

E-MACABRE

tales of horror and dark fantasy

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INTRODUCTION

If you like dark fiction and don't like reading bloated and boring introductions about how the genre began, so on and so forth. Great! You found the perfect ebook. And to top it off I don't have to write one more boring word and you can skip this section and go to what's truly important - the stories. Though, I do have one more thing to add before you do that - if you enjoy a story and feel like letting the author know about it - you can send your comments to emacfan@specficworld.com. And I'll make sure to forward your message to the author. Writers like feedback and more importantly they need fans like you. Why else write if they can't scare the crap out of someone else besides their mothers.

Enjoy!

Doyle Eldon Wilmoth, Jr

MORTICHINERY

BY MICHAEL A. ARNZEN

Michael Arzen's most recent chapbooks include *Freakcidents*, *Sportuary*, *Dying*, and *Gorelets: Unpleasant Poetry*. He won the Bram Stoker Award in 1995 for his novel, *Grave Markings*. Arzen teaches horror writing in the Writing Popular Fiction graduate program at Seton Hill University near Pittsburgh, PA. He runs two free newsletters -- the *Handy Job Hunter* for writers and *The Goreletter* for horror fans -- from his popular website, <http://www.gorelets.com>.

"Mortichinery" first appeared on horrorfind.com and is excerpted from a collection of one hundred dark short-shorts in development called *100 Jolts*.

A man had to bury a wife. But he did not want to.

So when the mortician was making preparations for the open casket viewing, and the man saw how beautiful his lost wife had become when embalmed -- her cheeks more rosy than when she was young, her eyes transfixed with mascara she'd never worn before, her hair permed in unfamiliar curls -- he asked whether there were some way to keep her so perfect.

"Your compliments are too kind, sir. My humble goal is that she will always remain this way," the well-dressed mortician said as he straightened his tie. "In your memories."

"But that's not good enough," the man mumbled, still lovingly gazing down upon the mannequin his wife had become. "Memories fade like old Polaroids." He gently fingered his wife's stiff, dead hand. "And so does flesh. But I want my wife to be with me -- like this -- forever."

The mortician could tell that the macabre man was earnest and took pity on him. He decided to at last reveal his secret experiment. "The problem is not the processes of death," he said, leading the man to a private and hidden chamber beneath the mortuary. "It's the low quality of embalming fluid. It needs to be constantly renewed and replenished to keep the dead alive, as it were. So I have invented a device which keeps pumping the carcass with enough fluid to maintain a healthy body." They rounded a turn at the foot of the stairs and inspected a large wooden sarcophagus enmeshed in a network of brass tubes and red wires and metallic buckets.

Noticing his puzzlement, the mortician said: "It's a chamber that perpetually embalms the subject. It uses the circulatory system already in place to keep the tissues replenished by pumping fluid through the veins and arteries at a steady rate of speed. It works, almost, like an external heart -- and, indeed, I have borrowed some of the mechanical parts from transfusion equipment. I first called it 'The Circulatory Coffin' but that was too scientific-sounding. So now I just call it 'The Mortichine.'" The mortician's face flushed with blood as he toyed with a nearby spigot. "I'm not sure if that name is sexy enough to sell to the mainstream market, and it's obviously still in development, but...."

The man saw the genius behind the device immediately, despite its messy tangle of unkempt tubes. He slapped the mortician on his bony back: "Well, I call it 'brilliant!'" He paced around the casket, examining the metal prods that lined the floor of the box like a postmodern bed of nails. "I assume it works? That you've tested it on others?"

"Yes," the mortician said, still wincing from the back slap and nodding solemnly. "On my own daughter."

"I'm sorry," the man said.

They stared down at the contraption in silence, understanding one another perfectly.

"Amber killed herself. Slashed her wrists. Luckily, I'm as good a thread man as I am a fluid man."

The man nodded.

Time passed. "So when can you do it?" the man finally asked, looking up at his new friend. "And how much will it cost me?"

The process was quite expensive, because the constant replenishment of fluids would be a pricey affair. But the man realized he was rich enough in insurance to afford it. Arrangements were quickly made to substitute another corpse for the wife's burial and they decided to keep the embalmed woman in the mortician's hidden room. It was impossible, they agreed, to keep the wife in the man's own home because of maintenance requirements, not to mention the suspicion it might cause. It would take two weeks to prepare The Mortichine and make it suitable for regular viewing -- after that waiting period, the man would be welcome to come and go as he pleased.

The day finally arrived for his first visit. The man and the mortician chatted like old friends as they entered the hidden chamber, then went into a back room where there were several stainless steel doors with large padlocks bolted onto them. The mortician pulled a ring of keys from his pocket and opened one of the locks, unveiling a finely wallpapered room with a flower arrangement and two leather chairs arranged around a fine mahogany coffin. The casket was closed. All was quiet, save for the sound of the pulsing machinery that regularly pumped and sloshed like a rubbery heartbeat. "Do you approve?"

"Approve?" He clapped the mortician on the back again. "My good man, this is beyond my expectations!"

"Then allow me to unveil your beloved wife." The mortician pulled open the casket lid like a bellhop would open the doorway to a penthouse suite.

The man's wife glowed with a pallor of fluids and fresh make-up. She wore the fine cocktail dress the man had provided (one of many that would be routinely changed each week) and her eyes were open and gleaming. She looked even more life-like than she had two weeks ago. The Mortichine had done -- was still doing -- a fine job.

The husband nearly fell to the ground, but then caught himself on the coffin base. He stood and looked down upon his wife. "Her eyes. They are so...so..."

"Real?"

"No...different."

"Yes, they are. Her eyes are made of glass, I'm afraid, so the color isn't a perfect match. As a matter of fact, I couldn't keep all her organs replenished with proper fluids. Her brain, too, is all cotton, I'm sorry to say. As is her lung cavity. Other amenities and tailor fitting had to be performed elsewhere, but suffice it to say that I went through a lot of thread. But the circulatory system is rather intact, I assure you." The mortician looked at the man and then realized he really didn't want to hear any of these details. For the mortician, the science was the beauty, not the finished product. But he tried to make it up to the man anyway: "Look at her flesh, or better yet, her lips...see how full they are? See how perfect?"

The man did. He bent at the waist and then kissed the cold meat of her face. Her cheek was so firm with fluid that he could feel it pulsing against his lips.

The mortician clasped his hands, cocked his head, and sighed with satisfaction.

When he looked over at the man for confirmation, however, he saw the unimaginable. He towered over the casket with his arms upraised, a large carving knife glinting in his two-fisted grip. Before the mortician could cry "No!" the man was in motion, plunging the blade hard into his wife's ribcage. Black ooze blurted out from an aortic tear and splattered up his sleeve before he repeated the atrocity, stabbing deep into the chest again. Liquids began pissing out all over the box.

Though he knew he would do better to run, the mortician dropped helplessly to his knees: "My work!"

Again the man sharply stabbed into the coffin, this time plunging his blade down into his wife's throat. The voice box gargled as if there were some life inside the larynx. With two fists the man twisted it around to silence her.

The mortician could stand the grotesque sounds blurring and scraping above him no longer. He pulled himself to the man's side and began tugging on his pant leg. "Please! Stop! I implore you!"

The man stopped and breathed heavy above him. The Mortichine began making sucking sounds from somewhere in the room. A hose popped somewhere but the machinery kept chugging along.

The man turned to look down at the mortician. He smiled and patted his head. "It's alright." He stabbed the knife into the body once more and then left it pegged there, standing like a stake in wet soil. "I don't think I hit the actual device."

"Why are you doing this?" the mortician cried from the floor, calming a bit. "I thought we had an understanding!"

