



# SOMM

ISSUE 27

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**CHUCK WENDIG** | **KAARON WARREN**  
**SADIE HARTMAN** | **A.M. SHINE** | **JACK MURPHY**  
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# From the Editor

BETH TABLER

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Hey, there. My name is Beth Tabler, and I am guest editing the horror crossover issue of Grimdark Magazine. As a young connoisseur of all horror and science fiction movies inappropriate for my age, I remember seeing Poltergeist for the first time when I was seven years old. I had snuck down to the television while my folks were sleeping. I never quite got over demonic trees, clowns, and an old woman screaming, "Carol Anne." I remember reading my first Stephen King book, Salem's Lot, at 12. I knew at that moment that my reading life would never be the same. I remember the first grimdark book I read at 25; it was Mark Lawrence's Prince of Thorns, by the way. I realized sometimes heroes aren't heroic, bad guys can be protagonists, and life is full of a lot more gray than I had thought. Horror and grimdark are a part of who I am and how I see the world. They are my jam.

The themes of horror and grimdark have always gone hand in hand. But often, a thin gray line separates the two, a place where the story does not fall one way or another but sits on that terrifying spot between the two, where you can't quite tell what is what. This idea is what issue #27 is all about.

We have some fantastic stories, interviews, and articles with some of the best writers in the horror genre, those whose stories often hang out on that gray line. I invite all of you reading this, both horror fans and SFF fans alike, to kick back with a beer and dive into the scary, the dark, and the gory.

Thank you for joining me on this gray line, and don't mind the screaming. Happy reading.

Beth Tabler  
Guest Editor

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# Outliers

A.M. SHINE

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Me and Teddy had seen it all. Frozen lakes, clear as polished crystal. Cemeteries sprawled like moneyed towns, with dead families all a-slumber in their marbled houses. Dark forests where the fog hangs thick as webs and the shadows have eyes. We journeyed like two jailbirds on the fly, with no compass to guide us and no choice but to keep running, always with Teddy nestled in the crook of my arm so he could watch the world with those big eyes of his. We'd rest by night and talk awhile about our day and whatever dreams we had for the morning. I'd stoke the firepit, wondering to myself where our run of bad luck might take us next, and Teddy would sleep, bundled up inside my jacket, close to my heart so he wouldn't feel the cold.

We never had a home before, and I couldn't imagine two rogues like us ever settling down anywhere for long. But as it turned out, that's where our fates were taking us, to a cabin high up in the pines of Jessop Peak, where the snow was sturdy even in the sunshine and there wasn't another shelter for miles. Up here, it feels like you can look out across the whole world. I realized you don't need nice memories when you're living your happiest life in the present. And me and Teddy *were* happy. Nobody bothered us for so long I thought maybe they never would.

A heavy snowfall filled in his footprints, but it had settled deeper by the door. Cold feet had stomped there, shifting their numb weight back and forth. He'd brushed the white powder from the keyhole and fumbled with a lockpick, but he'd found his way inside

eventually, escaping the night and all those wolves' eyes constellating around him like fallen stars. The wind whipped against the cabin like a wave of rock salt, blinding, cutting, killing if you lost your way. Even I had to walk home with my eyes shut, seeing only vague memories and hoping I could trust them.

Hell knows how *he* knew where we lived, and only the devil himself could tell you how he got here. This mountain doesn't welcome the living lightly. I suppose we have that in common.

I knew he was in there, waiting for us, and I saw no harm in letting him wait a little longer. Besides, the cold hadn't caused me any trouble since I skinned that grizzly, making his winter coat my own. I remember burying the frozen meat so the wolves wouldn't come scratching for it. The fat tasted good once you boiled up a hunk of ice and made it spit and bubble. After that batch, the whole cabin stank of rot for a while, like its log walls were flesh going rancid. Teddy blamed the rising steam leaving its stain in the air, like a sad soul trying to escape us. He was probably right, too. I dug up that carcass so many times that, in its last days, even the wolves didn't want it.

Teddy loved to watch the stars, all those polished eyes twinkling down on us in the black, keeping lookout for the likes of him who was waiting inside our home with a gun steadied on the door. I tugged him out of my tunic so he could take a better look. We stole a moment, just the two of us, before we went inside, trying to remember how we used to be.

I guess the brain in this body is what makes the memories, though truth be told I've never really got the knack for it. Took me a time before I could even make something so simple as a fist. Before that we were more like chewing tobacco after it's spit. And I guess there were lots of us too, all buried inside the honeycomb of that rock, floating through stars that I didn't know existed until I got these eyes. There's such

beauty to be seen here. Some say this world's a bad place, full of bad people, and that I don't see it for what it really is. But with those stars overhead and Teddy in my arms, this world looks just fine to me.

'Let's see what this one wants,' I whispered in his ear, squeezing him closer. 'Maybe it won't be like the other times.'

I shoved in the door and let the wind carry it through. The snowflakes were quick to slip inside, dancing like ash in the half light, flitting about as though they owned the place and chasing the warmth out. He'd dragged my chair away from the fireplace and into the far corner of the cabin. He was sitting, hand on his thigh, fingers tensed around the pistol's cold steel. He had on him a thick coat, and his head was mostly beard from what I could see, with a skull the size of half a dozen hats. And still he trembled like the last leaf of autumn, so close to death as to lay no claim on life. I closed the door behind me, shouldering its lock in place. The scream of the wind softened to a song.

'Stand where you are,' he croaked, as though his throat was an hourglass filled with coarse sand. 'Don't make any sudden movements.'

It would have been polite of him to offer up my only chair. I looked about my home, searching for anything else he might have rearranged without me and Teddy's permission. He'd force-fed the fire some logs, stacked all akimbo like he'd never had need to build one himself until that night. I noticed that my ladle had been shifted around to the far side the pot. The son of a bitch had come hungry, not even bringing some bread to stretch dinner between the three of us. I stared him down across the darkness. He couldn't see my eyes. I know that for a fact because he didn't flinch.

That's how the humans here tell us apart from them. Me and Teddy have got eyes like egg yolks bursting with black worms, always wriggling and sometimes they tickle. Maybe I'd best keep them closed and play

blind. But there's so much to see on this world that I just can't bring myself to do it.

His bones shifted in my chair. 'I've been tracking you for—'

'Wait,' I said, cutting him off before he could find his rhythm. 'Seeing as you're sitting comfy, I'm guessing I'll be the one fixing the fire. Once I've worked some life into it, you can get back to telling us your story.'

'Us?' he whispered.

He was cold enough not to argue with me, or terrified. Either way he didn't try to lend a hand. I still disbelieved the sight of him in my chair. Makes me think he craved his own death more than mine. I tweaked the wood with my bare hands; callused harder than cowhide, they could squeeze a glowing coal to dust. This body wasn't so strong until I got inside it, but you won't hear me complaining about that. After I kicked the fire up, I fixed the ladle back where it belonged, throwing a glance over whatever was left floating in the pot, which looked like the drowned when the ocean bloats them up. If he had helped himself, then he hadn't come back for seconds. Wolf meat, mostly, with maybe the fat cheeks of the last one that found us. I couldn't be certain. My memory loses focus like a fogged-up window, hiding the truth of things. Teddy tells me that it's for the best, just my mind doing me a kindness because nobody else ever did.

'I have a gun, you know?' the man said to me, assuming I'd left both eyes outside the front door for the wolves to feed on.

'The one in your hand, is it?' I replied. 'Don't worry, I can see it.'

If his plan were so simple as to shoot me dead, he would have already pulled the trigger. No, he wanted me to know what I'd done to make him climb that mountain. They always do.

'So, who are you?' I asked, clapping the ash from my palms.

Firelight brushed my leg like a mutt thanking me for feeding it. The crisp bark of the wood was crackling now, getting warmer, so I gave the pot a stir. The sight of those fleshy bits bobbing up and down in the broth made my belly grumble like thunder.

'You don't know who I am?' he asked me, so seriously that I chuckled more than I probably should have; sitting in the darkest corner of the cabin with whiskers so bushy I could barely see his face, he could have been anyone.

I beckoned him towards me, 'Step up here to the fire so I can get a better look at you.'

'No,' he snapped, his pistol shivering silver, 'I'll stay where I am.'

'In *my* chair, no less,' I sighed, ogling the stew from the corner of my eye. 'Have it your way.'

'You took everything from me,' he said, bracing himself as best he could, but still a little sadness seeped through.

He was clearly moistening up his lips for a bout of storytelling. I swirled the pot some more. It was steaming now and at its best, with white lumps of flesh sweating as though they could still feel the heat, screaming at me and Teddy to gobble them up.

'And when did I take all this from you?' I asked, drawing the ladle to my lips for a taste.

'Thirty-two days ago,' he replied, his consonants sharper than the wind whistling by my window.

'Thirty-two days ago,' I repeated slowly, licking around my mouth, 'and what exactly did I do?'

'You don't remember?'

I reached for the stone bowls that I keep on the hearth and held them up for him to see. 'I only have the two of these, but you're welcome to help yourself after me and Teddy have had our share.'

'Teddy?' he whispered, and the sound of this stranger saying his name made my blood boil like the broth, but I cooled it down to a simmer.

I ladled out our dinner, taking due care to divvy the meat evenly between the two of us. Teddy never had much of an appetite, but he loved to sit over a stew and breathe it in. We squatted down with our bowls between our legs. I was ready to find out what I did that caused this man to voluntarily kill himself by my hand and in our good company. Truth was that by now, me and Teddy were more than a little curious.

‘So, it’s true what they say,’ he said, his beady eyes glinting at Teddy.

‘And what’s that now?’ I asked, working some fat around my gums.

‘The teddy bear,’ he whispered.

I quit chewing, ‘His name’s *Teddy*.’

‘You’re mad.’

No word raises my hackles quite like that one. But its sound was so familiar, it seemed to somehow lift the haze that hung over me, and a memory crawled in my ear like a bug. Dates and months are Dutch to me, but it couldn’t have been long ago if I still remembered it.

Me and Teddy had come across a hunter in the woods, crunching through the snow towards us with a rifle cocked over his shoulder, like a one-man army looking for a war; curious fellow, asked too many questions and eyed Teddy in a way that made me uncomfortable. His skull collapsed after only a few kicks and after that we tracked his footprints to a village. I wasn’t eager to break my pact after so many months, but my hunger had made me desperate. Small-town folk never understood us. Their people can be so cruel, calling me and Teddy names just to hurt us. And I feel no guilt for the wrongs they hold against me. That’s why we chose to disappear, for their sake and ours; cats and dogs best kept apart.

We found a tavern, its windows glowing opaque like candles in dirty jars. I can recall hearing laughter bubbling from within, not the mocking sort that met me and Teddy everywhere we went but a tittering more like

merriment. I still held out hope that we might meet some of our own kind, unlikely as that was. When that rock crumbled in the sky, we were spread all over. But when I eased in the door, all that mirth escaped out into the night like a dog dying to piss. My first thought was to back away, but the open fire waved us in as though it had been expecting us, and me and Teddy were too polite to ignore its hospitality, so seldom did we meet a kindness.

The silence held as we approached the bar, my snow-crustrated boots thudding and creaking across the wooden floor. I kept my head down as I took a seat and sat Teddy atop the stool beside me. The soft purr of conversation returned like a litter of cats getting comfy, but I could still feel the hot iron of their eyes burning into my back. I ignored them for their own good and called for two dinners. The grin on the owner's moustachioed face caused my fists to clench into boulders. I trust he didn't expect my best friend to starve after all those miles we'd walked, so I gave him a look that made him understand. He wasn't smiling so much when he looked into my eyes, but he didn't call me on them. He just disappeared out the back to get us our meat, shaking like a fawn finding its legs, probably thinking I had a kind of sickness in me.

'This is nice, isn't it?' I whispered to Teddy, hoping he hadn't noticed how uneasy the air had become since we sat down.

A young girl was watching my friend like she knew him. But that wasn't possible. Teddy was mine and mine only. She had the longest hair, like black velvet drapes hanging down over her dress. I drew Teddy's chair in closer to me and patted his head, reminding him that he need never worry so long as we were together. And then I felt a tap on my shoulder. Before my neck had twisted an inch, I could smell whiskey on his breath and knew what was coming.

‘Who’s your friend?’ he garbled, swaying before a crowd now bleating like sheep, amused to near madness by the simplest of questions.

How I cursed that fire for luring us indoors. I should have known better. The man made a move to flaunt Teddy in front of all those leering faces, each one craving his swift oblivion. I wrapped my fingers around his neck, sobering him up in a heartbeat, making him look me in the eye the way so many had before—in absolute terror. I ripped his throat open and pulled Teddy from his dirty hands.

After that, my memories are blurred, just shapes and shadows. Their bodies swarmed around me, all loyal to the throatless deceased, and I couldn’t tell one from the other. They tried to drag me down, wild fists flailing from every side, their mouths spitting words like *mad man* and *murderer*. I know I lost myself like I promised Teddy I wouldn’t, but it wasn’t me I was trying to protect. I slaughtered them. All of them. I pulverised anyone who approached me into blood and broken bits of bone that gathered under me in a mound I could stand upon. And I’m big enough without their dead parts beneath my feet. Others ran screaming into the street, the wind carrying their cries to whoever would listen. I took Teddy in my arms and ran, hoping that they’d never find us. But nothing stains your trail quite like blood. Even the mountain snow can’t cover that up.

The man sitting in my chair in the corner said, ‘You killed my only child,’ snapping my mind back to the moment as though a jailer had just wrenched my chains for slacking off.

I’d forgotten he was there, now standing awkwardly on two feet with no more feeling than dead weights holding him upright. He couldn’t have run from me, even if his common sense finally told him to. He scraped over with toes that were black and rotting in his boots, stopping just beyond my reach, and there he placed a square of card down on the floor. It wasn’t

much bigger than the kind a dealer stacks in his deck to make enemies of brothers, spreading hate and envy with every hand as though the devil pays his way. He still gripped that pistol when he slid this offering towards me.

‘Look at her,’ he spat, his eyeballs all wet with tears like eggs in a pickling jar.

I lifted Teddy up tenderly and propped him between my legs so we both could get a good look. The square card was a drawing, dusty charcoal on grey; a portrait is what they call them. There were two girls that I could see. The tallest of them had long hair like the girl that night in the tavern. Could have been the same one but I can’t be certain. The other was shorter and much prettier.

‘You said you had only one daughter.’

‘I had *only one* daughter,’ he replied, falling a step back as though I’d just punched the air out of him. ‘My God, you think they’re both alive, don’t you?’

‘I doubt very much you’d be here if they were both still alive,’ I said, feeling my patience cramping.

‘That’s her porcelain doll, you mad man.’

There was that word again. I know my eyes see the world differently. But that doesn’t give him cause to call me that word.

‘You’ll pay for what you’ve done,’ he bawled, both hands aquirer on his pistol. ‘This is for my daughter and all the lives you’ve ruined.’

The trigger clicked. I’ve never seen a man look so confused. He stared at his pistol like it was a puzzle he couldn’t solve. It clicked over and over while the shrieking wind swirled around the cabin like a hundred lost souls. I looked at him, wondering if he realized now that steel doesn’t hold up too good in the cold. A seasoned killer would have swaddled his sidearm like a newborn to keep its mechanisms from freezing up. There isn’t much use learning new lessons so late in life.

He collapsed to his knees as I approached him, 'More will come,' he hissed. 'They'll kill you if I don't.'

'More meat for the pot,' I said and then I cracked his neck.

He never did say how he found me, and I never cared to ask. Shame that we might never know. Not that it matters. More *will* come looking for us. They always do.

I went about the business of rifling through the dead man's pockets, scrounging for anything worth keeping. It seemed he brought with him a hunk of bread after all; frozen, but it'd soften right up by the fire in time for our next pot. He had coins, too, that I'd look over in the daylight, and a few bullets that he might as well have thrown at me instead of pulling that trigger. The inside pockets of his coat were the deepest, and I felt a weight in there that I first hoped might have been more bread. Food like that was a rare treat for me and Teddy.

