button cars. Khalil preferred old school, something with a carburetor you could prime with a 5-gallon gas can. His 1976 Chevy Nova was much more reliable than anything on this lot in his humble opinion.

It wasn’t that he was against technology; Khalil considered himself fairly savvy. He had an account with all the major social media outlets and owned an iPad and a kept the latest Samsung model. It was however no secret that he mourned the demise of Blackberry (and occasionally ranted to close friends about it being a conspiracy as it had been the only un-hackable phone on the market). He kept a record player instead of a cd player in his apartment. He NEVER used wi-fi for personal business. And Khalil did not like new cars. Ironically, his in-the-meantime job surrounded him with just that. A 4000-pound metal hulk full of wires and gadgets that pretended to be human, and the real humans were just supposed to trust that? Uh uh, no way in Khalil’s view. Humans can’t control themselves, and Khalil couldn’t see how computers that flawed humans made could be trustworthy. All indications pointed to the opposite, so he refused to drive cars equipped with auto driving mechanism. No way he would relinquish control of his safety to a computer, supposedly thinking or not.

His instinctive disinclination for technology running through the back of his mind, Khalil inspected the car, clipboard in hand. He noticed the rep that drove it in watching him intently, as if waiting for...something. Khalil ignored him and looked at the car. It was definitely new. Shiny

chrome in all the right places—bumpers, light covers, trim—with dark red matte paint on the body. He opened the door and stared at the lit-up dashboard. The keys were still in it, and the odometer read 136 miles. Khalil peered inside and saw the GPS screen at the top of the center console, about 7 x 5 inches around, black but with that faint greenish tinge that hinted at the superior electronic intelligence that would be activated once it was turned on. Khalil smelled that new car smell, but it smelled wrong to him, like there was an extra chemical included in the usual mix, which was bad enough by itself. That new car smell, similar to shower curtains fresh out the pack or burning plastic was accompanied by a faint acrid smell, as if the upholstery had been burned. With the windows rolled up. Recently.

Then the GPS turned on by itself.

“Hello Friend. Where would you like to go today?” The disembodied female voice, deep but strong, sounded as if it was an alto opera singer in its spare time. A smirking smiley face appeared below the words printed on the screen that the GPS spoke, which just reinforced the sarcasm Khalil swore he heard in the announcing statement. He took a step back and decided he didn’t have time to add a new car to the fleet at that moment. He’d have the new kid Thurston do it; he needed the experience and then Khalil could leave early. He made the decision in seconds, and didn’t second guess it, immediately closing the door and walking past the rep, totally ignoring his knowing look to give Thurston the keys and clipboard. That was the closest Khalil ever got to the car.

The first documented complaint they got about the sedan was about six months later. A renter wrote up a report saying the car wasn’t responding to her driving instructions and the GPS was faulty. But the report was woefully incomplete, not describing how exactly the car malfunctioned and the matter was never followed up on. However, Khalil remembered the look on the lady’s face when she turned in the paperwork with the keys. Her pale face was flushed bright red to her blonde roots and she was breathing heavily. She spoke earnestly to the person at the desk, darting furtive glances back at the rental car she’d parked in front of the door. Khalil saw the clerk point towards the return lot and the renter shook her head NO repeatedly, slammed the keys down on the counter and walked out. She gave the car a wide berth as she got into another vehicle that had been waiting across the lot for her.

Khalil had Thurston check the car in and file the complaint.

Then last year, a couple came in demanding to speak to management. Khalil got a call while he was at lunch saying angry customers were threatening to sue everyone they could think of. When he got back, Khalil took them in his office and they explained that the GPS in their rental car had been hacked and the car itself was dangerous. The wife stated it started as soon as they drove off the lot. Doesn't it always, Khalil thought absently as he looked at the folder. Then he saw it was THAT car. And he began paying attention.