"We still do, my good man," the husband said, looking back into his wife's unblinking eyes with some satisfaction, noting dark droplets resting on the glass. "We still do. You use that magic sewing talent of yours to patch up my wife and keep her ripe and juicy for me." He flicked at the blade handle in her belly, making it

wobble like a tuning fork. "And I'll be back every week to kill this fucking bitch all over again."

The mortician could feel his eyes trembling in their sockets as tears spilled over the rims.

"And if you don't do it, I'll come back and cut you, instead." He pulled the knife from his wife's body with a tug and then squatted down to confront him face-to-face. "And then there wouldn't be anyone left around here to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Understand?"

The mortician bowed his head away and stared at the floor, where brown-gold embalming fluid pooled around his feet. It didn't look like blood but it certainly spilled like it. "Yes," he said, seeing destiny. "I do."

The man patted the mortician on his head like a good boy and then stood up. "That's what my wife said once, too." He chuckled and then gripped his blade tightly, stabbing the air as if reliving the atrocity he'd committed, still wanting more. "Now why don't you show me where you keep that daughter of yours?"

He was stunned by the audacity of this request -- the realization that the man would not be satisfied with just one body was more chilling than what he had just witnessed -- but the mortician knew better than to resist. He mechanically pulled himself up, still staring at the puddle of amber liquid on the floor. He despondently marched the man back to the hallway and led him toward his daughter's chamber. The stainless steel door was padlocked and the mortician nervously jangled the key ring, trying to find the right match.

"C'mon, hurry up," the man said, wiping his blade on his pant leg.

The mortician was shaking. He dropped the keys.

"Idiot! Don't bother!" The man bent forward and picked them up and impatiently moved to open the door himself. After three tries, he finally found the key that fit and quickly unhasped the lock. He kicked open the door. The room was dark, dank. He couldn't see the coffin at all as he entered, but he saw glints of familiar looking equipment.

"It stinks in here. Where's the freaking light?" the man asked, but the mortician was already rushing toward him, knocking him

forward into the dark, tripping him headfirst over the edge of the coffin. The man tumbled forward, slashing madly at air, knocking over an intravenous bottle instead before slamming neck-first into a large thick needle in the middle of the casket. This needle was intended to tap into the aorta of the deceased, but it popped into the man's throat with a wheeze. The remainder of his body fell into the battery of smaller needles that lined the bed of the contraption like a modern day Iron Maiden.

As life began pouring rapidly out of him from hundreds of holes, he felt the press of old meat and rust into his guts. The room's fluorescent lights flickered on. The mortician pressed a button and the needles mechanically shunted more deeply into him, tickling his inner organs so far inside that he quivered and gasped with something terribly similar to laughter.

"I do so very much appreciate your support of my research, sir." He turned a dial and thick liquid began pumping into the man's flaccid neck, coursing down his throat. "You might appreciate this new device, as well. You see, it not only keeps the flesh livid..." he placed a finger over a large green button, "but it also takes care of all the stitching and body tailoring I would normally have to do myself. It's kind of like a sewing machine, I suppose. It should save me a lot of work." He looked over at the dying man in his coffin. "But I'm not certain. I haven't tested it yet. I certainly wouldn't try it out on my daughter, I assure you."

He pressed the green button and all the needles began to writhe and stitch and staple the man's organs together. "I wonder what to call this one...the Rigor Rigger? The Deader Threader? Hmm..."

A bone scraped, sounding like a file sliding on porcelain. The pelvis cracked in half with a meaty snap. The liver popped and was smeared against the abdominal wall by a metal fork, staining the body from the inside out. Liquid overflowed in a nearby drainage bucket.

The mortician didn't hear these things, even though he had purposely left the door ajar. He was too busy brainstorming as he visited his daughter in her finely decorated chamber, one door over.

THE END

THE FOUNDLING

BY ANGELINE HAWKES CRAIG

Angeline Hawkes-Craig has several stories in 2003 anthologies: *Femmes de La Brume: A Collection of Speculative Fiction* [Double Dragon], *Fantastical Visions Volume II* [Fantasist Enterprises], *Scriptures of the Damned* [DDP], *Otherworlds Sci-Fi Alien Alerts Anthology* [Branch & Vine Publishers]. *Scars Publications* released a collection of her fiction entitled, *Memento Mori: A Collection of Short Fiction*, May, 2003 and the book will be released in e-book format by Double Dragon in 2004. Her story *The Board* won Horror-Web's Best of 2002 Contest Fiction. Hawkes-Craig's fantasy novel, *The Swan Road*, published by *Scars* was released in 2002.

She is a member of the Horror Writer's Association and of The Writer's League of Texas. Hawkes-Craig received a B.A. in Composite English Language Arts from East Texas State University in 1991. Visit her website at <http://www.angelinehawkes-craig.com>.

Cold wind curled its icy fingers around the walls with blasts of snow and snow-laden gusts. The only thing white in the dreariness of the soot-blackened alley was the snow that had not yet hit the cobblestones. The pale brick walls, square and uniform, were streaked with ice rivulets and ice streams that had frozen from water dripping down the walls in steady paths. It was dark. The one dim lantern swaying in the wind, hung from the iron ring, did little to light the doorstep. Even that poor excuse for light was in danger of being snuffed out by the gales of death cold wind.

The large basket hung empty outside of the Foundling Hospital. The bell tinkled in the blasts of wind, but no one peeked through the window pane to see if a baby waited there – huddled in a bundle of rags, wrapped in cast-off clothes like the throw away item the baby had become. Not all of the babies were unloved or unwanted. Sometimes the wretched of the city, too poor to afford a proper burial would leave their precious dying children in the basket to be nursed until the end and then buried at the hospital's expense. How many wailing women had been dragged away from spending their baby's last few moments holding that little life in their arms all because they lacked the resources to bury the pathetic child in the end? No questions were asked of those leaving their infants or small children huddled in the basket. All babies were taken, and loved as much as an institutional setting would allow until a home could be found for the unfortunate babe.

The lantern blew out in one whoosh of wind. Darkness enveloped the already dark alley. The steps to the door were just a slight glow in the faint whisper of light set off from inside of the hospital.

The bell rang sharply – again and again.

“Damn. Mary! Check the basket,” Mrs. Nelson called out to the young girl stoking the fire.”

“Jest the wind, Mum. No one would be daft enough to leave a babe on this kind of night!” Mary poked the log with the iron poker and wiped her sooty hands on her apron.

The bell rang noisily and persistently out in the darkened street.

“Mary!” Mrs. Nelson bellowed again.

“I’m goin’, I’m goin’. I’ll look to it!” Mary grumbled and kept grumbling down the hall and into the cold, open foyer. She cracked the door a bit bracing herself against the anticipated blast of wind.

“Bugger me! There’s a baby out ‘ere!” Mary yelled from outside as she ran to fetch the huddled babe from the ice covered basket.

Mrs. Nelson came waddling down the hall as fast as her fat haunches would propel her. “Alpheus! Fetch some warm things! ‘Lizabeth, pour some warm water into the basin!” she barked her orders as Mary struggled back indoors, slamming the door behind her with a bump of her ample backside while cradling the chilled babe in her arms.

“Mite’s ‘alf frozen!” Mary pulled back the rags the baby was wrapped in to reveal a porcelain white baby – as white as the falling snow.

“Get him to the kitchen,” Mrs. Nelson again bellowed, assuming the baby was a he.

Mary raced him to the kitchen where Elizabeth had a basin of warm water set before the blazing fire. She peeled off the layers of tattered rags one at a time. Finally she peeled back the last piece of rough woven linen to, astonishingly enough, reveal a rich burgundy velvet blanket trimmed in black fox and bearing gold tassels at each corner.

Mary stopped for a minute. “Well, what do ye make of that?” she asked aloud, and then whistled at the finery from between her teeth.