I couldn't believe it when I held that little doll in my hands, more beautiful in the flames' amber gloss than in that picture he had shown us. It was the girl, the one sat on the knee of the taller one. Dolly he had called her. She was so alive and healthy that I couldn't understand why he'd come to kill me, but I was so glad that he did. Her eyes were like ours. We'd all been travelling on that rock so long ago, and I'm guessing the fate of good fortune brought us together now.

'Teddy,' I whispered, holding Dolly up for him to see. 'We've found a new friend.'

In the firelight, Teddy's yellow eyes glistened with tears like my own, and the black worms inside them were wriggling more than I'd ever seen. And so, with a man lying dead on the cabin floor and the snow gathering fat on the sill outside, I scooped Dolly out a bowl of stew and sat her down between us. The memories might fade of how we found her, but I've never been happier, so far from the stars that I wonder if we'll ever make it back.



**A.M. Shine** is a writer and advocate of the Gothic horror tradition. Born in Galway in the west of Ireland, there he received his Master Degree in History before sharpening his quill and pursuing all things literary and macabre. His stories have won the Word Hut and Bookers Corner prize. He has published two collections, *Coldwood: the haunted man and other stories* and *13* and is a member of the Irish Writers Centre. *The Watchers* is his first full-length novel.

# Crossing the Monster

KAARON WARREN

---

The best monsters are not 'other', or 'different', or 'damaged', but those that exploit our fears and our own flaws. The creatures that make us think of death, loss, drastic unasked for change, loss of control, irreparable damage.

Both science fiction and horror address these things, often using the monster as a way in. Science fiction monsters are based in a form of reality. They could almost be true, given circumstances. Horror monsters are dark, unflinching, nightmarish, unthinking, immoral, terrifying.

These things can be stronger if drawn together.

Classic horror monsters include Joe R Lansdale's Folding Man from "The Folding Man" short story; Jeffrey Ford's Daddy Long Legs in the Evening from the story of the same name, and of course Stephen King's Pennywise. All three of these creations tap into our deepest fears, and explore what it is to be changed by them.

Classic SF monsters for me include the aliens in HG Wells' *War of the Worlds*, those bloody sandworms in Frank Herbert's *Dune*, Peter Watts' evolved vampire in *Blindsight* and Simon Kress, the utterly awful 'animal lover' in George R R Martin's "Sandkings" novella.

Monsters are particularly important in both sf and horror, genres in which we investigate human behaviour and motivations, look at why people do the things they do, and try to imagine what will happen if they keep doing them. Fears are there to be explored and exploited: In Jeffrey Ford's story, where a young

boy is taken over by a monster, Ford looks at the terror of losing control, being made to do things that fill us with grief and guilt. The best of these stories draw us in so that we almost understand what it's like to be monstrous. *Grimdark Magazine's* anthology *Evil is a Matter of Perspective* has just this as a theme: all the stories are from the point of view of so-called evil, in the hope of understanding why bad things happen.

Almost every story I've written has a monster. I sure can't seem to write a story that isn't full of monstrous behaviour. I'm just going to talk about the literal monsters here, not the human ones. About how using elements of science and research helped me make the horror stronger.

In "Working for the God of the Love of Money", my story about a god who survives on the greed of others and protects himself with armour made from stolen coins, I looked at the science of melting metals and at the history of the metals in coins. Silver has a melting point of 961 celcius, whereas copper melts at 1085 celcius. Given our Australian dollar coins are 92 percent copper, this helped develop the nature of my heat-loving monster.

"His Lipstick Minx" is futuristic, set on an imagined oil drilling rig. The minxes are tiny women, monsters in their own way, but so are the workers who keep them as pets. I researched this by reading online forums, where rig workers talked about their traumas and their daily routines in the same matter of fact way. It helped me step into this awful possible future in a more natural way, and make my monsters believable in context.

"Dead Sea Fruit" is science-fictional in that it looks at the worst case scenario of eating disorders. It imagines a man whose kiss makes everything you eat taste of ash, and young girls seek him out, wanting never to eat again. Research for this story took me to some very dark places. I looked at long term affects of

poor diet, and at causes of a lack of appetite. I wanted that element of it to ring true.

“In the Drawback” was inspired by way the tide draws back before a tsunami, and is set in a post-climate change world. While I don’t explore that part of it, I do provide a monster in the form of a giant, drowned with his mouth sewn shut.

“The Coral Gatherer” is about a lonely woman who builds a lover out of coral. I was fascinated to learn that coral can be used for bone grafts, because the make-up of the two things is similar.

For “Winter Sweet, Winter Grieve”, my story in a recent issue of *Grimdark Magazine*, I wanted to capture the feel of a fairy tale gone bad. So this giant living underground, collecting the bones of his victims is more fantasy than science fiction, but that merging of two genres can work as well, I think.

In the end, Horror shouldn’t ever be limited by constraining concepts of what it is. If it makes you feel bad, then it’s horror, whether it’s set on a spaceship or a haunted house. It’s important to allow elements of all genres to creep in if they need to, and I mean romance as well, and certainly crime. Stories should be layered so that we’re not telling them in a shallow way, but looking beneath the surface to find the rocks and murk and maybe even treasure below.

Shirley Jackson award-winner **Kaaron Warren** published her first short story in 1993 and has had fiction in print every year since. She was recently given the Peter McNamara Lifetime Achievement Award and was Guest of Honour at World Fantasy 2018, Stokercon 2019 and Geysercon 2019.

She has published five multi-award winning novels (*Slights*, *Walking the Tree*, *Mistification*, *The Grief Hole* and *Tide of Stone*) and seven short story collections. Her most recent books are the novella *Into Bones Like Oil*, the chapbook *Tool Tales* (with Ellen Datlow!), and the writing advice chapbook *Capturing Ghosts*.

# Island of Sin

JACK MURPHY

---

Caill stood high above the waves on a lone sea stack. It stuck out from the water like a jagged tooth burst through angry flesh. The sea was angry too. He had made it so. Salt spray stung his eyes, made every bit of his skin sing. He had been out there alone for three days and nights.

He had been watching the invading fleet sailing across the horizon now for over a week, sniffing at the spit of land he and his family had found succor upon. No doubt the people aboard were desperate as he, his wife, and children had been before they found this island.

“You have waited too long,” he said to the waves he willed to thrash. “No man could survive the pestilence of the continent.” He knew that well enough; he and his family had fled their home early, abandoned the blackened fields destroyed by some esoteric disease. They had watched the corruption outpace their caravan. It had sunk into the hooves of the horses, driven the beasts mad. They had eaten them all the same. Boiled them for hours, removing the scum from the top of the boil until it was clear; the meat was flavorless. Still, his father-in-law had succumbed to the sickness, gone mad before they found a vessel to take them off the blasted continent. Caill had had to put him down like a rabid mutt. If the wretches aboard these boats decided to test his water, he would not feel pity in putting them down either.

He imagined their faces. Cheeks sunken, lips chapped, their eyes beady and rheumy like pigs’.

Hungry, ravenous things desperate to feed. Without his magic, they would beach their ships, find his family and destroy what little safety they had eked out here.

Others had come dangerously close before. Several months back, two longships had trawled close to the sheer shoreline. Men and women with pallid, pink faces and heavy brows. They looked like they enjoyed the salt of the sea, perhaps even took joy in the spray that blistered their skin. They'd send an envoy, no doubt to see if the island had anything of worth beyond its cliffs.

He had drawn up a spell, used his fullamancy, each beat of his heart pushing blood from his veins into the air, casting the beach and his home in mist as thick as woven wool. His intentions had been strong, and his blood resonated with forces beyond his understanding. The invaders were butchered by his magic, no blade or arrow stood a chance against it. Still, he had spent himself, and as the invaders' companions beyond his mists abandoned their comrades upon his shores, he had fallen sick, his days filled with lunacy as he remembered the worst of what he had done before his family had found the island.

A whistle across the water shook him from his thoughts. It had surprised him at first to learn that voices travelled easily on the waves. When he and his family had been on their boat, he had begun to hear voices. Terrible voices that urged him to dive into the depths of salt water for relief or throttle his loved ones for something fresher than the rancid horsemeat.

But the whistle he heard was true. It was the hoots and commands of seamen. He watched as they lowered their sails. He gave a beat to the waves, hoping the captain of these boats might not dare tip the nose of their fleet any closer to his home.

"Piss off now, bring your reavers to another coast," he said, catching a mouthful of ocean spray for his curse.

He watched the ships converge, one great mass of oiled timbers.

Perhaps they had run out of water or, even better, scurvy had consumed them. They would be too weak to row to the beach or, his heart quickened, they might be desperate enough to sail their ships right through his storm and onto the shore.

Then he spied a flitting dot in the water that might have been mistaken for flotsam by someone with a lesser eye. It departed the fleet like a small leaf placed atop a stream by an eager child.

Caill watched it edge toward him, test the weight of his waves and push through them. He watched it disappear under a dark wave and then reappear on the swell of another.

He saw a lone woman in the boat, a cloak pulled tight around her to protect from the worst of his waves. Her face was white and pink like so many others that had fled the Low Continent, but unlike the others before, whose faces were hard and pocked, hers was without blemish.

He was dismayed to see her navigate his waves with ease, holding no oars, just a staff with a smoking cup latched to it.

Caill felt a heavy weight in his stomach. He could smell her magic, almost taste the iron in the air. Unlike him, she had drawn another's blood to save her own strength. A surrogate's blood could save a true user's strength for a real fight, or perhaps she was a lesser fuilamancer, if she was one at all. The staff was nothing more than a link to the fabric of intention; fueled by stale blood it would be no match for him. He watched as she used the blood in her staff to quell his waves and wondered how many people had died to fill her cup.

His family had grown up on stories of people like her. Cannibal fuilamancers that drained people of their blood, bottled it as if it were wine, and sold it on just as

cheap. The idea made him sick when he was a child and gave him nightmares for years afterward.

He controlled the spider-like threads of blood wicking away from his wrist, watched it evaporate into the air at arm's length like ashes dancing above a fire, feeding the spell, paying his price for the waves.

Her boat moved closer, traversing his turbulent waters.

She seemed to see him finally, looking up from her boat. He wondered if he looked imposing on the rock, like some legendary entity, commanding the sea and the clouds from his perch.

Her dark eyes, deep and saccharine as winter treacle, searched him with resolve. Her lips piqued as she watched life flowing from him.

"Turn back," he said, over the roar of the waves against the rock. "Leave my home."

"The sea is without succor, magician," she said, her voice rising easily over the crash of the waves. "My people have traveled far to escape the pestilence. Would you not let us rest and eat and see what this land has to offer? Surely this island is too large for one man alone?"

"No." he said, feeding the water more of himself, rocking her boat on a wave as tall as the stone he stood atop. She screamed and then recovered her balance, tipping her staff forward so a thread of blood pierced the wave and settled it. "My land is not a suckling pig. There is no wildlife for traps, hardly enough land to sow, and the coast is too sheer to hunt for anything beyond sea snails."

He heard shouting across the water, felt an arc of pain along the base of his neck. He looked back towards the island, saw his son and daughter playing on the shore.

He looked back to the woman. "You see my children play. My wife alone. No, this island will be no place for

a fleet of brigands to inhabit, to bring their sickness to its soil. Sail elsewhere.”

He was surprised to see her smile. Her teeth were white as the foam on his waves. “I see no children. Only a sanity long ago lost. I see a man ravaged by loneliness.” She looked back at her boats. He watched as words formed on her lips before she spoke again. “There is no ‘elsewhere’. The sea is a graveyard of ships. A kingdom of people dead and bloated. I will not be turned back.”

He could see her eyeing the threads of his blood. He felt his heart thrum in his chest. Her words had cut him. He couldn’t help but remember the worst of what he had done and seen. Dark images of his wife and children sick, on the verge of death, and he a raving madman, saved only by the sight of this island he now protected.

“Do you not know how dangerous that is?” she said, pointing to his wrist. “How a man becomes less the more he draws on himself. Your heart is probably poisoned through. I could pop you off that little rock and you’d sink to the floor of the ocean.”

“I am no leech,” he said, tasting the lie in his mouth. He felt nauseous. “You use others for your own means.”

He felt guilt deep in his guts.

Her brows knit together, and her gaze drifted to her staff.

“This?” she asked, holding the staff in two hands as if it were her boat’s mast. “This blood was an offering, mine by right. It is a utility, like the wind that fills a sail’s belly, or a grindstone that crushes grain and splits the germ from the wheat. Perhaps a lie to keep a mad man sane?”

He gritted his teeth at her words. Who was this stranger to judge him? She was nothing more than a cannibal from his childhood stories.

She let a piteous laugh and he tasted an explosion on his tongue, the metallic tang of the woman about to cast a spell. Without thought, he let his waves relax and siphoned that payment for a new spell. He cast his blood wide in front of him like a fisherman's net, latticed strands vibrating white hot.

She hadn't moved, but her cup was overflowing, dark, septic blood arced toward him. A hundred javelins, black glowing and hard as iron, crashed dead against his protective net.

"Turn back," he said, pushing his net outward and casting the woman in its shadow. "For your word I will give you your life."

Her face was filled with anger, rabid spit at the corners of her lips. She tipped the maw of the staff toward him and poured out its entire contents. A column of black burst to life, a swirling pillar, tearing through the shadow he had cast above her, scattering his spell to the winds and revealing a swathe of blue sky above.

"You have no sway over me. I am a queen. I have been on the sea too long. I will come to this island, no haggard man will turn me back."

She brought the pillar of black down on his head, seeking to grind him to dust. Like the crash of a wave, it fell upon him.

For all its weight and the amount of blood the witch had used to create it, it was clumsy. He had long ago learned how to make a spell well, make it beautiful, weave the blood and his intention like a fine silk. Such a spell could make an evil man a saint or enable a person to commune with the dead.

He raised his hand above his head and formed a wedge of slick, oiled magic. Instead of crushing him, her spell rolled over his shoulders and thundered down the side of the rock face and into the sea.

The water turned to a cloud of boiling steam, and for a moment the very sea parted.

His face burned red hot, blisters forming and bursting before he could wash it with his blood to halt the burns.

The amount of blood she had used to attack would have knocked any other fuilamancer out cold. Weaker ones might have even died from that amount of blood loss. Still, she stood. One of her eyes boiled in its socket, gone white through. She gritted her teeth. "I will not turn back!"

"There you are correct," Caill said. "First, I asked. Now I command you." He shot a strand, white-hot from his wrist, like a puppeteer might use to guide the hand of a marionette, and attached it to the woman's chest. He pushed it through her white, salt-crusted skin and then deeper, past the flesh, the bone, and into the squirming mass that was her soul.

He felt the thrash of that small indescribable thing as he wrapped it in his spell. He felt her heart in there too, a life of pain and suffering, of hate and fear.

He wove an intricate lie, took details from his own life and made them hers. He built a reason for her to turn around, to be ruthless. He gave her darkness and sin. He gave her the will to butcher her people, to feed on them so she could make her long voyage home to the blighted continent. He filled her with the resolve to murder her lover, to rip out his heart and feast on it if he dare question her.

Then Caill turned her loose, her eyes as far and distant as the island he protected. He watched her in her little boat like a leaf on a river, thrashing and bouncing off the rocks as it traveled downstream.

\* \* \*

He could hear his family from the shore as he dragged his boat across the sand. His daughter was singing in the high grasses, his son whistling in the small grove of wild grapes he had planted over a decade ago. They were gnarled things now, dark fingers of wiry branches that curled away from the coastal winds.

He couldn't see his wife. No doubt she had been worrying about him since he had left to protect them.