They drove the sedan to the gas station, as the tank was only half full and they'd gotten a discount for taking it that way. They attempted to put in unleaded gas, not knowing the car only took premium but they couldn't get the nozzle into the opening. Every time they attempted to insert the nozzle, something blocked the gas pump. The couple finally gave up, got back into the car and that's when the GPS began cursing at them.

"It literally said, 'Premium You Stupid Bitch' on the screen!" the wife exclaimed. Khalil felt the woman was more indignant at being called out her name than the fact that the car was reacting like a human. The husband knew that of course and declared he was taking the car back to the rental lot right then. But the doors locked, and the driver assist took over, driving the two through the gas station's car wash instead. The husband pumped the brakes and strained against the wheel to no avail. The whole time the GPS called them names, accompanied by the filthy words rolling across the screen in tandem. Once the car came out the automated car wash tunnel, the driver assist function clicked off and the husband was able to control the car again. He drove immediately back to the lot and told Khalil they knew that an employee had programmed the car's GPS to say and write those disgusting insults as some sort of sick joke. He demanded that the company do an immediate investigation into the situation and just how did Corporate plan to compensate them for this distressing situation?

Khalil went right into 'soothe the customer' mode, promising everything under the sun to avoid bad Facebook reviews and assured them he would be in touch with the results of the investigation. Luckily, the frazzled couple had parked the vehicle in the intake lot, so Khalil didn't have to move it anywhere. The next shift would handle the paperwork and moving of the vehicle. He signed the correct forms and called the right people to have the car looked at. Nothing amiss was found, as Khalil had expected. You couldn't find what was there with normal eyes, especially if you didn't know what you were dealing with.

Even with that sentiment rolling around in his head, Khalil didn't wonder why he knew this and no one else did. He did not probe the idea that he might have an extra sensory talent; maybe passed down from ancestors like his skin color that knew how to cultivate such arcane knowledge. Khalil merely accepted his truth and acted accordingly.

The savvy office manager would never find out the inspector that came directly from the car's manufacturer had a breakdown while test driving the vehicle and killed himself a week after sending in a report saying the car was functioning normally.

Honestly, Khalil didn't need to know that extra bit of information to continue and even increase his silent protest of the rental. Two complaints of weirdness were enough for him to steer as clear as he possibly could and still work for the company. Currently he viewed the car sitting disabled in its slot, keys in the ignition but clearly not going anywhere. It had been towed in on a flatbed after the last renter got into an intersection loss where all the airbags deployed. The right rear quarter panel of the vehicle was smashed in, with the tire obliterated and the broken axle displayed. Khalil could see the side curtains and steering wheel airbags laying deflated on the inside. He'd read the report; a tourist family from overseas, unfamiliar with the rules of the road in this country made an unprotected left turn at high speed and was hit by a semi-truck. Everyone inside the rental car was taken to the ER by ambulance, with the backseat passengers being airlifted due to massive internal organ injuries. The tow truck driver told Khalil that the right-side windows exploded at impact and the glass shards flew towards all the passengers. "There was blood all over the street, man!" Khalil could believe it. He imagined he could even see some red streaks from where he was standing but had no intentions of getting close enough to confirm. The fact that the front of the car had relatively no damage, except for a starred windshield from the driver's head-first impact seemed ... interestingly fortuitous to Khalil. He could definitely see the GPS screen from his vantage point, sitting dark and somehow expectant. While staring, Khalil could see the front grilled had maybe shifted a bit towards the left, consistent with a heavy impact. This was to be expected after being smacked by an 18-wheeler, although Khalil did wonder why the renter had been speeding. He'd seemed fairly meek when checking out the car and hardly the type to play Dukes of Hazzard with his family along.