Mrs. Nelson's eyebrows flew up in a flash, "Odd," she muttered.

Mary unfolded the velvet blanket to reveal a smartly dressed baby in a fine white lawn shift with delicate embroidery around the hem and neck. Tied around the baby's midsection was a gilded cross.

"Mum, there's a note 'ere." Mary handed the parchment to Mrs. Nelson as Mary could neither read nor write.

Mrs. Nelson read it silently, then muttered, "Odd", once again.

"What does it say?" Mary questioned impatiently.

Mrs. Nelson looked over the edge of the parchment, down her long, straight nose and into Mary's blue eyes and frowned. "It says: Remove not the cross."

Mary frowned as well. "That's it?" she asked.

"That is it. Whatever do they mean, I wonder. Of course we have to remove the cross, can't very well let the little bastard run around all his life with a cross strapped to his bosom." Mrs. Nelson knit her brows together closely.

Mary continued to undress the baby and handed the gilded cross to Mrs. Nelson (who slipped it into her apron pocket) before pulling the white gown from the baby. "Igh quality this shift is," Mary commented and laid the little shift on the table away from the splashing water, and next to the pile of rags and the velvet blanket.

"What gent would off an' leave 'is babe on the doorstep of a charity 'ospital?" Mary wondered aloud.

"One who has been up to no good, apparently," Mrs. Nelson said before tut-tutting at the shame of it all.

"'E seems to be well cared for. Plump and pretty this one," Mary said smiling at the baby who was now cooing in the comfort of the warm water.

"Well, I'll go write him down in the books. We'll call him George, Little royal babe!" Mrs. Nelson chuckled at her bit of humor. "You bathe him and dress him, and take him to the ward with the other his age."

Mary smiled. "Aye. Will do, Mum." She continued to pour the warm water over little George.

She washed behind his ears and went to wipe the water from around his eyes with her fingers, when she brushed against his little ruby lips. "Ow!" Mary hollered.

Elizabeth looked up startled, "Is it?" she asked sleepily.

"Little bugger bit me!" Mary screeched, blood welling up from the slice in her finger.

"'E got teeth?" Elizabeth questioned somewhat shocked.

"Bastard 'as little daggers for teeth it seems." Mary examined her finger while holding onto the squirming baby with her other hand.

"Goodness!" Elizabeth wrapped a rag around Mary's gushing finger. "Bit you 'ard, 'e did!"

Mary peered closer at George's mouth. She wanted to pull back his pouty lips and have a look at his teeth, but fear of being bit again discouraged her. She wrapped her fingers in rags and then grasped his lips. There they were – gleaming knife sharp fangs protruding from his tiny pink gums.

"Mother Mary!" Elizabeth uttered as she looked over Mary's shoulder.

"What the devil?" Mary gasped and then added, "Go get Mrs. Nelson."

Elizabeth closed the kitchen door behind her and walked down the dim corridor to Mrs. Nelson's room. She knocked.

"Come in," Mrs. Nelson said in a tired tone of voice.

Elizabeth cracked the door a bit. "Don't mean to disturb you, Mum, but Mary 'as discovered something most peculiar about George. She told me to fetch you."

Mrs. Nelson frowned, heavy lines rippling across her heavy face; but, sitting down her quill and capping her ink, she got up and followed Elizabeth.

They walked silently through the corridor so as not to wake the other sleeping children. Elizabeth opened the kitchen door and quietly closed it behind them again. As she turned around she saw Mrs. Nelson mutely standing frozen staring at the ghastly scene before them.

Mary's body was sprawled bloodily across the floor before the fire. Nude, plump baby George, gore-smeared, with blood trickling from his open mouth and blood spurting from the savage gash torn into Mary's throat, was sitting on Mary's crimson bosom.

Mrs. Nelson stared at the abhorrent scene.

"My God!" Elizabeth cried loudly and her hand flew to cover her open mouth.

George looked in their direction, squinted up his eyes, and began to wail.

"What do we d-d-d-do?" Elizabeth stuttered.

"Get the baby," Mrs. Nelson said hoarsely.

"I'm not touching that monster! 'E be the devil's own child!" Elizabeth gasped in horror.

"Remove not the cross," Mrs. Nelson said suddenly.

"Twas a warning," Elizabeth whispered.

"Aye. We have to put the cross back on that child." Mrs. Nelson pulled it from her apron pocket.

"Need to kill the little bastard, if you ask me!" Elizabeth stated.

"I didn't ask you," Mrs. Nelson said calmly. "You grab the baby, and I'll bind the cross back on his chest," Mrs. Nelson ordered.

Elizabeth looked skeptical.

"The cross must be replaced!" Mrs. Nelson hissed.

"What if 'e bites me? 'E bit Mary before she sent me to fetch you," Elizabeth said fearfully.

"We'll be quick about it." Mrs. Nelson had the cross and the binding strip of linen ready. "On my mark then?"

Elizabeth nodded.

"Go!"

Both ladies plunged towards the bloody baby and setting hold to him, bound the cross around his midsection firmly.

"Poor Mary!" wailed Elizabeth.

"This baby has to be destroyed," Mrs. Nelson said coldly.

"What? You mean kill 'im?" Elizabeth asked wide-eyed. "I wasn't serious when I said that before!"

"It is evil. Should have been left at the church door, not here." Mrs. Nelson tugged the shift over the baby's head and pulled it through the bound cross and linen, so that the shift ended up underneath of the gilded cross in a puffy sort of way. She watched as the little beast's cherubic curls sprang up here and there again.

"Fetch Willie," Mrs. Nelson said to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth nodded and left. She came back with Willie, the handy man, jack-of-all-trades they boarded and employed. Willie was a simpleton who had been raised at the hospital himself. He was more child than man – trapped in an adult body with the mind of a boy.

"Willie," Mrs. Nelson said calmly. "I need you to take this basket of old rags down and throw it into the river. Can you do that for me?" Mrs. Nelson asked with a smile.

Willie smiled proudly. He was always proud to be entrusted with a chore by Mrs. Nelson. "Yes, Mum. Right away, Mum."

"Now, you go straight to the river, toss it all in, basket and all. Then you come straight back home. It's freezing out there and you'll catch your death. Come straight home." Mrs. Nelson pointed a finger at Willie.

"Yes, Mum. Straight home. Basket in the river. Come straight home," Willie said in a childish sing-songy voice.

Mrs. Nelson walked with him to the door and patted him on his big square back.

"Straight home," she admonished again.

Willie trudged out into the swirling snow, basket in one hand, lantern swinging in the other.

"What if 'e cries?" Elizabeth asked closing the door.

"Won't. I gave him a sleeping draught while you were fetching Willie. Should sleep his way into Hell," Mrs. Nelson grunted.

"Tis murder, Mum," Elizabeth whispered.

"It murdered Mary most foul! It isn't a baby, girl. That's a monster. Something evil. A beast borne from Satan's loins, if any!" Mrs. Nelson grasped Elizabeth firmly by the shoulder. "Come. We've poor Mary's body to tend to."

Willie tramped through the frozen sludge and through the cold stench of the icy streets toward the putrid smelling river. Losing his footing, he slipped on the ice-covered street. His hand flew into the basket and collided with something hard. He dug through the rags and soon revealed the sleeping baby.

"Baby?" Willie asked fumbling to sit up and retrieve his lantern. He held the light up to the basket near where the baby lay sleeping in the nest of rags.

Willie saw the gilded cross gleaming in the lantern light. "Gold?" he asked aloud through blackened teeth.

Willie scooped up the basket and the lantern and ducked into the closest doorway to figure out this mystery with his slow-churning brain. Willie's simple mind worked very slowly and his gears up there just couldn't quite make sense out of anything so far.