He set his rowboat on its back between two rocks and looked back towards the ocean. The witch queen's ships were already moving away. He turned and walked up dunes, through the whispering, chest-high sea grass.

The island had barely any trees taller than his waist. Everything had been cut down by people that had long ago left or died on the island. He had found ruins of age-old homes. He had reused it all, and when there was none left, he had become resourceful like the three sailors that had come upon his home several months back. He had hacked up their boat and repaired the leak in the roof of his home. There had even been enough wood to finish the smokehouse he had been meaning to build before last winter's rain had spoiled the timbers he had been saving to use in the spring.

He could see his house now as he crested the dunes. Everything he cared about was on this cut of land. His family, his house, his refuge.

"Children, father is home," he said, breaking up clumps of salt and sand that had collected in his beard over the past three days. "Set the table and Da will go grab us some supper."

He heard his children's feet running up the dirt tracks as he made his way into the smokehouse. The coals he had used to dry the meat crunched under his boots as he entered the shed. It was a modest size, room enough for him to step inside if he stooped. He felt proud of his creation. He had repurposed the invaders' paddles into smoking racks. He inspected the slabs of meat slowly, tending pieces that showed signs of black spots with his short knife. He had lost half the meat to mold already. The legs had survived, thankfully. Set right above the coals, they had had the best of the heat and smoke. One he had stripped

nearly clean already, exposing the yellow-white femur and patella.

He cut four strips from the closest leg and took a bite. He savored the taste, pushing it around his mouth, pretending it was a slab of pork slathered in drippings from back home, before the pestilence. If he wasn't so weak, he would have bewitched himself and sat down in the very memory he was now trying to recall. His stomach ached; an itch at the back his mind screamed for him to swallow all four strips down right there in the smoke shed.

"Manners, you old brute. Three days at sea and you lose all civility?"

He locked up the smokehouse and walked back towards the house. "Hope you two helped your mother whilst I was away," he said as he kicked his boots off at the door.

Inside the house was dark, no light came in, save for the cracks between the rough pieces of wood he used as a door.

"I'll set the fire and we can swap stories," he said idly as he stacked bundles of dried grass into the small hearth he had fashioned long ago. He opened his hands above the kindling, willing the fabric beyond the world to reach out to him, he enticed it with his blood. The skin parted from his wrists on command, and he directed his blood onto the tinder. He watched it soak into the grass and then willed it to catch flame. Within moments the small room that was the entire home was flickering in orange light. "Better, much better." He said, turning himself around so his back was to the flame.

His wife and children were seated against the wall, their bodies impossibly still save for the shadows that danced in their eye sockets and bounced around the backs of their skulls. He set a cut of meat on each of their laps and then sat back and began his meal alone.

**Jack Murphy** emigrated from Ireland to Canada in 2015. He is a graduate of SFU's The Writer's Studio. When not running an Irish Bakery with his partner he is working on the next draft of a fantasy novel with all the Dickensian murder mystery and gunpowder plot he can fit into it. He can be found on Twitter and Instagram @Jackrioch

# An Interview with Chuck Wendig

BETH TABLER

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Chuck Wendig is a New York Times and USA Today best-selling author, both non-fiction and novels. His recent books include *Wanderers*, which is a Locus, Bram Stokers, and Goodreads award Nominee. As well as the series *Miriam Black*, *Force Awakens*, the *Invasive* Duology. You can find him on his blog Terribleminds or his Twitter account @wendig, where he might be talking about writing, birds, apples, or sandwiches, depending on the season.

Chuck was kind enough to chat with me about his writing and his upcoming horror novel, *The Book of Accidents*.

**[GdM] Reading your stories, I have noticed that you don't do a lot of worldbuilding. You establish a setting and go, or maybe jump right in as you did with *Wanderers* because [gestures around] the scene is pretty much already set. Is that a conscious choice or how the words flow out of you creatively?**

**[CW]** Worldbuilding is something I love very much, coming from a roleplaying game background (both playing and writing) but it also can be an anchor that drags a story down—I do as much worldbuilding as is ideally needed to get to the next section of the book. It's a bridge, in many ways. Not to say you can't or shouldn't build other pieces of glorious architecture.

Every book is different, and I don't think every story needs to be mercilessly screaming WELL THIS MUST SERVE A POINT OR YOU WILL BURN IT DOWN. But for my mileage I do prefer to focus more on the characters, and through them, worldbuilding is revealed.

**[GdM] As someone who is deathly afraid of ants, I read *Invasive* because apparently, I enjoy creeping myself the hell out. One of the first lines of my review was "Chuck Wendig, you are a maniac." Why ants?**

**[CW]** Ants are awesome and weird, that's why. Like bees, they are eusocial, and have behaviors that are both individual and group-based—I've always been interested in them. In fiction form they also make a nice metaphorical stand-in for anxiety.

**[GdM] *Wanderers* is an epic story. When you sat down to write it, did you have any idea the depth of scope it was going to cover? Or did you always know that it was going to be a huge story?**

**[CW]** I knew it was huge, but mayyyyyybe not 280,000 words huge.

**[GdM] What kind of research did you do for *Wanderers*? While we did not have a great sleepwalking plague of 2020, there are certain similarities between the governmental response in the face of a health crisis and how things played out in your novel. *Wanderers* was remarkably prescient. Especially the Black Swan AI versus Blue Dot AI.**

**[CW]** I'm a lazy writer, and much of the research for the book was not done for the book, but was rather just

stuff I read that I found interesting. A lot of the prescient stuff wasn't particularly insightful or prophetic on my part—it's not like we didn't know pandemics could happen or that white supremacy was a problem. But the Black Swan / Blue Dot thing was hahaha yeah, that was a little freaky.

**[GdM] Tell me a bit about your newest book, *The Book of Accidents*. It seems like a complicated horror story to sum up with a small blurb. A lot is going on. Off the top of my head, I can think of a few of the different horror types in it: Lovecraftian, paranormal, post-apocalyptic, psychological, and serial killers, all as part of the narrative. As the author, how would you describe it to prospective horror readers?**

**[CW]** A lot is going on, indeed. It starts simple, as a family moving to a haunted house that was once the home of the father, a home of abuse and trauma. And from there, it certainly goes places. I like to focus on the family aspect: What happens when your family is at the center of great evil? How do they survive? How do they help each other? They are haunted by not only apparent specters, but also by generational trauma and cycles of abuse, and how do you break that circuit? How do you exorcise that kind of evil?

**[GdM] One of the central parts of the story is the dynamics of family and the effect family can have on someone for good or evil. The story rang with authenticity, especially the scenes depicting familial violence. What kind of research did you do to portray the characters so accurately?**

**[CW]** No real research there—I have my own family and grew up in a haunted house, so I had enough idea ammunition for this. It's a very personal book.

**[GdM]** When you were writing *The Book of Accidents* and wading into the kind of horror and darkness described in the story while writing during a pandemic with the horror and darkness in the real world, how did you shake it off?

**[CW]** I wrote this before the pandemic, actually (though edited it during). We originally were going to release this book in October of 2020, but before the pandemic the publisher (wisely) opted to move the date—not, in fact, because of prophesying the pandemic but because there was going to be a huge, tumultuous election at that time and it would be hard to get traction with media attention for a book. And then, as it turned out, there was TOTALLY a global pandemic so I'm pretty glad we didn't release then. (We are still of course in that pandemic, but it's certainly an easier, calmer time.)

**[GdM]** How do you separate yourself when writing such complex themes during such a difficult time like 2020?

**[CW]** I don't really separate myself? I'm writing a book for a reason and that reason is personal, so I don't try to give myself great distance from the work. Especially in first drafts.

**[GdM]** Talking about horror stories in general, I found *The Book of Accidents* dark but not bleak. It treads the line bringing you to the brink of despair only to have a small glimmer of hope to grab on to in the distance. Do you find that to be an essential aspect while writing horror in general?

**[CW]** That's usually my aim—dark, but not bleak. There's enough despair in this era, and I'm not

interested in adding to it. Just the same, I feel like horror fiction helps us contextualize real-world horror. I often compare it to how a sorcerer creates a summoning circle in which to conjure demons: that circle is a safe place to fight those monsters, and that's horror fiction to me. It's a safe place to fight monsters.

**[GdM] Finally, I would love to know what you're reading and what books you are excited about in 2021?**

**[CW]** I just read Christopher Golden's *Road of Bones* and it's fucking legit, stellar "adventure horror" that just fires up my readerly happiness. Always excited for new Stephen Graham Jones. New Caitlin Starling, too. Kiersten White's debut with Del Rey. Delilah Dawson's *The Violence*. C'mon. This is a great time to be a horror reader.

# The Tesseract

EVAN MARCROFT

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*A man must have a foundation*, or so the Kaiser often said in his public speeches. For the common citizens of the Brotherland it ought to be love for him, their leader. If their foundation was solid, then the man that arose from it would be good. All agreed that their Kaiser's logic was infallible, and few agreed more fervently than the warden of Indefinite Corrections Outpost 1. His facility—the largest in the nation—housed thousands of those failed citizens whose foundations were structurally weak, riddled with the mold of rebelliousness and individualism, or simply constructed from inferior genetics. As for the warden himself, his foundation was perfection. His role demanded nothing less.

He was punctual: every day at seven o'clock sharp, after combing his moustache and saluting the framed photo of the Kaiser above his bed, he toured the Special Cells below the general population. He was tidy as well, keeping these chthonic halls well-lit, and their checker-tiled floors free of any stains that might obfuscate his facility's purpose as a place of gentle correction, healing, and purification. Most of all, he was precise, never failing to administer the perfect punishment for each malcontent under his care. For murderers, prolonged isolation. For thieves and rapists, reasonable amputation. For undesirable ethnicities, well, it was not so much a punishment as waste removal, and even then, he made sure that the ashes were disposed of properly. But it was for the radicals, the anarchists, the dissidents and enemies of

the state that the warden reserved his most clever, most lovingly tailored sentences. These men had to be broken before they could heal, their malformed foundations reduced to rubble.

For a working-class agitator whose denunciations of the Kaiser had grown a bit too loud, it might be room forty-three, 'The Echo Chamber,' in which an ingenious arrangement of acoustics returned his every utterance as a brain-shaking roar, guaranteed in time to instill in the prisoner a terror of his own voice. For the Officer of the Central Ministry who'd failed to laugh at one of the Kaiser's gut-busting jokes it was number ninety-eight, 'The Inverse Loom,' where a man's raw nerves were wound around spindles and slowly unraveled so he would learn to appreciate the sensations he'd stone-facedly squandered.

On this morning, the warden stopped at number fifty-seven, 'The Tesseract,' one of his very favorites, and opened a slot on the door to peer inside. His lieutenant had reported recent irregularities with its occupant, and that would not do.

Special Cell Number 57 was exactly three meters by three meters, each surface the purest white that could be found on Earth. Light emanated through the semi-translucent walls in such a way that no shadow was possible, and thus the room seemed an endless void. To reinforce the illusion, prisoners were put to sleep with gas and then fed, watered and drained while unconscious. Those interred here inevitably went mad as the infinite room slowly peeled away their sense of self like the sucking vacuum of space.

However, its current resident was not displaying any of the usual symptoms after several weeks in captivity. The man in question, Prisoner 3934, was crawling about on his hands and knees, squinting at the invisible seams between walls with intense interest. It very well *could* be insanity, but the warden expected the customary self-harm and gibbering.

He went to the wall-mounted telephone outside the cell and dialed up his lieutenant, who arrived promptly to the scene. "What the devil is he searching for?" the warden asked.

The lieutenant was a supremely plain young man, a patch of beige background in his creaseless uniform, who was admirably detached from his at-times dangerously intimate work. A fine warden one day for certain. "Sir," he replied, "one of the guards heard him mutter something about a cockroach."

The warden furrowed his moustache. "That's impossible." There were no openings of that size in The Tesseract, no cracks or drains. The door was flush with the wall and sealed shut. Moreover, the warden's pest-control policies were punctilious prison-wide. There were no cockroaches *anywhere*.

The warden stole another look through the peephole; if the inmate noticed a pair of befuddled eyes appear in the void, he was too busy with his task to remark on it.

"Keep an eye on this one," the warden ordered his lieutenant. "Just in case." He reasoned that whatever the problem was it would resolve itself shortly, though his thoughts skittered around the matter like crane flies around a torch. The Tesseract had never failed to eke results from its residents before, and for this prisoner, whose crime was unsurpassed, there was no more fitting room to put him.

\* \* \*

The warden gave it a week, a neat, concise, and reasonable span of time, but the matter did not improve. Prisoner 3934 continued to hunt for his cockroach day in and day out—not that he was aware of the cycling of the days—time that ought to have been spent screaming holes in his throat and chewing his fingers off. The warden decided that his blattodeic fixation was the problem. The cockroach was a distraction from the mind-annihilating emptiness of the

room. Any second thing, real or otherwise, beyond the occupant defeated the illusion.

“I’ve had just about enough of this,” the warden informed his lieutenant at the end of the seventh day. Unusual measures would be required here. “I’ll set the lad straight.”

That evening he had the prisoner removed from the Tesseract and brought in for a face-to-face meeting. He did not bother having the man drugged this time; the room’s conceit wasn’t working anyway, and it would be a waste of expensive sleeping gas.

The Yes or No Room was a windowless chamber with a steel table in the middle and a chair on either side. Its walls were pea-green tile, and as some reported, it was a bit cramped inside. This was true: the warden had researched the minimum area in which the average person could feel comfortable—the radius to which the human soul emanated, he liked to think—and built the room to dimensions just shy of that to ever-so-slightly crush the presumptuous soul back into its body.

He sat himself on one side of the table and the prisoner on the other. Present circumstances aside, incarceration had picked at the man like a vulture, leaving him increasingly thin with patches of long, gray beard. Despite his appearance, other wardens would have killed to host such a prisoner. Inmates came in denominations of sin, and this one was of the highest value.

“I’m very thirsty sir,” said Prisoner 3934. He frowned at the table as if it should be laden with wine and cheese.

“Yes, well, this is normally when we’d water you,” the warden said. “Bear with it and listen here, son. This cockroach business isn’t healthy, and it has to stop.”

He explained at length the myriad reasons why there was no cockroach, from the janitors’ cleaning schedule to the confidential mechanics of the

Tesseract, its insect-proof, labyrinthine air-exchange system, for instance. “As you can see,” he concluded, “there isn’t even the possibility of a cockroach. Please accept that and move on.”

The warden paused to let Prisoner 3934 thank him for clearing things up. The prisoner, however, only sighed. “With all due respect, sir, and acknowledging the strength of your logic,” he said, “I know what I saw. I don’t want a bug crawling all over me while I sleep. I’m going to find that thing, so please let me be until I do.”

“See reason, son,” the warden pleaded.

“I’m sorry, but I must respect my experiences.” His eyes did not speak of a moth-holed brain. They stared straight ahead, utterly calm, frighteningly sane.

The warden could feel blood swelling the sponges of his cheeks. The prisoner’s certainty was a slap in the face. The Kaiser demanded that this facility be perfect, and the warden had labored faithfully to create a stainless-steel high-capacity enemy processor. This phantom cockroach implied that, even in some tiny, six-legged way, he had failed. *No sir*, he thought to himself, *No grit in these gears*.

There was no reasoning with the prisoner, the warden decided. In fact, he’d acted rashly in trying. Only pressure turned a stubborn lump of coal into a diamond. He thanked the prisoner for his time and then rang the guards, ordering them to return him to the Tesseract after three minutes’ beating.

\* \* \*

Another week crawled by with no sign of improvement. If anything, Prisoner 3439 grew even more determined. He’d begun to speak to the guards he knew were standing outside, when the mood struck him: “It almost crawled up my nose once,” and so forth. As if that and not the prison unfolding in concrete layers around him were presently his biggest issue. The damned bug was starting to give the man an anchor to reality. He’d

developed enough of a sense of the passing time to call for breakfast in the morning and lie down before the gas knocked him out. The warden didn't see how that should be possible, but he supposed the human mind was itself a labyrinth of undiscovered corridors.