A tragedy, Khalil thought, but that didn't solve his current dilemma. He was saddened at the circumstances and of course wished his customer's

a speedy recovery. However, no matter how sad he was at the turn of events, the car still needed to be processed, and Khalil was the only one in the office that day. Someone had to go out, take pictures, note the mileage, get the keys and then clean the inside out of any personal belongings. Normal procedure when a rental car has been in an accident. However, Khalil was not the one. "I am NOT the one, for real," he mumbled to himself while looking at the car. There was no way he was going to get near that car for any reason. His sense of duty made him want to spare any of his workers from exposure to that thing, although he hadn't heard anything from the employees who had interacted with the car thus far. His common sense told him that no matter what his job title was, his first responsibility was to his own well-being and not to die on the sword. It never occurred to Khalil to question his 'common sense' or attempt to override it. He suffered from none of the self-recriminations some people felt when they had no explanation for their own actions. He simply felt what he felt and didn't waste time second guessing himself. With his eye still on the rental, he called the local salvage yard to arrange the vehicle pick up. Khalil gave them the address and instructions and what to do: remove the keys as they would remain in the vehicle. He assured the associate on the phone that the car would be safe from vandalism with the keys still in play. I pity the burglar foolish enough to try and steal that hunk of metal, Khalil thought. He advised them the paperwork would be in the drop box and they could confirm any additional information with the Corporate claims adjuster. He promised to waive any storage fees if they promised to move the vehicle within the next 48 hours to their own facility, and a deal was struck. As he hung up the phone, thanking the representative one last time, Khalil swore the car's crooked grille stretched just a little into a knowing smirk. Khalil imagined that was the GPS' way of noting Khalil's reluctance to get near the vehicle, maybe even a last-ditch effort to use reverse psychology to get him inside and...

And what? Khalil thought. But he recognized that as a rhetorical question, one he did not need the answer to in order to proceed. Doesn't matter what, he thought as he placed the accident report into the file and into the Out bin. I don't plan to find out at any rate so who cares? He gave the sneering sports car one last look as he locked up and headed for the Nova. He was sorry the last people in the car got hurt, but totaling the car was probably for the best. This way no one else would get hurt and the car would be out of commission without anyone "dying", Khalil said out loud. Because that was the next logical step, right? Like some sort of sacrifice; life lost to a rogue GPS system and wily driver assist

program. Khalil didn't bother to wonder what that sort of sacrifice would engender for the eerily autonomous machine. He just thanked whatever God, Orishas or Saints existed that it had not come to pass.

Later...

The salvage insurance adjuster looked at the sports car sitting on the flatbed of the tow truck. Obvious total loss, he thought automatically. This was his last process of the day, having just come in from the rental lot with a rush request. He catalogued the damage by rote, barely registering the truck driver's words about the difficulty in getting the vehicle on the truck and into the facility. Something about faulty electronics, he thought. He concentrated on filling out the forms and taking pictures to document the damages. Airbags deployed, check. Right rear axle broken, check. Right rear quarter panel, door and side frame were all damaged beyond cost effective repair. He walked around the front and noticed the shifted grille, but that the headlights and fog lights were intact. He leaned in on the left side and confirmed the dashboard still worked. He noted the GPS screen was not cracked and indeed came on by itself during inspection, giving its expected "Hello Friend" greeting. The man noted the GPS in 'good condition' on the form and checked the 'ok to reinstall' box. Putting the GPS into another vehicle would increase the salvage value, thereby saving everyone money. After all, recycling saves lives, he thought.

Afterword

In case you were wondering, the car is a woman 😊



### About the Author:

Tish grew up in the Bay Area of Northern California and started writing in elementary school. Graduating to crafting murder mysteries in high school, the love of writing stuck. After graduating from an HBCU in New Orleans, she moved back home and continued writing. A regular at Dorsey's Locker in Oakland, Tish started exhibiting her work during weekly spoken mic events. Her story 'The Love of a Zombie is Everlasting' was included in Brandon Massey's horror anthology *Whispers in the Night: Dark Dreams III*. Her newest story, 'Cheaters' (confirming they never prosper) was included in the 2017 Bram Stoker Award nominated anthology 'Sycorax's Daughters'. This is her first collection of short stories detailing the ways that people try to heal their own pain through murder. If you're looking for a scary good time, Tish can be reached at [TishDoesHorror@jacksonpress.net](mailto:TishDoesHorror@jacksonpress.net).