"Mrs. Nelson asked me to kill the baby? Throw the basket into the river. Come straight home," Willie repeated his orders, teeth chattering. "Straight back. Go straight back. Back home." He frowned.

"Kill is murder. Murder is bad." Willie wrestled with his boyish mind. "Reverend says kill is wrong. Sin. Willie would burn in Hell for kill."

Willie looked at the sleeping baby again. Suddenly an idea formed in his dim brain. There was another charity hospital across town. He'd leave the baby there. No one would know. Not even Mrs. Nelson. He'd seen hundreds of women do it. Put the baby on the step, or in the basket, and run away.

Willie felt proud of himself for this revelation and he gathered up the basket of baby and his lantern and trudged towards the other hospital. He had made the trip several times before. Delivering supplies, collecting supplies. The two hospitals often aided each other in their collective effort to relieve the suffering of the unfortunate.

Willie saw the looming building before him and fought his way through the biting cold wind to the steps of the charity hospital. He placed the baby in the basket on the steps and turned to go. Turning slowly back to the baby he looked one more time at the gold cross tied to the baby's chest.

He had never had anything gold. He had always been poor Willie, cared for by the hospital and by Mrs. Nelson. He rarely had any money to spend on what he would like to buy. He would like to buy Mrs. Nelson a ribbon. He could buy some nice things with gold. Sweets. He loved sweets! Willie smacked his lips. He could almost taste the sugary confections melting on his tongue.

He slowly slid the cross out from beneath the linen band that bound it there, careful not to wake the baby. "Straight home," Willie whispered as he slipped the gilded cross into his tattered pocket.

A scream sounded in the darkness. The door was thrust open to reveal a young girl in the midst of depositing a bundled baby on the steps, next to a basket with a sleeping, blood smeared baby and a much butchered body of a husky man.

The girl thrust the baby into the arms of the startled woman who was standing on the steps and dashed into the dark street.

The woman and man, who had opened the hospital door, stood staring at the gruesome image laid out on their doorstep.

"Is the babe...?" the woman hesitantly began.

The man hovered over the bloodied babe. "No. He's alive. Sleeping covered in blood, but no injuries. Not like the poor bloke there." He nodded towards the bleeding man stretched out in the snow.

"Someone must have killed him while he was leaving the baby." The woman shook her head. "But why?"

"What sort of a beast would kill a man like this?" The man rolled the dead man over to reveal a mangled mass of pulp and shredded skin and muscle where once his throat had been.

"Blessed Mary," the woman gasped.

"Best send for the authorities." The man stood up and picked up the basket with the sleeping baby.

"Need to clean that poor mite off." The woman nodded to the basket and went inside still clutching the other hapless baby.

The man stopped and surveyed the dead man one last time, and head shaking, turned to follow his wife inside.

The soft glow from the street lanterns fell upon the sleeping baby, whose eye's flashed open and pursed lips revealed a gleam of pearly white, bloodied teeth.

"Let's get you washed off now, shall we?" the man clucked to the babe in the basket and closed the door to the freezing street behind them.

THE END

SUNRISE REVIVAL

BY JAMES S. DORR

James S. Dorr's current collection, *Strange Mistresses: Tales of Wonder and Romance*, was released in November 2001 by Dark Regions Press. He is an active member of HWA and SFWA, a past Anthony (mystery) and Darrell finalist, winner of the Best of the Web 1998 award, a Pushcart Prize nominee, and has been listed in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* ten of the past twelve years. Prior credits include *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *New Mystery*, *The Strand*, *Gothic.net*, *Tomorrow* (both print and web versions), *Enigmatic Tales* (U.K.), *Future Orbits*, *Terminal Frights*, *Aboriginal SF*, *Fantastic Stories*, *Faeries* (France), and such anthologies as *Gothic Ghosts*, *Dark Tyrants*, *Darkside: Horror for the Next Millennium*, *The Best of Cemetery Dance*, *Bloodtype*, *Whispers and Shadows*, *Strange Attraction*, *Children of Cthulhu*, and *The Darker Side: Generations of Horror*.

"Damn," Cary Jensen said. "Back in the old days, number eleven would have kicked over her pail for sure."

He looked around sheepishly, half expecting his wife to have sneaked in the barn behind him, then finished unhooking the milking machine. "All the cows are skittish," he muttered, still out loud, as he patted the Jersey back into calmness. He leaned his weight against her rump as he got to his feet, then went down the line to cow number twelve.

Twelve was skittish too -- worse than the others -- he thought as he finished up with her, then added a little more feed to her bin.

Almost like there was some kind of storm coming. But she was the last one. He checked the gauges, noting the milk from all his cows seemed more frothy than normal, then twisted the stop-key to let it flow into the waiting cans. Then, capping the cans, he wobbled them out of the barn one by one, until they stood lined up under the tarp roof that shaded the dusty, already hot drive.

"Hope John Taylor's boy gets here quick," he said, still muttering.

"Would have been nice if Pru was back too -- getting too old to do this all alone." He strained his ears and could hear the singing, too far away to make out any words, from the tent on the other side of the woodlot.

As he walked to the farmhouse, he wondered if that could have spooked the cows. The singing and shouting. Pru could tell him if it

had been especially loud -- she'd gone to just about every service since the revival tent had been set up. She'd begged him, when the Reverend Satterfield first came to town, to let him use the fallow strip of land by the highway. She was the one who had the religion in the family, but, knowing Pru, she'd be likely to drag her husband to Heaven with her when the time came.

"Hope so, anyway," he muttered, after he'd banged the screen porch door behind him. He heaved himself down on a kitchen chair and unfurled the local Sunday paper. Other than the usual things -- kids from town getting into trouble Saturday night, a couple of sales at the discount mart -- the biggest news item was the revival, ending its week with this morning's special sunrise meeting. That and the weather, continuing sunny. Just like it always was in late August.



He'd just gotten up for a fresh cup of coffee when he heard the sound of the Taylor boy's truck pulling into the drive. He glanced at his watch, then went out to meet it.

"Running a little late?" he asked, after he had helped the teenager lift the last of the milk cans up onto its bed.

"Little bit late, Mr. Jensen, yeah. Got caught in traffic from the tent meeting -- they was just singing the final hymn when I drove by and some of the folks was already leaving. Still, you're the last one on my route, so it's straight to the creamery from here."

"Know if my wife's on her way home then?"

The boy pulled a handkerchief out of his jeans and used it to dab at the perspiration on his forehead. "Dunno, Mr. Jensen. You know how the women are at those meetings sometimes. Like to use them as a chance to socialize some before they get home."

Cary nodded. If he knew Pru, she'd probably be an hour more at least. Which meant, as long as he was up and outside again, he might as well start the rest of the day's work.

He nodded again. "Don't suppose the Reverend's sermon was on how the Bible says man's got to work by the sweat of his brow?"

The Taylor boy laughed. "Might as well have been," he said, wadding the handkerchief up in his hand. "But they had a notice

board up by the tent, said it was going to be about Jesus. Jesus and the Gadarene swine."

This time Cary laughed. "You don't mean to say the Reverend was going to be preaching about farming?"



It was well into afternoon by the time Cary got back to the house. Pru had been back for some hours by then and had dinner almost ready to serve, so he just kissed her and went to wash up. A few minutes later, though, she called to him.

"Honey," she said, "you really missed something. That Reverend Satterfield really can preach."

"Guess I might have," he said as he came back downstairs. He went in the kitchen and kissed her again, then accepted the coffee she handed to him. "John Taylor's son was by this morning to pick up the milk. He said the sermon was on hog farming."

"What do you mean, about hog farming?" His wife looked puzzled then, seeing his grin, broke into a smile too. "Oh, honey," she said. "You're trying to fun me. What it was was the Gadarene swine" – she talked while she put dishes out on the table -- "and about how Jesus was casting out devils."