Just as the prisoner spent his days on his wild goose chase, the warden found himself stewing on the matter day and night. At his lieutenant's urging he considered moving the man to another room—perhaps the Number 36, "The Tumble Box," or the Number 71, "The Bramble Wife"—but refused in the end, out of pride. Instead, he ordered another beating—petulantly, he realized soon after. The prisoner did not need teeth or fingers to hunt for his roach, but without eyes he could not gaze into the achromatic abyss of the Tesseract, and so the warden could only hurt him superficially. Likewise, a more straightforwardly torturous room would amount to an admission of defeat; a round peg could not be given the square hole it childishly demanded. The prisoner's cell was keeping him safe, and that serpentine conundrum bound the warden's hands as tightly as chains.

One morning, as he left for his rounds, he opened the door to find his lieutenant holding a sealed letter. The warden read it once, then again with his reading glasses, and then left it on his desk while he moved through his daily duties like a ghost reenacting the moment of its death.

The Kaiser himself would be making an inspection at the end of the month. Only a fool would doubt that he'd want to see what had been done with Prisoner 3934.

By the time he returned home at sundown he'd managed to calm his barking nerves with a decisive course of action. He was able to look the Kaiser's picture in the eye and promise him that he'd be pleased. As always, the Kaiser wore an austere smile, glad to know that his top warden was on the job.

If he had the prisoner beaten insensate, the warden reasoned, it would look as though the man had gone catatonically insane. They could disguise his injuries with cosmetics, perhaps pin his eyes open. It made more and more sense as he bathed, ate, and prepared for bed. What the Kaiser thought was true could only please him, and that would buy the warden time to put things right. There was not a lonesome thing to worry about. Everything, he insisted to his reflection, toothpaste foaming like spittle, would turn out fine.

Satisfied, he tucked himself into bed and turned off the lamp. Comforting visions of the Kaiser's praise guided his eyelids shut. There was even a chance at a medal; its phantom weight on his breast dragged him quickly towards the edge of sleep. Just as he'd begun to nod off, something scuttled across his face.

\* \* \*

Morning at Indefinite Corrections Outpost 1 was a machine of many moving parts. There was the AM role call in which all general inmates had to be accounted for, followed by tightly scheduled breakfast shifts for each block. While the inmates ate, their cells had to be ransacked for contraband. Meanwhile, each Special Cell required its own multi-point inspection to ensure that everything was flowing smoothly. Prisoners that expired overnight would have to be conveyed to the furnace, and their rooms promptly sterilized and reset for new residents. All of these actions had to proceed without interfering with one another. Therefore, it caused no small amount of slowdown and confusion when the warden abruptly introduced a new gear into the contraption.

"I want you to confirm that there is no cockroach in that room," he informed his lieutenant. The lieutenant was briefly puzzled, but the warden gave him a look that helped escort the order towards reality.

The warden stood with Prisoner 3934, who had been cuffed to a folding chair, as his men examined the

room from top to bottom. "As closely as possible," his lieutenant assured him, as though a three-meter by three-meter cell could only be scrutinized so thoroughly.

"You checked all the walls?" the warden asked, suspicious at how quickly the search had gone.

"Sir, there are only four," his Lieutenant. A bead of sweat hung perilously off one eyebrow.

"Did you look *behind* the walls?" The warden asked.

His lieutenant had to admit that they had not.

This second, more comprehensive search was equally fruitless. Taking apart the Tesseract's panels uncovered no evidence of cockroach infestation. The warden ground his teeth so hard that the rearmost molar on the bottom-right side fractured with a jolt of warm, seeping pain. Swallowing blood, he demanded that the Tesseract and all other Special Cells in that wing be sprayed for insects. He shuddered at the unforeseen cost blemishing the next expense report, but it had to be done.

And done it was, with industrious speed. Within a quarter hour, a troop of guards in white rubber suits and masks arrived to douse the room in mint-green gas. Cell by cell they proceeded down the hall, leaving the floor thickly carpeted with drifting poison. "I believe I understand now," his lieutenant remarked. "By addressing the cockroach as if it were real, we can convince the prisoner that it has been killed. I expect that will do the trick, sir. Very clever."

The warden said nothing. With one hand he stretched out his own mask and with the other he dug splinters of tooth from the raw socket in his gums. He thought he could taste a hint of something minty on his fingers but decided that it could only be good, a sterilization of all the little invaders in his mouth.

When all the cells had been sprayed, he commanded his men to do the same for his personal quarters and watched them do that too.

\* \* \*

The Kaiser's colorized photograph was twenty centimeters wide by twenty-eight centimeters tall. It sat behind glass in a frame of lacquered mahogany, custom-made at the warden's expense. The photo itself was the same image that hung in every government office, above the teacher's desk in every schoolhouse, and ideally, in the homes of every good citizen of the Brotherland. Perhaps between the children's portraits, where such a great man belonged.

The Kaiser was the epitome of male beauty. Though he had served the nation for decades now, his side-swept hair remained jet black, save for a handsome dusting of silver here and there. A full mustache capped an expression of thoughtful determination. According to the official report, his craniology was flawless. In his portrait, he sat at a thirty-degree angle to the camera, with his face turned towards the viewer, his cleft chin fearlessly upturned, and his blue eyes slightly squinted at the glorious future of the nation he saw edging over the horizon.

People would look at that picture and sleep soundly, knowing that whatever hardship befell them, it was only a step in the path their brave and ageless leader was pioneering towards prosperity. But as the warden now studied those eyes through the veil of twilight, the bottled air still humid with the antiseptic stink of poison, he could see only disappointment. Perhaps it was the lay of the shadows, but the Kaiser appeared to look slightly down at him, his confident grin now a subtle smirk.

His imminent visit bore down on the warden like an approaching tank—a great, blind, uncaring war engine that would reach its destination just as easily over him as with him. The warden could no longer sleep, for the churning of its treads had grown so loud.

He knew all too well the sorts of crimes that ushered citizens into his care. So many different names, but all

subspecies of failure. The Kaiser was a good father, and as the Kaiser said, a good father forgave his children but instructed with a fist. The warden had made this facility a machine, which meant that every component could be replaced. Another man would slot neatly into the office he'd so adoringly standardized. Through the same logic, the warden was interoperable with at least one of his own Special Rooms. He'd made sure there was something for everyone.

The warden knew in his heart that he needed no correction. His foundation was solid. And yet...

And yet cracks stemmed from cracks, didn't they?

The warden burst into tears. The mustache he'd nurtured in emulation of the Kaiser's was suddenly an unearned medal burning to come off. He tore at it until his skin ripped away in patches. He collapsed against the wall, smearing his sopping face against the glass, but that dire countenance on the wall refused to soften for his sacrifice of blood.

The evening deepened by degrees; shadows ran like wet ink. The Kaiser's smirk became a sneer.

*Men may shed tears, but they must never weep.*

The warden could hear the Kaiser's voice as clearly as if it thundered over the radio. It was a phrase he uttered often during his weekly speeches, each stentorian repetition twisting it deeper into the warden's psyche. He'd built himself up from such sayings; each of the Kaiser's wise words was a brick for constructing fine men.

*To despair is to surrender to the great enemy called life. The Kaiser's voice trembled through the glass like the echo of a distant roar. The warden cowered and listened. It is to admit that some things cannot be conquered. But this is not so. Through triumph of the will, all things are made mortal, from gods to populations. This is the secret road to perfection, my brothers, my children.*

*In the world, and in the self.*

*When men weep, they must also destroy.*

\* \* \*

Prisoner 3934 did not so much as scratch his ass when the warden hauled open the heavy door of the Tesseract. The prisoner must have grown acclimated to being manhandled, like a lady's dog adapted for the lap. He did bleat and awaken when the warden stamped his heel into the man's groin, however, and resisted feebly as the warden dragged him by the beard out into the hall.

"Where is it?" the warden demanded. He sat his bulk down upon the prisoner's chest and gripped an ear in each hand. With each word he twisted a fraction of an inch, pulling gristle taut against bone.

The prisoner winced. "Where is what, sir?"

"The crack in the wall," the warden hissed. "Where the cockroach comes in. Where is it?"

He twisted harder, felt skin tear and blood squirt through his fingers. The prisoner's howl echoed through the deserted corridor, slamming itself against the tiled walls in search of a sympathetic ear. But the Special Rooms were all soundproofed, and the night-watch had been instructed to go temporarily deaf. The Kaiser was still very far away; the warden was the only god present. And he was wrath.

The prisoner's howling slowly devolved into a high, giddy cackle.

"You don't know," the warden said. "No, you can't know, because it isn't real, is it? You're just a madman and you can't go mad because you're already mad. That's it, isn't it? Isn't it? Answer me!"

The prisoner held up a finger. Repeated beatings and malnutrition had warped the man into a simulacrum of his former self. "An incarceratory question, for a master gaoler: what do you build walls with? Brick, stone, steel bars? Obviously, but only because they're so soft, so easy to shape. The

strongest walls are made of something else. Do you know what?"

The warden was at a loss. He'd not come prepared to be questioned.

"I made a bomb to blow up the Kaiser's house," the prisoner said. "I wanted to set our country free, but all I blew up was brick and stone and steel, and so he threw me in your little white room. I am free of it now but look—I am still in prison. And even if I escaped your prison, I would still be in the Kaiser's little white room. Cages in cages make a circle. Do you understand? I'm afraid I may be raving."

The prisoner's words stuck like flies into the cobwebs in the warden's head. "What the hell are you talking about?"

The prisoner bared a smile. Teeth like rusted saws grinding. "Here is a great and terrible truth, clear as you'll hear anything," he rasped. "The strongest walls are invisible. Invisible and infinite, omnipresent yet unseen. We are all inside a cage of will, warden, and you more so than I, for though I will die in this place I am free within myself. But you, you are in a cage within a cage within a cage. His, yours, and *mine*."

His eyes suddenly narrowed and he stared past the warden. "Look!" he cried, stabbing a finger at the Tesseract.

The warden snapped his head around.

There, on the floor of the Tesseract, was a cockroach. A speck of black against infinite white, like a singularity that had devoured everything that was not itself. It waggled its antennae unconcernedly, perhaps rummaging the air for scents.

The warden stared, drool unspooling from his slack lip, the prisoner mentally discarded. Some vestigial predator switch activated in the absence of higher faculties. A simian roar freed itself through his mouth as a chemical squirt launched his body at the thing.

The cockroach was in motion before the warden left the prisoner's chest. It skittered sideways, past the doorframe, and disappeared as quickly as a brilliant idea. The warden landed inside the Tesseract in a feline crouch, his hands snapping shut around nothing, his mesh of fingers an empty cage. As ever, the walls of Room 57 were immaculate. There were no cracks into which the beast could have wriggled, and none appeared for all his screaming.

Behind him, a dribble of muddy laughter. He glanced back through the threshold of the Tesseract. The prisoner sprawled there, cackling at him.

"Bars within bars within bars, warden. Bars going down forever. You built them all yourself."

His laughing ripped like acid through the cognitive plumbing of the warden's mind, freeing desire to race towards reality without having to claw through reason. Tears poured down his cheeks and carved through his coating of sweat as he crawled towards the prisoner and took his head into his hands. The prisoner's remaining teeth bit deep into the ball of his thumb, but the pain was like a summary report delivered after the fact. He was locked up in a cell without windows or doors, and upon its walls were etched eight words:

*When men weep, they must also destroy.*

\* \* \*

The warden awoke with the sun the following morning feeling better rested than he could recall. He'd gone to bed with his mind too clear for worries to take root and sprout bad dreams. He made his bed, brewed his coffee, and watched the trees outside his window shake off the birds who'd come to roost in them. He put on a clean uniform, combed the remaining half of his moustache, and went to the door to salute the photo of the Kaiser. The image had not changed, but today the warden detected an approving wrinkle in the Kaiser's smile. It warmed the warden's heart better than his coffee.

He arrived at the Special Cells to find his lieutenant standing by outside the Tesseract while a janitor pushed a pool of blood around with a mop. Two guards were loading a body bag up onto a gurney. There was something oddly voyeuristic about walking in on a problem halfway fixed.

The lieutenant jumped when he saw the warden coming.

“Good morning,” the warden said merrily.

“Sir, there seems to have been an incident overnight,” his lieutenant began, only to be cut off by the warden’s proffered cap.

“Hold this would you?” he asked, shrugging out of his jacket and kicking off his boots. “These as well please. There’s a good mister.”

The lieutenant, burdened with all the warden’s clothing but his trousers and undershirt, tried and failed to look in control of his life. “Sir, I am very confused.”

The warden snapped his suspenders and filled his lungs with the sweet perfume of promise. The day lay spread-eagled before him, ready to be conquered. “Some things a man must do for himself,” he declared, and then turned about, strode into the Tesseract, and got down on his hands and knees. “Close the door, would you? I need to concentrate.”

The lieutenant seemed alarmed at this behavior, but he was no fool. He knew that if he interfered, he was likely to be punished himself. The warden’s orders were as rigid as iron bars. All he could do was as he was told and lock the door behind him.

**Evan Marcroft** is a speculative fiction writer from Sacramento California, currently operating out of Chicago with his wife. Evan uses his expensive degree in literary criticism to do menial data entry, and dreams of writing for video games, though he'll settle for literature instead. His works of science fiction, fantasy, and spine-curdling horror can be found in a variety of venues, such as Pseudopod, Strange Horizons, and Asimov's SF. Find a complete list of his published works at [evan-marcroft@spacesquare.com](mailto:evan-marcroft@spacesquare.com), or follow him on twitter at [@Evan\\_Marcroft](https://twitter.com/Evan_Marcroft).

# An Interview with Paul Tremblay

BETH TABLER

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Paul Tremblay has won the Bram Stoker Award, British Fantasy, and Massachusetts Book awards for his work in the horror field. His horror novels include *The Cabin at the End of the World*, *Disappearance at Devil's Rock*, *A Head Full of Ghosts*, *Survivor Song*, and the story collection *Growing Things*. He is also a crime novelist with the *Mark Genevich* series.

Paul was kind enough to sit down with me for the crossover issue of *Grimdark Magazine* and chat about the horror genre in general, the unreliable narrator in horror, and his newest novel, *Survivor Song*.

**[GdM] You have a master's degree in mathematics from the University of Vermont. How did you get from mathematics to writing? Are there creative similarities between the two?**

**[PT]** One of the last classes I took as an undergraduate was an English/Lit 101 kind of class to fulfill a humanities requirement. That class and Joyce Carol Oates's story "Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?" sparked a little pilot light of reading in me. A few months later, Lisa (my wife), bought me *The Stand* by Stephen King for my birthday, which ignited that pilot light into a flame in a furnace. (Um, work with me, here.) Yeah. Anyway, I went off to UVM, and in my free time I read all the King books I could get my hands on. From there I branched out to Peter Straub, Shirley

Jackson, Clive Barker, and more. After two years, I earned my master's by the skin of my teeth, but I also had an inexplicable itch to try writing some short stories.

Higher levels of mathematics require creativity. I never got there, though, in math. That said, I think my math background helps with some of the analytic aspects of writing, my constantly asking questions of the story and their characters, sort of like programming in a binary 0 or 1 language. Every choice you make in a story is a 0 or a 1 and it leads to the next choice and the next.