"I don't know, Pru," Cary said. The food smelled good. "You know I respect religion and all that, but when they get to talking about devils -- I mean, I know stuff like that might have gone on in Bible times, but here and now. . . ."

"You hush up and eat while it's hot." His wife pulled a sizzling platter of broiled chicken out of the oven and set it down on the kitchen table, then sat in the chair across from his. "According to the Reverend Satterfield, there's still devils all around, just waiting for a chance to get into people. The way he put it, it's like a disease -- a sort of infection. Like in the Middle Ages it infected Spain, so they had that Inquisition thing and tortured people. Then later, in France, in their revolution, where everybody went kind of crazy and started chopping off people's heads. People don't usually act like that."

"Some people do," Cary said between bites of chicken. "They're naturally mean. Like back when I was in the army, there was this sergeant. . . ."

"You just eat, honey. I know you had a long, hard day and I should have come back sooner to help with some of the chores. Still, the Reverend's preaching was *good*. He made you almost feel those red hot tongs and things they had in the Inquisition. Or what it was like if you were a witch and were going to be burned at the stake or something. And he pointed out -- like you mentioned the army -- that if it wasn't for the Devil we wouldn't have wars."

"That's the big Devil. Sure, I know that. And about Hell and stuff. But all these *little* devils and demons running around getting into people -- that's where I think preachers sometimes go too far. Like in the story about the swine. Weren't the devils supposed to actually be in the hogs?"

"That happens too, honey." She got up and scraped the last mashed potatoes onto his plate, then set the bowl into the sink to fill with water. "Remember that big boar you had who broke down his pen two summers ago. You said yourself that he just went wild. . . ."

"Yeah, but I caught him and, after that, he calmed right down."

"Sure he did, honey, but that's because the devils had already left him by then. When he tore himself on the broken gate post. You'd said he bled some. Reverend Satterfield says that's one way the devils leave people when they have to. Through bodily fluids like blood and stuff -- that's how he put it. That's why people who worship the big Devil always sacrifice an animal and drink its blood. That way the little devils get spread. . . ."

"You talking about those kids got caught painting stars and things on McKenna's old barn? The paper may have talked about devils, but you know those kids were just acting up -- just doing that stuff to dig at their parents. Anyway, even in the Bible, I don't remember Jesus chasing after those pigs with a knife or something."

Pru bent over and kissed her husband as she took the last of the plates away. "No, Jesus didn't use a knife. He *prayed* the devils out, just like people can do today if they believe hard enough. And that stuff about kids is serious, honey. Sure, some of them may be just acting up -- or so they'll think -- but the Reverend Satterfield

said he could feel devils all around us. That's why he had us saying those prayers. . . ."

"Well, I still don't know, Pru," Cary said as he got up from his own chair and stretched. "Do know this -- that between you and that Reverend Satterfield, any devils came onto *this* land would sure get off it as quick as they could. Tell you what, though" -- he stepped to where his wife was standing in front of the sink and gave her a hug -- "why don't you hold dessert for an hour, give me a chance to do evening chores now? It's been a big day for you in its way, with the meeting and all, so maybe, after, we'll get to bed early?"

His wife hugged him back. "Don't be too long, honey," she said. "Because it's so hot, we're going to have ice cream."



"Cows are sure funny," Cary said as he and his wife got undressed that night. "Don't think I told you, but they were all spooked up from something this morning. This evening, though, just before I got back to the kitchen, I thought I heard a storm in the distance. Yet, when I went in the barn to feed them, every one of them was perfectly calm."

"Weather report says sunny tomorrow -- that's what they said on the radio anyway. I turned it on to listen to after you left to finish the chores. Still, I guess like anything else, what the weather's going to be is God's will."

"Yeah, I guess it is, Pru. Like anything else." He pulled the top sheet down for his wife, then climbed into bed beside her. "Even like Jesus casting the devils out of those hogs in the Reverend's sermon."

"Doing what, honey?" Her voice sounded tired -- it *had* been a long day.

"Casting the devils out of the swine. Like you were saying at dinner before."

"Oh, honey," she said. She kissed him softly. "You just got to read your Bible more. Jesus didn't cast the devils *out* of the swine. That's where they fled to after He chased them out of some people. That's what we prayed for after the sermon, that Jesus would help

us cast devils out too -- but just out of people. Like from those boys that the sheriff caught painting those signs on the barn."

"Just chasing devils out of the boys, huh?" As he rolled over to turn out the light, he realized he was as tired as Pru was. He'd almost caught himself starting to wonder. . . .



Then how come the cows were so calm that evening? He woke from a dream about wars and torture and burning witches and severed heads. And, flowing with the blood in his dream, the chalk white cascade of a river of milk. A river that joined with other rivers from other farms, and mixed its fluids, and went into cartons to be distributed Monday morning. He'd dreamed about people who sacrificed animals to drink their blood. . . .

No, not their blood. Their bodily fluids. That's how Pru had said the Reverend Satterfield put it. The Reverend who -- like Jesus -- led prayers to cast devils, not out of animals, but out of people.

After which, the devils were free. . . .

And the cows were calm -- each one calmed, in turn, after its milking. Calm enough that they remained calm into the evening.

Despite the storm the weather bureau had failed to predict.



The storm, unnatural for the season, that he could now hear was coming closer.

THE END

THE SWEETNESS OF YOUR HEART

BY ANN K. SCHWADER

Ann K. Schwader lives and writes in Westminster, CO. She is an active member of both SFWA and HWA, with multiple Honorable Mentions in *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*. Her dark fiction has appeared in *Best of Dreams of Decadence*, *The Darker Side*, *Tales Out of Innsmouth*, and elsewhere. Her first collection of dark fiction, *Strange Stars & Alien Shadows*, is available now in eBook and print-on-demand formats from Lindisfarne Press.

<http://www.clare.ltd.new.net/epress/webpages/ankh.htm>.

So now you are dying, my love. At the end of your long proud drive lined with cypress, beyond the double-planked doors of your ancestral home (no home to me, though I dwelled therein), you lie pallid and speechless at last. The physicians come and go like so many ravens in their tight black coats, disturbing your household day and night with their harsh voices and nostrums and fees, though there is nothing to be done. Nothing at all.

Nothing but to wait, and to watch. And I do.

I dare not fail in my task, for there are many who rely upon me now. Many who are bound too strongly by age and habit and . . . change to stir far beyond their accustomed haunts. It is strange to be so free now -- I who was never free -- and I revel even in this duty beneath our lady moon. Beneath your wide sheer-curtained window, where the shrubberies have not been cut back for years, I wait with infinite patience and observe all that I can.

Observation, you might remember (but your mind does not remember anything, not now), is among my most notable virtues. Observation and silence. It was while I silently observed you from my exile's corner at a crowded ball that you fell in love with me at first sight. Or so you claimed. Surely there was little else to fall in love with but my virtues, for my mirror had been a poor friend since my earliest youth.

Too thin, it whispered in its harpy tones. Too thin, too pale, too graceless. Nothing my dressmaker devised could please it -- or my father, either; for he saw his investment in my future dwindling year by year. Season by season. Three seasons and a girl is done,

a failure forever. And it was in my third London season that you plucked me from that dismal garden of dashed hopes, waltzes, and wicked tongues, whirling me away to church as quickly as propriety (and settlements) allowed. You could not rest, you said, until we were one eternally. Until I was truly and wholly yours.

And all of this, I believed, from the sweetness of your heart.

There is a tolling now disturbing the chill air. A solemnity of iron and sentiment nine tailors long. Your passing bell, my love, ringing out from the squat gray chapel where your ancestors have been married and buried for centuries. And beside that stone toad of a building, well fenced in by more solemn iron, the churchyard dominated by a single outsize crypt of leprous marble.