**[GdM] Two of your first novels, *The Little Sleep* and *No Sleep until Wonderland*, feature a narcoleptic detective, Mark Genevich. The stories have been described as hardboiled crime noir. What inspired these? Are you a fan of hardboiled crime stories like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler?**

**[PT]** While my first and foremost love is horror fiction, I am a fan of noir/hardboiled, particularly Raymond Chandler, but also Sara Gran, Will Christopher Baer, and Liz Hand's Cass Neary series. *The Little Sleep* started with an image of a big city PI in his office and a beautiful woman walks in—the stereotype of a detective story—but her case is bizarre. She holds up a hand and bandages are wrapped around the bases of her fingers. She says someone stole her fingers and replaced them with someone else's. When I first had the idea, I thought I would do a PK Dick kind of noir story, but didn't get anywhere with it. Later, when I researched sleep disorders (I had an acute sleep apnea that resulted in surgery) and stumbled across narcolepsy and hypnagogic hallucinations, I knew the woman's fingers weren't really stolen and my PI was dreaming. The books spooled out from there, with Mark himself being the ultimate mystery of the novels.

**[GdM] Who is P.T. Jones? How did you arrive at that nom de plume?**

**[PT]** That guy owes me money!

Stephen Graham Jones and I co-wrote a now out-of-print YA novel called *Floating Boy and the Girl Who Couldn't Fly*. It's SF/F or F/SF (depending upon how shoddy you think our science was). It was an absolute pleasure to work with Stephen, who is kind and generous and beyond talented and hard-working. At the end we decided to Brundlefly our names into P. T. Jones and let that guy take all the blame.

**[GdM] Your books have a way of leaving the reader unsettled. There is nothing straightforward about how the stories take place. Have you always been drawn to horror that leaves you questioning your interpretation of things?**

**[PT]** Thank you, and the short version: yes!

Memory, identity, and reality are more malleable than we like to think they are, and I'm fascinated by those cracks within things and within us; those liminal spaces our imagination and hope and fear try to fill. Existence itself is ultimately ambiguous, right? Or at least its end is: what happens when/after we die? You can think you know or believe you know, but you (me included) don't and can't really know. I think most horror stories poke and probe at that final unanswered question, even without having to directly ask it.

**[GdM] Your novels have a very intimate nature to storytelling. Rather than the grandiose big picture, you tell stories that look into a smaller section of humanity. It is a doctor trying to help pregnant women during an outbreak, two loving fathers facing tough choices, or a reality television show**

**of a family who is possibly descending into madness. What attracts you to such intimate stories versus writing something more all-encompassing?**

**[PT]** The all-encompassing thing intimidates me as a writer, frankly.

As a reader, I connect with more personal stories. Even for a math person like me, the numbers can become too big, too faceless, too numbing in scope. Focusing on one person or one household's story often grounds or humanizes an event. Or maybe put in another way, all our stories are small, and I mean that in an intimate, humbling, and beautiful way. The awe and horror of the world is how we're fated to be continually caught within the gears of events beyond our control. And, so, now what? No really, I want to know. What do you do now? What does one person do when they're caught in the middle of the maelstrom, whether the maelstrom be a super rabies outbreak, economic disaster, zealot-eyed home invaders, or even the cruel will of the universe. I find both horror and hope in those individual stories.

**[GdM]** **Two of your novels are being adapted to film, *Cabin at the End of the Woods*, and *Head Full of Ghosts*. How do you feel knowing that your stories are being made into another medium?**

**[PT]** When the novels were first optioned it was very exciting of course, and it remains exciting. But. Also. There's a lot of waiting. Most optioned things don't get made. Like mine won't get made. But I hope they do. Unless the films are bad, then ask me this question again. I joke (mostly). I'm cautiously optimistic. In the case of *A Head Full of Ghosts*, which is a book about influence and the horror genre, I'm excited to see what someone else's interpretation or twist on that story

would be. For *Cabin*, my hope is the prospective filmmaker(s) hew closer to the text, as I imagined the book as a stage play when writing it. I feel very protective of some of those characters.

**[GdM] Tell me about the Barretts from *Head Full of Ghosts*. Their predicament was scary as hell.**

**[PT]** It was my hope that readers would find the Barretts to be flawed but tragic and humane figures. The story is told from the point of view of the youngest daughter, Merry. She was eight years old when her parents allowed a reality TV crew to document an attempted exorcism of Marjorie, who is fourteen, and exhibiting symptoms of schizophrenia. John and Sarah were desperate enough economically to say yes to the show and the exorcism. The novel is a mix of family drama and ambiguous horror.

For so many of us, the childhood realization that your parents aren't in control, cannot always keep you safe, and do not know what is best for you in every situation is a horrifying but human discovery. I think that's partly why family drama mixes with horror so well.

**[GdM] In *Head Full of Ghosts*, there is a doubt, a psychological horror that pervades the novel. Do we know what we think we know? It keeps the readers off-balance. Are there other books that influenced you in this style of storytelling?**

**[PT]** I already mentioned the story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" and it's a brilliant ambiguous story dripping with dread and menace. Specific to *A Head Full of Ghosts*, two novels that inspired my main characters Marjorie and Merry were *Speed Queen* by Stewart O'Nan and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson. Both novels

dwell in a liminal space, but take very different approaches to the material.

Otherwise, I'm a sucker for novels/stories that skew and play with perspective and reality and ontology. Books like *House of Leaves* (Mark Danielewski) and *Come Closer* (Sara Gran).

**[GdM] You had a pandemic novel come out, *Survivor Song*, during an actual pandemic. What was that like? It had a lot of plot points in it that seemed almost prophetic.**

**[PT]** It was a strange experience to say the least. In the months leading up to the release I found myself apologizing to people who had read or would read the book, which was and is ludicrous, but that reflected the stew of fear and emotions I was dealing with, that all of us were dealing with.

Since I get asked a lot about the timing of finishing the book and pandemic: I turned in my final copyedits for the novel to my publisher in early November 2019. I think the parts that feel the most 'prophetic' are due to the information I gleaned from my sister, Erin. At the start of the novel, I wanted to learn what a local hospital's response to an epidemic might look like, and I leaned on Erin, who is a nurse at one of the largest hospitals in Boston. Her experience with a brief (in the United States) brush of prepping for a possible Ebola outbreak in 2014 made it into my book in the form of a text exchange between nurses and Dr. Ramola Sherman. As far as forecasting that the Trump administration would be woefully unequipped to handle a pandemic and there being rampant misinformation regarding my fictional virus, I don't think either was hard to predict. If anything, I underestimated the depths of ineptitude and how mainstream virus and now vaccine conspiracies would become.

**[GdM] You chose rabies as the disease vector in *Survivor Song*. The infected reminded me of the dog in Stephen King's *Cujo*. Did you do a lot of research into how rabies would affect the human body?**

**[PT]** Yes, though most of the research was a happy accident prior to my having an idea for the book. When I walk my dog, I tend to listen to audiobooks, and at least a year before I had the idea for *Survivor Song* I listened to/read *Rabid: A Cultural History of the World's Most Diabolical Virus* because, why not? I had no idea how awful and strange the virus was. All I knew (or thought I knew) was foaming mouths and giant needles jabbed into your stomach.

In July 2018 I had the what-if that sparked the novel. I can't tell you the what-if because it spoils the book. But, I wanted to write a somewhat realistic zombie story, or zombie-adjacent story, and rabies fit the bill. I then re-read the rabies book and found gobs of rabies info online as well. Yes, I said 'gobs.'

**[GdM] Natalie and Ramola have an authenticity to their characters. You have a switching point of view between the two of them. However, most of Natalie's character is shown through her recordings to her unborn child. Why did you choose to express Natalie's character this way?**

**[PT]** Thank you. I wanted the bulk of the story to be from Ramola's point of view as I ultimately ask her character the most difficult questions of the book. I wanted to have some of Natalie's voice and POV in there as well, but I didn't want the two characters swapping chapters. I also didn't want the responsibility of telling the readers what it felt like to be eight and a half months pregnant. I obviously don't have any experience with that. Natalie's recordings for her child

aren't about what is happening to her in the moment but are instead these intimate moments between a mother/parent and a child they haven't met yet. I hoped the weight and import of those one-sided conversations would be meaningful to her character but also build suspense in a way, too.

**[GdM] Natalie and Ramola's story takes place in real-time, over 8 hours. What were the challenges of writing in this type of time frame?**

**[PT]** The most challenging part was attempting to make each moment realistic and (hopefully) plausible, while balancing the action of the story with more quiet, reflective times. Also, trying (and likely failing) to keep the flashbacking to a minimum. Though when I did have flashbacks I wanted to keep them purely relevant to the moment in the story.

Most of the writing for me is a feel thing, honestly. I really don't know what the hell I'm doing most of the time (don't tell anyone), but I trust when it feels right.

**[GdM] Finally, what are you reading right now? Have you read anything lately that was amazing?**

**[PT]** I am currently listening to the audiobook *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty* by Patrick Radden Keefe. It's about the Sackler family and the billions they've made in pharmaceuticals, most recently with creating and distributing and marketing Oxycontin. It's harrowing, infuriating stuff. I'm also reading *Twilight Zone* by Nona Fernandez, a novel about the trauma of living in post-Pinochet Chile and it's also quite harrowing. Later this summer, keep an eye out for *Build Your House Around My Body* by Violet Kupersmith. An epic, decade-hopping ghost story in Vietnam. My favorite of 2021 so far.

# The Jewels of the Mermaids

MARISCA PICHETTE

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Jan left his cottage early to walk down to the beach. He liked to get there right after the boat from the Mainland arrived, pick up the mail and head back to his cottage to sort it with a cup of black tea in his hand. He crossed his arms against the cold and fought the wind. With every breath he tasted the sea.

The sky this morning was overcast. Jan studied the clouds, flirting with the hope that they might stay through the day and into the night. A darkened night was likely on everyone's mind in Stone. As if, by hoping together, they could make it true.

Jan's boots ground against gravel as he approached the docks and the dark sea beyond. He could just make out the mermaids perched on the rocks. Their distant forms were amorphous, layers of shadow as yet untouched by dawn. Around them the water was calm, influenced by their presence. No white caps formed on the dark waters.

Jan hunched his shoulders and turned toward the Mainland boat, its hull knocking persistently against the dock as its cargo was unloaded.

Gen saw him coming and hefted the mail parcel. He was a freeman, one of the many who visited Stone to bring provisions and building supplies when the Mainland saw fit to offer them anything. Sometimes months passed before new lumber arrived to patch up the holes in the cottages. And every month lost meant

more replacements were needed, more new residents unloaded on the pier to face a sentence on Stone.

Jan's boots thudded along the dock planks. He tried not to think about the dark water below. He took the bag of mail from Gen. It was unsurprisingly light.

"How was the crossing?" Jan asked.

Gen scratched his chin. Many of the freeman declined to speak to Stoners, treating them like scarecrows erected only to keep the crows at bay and protect the harvest. Gen was different. He had served time on Stone, and survived to return to life on the Mainland, a freeman.

"Smooth," he said, meeting Jan's eyes. His tone betrayed the unease Jan felt. They looked together out at the mist... and the rocks.

"Forecast?" Jan asked.

Gen crossed his arms, his feet planted beneath his hips. "Dunno. Could hold, could clear."

Jan shouldered the mail and thanked Gen before making his grateful way back to shore. But the land was only a temporary relief. If the sky cleared tonight, there would be no safe place on Stone.

\* \* \*

Back at his cottage, Jan emptied the mailbag onto his table. He poured his tea and sat sorting letters and parcels by name. Before his conviction, he had served as postmaster in a small town on the southern coast of the Mainland. Life was quiet; the sea never brought any trouble. Jan had known that Stone kept the mermaids appeased, and in return they calmed the waves. He'd never given it much thought until he was a Stoner.

He'd been on the island for six months. He would be here for eighteen more, if he survived to see the end of his sentence.

Jan nursed his cup and the sorting, but he finished both in twenty minutes. There was hardly any mail today. There never was on the day before a full moon.

As he came to the last piece—a postcard with its edges bent due to poor handling—he stiffened. It was addressed to Karl Hess.

Karl had died two months ago.

Jan rubbed his thumb across the address, ink already smeared by another careless thumb.

*Karl banged his fists on Jan's door, shouting to be let in as dusk descended. Jan tried to block out the noise, soon enough swallowed by another sound.*

Jan threw the postcard into the fire. Soon enough the person who sent the card would hear of Karl's death, if they hadn't already.

Jan sat back, the slow light of dawn sneaking between the reinforced shutters over his windows. Golden beams crisscrossed the floor, reminding him of the prison bars that had preceded his transfer to Stone. It was a trade that made no pretense at fairness. On Stone, he could move around, live an almost normal life for most of the year. On the Mainland he would have been confined to a cell, with muck to eat and no home of his own.

Yet he would have been safe there.

At eight o'clock, Jan opened the shutters and removed the bars from his door.

Lessie was first to visit. Her left hand was missing three fingers, a present from the policemen who arrested her after she murdered her husband. Jan took two letters from the table and passed them into her mangled grasp.

"Thank you," Lessie whispered. She never spoke loudly, not on the day before a full moon. As if whispering would hide her from what was to come.

As Lessie passed out into the lightening day, Burt strode in. He was tall, but thin as the postcard Jan handed him.

"Haven't replaced your shutters, Jan?" Burt asked, jerking his head towards Jan's battered windows.

Jan shook his head. "Didn't get any of the new lumber. Only kindling was left by the time I got to the dock."

Burt shook his head and tapped the postcard to his stubbly chin. *Arson*, Jan recalled. That was Burt's conviction.

"I've got mine double-wide for tonight. Best of luck."

With that, Burt left. In the lull that followed, Jan stared at his hands. His nails were clean, well kept. He tried to look respectable. He'd always set an example for his community, right up until the day the police came for him. He hadn't expected them to find out about the fraud. He hadn't expected the penalty to be so harsh.

"Anything for me?" Kla asked, jerking Jan from his thoughts. He looked up at her aged face, rice paper skin folded in wrinkles around her eyes. Jan scanned his table and handed her a flimsy postcard. She had some family on the Mainland, but they were old and dying off by the day. She took the postcard and shuffled out as silently as she had entered.

Before Kla was fully gone, Hogart appeared in the doorway. He stood aside as the old woman left, then cast a quick glance at Jan's shutters as he entered the cottage. "Will they hold tonight?"

Jan picked up the small stack of letters addressed to Hogart. "Yes," he said, though he wasn't sure. Last month had been unmatched in fury, and he'd had to repair three hinges. If only he'd gotten more lumber.

Hogart took his mail from Jan's outstretched hand and thumbed through it in sharp strokes. *Battery of a police officer*, Jan recalled. Hogart had only recently been transferred to Stone, having served two years in prison on the Mainland. Last month had been his first on Stone.

"We need more metal from the Mainland. That'll hold them back."

“Metal rusts,” Jan said, rearranging the mail. As if the Mainland would ever waste metal on Stone, anyway.

No, they sent only enough to keep some Stoners alive. Only enough to carry to the next hunt.

\* \* \*

At four o'clock Jan closed and bolted his shop door, sliding the three beams through the brackets. He closed and bolted his shutters as well, and put the kettle on the stove.

He waited for the sun to set.

The clouds had cleared off around two o'clock, and only one person had come to collect mail after that. Everyone in Stone waited in their homes, hoping their latches were strong enough to keep the mermaids out, to send them to someone else's door.

*Not mermaids*, Jan thought. *Not tonight*.

Come six o'clock, the sun set. Jan sat by the fire, cup in hand, and listened to the untidy rhythm of his breath. And then the crying began.

The first sounded almost like a child, a long sob full of anguish. The second changed. Something between a howl and a woman's operatic note shook the night, and as Jan closed his eyes, his pulse rising, his breathes ragged as sweat collected between his shoulderblades. Above the rapid beating of his heart, he heard slashes out at sea. Wailing, splashing—silence.

He waited. The crying started again, changed anew. Any semblance of humanity had been torn away. Feral howls ripped through the night rising as they came closer.

Jan couldn't keep his gaze from straying to the door, his scratched shutters rattling in repaired hinges. They were coming. They had changed, and they were coming.

Jan had seen them before, on nights when the moon illuminated the sea and the mermaids changed.

When his shutters broke he saw the creatures up close, their faces elongated into snouts, black nails on their fingers. Their fish tails were replaced with grotesque legs, too long for their bodies, froglike and clawed, and covered in matted hair soaked with ocean water.

Last month the creatures had thrown themselves against Jan's cottage. Screeches and scratches, too much weight up against the wind-worn wood. Jan remembered the sound that shattered his paralysis, wood snapping and glass splintering when they broke through at last. Claws lashing the air, spraying him with sand and icy sea foam.

He'd managed to block them by upending the table and slamming it against the breach, but the sight of their pale, bloated faces refused to leave him. Yellowed teeth too long for their jaws to contain, and the horrible, rotting smell of the tide.

That night, they took Gret. Hogart arrived from the Mainland to replace her the next day.

Now as he sat by the fire, tea growing cold in his hands, Jan saw them in his mind as they ran between the cottages, hunting. The howls shifted to growls, claws and hands thudding over the ground.

When Stone was first settled, the inhabitants wondered about the mermaids on the rocks who never seemed to eat. But they did eat. Once a month, they changed.

The Mainland evacuated the initial settlers, but then the waves came, hammering the shore and drowning the boats. And so Stone was settled anew. For the price of one body each month, the Mainland enjoyed a calm sea, carefully shepherded by the mermaids.

Outside, wood smashed. Jan stiffened as screams joined with the snarls, too close to be anyone but one of his close neighbors.

Whose shutters were too weak? Whose door failed to hold?

The screams faded as the victim was dragged out of the village, back to the sea.

Jan sat by the fire until dawn, unable to shut his eyes.

\* \* \*

In the morning Jan unlatched his shutters and unbarred the door. He stepped out into the mist.

Across from him other Stoners emerged, hazy faces in the imperfect light. They looked at each other, then at the broken door of Kla's cottage, the torn-up earth leading down to the sea. The old woman would receive no more postcards. Kla's sentence had been carried out.

Jan joined his neighbors in salvaging wood and stone from Kla's ruined cottage, stepping around her spare furnishings. He took two armloads of lumber and a new chair. There were fresh scratches along its back. He covered them with a pillowcase.

He locked his new finds in his cottage. With the new lumber he could repair his shutters and be ready for next month.

When Jan walked down to the dock to collect the mail, the mist was lifting. He could see the mermaids clearly, perched on their rocks, the sea obediently calm around them. As he drew near, he couldn't help but focus on their delicate hands, changed from the claws that had left deep grooves in his new chair.

The mermaids were stringing together necklaces on strands of seaweed, their poses as serene as the water around them.

Even from the shore, Jan could see the pale beads. They appeared every morning after a full moon, when the mermaids adorned themselves anew, their payment collected.

Each bead was a single vertebra, picked clean and gleaming in the light of the rising sun.

**Marisca Pichette** is a bisexual author of speculative fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. She earned her BA from Mount Holyoke College and MFA from Stonecoast. Her work has been published in *PseudoPod*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Apparition Lit*, *Room*, *Channel*, and *The NoSleep Podcast*, among others. Her debut novel, *Broken*, is forthcoming in Spring 2022 with Heroic Books. A lover of moss and monsters, she lives in Western Massachusetts. She is on Twitter as @MariscaPichette.

# The Case for Conflict

SADIE HARTMAN

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In discussions about the genres of horror, science fiction, and fantasy, and the distinctions that set them apart, it becomes abundantly clear that these three genres are also easily blended together. However, posting about these three genres on social media always brings out passionate genre buffs who rarely stray from their preferred genre of choice. The communities surrounding horror, science fiction, and fantasy seem to build a strong presence, especially noticeable on Twitter, and the three “kingdoms” rarely intersect.

Except for grimdark fans. grimdark lovers frequently play quite nicely in the sandbox of horror. More on this later.

Oh! And science fiction and fantasy are usually shelved together in book stores (which makes zero sense to me since they each have massive catalogs, why would stores try to smoosh them together?). Have science fiction and fantasy formed an alliance and made horror the odd one out?

At a book signing for *Wanderers* by Chuck Wendig at The Elliot Bay Book Store in Seattle, I asked him if there was any fandom crossover between his Star Wars books and his other books?

The short answer was “No.”

The longer answer was basically “Sometimes.”

I thought about this for a long time because I stan Chuck Wendig but I’m not going to read Star Wars. I just don’t have any interest in it, and it’s not because I don’t love Star Wars, I do. And it’s not because I don’t

love Wendig's writing, I do. I think the real issue for me is the genre: science fiction.

All that world-building.

Those hard to pronounce names.

Space itself.

All the natural, scientific laws of this doohickey and that gizmo—everything has to be explained and demonstrated, and oftentimes I'm still confused!

\*makes a face\*

These are pretty much the same complaints I have about fantasy. The learning curve can be so intense! Recently I convinced my husband to watch *Game of Thrones* with me on HBO Max.

A re-watch for me since I've already watched the series in its entirety and read the whole book series. (Where's *Winds of Winter*, George?)

But there is so much up-front investment to gain access to this story! There's a huge cast with an intricately plotted storyline, tons of backstory and history; it's very, very complicated, especially for newcomers. Fans of the show who had read the books have no idea how much of an advantage they had in understanding what was going on in season one. Book nerds, like me, who grew up reading high fantasy, are accustomed to remembering details, character relationships, and such... but it's a lot of work. My poor husband is intrigued by the basic premise of all these kingdoms vying for the throne, but I often have to pause the show and act as his personal tour guide through Westeros.

I remember a similar experience I had with Robin Hobb. The notion of becoming a fan of Hobb's books is daunting.

It's not just one series of books, but five! Fantasy fans love this stuff: Buying into a whole mythos and investing time in an entire universe. Multiple worlds, a large cast of characters, and hidden Easter eggs

hidden throughout the books for super-nerds who have been there since book one.

I know the wanderlust well. I'm a huge fan of C. S. Lewis and Tolkien, so I'm familiar with being bitten by that bug, that sense of going on a long, literary journey; it's very appealing for some.

Nowadays though, I just don't have the time to wander off into the weeds with a huge fantasy series. The mental labor it requires is not conducive to my lifestyle. As a freelance writer of book reviews for several platforms, I need books that are a "one and done," books that welcome me into the story and whisk me away to some horribly dark place where I can feel the edges of reality slip away as the pages fly, but also promise me a safe return and an ending to the journey so I can move on to the next.

However.

One book series ruined my reading preferences for the rest of my life. A series that took the elements of fantasy and horror and even a little science fiction and Western and created something that set the standard for everything to come after it. Stephen King's *The Dark Tower Series*.

The *Dark Tower* manages to blend all of the major genres effortlessly. It's the perfect example of how an author can blend the most appealing aspects of all the different genres into one epic saga. It works because King is a character-driven storyteller. The emphasis is on the people of Mid-World. There's not a lot of exposition spent on world-building. The entire first book, *The Gunslinger*, revolves around its central character, Roland Deschain. The simplistic narrative reads very much like a Western as Deschain pursues the elusive Man in Black across what King calls "the desert."

Even though the tale takes place in a world different than our own, everything is familiar—there's nothing to learn except some subtle indicators that this is a

parallel universe of some sort. The most important thing King does to equip his readers for this wild adventure is to abide by the characteristic laws of all four genres:

Science fiction—the genre of natural laws.

Fantasy—the genre of new laws.

Horror—the genre of no laws.

Western—the genre of vigilante laws.

And where there are laws, there is conflict—the central and underlying unifying element for any story in any genre.

Blending any genre with horror creates accessibility that might not have been there before. Horror is a genre defined by the provocation of emotion. The only genre that is also an emotion. In very basic terms, fantasy emphasizes the fantastical. Science fiction, the science. Horror... well, the horror. Our horror. What frightens us.

It's this call to action that gets readers invested in the story. If there's real concern or worry for the lives of fictional characters, anything is possible but you can count on conflict.

Circle back to grimdark.

Grimdark is a subgenre of SFF that is characterized or identified by its dark, bleak, and oftentimes, violent nature and its moral ambiguity. So of course it comfortably shares space with horror. In my mind, Joe Abercrombie is synonymous with grimdark.

“People love to see death. It reminds them that however mean, however low, however horrible their lives become... at least they have one.”

— Joe Abercrombie

And this quote is where I'll leave you... alone... with your dark thoughts about death, murder, monsters—the human kind or otherwise, laws that were made to be broken.

In which kingdom do you reside? Horror, fantasy, science fiction or...

...do you have no kingdom?

**Sadie Hartmann** aka Mother Horror reviews horror for *Cemetery Dance* and *SCREAM Magazine*. She is the co-owner of the horror fiction subscription company, Night Worms. She lives in Tacoma, WA with her husband of 20+ years where they enjoy perfect weather, street tacos and hanging out with their 3 kids. They have a Frenchie named Owen.

# The Tubes

JEREMY C. SHIPP

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We all have moments like this, don't we? When you're at a condo-warming party, sipping a soft Saint-Émilion red, while the host waxes poetic about the future of financial regulation in the European Union, and suddenly, out of the corner of your eye, you see your Uncle Hugo speeding headfirst through the glass reaper tube. He's almost indistinguishable from every other body you see carried in the endless green current. But for a moment at least, you're sure that this shriveled, naked corpse belongs to a man you thought you loved.

Martin places a hand on my shoulder, shattering my thoughts. "What do you think, Tony?" he says.

"I think you're right," I say.

The host grins and turns away from me, off to find his next victim. He'll talk anyone's ear off and then stomp it into the ground.

I head in the opposite direction and find Glen on the other side of the room.

"You shouldn't let him trap you like that," Glen says, smirking and handing me his empty wine glass.

"I was being polite," I say.

"Next time, tell him you need to call the hospital and walk away. It's as easy as that."

I place our wine glasses on the table beside us. "Are you ready to go?"

"I was ready half an hour ago."

While Glen visits the restroom before we leave, I wait in the foyer. A couple of children sit on the marble medallion, looking at a vertical reaper that travels

through the floor and ceiling. The green liquid and the bodies flow upward.

"Weiner or boobs?" the boy says. "Come on. Weiner or boobs?"

"Weiner," the girl says.

The children stare at the tube in silence, and I stare with them. I imagine my uncle alive in the tube, holding his breath, scratching at the glass with gray fingers. Of course, no living person is ever dumped into the tubes, so I don't know why I would imagine such a thing.

I reach into my pocket and find the pill that I always keep on my person. I roll the pill between my thumb and my index finger.

After a long while, a body speeds by through the tube.

"Ha, it was boobs," the boy says, pointing at the girl's face. "You lose."

"Nuh-uh." She pushes the boy's hand away. "I saw a wiener!"

"It was boobs!"

The girl stands up and heads toward the living room. When she notices me, she stops and gives me a pleading look.

"It was boobs," I say.

"Told you," the boy says.

I feel sorry for the little girl, but what can I do.

Rules are rules.

\* \* \*

Glen and I relax in the sunroom, sitting together on a hand-carved chaise longue. I lean back against him and he wraps his arms around me. With his index finger, he draws spirals on my open palm. Our Bichon Frisé, Marshmallow, snores on his walnut doggy bed at our feet.

"I want to learn to paint," Glen says. "Still life or old barns."

"Really?" I say.

And this might be the last word I'll ever speak to Glen, because in the next moment, there are men in white surrounding us with their weapons drawn. The fortress insignias on their chests glimmer in the sunlight.

I fully expect them to say my name.

"Glen Caverly," one of them says. "You have relinquished yourself of all privileges, rights and protections under the law. Your vessel is now the property of the state."

"This is bullshit!" Glen says.

The men in white pull me off of the chaise and throw me on the floor. They handcuff Glen.

"Stop," I say.

They drag Glen toward the door. He gives me a pleading look.

I can feel my blood steaming, boiling, erupting. I want to kick and punch and bite and scream. But all I can manage is to stand up, and by the time I'm upright, the men are gone.

Glen is gone.

I stand there and watch as Marshmallow skitters out the now wide-open sunroom door. The dog could die out there all alone.

"Wait," I say, but I can't hear my own voice.

Minutes later, I call my mother, because I don't know who else to turn to.

"They took him," I say. "They took Glen."

"Who?" she says.

"They took him to the fortress."

"Oh my god, Tony. I'm so sorry. Glen always seemed like such a nice man."

"He is."

My mother sighs a burst of static. I already know what she's going to say, so I hang up.

I walk outside and call for Marshmallow. He doesn't return.

Back in the living room, I sit on a splat-back side chair, looking at the vertical reaper tube that almost touches the floor. I reach into my pocket. As the bodies speed by, I roll the pill between my thumb and my index finger.

I know what I should be feeling. I should feel betrayed by Glen. He engaged in subversive acts and defied the state. I'll never know exactly what he did.

As I gaze into the reaper tube, I should feel happy that I'm a living, breathing citizen who exists outside the glass. I may have traitorous blood. I may have lost an uncle and a cousin to the fortress, but at least I'm not a shriveled-up thing drifting aimlessly through the city.

This is what I'm supposed to feel, but all I want is to hold Glen again. I can picture him in the fortress. He's crying. He's rubbing his face, the way he always does when he's anxious or afraid. He's cut and burned and bruised.

They'll mutilate him until he sheds his humanity and reveals the treasonous demon within.

But I know Glen. I know him better than any torturer ever could.

\* \* \*

We all have moments like this, don't we? When you're driving your Aston Martin on the 215, snacking on organic almonds while the radio host waxes philosophical about the need for welfare conditionality. And suddenly, out of nowhere, you make a sharp turn toward the median. Tires screech. You smash headfirst into a reaper tube. A maw of jagged glass spews out a river of formaldehyde. And the naked, gray corpses spill onto the freeway, tumbling through the stalled traffic.

All the while, I sit with my hand in my pocket.

The bodies swim over my windshield, and sometimes in their faces I see Uncle Herman or my cousin Eva or Glen. Sometimes I see myself.

I hear sirens. They shriek louder with every passing second.

The problem isn't that I smashed my car into a reaper. The problem is that I did this on purpose. And they'll know.

I reach into my pocket. I roll the pill between my fingers. I tried to fight it, but I always knew I'd end up a traitor. It's in my blood. It's in my heart.

I pop the pill and think of Glen and that silly smirk of his.

If I'm lucky, they won't reach me in time to bring me back.

**Jeremy C. Shipp** is the Bram Stoker and Shirley Jackson Award-nominated author of *The Atrocities*, *Bedfellow*, and *Cursed*. Their shorter tales have appeared in over 60 publications, including *Cemetery Dance* and *Apex Magazine*. Jeremy lives in Southern California in a tiny, moderately haunted farmhouse. Their twitter handle is @JeremyCShipp.

# An Interview with Graham Masterton

BETH TABLER

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Graham Masterton, known to be one of the lions of the horror genre and one of its most celebrated novelists, is also one of its most prolific writers, with over 40 novels spanning multiple genres. He received the lifetime achievement award from the Horror Writers' Association in 2019 for his work in the genre.

I had the immense honor of having a chat with the horror legend about his writing, sex-help novels, what he is working on now, and the horror genre in general.