Your crypt, my love. Soon. Soon you shall join that society of the smug and justified dead, another brick in its proper niche in the family wall. You showed it to me once, soon after we were married. A shallow cold bone-slot . . . but how proud you were of it; and of the niche immediately beneath, where I should be placed one day.

There were other niches below yours as well, and more than one of them sealed. When I stooped to read their engraving, though, you took me by the arm and hurried me out of that place. "Never speak of them," you said. "I could not bear it."

But driving away that dying afternoon, I stared back out of the window and thought of them. Called to them out of my heart, wishing them happy where they were as I was now happy beside you -- until you caught me leaning out too far, and pulled me back in. Such flattering anger! The sweetness of your heart could not bear that I might be injured by falling from your carriage.

Or perhaps you too had seen -- from the corner of your eye, as I did -- certain shadows in the day's last light, flitting among the constellation of lesser stones. *Never speak of them, either*, said your fixed expression.

Your habitual expression, as I learned soon enough at the end of that cypress drive, within the endless cold rooms and rambling wings of your ancestral monument. Monument to some infinitely more important past, when your family name was a conjuring-word for counties around and each November's hunt rode out in a glory of surging hounds and horns and expense. Now only the monument

itself remained, sustained on diminished lands and investments you never spoke of -- not even to my father, or his solicitor.

Or to me, of course, your most recent investment.

I was truly and wholly yours along with my passions and my virtues and all I possessed, but only the latter held much continuing luster for you. The rest was a troublesome packet of inadequacies demanding constant management. Discipline, even, though you never struck me. You only shrank my world around me, like distant sun drying up a puddle.

Another physician, now. And a surgeon, hurrying fast into the house. The silhouettes at your bedside flock thick as a murder of crows.

There were crows outside my sitting-room window every morning until the last. Or perhaps they were ravens, though I never dared to ask you. You had, you said, no patience with ignorant women. My shrunken world made ignorance too easy, and so I resumed silence instead. For some months you accepted that (welcomed it even, I think), but then my silence became a barrier to be pecked away at, if only because it was mine. It was all I had left.

And when that was gone too; when I had no peace from what passed for your conversation . . . at meals, in the endless evenings, even in your bed on rare occasions . . . I knew nothing but hollowness and a longing for death. Remembering the churchyard shadows of that long-ago afternoon, I felt a bleak kinship. Surely they would take me now if I went to them.

The moon hung like a suicide blade in the night beyond my window. Slipping outside in my nightdress, I ran up that long drive like a penitent, welcoming each stone beneath my bleeding feet. Mortality's black angel haunted my soul now, harrying it on towards the tall spiked gates which had tempted me with their shadows.

They should, of course, have been locked now, so long after sunset.

I had not thought of that.

Ignorant, your brandy-whetted voice rasped in the ear of my memory. *Too ignorant even to die*. And perhaps you were right, my love. The thick chain -- thick as a young child's wrist -- which should have bound those gates coiled snakelike on the ground

inside, its lock broken open. Pushing through with my last scraps of strength, I heard only the silence of oiled hinges where I remembered no such blessing.

And still further inside, beyond that great crypt crouched like a pallid sphinx, beyond all but the meanest clumpings of headstones, I came upon my shadows at last.

Or rather, they came upon me.

Even now . . . even to myself . . . I can hardly describe such horrid magnificence of limb and feature. Bestirring themselves suddenly from their strange feast, they seemed at first like a pride of she-hyenas sprung out of hell, with eyes of kindled amber and dripping crimson jaws. Such jaws they were, too! for the long bones of a human leg were nothing to them, and the soundest-woven graveclothes merest tissue.

Then a wind licked through that churchyard and brought me the scent of them, and I knew I should die where I stood. It was an exhalation of the conquering worm and the death-gorged earth, every rank impurity of the flesh and the unshriven spirit, all mingled within a miasma of ancient brimstone.

"*So,*" breathed the most twisted of these apparitions, impaling me with her incarnadine gaze.

But now there are sudden stirrings of light in the frugal dankness of your rooms. Exclamations of something which passes for grief. A great cry for candles and lamps and messengers goes up, and I fade further into these shrubberies which have served me so well. The violent apoplexy which struck you down on the morning after my escape has won through at last. The Demoiselle D'eath lays her chill kiss upon your brow, marking you as truly and wholly hers.

Or perhaps not wholly. Only truly, for the pageant I have watched through this long night for -- this night, and two before it -- now stirs to life, a massive and hideously costly creature.

In its masque of crape and bombazine and jet, in its mummery of mutes and prayers and priests, it will ravage your lands like a fire. Ancestral pride, as manifested by obscure relatives and hangers-on, must squander what it cannot lay claim to. A burnished ebony hearse and four matched blacks, with nodding raven plumes to their headstalls -- nothing less will suffice for your final

conveyance. Dripping guineas in place of honest tears, this dark pantomime shall wind its way to the burying-ground of St. Toad's.

And there, behind the verdigris doors and poxed marble of your ancestral mausoleum, after the last hireling mourners have departed . . . while your distant relations are pillaging the choicest vintages from your cellar . . . there we shall be reunited at last, my love. All of us.

Eternally, just as you wished.

Si'lat, my shadows call themselves, in the esoteric Eastern tongue of ghûls: sister connoisseurs of the new-dug grave, female adepts of the truest possible consumption. But they bore other names once. Names you could not bear to hear spoken, names you saw engraved and forgotten under niches sealed against prying eyes. However you willed yourself to believe in their deaths -- by drowning or laudanum or lethal melancholy -- they were merely used up, and not dead forever. Only inconveniently missing, when you so wished and needed to marry again.

But, of course, you managed anyway. Over and over, with all the proper certifications of your widower's weeds in hand. Some thrice-damned, thrice-perjured solicitor, no doubt. And some soundly blackmailed surgeon as well, to sign where the solicitor could not.

There are no surgeons waiting in this final twilight, my love. No solicitors. Only we who were utterly devoured by you, in full view of the world and without recourse. Hollow and aching in our esuriance, we await what is by right of nature -- red-fanged Nature, who rends to rebirth -- ours alone.

And to me alone (for I have been promised) shall go the most highly esteemed tidbit of all. The delicacy I craved always, yet waited a lonely lifetime to savor.

The sweetness of your heart.

THE END

THE KINDS OF THINGS YOU TALK ABOUT IN ARKANSAS TRUCK STOPS BY DAVID ACORD

David Acord lives in the Washington, D.C. area where he is managing editor at a business publishing company. His fiction has previously appeared in *The Crescent Review* and is forthcoming in *Permutations: The Journal of Strange & Unsettling Fiction*. He received his MFA in Fiction from Penn State University in 1996.

Sure it happens, this is life, real life, these are *people* we're talking about. Jealousy, fear, hatred, you name the motivation: it happens. The old one will catch the new one going through his things and decide to put a bullet in him. Or the new one will lose his temper and shove the old one out a window or down a flight of stairs. You get the idea.

Yes ma'am, more coffee. Thank you. You pour, I'll drink. Do what? That's right. That's why they call it a bottomless cup.

What about you? You all right? I'm buying. No? Okay. So where...yeah, things can get tense some times, no doubt about it. That's why my approach is always to take it easy, play it cool, try not to spook anybody too much. Ease into it. When I can, anyway. Sometimes it's a rush job. There's been a lot of those lately: wham-bam-thank-you-whatever-the-hell-your-name-is. We're over-worked and under-staffed. You've heard that story before.

But it's better if you have time. If they live in a farm house, for instance, you come in across the fields, slowly. Let them see you. Let them run back into the house and get their binoculars. Let them watch you set up camp a few hundred yards away, see that you aren't a threat. Then the next day, you come in a little closer. Maybe you spend the next night in the barn. Then you make your way to the back porch. By now it's sinking in. Usually.