**[GdM] Before becoming a novelist, you were a journalist for a few years. Journalism requires a different type of approach to presenting the reader with an idea or situation. There is also a lot of overlap between the two. Could you tell me a bit about what you learned as a reporter and how that has affected your writing later in your career?**

**[GM]** Most of my education was at Whitgift School in Croydon which was an all-boys school. My parents moved and I was supposed to complete my sixth-form education at a mixed grammar school in Crawley. Unfortunately (or fortunately as it turned out in terms of my career) I lost all interest in Shakespeare and Byron and Wordsworth and concentrated all my studies on Jane and Jill and Charmienne. After two terms I was asked to leave. After a short spell as a greengrocer I was offered a job as a junior reporter on the *Crawley*

*Observer* newspaper. I was lucky that in those days local papers were staffed by semi-retired Fleet Street reporters who really knew their stuff, and so I was taught all the rudiments of writing a good news story, as well as layout and typography. The most important lesson I learned as a news reporter, though, I learned on my very first day. I was sent to interview a woman about her husband's cycling trophies (not exactly front-page news) but after she had told me all about them and I was about to leave, she said, 'He beats me.' I went back into her living-room with her and for an hour she poured out the whole story of her husband's abuse... how he hit her if she argued with him, how he threw his dinner onto the kitchen floor if it wasn't what he wanted to eat, how he would rape her in the middle of the night when she was asleep. She had told her mother and her sisters, but they had simply told her that it was her fault for marrying him. There was little that I could do for her except to suggest that she go to her doctor and social services. But as I cycled away that day, I felt like Saul on the way to Damascus. I had learned in that one morning that everybody is bursting to tell you their story, especially if they are caught in a distressing situation from which they feel they can't escape, and if you listen sympathetically they will tell you everything... right down to the most intimate details. Obviously my horror novels are based on fantasy and mythology, but I still base my characters on real people in ordinary situations... characters who have their own mundane problems like abusive marriages or debt or stress in their careers, apart from having to face up to demons and obnoxious spirits and other mythological perils. I believe that helps to make my novels more realistic and more frightening. The other important thing I learned as a reporter was how to join two contrasting or even conflicting ideas together to come up with an interesting story. As a reporter, if you witness a car crash, you don't just

describe the crash and any injuries that might result, you ask how and why did it happen, and who were the people involved.

**[GdM] You are a sex instruction manual writer, 29 so far. I read that you got into that through writing a column for *Mayfair*, then through *Penthouse* magazine. I would love to know how you got from *Mayfair* to *Penthouse* and then on to writing the instruction manuals. And what continued to draw you to write on different topics in the genre?**

**[GM]** After four years training on the *Crawley Observer* I wrote a very arrogant letter to the newly-launched *Mayfair* magazine, and they were so impressed by my arrogance that they gave me the job of deputy editor. The staff included the publisher, the editor, me, the secretary, and the publisher's dog. Our office was the size of a wardrobe. But I was given free rein to write features and to organize fashion shoots and I also had the arduous job of going to the photographers' studios and interviewing the girls who appeared in the centre-spread every month. Most men who casually visited the studios would simply gawp at the girls, but I always got to talk to them in the same way that I had talked to that woman whose husband had abused her. They told me just as much: about their boyfriends, about their ambitions, about why they had decided to pose nude, about their sex lives. I just listened and nodded and took it all in. At that time *Penthouse* was outselling *Mayfair* by a considerable number of copies and one of its most attractive features was the famous *Penthouse* readers' letters, which were all very frank accounts of sexual encounters. I suggested that we start a regular column of verbatim interviews with girls about their sex lives... what they wanted and how they went about getting it. I called it 'Quest.' Of course I wrote all the girls' responses myself, but they were

based very closely on the personal stories that had been given to me by our models, so they were realistic and not misleading, and hopefully quite informative too. After three years at *Mayfair* I had an argument with the editor and simply walked out. I phoned the editor of *Penthouse*, and he gave me a job as deputy editor the following week, for twice the pay. At that time, *Penthouse* had just started publishing an American edition, and so I was sent to New York fairly regularly to help out. While I was there I met Howard Kaminsky from Warner Paperback Library (who happened to be the cousin of Mel Brooks, whose real name is Mel Kaminsky). He suggested I write an anecdotal sex instruction book and so he commissioned me to write *How A Woman Loves To Be Loved*. I wrote it under the nom-de-plume 'Angel Smith' and there was a photograph of Angel on the cover in a wet T-shirt. It was hugely successful, since most sex books those days were very medical. The only trouble was that Angel received a lot of fan mail. One letter included a condom which the sender said he had rolled on and off himself as a tribute to Angel. After that I insisted on writing sex books under my own name. The first was *How To Drive Your Man Wild In Bed*, published by Signet, and it sold half a million copies in six months. For various personal reasons I eventually resigned from *Penthouse* but my sex books were easily making enough money for me to live on. Sex is a varied and interesting subject, and I got to know many of its most famous (or notorious) practitioners. I became friends with Xaviera Hollander, the Happy Hooker, and with the late Monique von Cleef, the dominatrix, and I learned a lot from them about what men wanted and how women could give it to them, and vice versa. Eventually, though, the market became flooded with similar books, and it was time to move on.

**[GdM] You have had a hand in writing many types of novels. You have an extensive repertoire of horror stories. But you are also a prolific crime novelist and an author of non-fiction sex instruction manuals. Is the creative process different for each of these types of books?**

**[GM]** Obviously the research is very different for each type of book. I try to make the characters and the background as believable as possible, which is why I usually set my stories in real locations, rather than invented ones. You can visit almost all of the locations that you read about in my books, including pubs and restaurants. I don't have a 'Castle Rock' for example, although I have no criticism of Stephen King. My horror novel *The Children God Forgot* is set in Peckham, East London, which I know well; and my crime series featuring Detective Superintendent Katie Maguire of the Cork Gardai was based closely on my experience of living in Cork for a few years. In the same way my horror novels set in various American cities are all based on personal observation—like *The Manitou* in New York and *Walkers* in Milwaukee and a new horror novel I have just finished, *The Soul Stealer*, set in Hollywood. Essentially, though, the creative process is much the same. The story has to grab the reader from the very first line, the writing has to be tight and clear, and the dialogue has to be believable. It is important for the characters to sound as if they know what they're talking about, and in the case of the Katie Maguire novels I used a certain amount of Cork slang, although not as much as the real Corkonians use, or nobody would have understood a word of it. 'That langer would break your melt' (that dick would test your patience to breaking point); or 'That's the berries' (that's excellent.)

**[GdM] As a reader, which type of horror resonates the most with you? Has there ever been a horror**

**novel that you have had to put down for a bit because it was just too intense? And if so, why?**

**[GM]** I don't read horror fiction. In fact I read almost no fiction at all. I regret it, because I used to enjoy it a great deal, and I learned a lot about developing a direct and involving style from American writers like Herman Wouk (*The Caine Mutiny*, for example) and Nelson Algren (*The Man With The Golden Arm*). One of the reasons I don't read fiction is because I am severely critical of my own writing, and I am too quick to pick holes in other authors' fiction. I think the day I stopped reading fiction was when I was reading a Len Deighton novel and realized that I knew he was hungry and was rushing to finish the chapter so that he could go for his lunch.

**[GdM] When you create a horror scene, how do you know where the tipping point is when a scene's horror is too much? Or does such a place exist?**

**[GM]** I thought long and hard before writing *The Children God Forgot* because of its controversial subject matter, and to be honest I wasn't sure that any publisher would touch it. In the end, though, I knew I had to write it even if it never saw the light of day. But times have changed, and my publishers Head of Zeus are open-minded and advanced in their thinking and they got behind it regardless. When you consider the atrocities that are committed in real life, there is nothing that you could possibly write in fiction that could come close. I regularly visit towns in Poland where, during the war, scores of innocent children were taken away and gassed. You can't write anything worse than that. I know that some people prefer 'cosy crime' like Agatha Christie stories in which the most dreadful thing that happens is that the bishop gets beaten to death with a badger in the bathroom. But in reality people get raped

and tortured and chopped into bits, and left in builders' bags in a forest somewhere. These killings affect detectives, too, deeply. They don't sit calmly puffing a pipe in Baker Street or putting on a hairnet when they go to bed like Hercule Poirot. They suffer terrible PTSD. Obviously I try to write entertaining stories, but I believe in representing the horrors of this world as they really are.

**[GdM] How has the release pacing of horror novels changed since the introduction of ebooks?**

**[GM]** Ebooks have changed my whole career as a horror writer. They have made it possible for almost my entire backlist to be made available, whereas it is very doubtful that so many of them would have been re-issued if it had been necessary to reprint them on paper and store them in warehouses. I seem to be writing horror novels at a fair lick now. I sometimes think that readers don't appreciate that a book that takes them three days to read can take three months or more to write. Their appetites are voracious!

**[GdM] Can you tell me a bit about the Graham Masterton Written In Prison Award (Nagroda Grahama Mastertona W Wiezieniu Pisane). How did that come about, and how did you end up working with Polish writer Joanna Opiat-Bojarska?**

**[GM]** I first had the idea for the Graham Masterton Written In Prison Award five years ago when I was taken to Wołów maximum security prison near Wrocław to talk to the inmates. They were plainly so interested in writing and reading that when I was having lunch with the prison director, Robert Kuchera, afterwards I suggested that it might be therapeutic for them to write short stories for a small prize. Robert is very enthusiastic about rehabilitation and he got

behind the idea immediately. In the first year we received more than 120 entries and even last year with Covid we received nearly 100. It is open to the inmates of every penal institution in Poland and the prizes (DVD players) are now financed by the Polish Prison Service although I used to pay for them myself. Some of the stories are crime thrillers, some are fantasies, but at their core almost all of them have some element of personal experience... pain, and regret, and sadness. I was unable to go to Poland last year to present the prizes in person but I am hoping to go back in October. Joanna Opiat-Bojarska I have yet to meet, because of Covid. She volunteered to help by selecting the best 20 stories, which are then translated and sent to me to pick the 10 winners. The best story receives a brass plaque, and the runners-up receive certificates, as well as prizes. I write a personal letter to every entrant and every entrant receives a souvenir pen.

**[GdM] Your first horror novel, *The Manitou*, came out in 1976, and most recently, *The Children God Forgot* in 2021. How have things changed in the horror industry?**

**[GM]** Things have changed enormously, especially in the horror writing business. When I published *The Manitou* there were very few horror novels on offer on the mass market, but these days there is a regular flood. It is partly because the internet has made communication so much simpler, and partly because social attitudes towards horror have become much more relaxed.

**[GdM] Can you tell me a bit about your newest novel, *The Children God Forgot*? For me, it was a book that is difficult to categorize in any subset of the horror genre. It has a bit of everything in it.**

**[GM]** *The Children God Forgot* is a novel that examines different attitudes towards abortion. On one hand there are people who believe that every life is sacred, from the moment of conception. On the other hand there are people who believe that a woman is entitled to seek a termination if she has become pregnant through rape or incest, or whose foetus has such defects that it is non-viable. It is a book about the conflict between religion and superstition and progressive feminism. I think you can understand why I ummed and aahed a bit before I wrote it. Not to mention the fact that it describes blocked-up sewers.

**[GdM]** *The Children God Forgot*, is a follow-up to *Ghost Virus*, which follows DC Jerry Pardoe and DS Jamila Patel on a case and combines crime and horror. What important aspects do you think a book needs to straddle the line between the two genres? There seem to be aspects of each genre that compliment each other.

**[GM]** To me, horror and crime go pretty much hand-in-gory-hand. If somebody gets horribly killed, the police are naturally going to get involved. Apart from which, I enjoy writing about the reaction of ordinary, run-of-the-mill coppers to the appearance of some ghastly demonic apparition. When I started writing horror novels, I had no idea that there was such a thing as a 'genre.' To me, a story is a story, and what makes it come to life is the contrast between fantasy and reality. On more than one occasion I have started writing a book that was going to be a straightforward thriller and then found out that it worked better as a horror novel. *Blind Panic* was one of those... it was going to be a disaster novel about a pandemic of blindness in the United States, but then I found out that it was being caused by vengeful Native American spirits. A similar

thing has happened with the novel that I have just completed, *The Soul Stealer*.

**[GdM] Do you tend to model aspects of characters after real-life people? I am especially interested in Jamila Patel. She seems like a powerful and capable character, one that bucks the many female character tropes of the horror genre. Can you tell me a bit about her creation?**

**[GM]** All of my closest friends all my life have been women. When I was 17 I became friends with a young woman reporter on the rival newspaper in Crawley, and we still meet and talk for hours. I had a Burmese girlfriend, too, and she had the kind of inner strength that Jamila Patel has. In fact so many women are strong and clever and capable but do not allow themselves (or are not allowed) to challenge men. I have a woman friend now who is highly qualified but finds it desperately hard to have her abilities recognized. And I am close friends with the brilliant writer Dawn G Harris. We have co-authored two horror stories together and published them in five different countries and we are writing more. Jamila is a combination of several of those women.

**[GdM] I think the first thing I googled when I started *The Children God Forgot* was “What is a Fatberg?” From there, I went down a terrifying rabbit hole. Yes, they are very much real things. How did you come across that this was a thing?**

**[GM]** Fatbergs were shown on the TV news, and it occurred to me that they would make a fairly stomach-churning feature in a horror novel. This is another example of mixing two contrasting stories together (sewers and abortions) to make the whole novel take

on an extra sense of reality. Not to mention making editors of horror magazines throw up.

**[GdM] Now that *The Children God Forgot* has released, what do you have in the hopper?**

**[GM]** A new horror novel featuring Det Sgt Jamila Patel and Det Con Jerry Pardoe will be coming out in December—*The Shadow People*. Following that, *The Soul Stealer*. I have been writing some new short stories, too, and I hope to have a new collection out sometime next year. Thank you for your interest.

# Gingerbread

LINDSAY KING-MILLER

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Between the village and the forest but not quite part of either, there was a cozy little house made of rough boards, where Abigail's mother died for weeks.

"You have to make the gingerbread, William," she said between deep, rattling coughs, and later, when she woke sweating through her sheets, "Abigail, did you eat your gingerbread?" In those final pain-wracked days, after William stopped sending Abigail for the village healer because she couldn't help, the gingerbread bound Rebecca to what was left of her body. Sometimes she didn't recognize her own daughter, but she still clutched her hands and said, "Abigail needs it. It's for Abigail." Abigail stroked her hair until she slept, then fled to her own bedroom, covered her head with a pillow, and sobbed.

The gingerbread was a bit of a charm because Abigail's mother was a bit of a witch. It had a protective spell baked into it. Here in their nameless little village, only a generation old and barely holding back the wilderness, strange things happened. People got lost following paths they'd walked a thousand times and were never seen again. Bird calls sounded like human voices. A new mother got up in the night to nurse her baby and found nothing in the cradle but a stone.

The gingerbread kept Abigail safe, Rebecca said. But it wasn't enough to keep her mother by her side.

On the morning after Rebecca's death, her body still cooling in their bed, William stood in the kitchen, stirring and spicing. Soon, he would carry his dead wife down the path to the little village church, but for now,

he followed her final instructions. His eyes were red and dry.

William was neither a baker nor a witch: he was a woodcutter and had built his own house where the trees it was made of once stood. His gingerbread was awful. It was too wet and too salty, but Abigail ate it all.

When Abigail was thirteen, her father remarried. His new wife Hannah came to their home bearing a beautiful new quilt and an old Bible. She didn't set out to hate Abigail, but every time Hannah reached out, Abigail drew back from her hand. She could not seem to make herself do otherwise.

No one had ever loved Abigail except her mother. Even after all these years, William still looked at her with a mixture of surprise and dread, as though he hadn't meant to create this almost-grown woman and wasn't prepared to take care of her. Abigail didn't expect Hannah to love her, even over time, but when Hannah shifted from tentative kindness to outright contempt, Abigail felt the sting.

Hannah's loathing spilled over into her marriage to William. In the little house, it was impossible to conceal, though they tried to stifle their anger so the girl couldn't hear. William pleaded and Hannah raged; then Hannah demanded and William refused. Abigail couldn't follow the exact content of their disputes, but they were bitter in the dark and silent in the daylight.

And there was no gingerbread.

Abigail was determined never to ask for it. She craved the taste, the texture, the physical evidence of her mother's love, but she said not a word to her father.

But weeks went by and she couldn't sleep. Gingerbread tormented her endless waking thoughts. Her teeth grew sore, and her belly growled for its sugar and spices, the almost bitter depth of flavor. Abigail did not go hungry, though the family was not well off. Hannah's hatred did not extend so far as to withhold food from a child. Still, at night she ached as though

she hadn't eaten in days. She buried her face in her pillow and wailed for her mother. If Hannah and William fought on those nights—and they did—Abigail was too engrossed in her own suffering to hear them.

On the morning of her fourteenth birthday, Abigail's face was drawn and thin. Dark shadows hung under her eyes and cheekbones. She barely saw the furious looks her father and Hannah gave each other over the breakfast table. Though she was starving, she could summon no appetite for the biscuits her stepmother had baked. They crumbled on her tongue like dust.

"Abigail," said her father. "Will you come into the forest with me?"

William was a solitary man. He was a woodcutter in no small part because he liked to be alone, listening to nothing but the sound of his ax. Never before had he suggested that Abigail accompany him.

It was a clear autumn day, bright and cool, but little sunlight reached the forest floor. William set off deep into the woods, walking fast on his long legs. Abigail stumbled a few steps behind him. Her throat burned with bile, as though in her hunger she were beginning to digest herself from the inside. Her eyes felt too big for her head. Her teeth still hurt.

She followed her father without noting where she was going. No birds sang in the branches, but Abigail's head rang with cacophonous sound. She wanted to ask to slow down, but her tongue was thick and the words didn't come.

She walked in his footsteps through mud, over rocks, across a rotting log. She didn't look up at the trees or the sky above, didn't search for small animals in the undergrowth. As long as she followed her father, she wouldn't fall.

She fell.

Her foot hit a stone slick with moss, and she twisted, lost her balance. She might have caught herself if not for a gnarled tree branch that cracked her across the

face. Pain drowned out the dull misery of her hunger. She knelt in the mud, too stricken to cry.

William stopped on the path and turned to stare at her. He didn't help her up, or even take a step toward her, and after a long moment, Abigail realized he wasn't going to. She coughed and struggled to her feet. She spit a bloody tooth into her hand, flinched, and dropped it on the ground.

William started walking again. Not knowing what else to do, Abigail followed.

Some minutes or hours later, they came to a dry streambed. "We can sit here and rest," William said, though he stayed on his feet as Abigail slumped to the earth.

"Where are we going?" she asked when she had her breath back. Dimly, she realized it made no sense to come this far, to spend the day walking instead of cutting wood.

Without answering, William took a piece of bread from his bag and bit into it, his teeth rending the crust with such violence Abigail was surprised it didn't bleed. A claw of hunger twisted in her stomach, followed by an equal pang of revulsion when William held out the bread for her to take. He kept his arm extended until Abigail dropped to her hands and knees in the dirt and vomited.

After she wiped her mouth as clean as she could on her sleeve, she asked, "Why?" Still, her father said nothing.

Abigail's belly snarled. She missed her mother. Even deep in the shadow of the October trees, she felt too hot, her skin tight and sweating. She pressed her forehead into the soil, seeking the cool underside of the earth. Perhaps she slept, pained and restless, or perhaps she only drifted in the delirium of hunger, but when she raised her head, her father was gone.

The forest was darker than it had been, the long shadows of late afternoon eating up the scant sunlight.

Inside her, a void screamed for sustenance, while around her the trees whispered and closed ranks.

Her father had left half the loaf of bread on a flat rock, as though serving her a final meal. Abigail picked it up and flung it with all her strength and rage. It bounced off a rock and rolled to a stop inches from her feet.

With a single, dry-eyed sob, Abigail spun, looking for the path. Had there been a path? All the trees and the shadows between them looked the same. She didn't have the first idea how to track her father, how to find her way back home. Her head throbbed like a fist clenched in anger.

This was no accident, she realized. Her father brought her here on purpose, left her alone and half-crazed to fend for herself—or, more likely, to die.

Abigail wanted to cry out for her mother, but didn't dare waste the energy. Without a glance at the bread in the dirt, fresh only last night, she chose a direction at random and began to walk.

After some time she realized she was following a smell. A good smell. A food smell—not like the bread which had sickened her, but something she wanted, *needed* to eat. Something to pull apart with her teeth, something to smear on her lips and gulp down her throat. She wept as she walked, pale and malnourished, her face streaked with tears and mucus. Her skin felt dry and tight-stretched over her bones, ready to crackle into kindling.

Suddenly, a house loomed before her. Yellow light leered from its windows in the darkening woods. The aroma of food was so rich and heavy in the air that she opened her mouth to taste it. She felt she could almost sink her teeth into the twilight. The smell came not from inside the house, but from the house itself, its very walls beckoning her with the promise of *enough*.

Abigail crept closer, fearing the light but unable to resist the scent. For a moment, in the dancing

shadows, the walls of the house seemed to run with blood.

Her mouth watered.

“Come inside, dear,” said a woman standing in the doorway, which Abigail, in her confusion, hadn’t realized was open. “You look awfully hungry.”

Too dazed to ask questions, Abigail obeyed.

Inside, the house was a single small room, lit by flickering firelight. The floorboards were sticky under Abigail’s feet. There was no bed, no chest of drawers, nothing but a table covered in a filthy cloth and two plain chairs. The woman smiled widely and gestured to the house as though it were very grand. Her face was smooth, but she moved and spoke like someone desperately old and unwell.

“I’ve been keeping dinner hot for you,” she said, her voice a wet cough. “I thought you’d be here sooner, but no matter.” She ladled soup into the bowl on the table, then set it before Abigail. Still moving as though everything pained her, the woman—the old woman?—settled into the chair opposite Abigail. She didn’t serve herself.

Abigail barely spent a moment wondering why, and then the smell of the soup hit her: hot and deep and salt-sweet, with a tang of spice that made her think of her mother’s gingerbread. The woman did not offer her a spoon, and Abigail couldn’t spare the breath to ask for one. Frantically, she scooped chunks of meat into her mouth with her bare hand, scalding her fingers, spilling thick broth down the front of her already stained dress and making no move to clean herself.

She ate like she’d been starving for a week. Her pinched, empty belly cried out as she devoured a bowlful in minutes, barely stopping to chew the tender chunks of meat floating in the perfect, briny broth. “Another?” the old woman asked as Abigail wiped the nearly empty bowl with her fingertips.

“Please,” said Abigail.

By the time she finished the second bowl, she was beginning to feel whole again. The haze in her mind cleared as the pain in her gut faded. She felt queasy—she had eaten too much, too fast, on an empty stomach and a full day of walking—but she swallowed the bile in her throat and forced herself to say, “Thank you so much for your generosity to a stranger.”

“Oh, there’s always a price for such things,” the woman said.

Abigail held out her hands, dripping and empty, palms up. “I have nothing, but if you’ll let me—” She didn’t know how she intended to finish that sentence, with no home to return to, no family to pay her debts.

But the woman only laughed, a sound like old wood creaking. “Not that kind of price, my dear. In my age I grow lonely. Will you stay a while and listen to me talk? Will you let me tell you a story?”

“Of course,” said Abigail.

“I think you’ll find it interesting, since it’s the story of how you were born.”

Abigail could only stare.

“I am, or once was, a midwife,” said the old woman. “A long time ago, I was the midwife for your village. Many a babe wailed their first breaths in my arms. Your mother came to see me often during her pregnancy, but one day I felt her belly and couldn’t find your heartbeat. You’d died, you see, a quiet little death before you ever lived.”

“Obviously, I had not,” said Abigail. The woman ignored her.

“Your mother was devastated. She wanted a child like she wanted to breathe. She’d already bled out three of your sisters before they quickened, and she feared she was too old to try again.” The old woman peered at Abigail’s face. “She loved you very much, dear. Your mother loved you more than anything in this world.” Perhaps she meant the words to be comforting, but to Abigail they sounded heavy and ominous.

"What did she do?"

"She asked me how to save you," said the midwife. "She believed I knew more than just herbs, and she wasn't wrong. I made the mistake of telling her a child lost could not in good conscience be saved." The old woman laughed without humor. "She demanded to know what could be done in bad conscience."

Abigail shivered.

"Your mother could be very persuasive. At last she got the answer from me. One life for another—the simplest kind of exchange. She drank the blood from a human heart, and inside her, your heart began to beat again."

"No," said Abigail.

"Oh, yes," the old woman said. "Have some more to eat, sweet girl." Abigail didn't want more, but she didn't refuse. A gristly bit of meat stuck between her teeth, and she worked her tongue to loosen it.

"You were born at midwinter, pink and screaming and healthy, and your mother sighed with relief. But once you'd fed on blood, the appetite didn't go away. You bit her nipples raw, but it wasn't enough. All day and all night, your belly full of milk, you screamed with hunger. You never grew fat and happy as a baby should. Finally your mother understood what she had to do."

Abigail shook her head. She didn't want to hear more, but the woman kept talking.

"Having paid an unthinkable price already, well, it became thinkable. And if you died of hunger, wouldn't that first death have been in vain, the sacrifice wasted? There was no way out but through, your mother thought, and so she wrapped you up in a sling and went for a walk. She walked for hours through the woods, away from the village, until she came to a little house."

"No," said Abigail.

“An old man was sitting on the front porch in the sunshine. She cut his throat.”

“Stop it,” said Abigail.

“And when you’d drunk your fill you looked up at her with your baby eyes so bright, and you smiled, and she kissed your sticky face and knew she’d do whatever it took to keep you with her always.”

“It isn’t true,” Abigail said. “I don’t drink blood.”

The old woman smiled. Her teeth were very straight and very white. “Of course she couldn’t keep feeding you blood as you got older,” she agreed. “You would have noticed. She found a way to hide it in your food, to mask the taste with stronger flavors, sugar and spice. And she discovered you didn’t need it very often—only once or twice a year. On special occasions, you might say.”

Abigail’s stomach heaved. She opened her mouth to say it, but stopped herself short, fearing that she would be sick all over the woman’s dirty tablecloth. The old woman said it for her.

“Your gingerbread, my dear.”

“I don’t believe you,” Abigail lied.

“Strange things happen around these parts, don’t they?” said the old woman. “People go missing. Farmers from their fields, babes from their cradles. A great and terrible mystery—one your mother knew more about than she ever told you.”

“It’s for protection,” Abigail protested. “A little charm in the bread, that’s all. She was a kitchen witch.”

“She was a witch, all right,” said the old woman. “Stronger than most ever become, with the audacity to do what most would never dare. All those years, all that blood—she saw into many shadows and learned many dark things. She could fly over the village in the form of a sparrow, searching for folk foolish enough to go walking alone. She could send a grown man into a deep sleep so he didn’t even feel her blade in his heart. But there’s a cost to using magic that way. Your mother

learned it too late, but I don't think she would have done anything differently if she'd had the chance. After all the lives she sacrificed for you, she didn't hesitate to part with her own."

"My father?" asked Abigail.

"He knew all along," the old woman answered. "He didn't have the stomach for it himself, but after she died, he kept his promise to her. But then..."

"Then he met Hannah," said Abigail.

"You can hardly blame her," said the woman kindly. "She's a God-fearing woman."

Abigail gripped the edge of the table with her slick, sticky hands. "She made him do it. She made him leave me in the woods."

"She tried not to think about what would happen to you," the woman agreed. "She hoped it would be painless."

Abruptly, Abigail stood, knocking over her chair. The dregs of soup left in her bowl sloshed, but didn't spill. "Who are you?" she demanded. "How do you know all this? Why would my mother tell you these things?"

"No one had to tell me," the woman said. "I saw it all. I've been watching you since the day I died." She pulled her hair away from her neck, and Abigail saw that her throat was cut, the wound gaping bloodless like a second mouth. "I was your mother's first sacrifice, you see. You tasted my blood before you tasted air."

Abigail covered her face with her hands and reeled away from the table. "You're lying," she said, her voice raw, the soup in her belly churning. "Or I'm dreaming. This isn't real—"

"I suppose I have been a bit deceptive," the old woman agreed. "I'm not half the witch your mother was, but I have a little power still, even after all these years as a ghost. Enough to make you see what I want you to see." Her mouth opened in a smile—opened too

wide, gaped until her jaw cracked, and Abigail stared transfixed into the darkness of her throat.

When she wrenched her gaze away from the black void of the old woman's gullet, the cottage around her was a ruin. Only a few beams of it still stood, moldering and half-digested by the forest. Scraps of wood defined corners and a pile of stones suggested the remains of a fireplace, but the roof was demolished, replaced by sky. Abigail and the woman crouched on bare earth between stunted trees.

Where the table had stood between them, a corpse lay on the ground.

Abigail took all this in at a moment's glance, but it was harder to process the face that looked up at her from the dirt. It was her father's face, familiar but wrong. She had never seen it empty like this, the skin hanging like a rag doll's without its stuffing.

Below her father's face was her father's body, even less recognizable. It had been torn, ripped open from throat to belly. His guts were pulled out in tatters, as if something had gnawed and yanked and burrowed into the core of him, seeking hungrily for the hot wet parts. Blood and other fluids soaked the earth in a dark circle around the body.

Abigail's hands were sticky with blood. Now she understood the taste in her mouth, salty and dark, the flavor that quelled the deepest hunger she'd ever known. Her stomach roiled, but she clenched her jaw and forced herself not to retch. What would be the point of purging herself now? What she had taken from him could never be returned.

"It was easy enough to convince him to rest by my fire," said the old woman. "After that I simply had to keep him asleep and let your hunger do the rest."

Abigail lashed out, fingernails still wet with her father's gore as she raked them at the old woman's face. But of course the woman wasn't there at all. She

was mist, nothing but the night sky. She was smiling. Abigail's hand went right through her.

"Why?" Abigail pleaded, dropping to her knees.

"Because you should know what your life cost," said the old woman. "You should know how much your mother loved you."

Abigail curled up and pressed her face into her father's shoulder. His shirt was bloody, but what was a little more blood to her now? She screamed into his flesh until her throat ached, and then screamed more. Her belly was full and she was strong, and her voice didn't give out for a long, long time.

When she finally sat up, the old woman was gone and she was alone. Her father's body was cool and stiff. Blood had dried to a tacky film on Abigail's face and hands. The gray sky whispered of sunrise approaching, yet she heard no scuffling of birds or animals.

That made sense. Small creatures knew not to come near a predator with a fresh kill.

Rising, Abigail oriented herself toward the palest part of the sky. The village lay that way. Now that her mind wasn't clouded by hunger, it was easy to pick out the path she'd followed the day before, winding and wandering between the trees.

It felt good to walk. She took longer and longer strides until she was almost running, leaping, barely out of breath. She stopped for a moment at the rock where she'd spit out a tooth the day before, inhaled the tang of her own dried blood, then sprang into motion again.

The sun came up. The air smelled fresh and cold and sweet. There was a strange woman in Abigail's home, a woman who had sent her into the forest to die.

Abigail knew what her mother would want. She knew how to make her mother proud.

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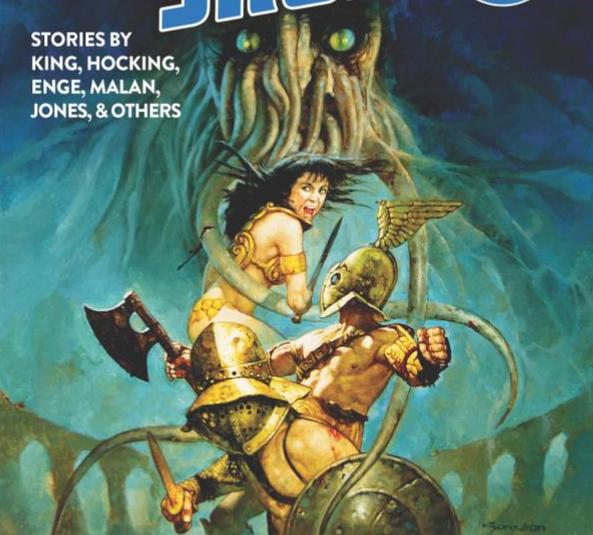
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