One of the first things I always do – besides being friendly and polite, of course – one of the first things is, I tell them, "Believe it or not, we're not completely alike." And the old one will always go, "No way, you look just like me." And they'll always say it in this really horrified voice.

And then I'll say, "You got any scars? Any old wounds?"

And they'll show me something, some cut on an arm or leg. Then I'll show them my arm or leg, and it's not there.

"See? Not completely alike. Almost, but not completely."

And that sets them at ease. Because the last few days have been tough. They're about to get tougher, too. More melancholy.

Man, I tell you what...no, it's all right. Damn nosebleeds. You got a handkerchief? I'll be right back. Just give me a second. Don't go anywhere.

No, not a headache. More like a face-ache. A skull-ache. It's like...I can't describe it. But I'm better now. It comes in waves. There'll be another one along soon.

Hey, you didn't eat my eggs while I was gone, did you?

Just kidding. So where...

Right. Melancholy.

Like the sunset this evening, right after you picked me up. Thanks again, by the way. Hitching in December is no fun.

But it makes you sad, doesn't it, staring at a sunset on the interstate? It's sort of the same thing when I show up. They're not angry, at least not all the time. Mostly they're sad, like they're watching a sunset. And they are. Things are winding down. They had their chance to work things out, but they didn't, and they realize that. But they gave it their best shot. I always tell them, "You did the best you could. No one's saying you didn't work hard."

I try to keep them busy those last few days. Once they accept it, don't let them drift off by themselves and brood. I give them little things to do: make a list of all their scars and wounds. And any tattoos, of course. Measure them. Write down their exact location. That helps me later when I make the final touch-ups.

Some of them will get real eager; they'll want to help. They'll tell me all about their life, their routine, they'll show me around the house, tell me how to fix the water heater when it breaks down, show me how much food to give the dog. And it's all good information. I'm happy to get it. Just makes my job easier. Plus it makes them feel better. And that's what it's all about, man: keeping things copasetic. You don't want them flaking out on you. You want them calm, for when the pains start.

The face-aches. The skull-aches. Whatever you want to call them. Me, I've learned to handle it, with experience. But most people, the first time it happens, they think their eyes are going to explode. They think their nose is going to shoot off around the room like a Scud missile.

No, thanks, hon, I'm still working on the last cup. What about you? Sure? Okay.

The first time's always the hardest. All I can do is hold them.

Sorry. I told you... well, better to bleed on my eggs than yours, right? That's one way to keep you from eating them!

Be right back.

I think I passed out for a second in one of the stalls.

What? Yeah, it's still me! No, don't apologize, man. It's all right. I get it all the time. It freaks people out. I go to the bathroom, come back five minutes later, my eyebrows are thicker. And a different color. Or my cheekbones have moved! And maybe I've got an accent! Lord love a duck.

You need to find the right perspective in this job. That's what I tell them. Take the long view. It's all about cycles. I'll stand them in front of a mirror and say, "Look at that. You're going away and I'm coming in. And you're coming into someone else, and that person, he's going away into someone else, too. And on and on it goes."

I don't kick the old ones out right away. I let them hang around until they get through their first change all right. It's always weird when it's over, handing them a mirror and letting them check out the new face job. Watching them strip off their clothes and stare at their new body like it was a giant leech attached to their neck. But they get used to it. Eventually we all do.

They even get excited after I explain it to them. Once they realize that someone is going to make something out of their life after all – it's just not going to be *them*. But hey, it's the same name, right? And then they realize that they're going to do the same thing. They're going to get a chance to make someone else's life better. Right someone else's wrongs. And maybe in the process, atone for their own sins. For the fact that they screwed up their own life.

Once they leave – and I always tell them, be polite when you find the person you're going to replace, remember what it was like

for you – once they leave, that’s when my job really begins. There’s usually quite a mess to clean up. Maybe I have to divorce their wife or quit their job or turn myself in for not paying child support for the last five years. Shit like that. Complete turnaround.

Ever known someone who’s been trying to lose weight for years, but never does? Then all of a sudden, boom, they drop two hundred pounds. That’s our handiwork. Someone else is on the job now.

Or maybe your best friend stops screwing his secretary and starts showing up for church every Sunday. Maybe your sister kicks heroin once and for all and starts making handmade Christmas cards.

No, sweetheart, I think I’ve finally reached the bottom of that cup. Never thought I would, but I did. Just the check, please, we’re ready to roll. Hmm? No ma’am, we’re not brothers. Just two fellow travelers.

Listen, man, this one’s on me. You keep your wallet in your pocket.

Hold on. Just take it easy. Take a deep breath. Here, grip my hand. Grip it as hard as you want. Grip it. Grip it. That’s right. Come on man, hang in there, it’ll only last a few more seconds. I know it hurts. It hurts like hell. You can gut it out. Come on. Grip it. Grip it.

Grip it.

There. All right. Good job. Way to go. See that? Your head’s still in one piece. Your skull’s not on fire. It’s just your first time, it always feels way more intense that first time.

All right. Let’s just sit here one more minute.

So tell me something, man.

Any tattoos I should know about?

THE END

RESIDUAL FUMES

BY MARGARET L. CARTER

Marked for life by reading *Dracula* at the age of twelve, Margaret L. Carter specializes in fiction and literary criticism on fantasy and the supernatural, especially vampires. She edited a scholarly anthology, *Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics*, and wrote *The Vampire in Literature: A Critical Bibliography* and *Different Blood: The Vampire as Alien*. Her novels include a werewolf tale, *Shadow of the Beast*, an Eppie Award-winning vampire novel, *Dark Changeling*, and several vampire romances. Check out her books and back issues of her vampire zine at <http://www.margaretlcarter.com>. Still available from Shocklines.com and Mythos Books.

The garage reeked of gasoline fumes.

Marcie told herself once again that the odor sprang from her morbid imagination. Eight days had passed since the -- incident. She had aired out the place and even mopped the concrete slab floor with soapy water. The police had impounded the car. No physical traces remained.

Nevertheless, she felt half-suffocated. She raised the garage door and paused for a breath of air, gazing at the closely mown and edged lawn. The grass was turning brown. Marcie hadn't remembered to water it since her sister JoAnn had gone to the hospital. As if I don't have enough to think about. *Mom sure can't cope, so I'm stuck with all of it.*

As usual, Marcie's thoughts shied away from the details of "it." She had plenty of work to keep her grounded in the here and now, clearing out her late brother-in-law's things. When JoAnn came home, she wouldn't want physical reminders of her husband.

She will come home. Of course she will. Marcie squelched the inner voice echoing the doctor's opinion that JoAnn's coma would most likely end only in death.

Hoping for a breeze, she propped open the door that led to the kitchen. She scanned the garage, debating where to start. Despite several moppings, oil stains dotted the floor where the car had been parked. She swallowed against sudden queasiness and instead turned her eyes toward the wall where Lou's fishing rods hung. Tackle boxes sat on shelves next to the washing machine, and a golf

bag leaned in a corner. Stacks of sports magazines and *Playboy* issues covered other shelves. The only property of JoAnn's immediately visible was a pile of folded laundry on top of the dryer.

Marcie had brought her van to haul away every remaining trace of Lou. After donating his clothes and other personal items to the Salvation Army, she'd put off this ordeal until the last.

She marched over to the wall and stripped the fishing rods from their racks. As much as JoAnn had complained about Lou's neglecting her for his male bonding excursions, she'd been better off with him out of the house than in it.

A glimpse of the kitchen through the half-open door woke a memory: Drinking coffee with JoAnn at that very table one Saturday afternoon. Lou had walked in with a brace of large rockfish, which he'd plopped in the sink. When he bent over to give JoAnn a peck on the cheek, Marcie smelled beer on top of the fishy aroma. "Clean those for dinner, babe. And do it right this time."

JoAnn's fingers curled into a fist around her coffee mug. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You wasted half of my last catch trying to fillet them. Pay attention to what you're doing for a change."

"Like I've got nothing else to do."

"Yeah, you're real busy, drinking coffee all day."

"How would you know what I do all day? You're never here." She banged the mug down with a slosh of warm liquid. "If you're so particular, clean your own damn fish."

"Watch your mouth! Nobody talks to me like that." Lou grabbed her arm to haul her out of the chair.

Marcie's chest tightened. She sprang up and took one step in their direction. "Get your hands off her."

Lou glared at her. "And you mind your own business. I'm sick of you butting in."

"JoAnn, don't let him --"

JoAnn cast her a pleading look. "Go on, Marcie. I'll be fine."

Knowing intervention might make things worse, Marcie had left. She felt a familiar flush of anger, reliving the times she'd seen her sister with bruises on arm or cheek. Again and again, Lou's long-stemmed roses and crocodile tears had overridden JoAnn's sporadic attacks of good sense.

Breathing hard, Marcie wrestled piles of magazines from shelves into boxes. Dust puffed up and made her sneeze. A deep breath sucked the remnants of gasoline odor into her lungs. Noticing a wad of oily rags on the nearby workbench, she decided that was the source of the smell. With the fumes, the images of that last day flooded her mind.

The phone call had come late on a weekday afternoon. "Sis, he's gone crazy. You were right, and I'm not putting up with it anymore."

Having begged JoAnn several times to leave her husband, Marcie had heard this resolution before. Nothing had come of it. This time, though, JoAnn had her bag packed. "Can I stay with you awhile? I'll be over there as soon as I finish getting my stuff together."

After an hour's wait, Marcie had started to worry. With no answer on the phone, she'd rushed to JoAnn's house.

Entering through the unlocked front entrance, she scurried from room to room. All empty. Last, she wrenched open the door between kitchen and garage. A cloud of smoke hit her in the face. She held her breath and dashed forward to raise the main door. Then, coughing and retching, she stumbled to the car and reached into the driver's side, across Lou's inert body, to switch off the ignition.

Both of their faces were flushed a deep red. Blood matted JoAnn's short, blonde hair. Lou must have knocked her unconscious to keep her from escaping. After a quick check of Lou's wrist, finding no pulse, Marcie hurried around to pull her sister out. She dragged JoAnn into the kitchen, laid her on the cool floor, and called 911. Until the ambulance shrieked into the driveway, she worked frantically at CPR.

The ER staff had declared Lou DOA. JoAnn had remained comatose ever since.

Again, Marcie could smell that asphyxiating cloud as if the room had never been ventilated. Yes, she knew the real danger wasn't the stink of the exhaust, but rather the odorless gas hiding behind it. Still, the memory choked her. *Just my imagination.* She fought the urge to rush outside to the fresh air of the summer day and

leave the cleanup for another time. *No time like the present; it won't get any better.*

A scraping sound broke into her thoughts. She looked up, wiping grimy sweat from her forehead. With a groan of hinges, the garage door slipped downward. Hadn't she braced it open? She headed for the entrance. The gap between door and driveway shrank at increasing speed. Before she reached the door, it fell shut with a crash.

Marcie walked over to raise it. Just as her hands touched the lever, she heard the kitchen door slam. The idea of spending one minute in that space with no escape hatch made her feel stifled. She scurried back to the smaller door and grasped the knob. Her sweat-dampened palm slipped on the brass. After wiping her hand on her shorts, she tried again. The knob wouldn't turn.

Okay, it's stuck, she told herself. Or I accidentally pushed in the lock button. No problem, I'll just open the big door.

At the front of the garage, she tugged on the latch until she managed to wrench it into the unlocked position. But all her strength couldn't budge the metal door. Panting and sweaty, she paused to rub her aching arms. *It's not that heavy. The heat's making it stick. That has to be what's wrong.* She braced herself and shoved again.

After another minute or two, she leaned against the immobile barrier, gasping. In the stuffy warmth of the room, she scented gasoline again. *Lou must've spilled a puddle of gas, filling the lawn mower, in some corner where I didn't see it.* Taking shallow breaths, she made her way to the workbench and rummaged through the tools for a miniature screwdriver. Picking the flimsy lock of the kitchen door shouldn't pose a problem.

She poked the screwdriver into the hole in the doorknob and jiggled it every possible way. The fumes got stronger minute by minute. At last she heard the mechanism click. The knob still wouldn't turn. She rattled it, kicked the wooden panel, beat on it with both fists.

The smell of exhaust smoke was now unmistakable. She felt smothered by the heat, and her head throbbed. She started across the concrete floor to the front of the house. She stumbled and had to hold onto walls and shelves to steady herself. The odor made her

stomach churn. Reaching the large door, she gave it one more futile shove. Pounding on the metal, she screamed until her throat turned hoarse. She sank to her knees and laid her cheek against the hinge, trying to pretend she felt a stirring of air.

If I just had my cell phone. But she had left it in her car in the driveway.

This is ridiculous. She couldn't suffocate in an empty garage, shut in by an ordinary pair of doors. If nothing else, she could batter a hole into the kitchen. She pulled herself to her feet and began groping her way toward the workbench. Fighting nausea and dizziness, her vision graying, she fumbled among the tools until her fingers closed on a hammer. Now all she had to do was find the door.

A deep voice rumbled in her ear, "What do you think you're doing with that, bitch?"

Her stomach lurched. Lou! A second later, sanity asserted itself. *No way. Hallucination. Got to get out of here.* She turned in a half circle, unsure which way she needed to walk.

"Damn it, I'm talking to you!" the voice roared.

When she took two blundering steps in what she guessed to be the right direction, she hit an invisible barrier, staggered backward, and fell. Her elbow struck the floor with a nerve-jangling pain. For a few seconds she lay hunched over, coughing and choking. As soon as she could move, she clutched the nearest shelf to pull herself up.

"You're dead," she gasped.

"Yeah, and it's your fault."

Blinking, Marcie stared at the figure that blocked the path to the kitchen. It looked like her brother-in-law, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, with untidy brown hair framing his deceptively handsome face. Hallucination or not, he appeared solid. She caught a whiff of beer and fish.

"My fault?" The words came out as a feeble croak.

"You encouraged her with that independence crap. Because of you, she tried to run away."

Marcie felt the fumes thickening around her in a noxious cloud. "Go back to hell, you --" She gagged on the foul air.

He glided toward her. She threw the hammer. It went right through him.

Laughing, he reached for her. She lurched to one side, and he let her go. Circling around him, she tried to snatch up the hammer and fell to her knees. With her head spinning, she struggled to stand up.

"Thanks to you, I'm stuck here like this," Lou's voice said above her. "I wanted to keep JoAnn with me, but I can't find her anywhere."

"Because she's not dead," Marcie gasped.

"Then she will be soon. And we'll be together forever."

Using the dryer for support, Marcie stood up once more. Her hand explored the top of the machine and found the folded lingerie from the last washload, over a week before. She plucked out a sheer nightgown, which she pressed to her nose and mouth as a barrier against the gas. The cloth still held a hint of her sister's jasmine cologne, under the fragrance of soap. *JoAnn -- don't let him win.*

"She'll never be with you." Gray spots clustered in front of Marcie's eyes. Her head pounded. She fought to keep a grip on consciousness, knowing that if she passed out, she would never wake. If she could only retrieve the hammer and reach the door, she had a chance.

Another voice spoke: "No, I won't. Give up, Lou."

Startled, Marcie tripped and fell again. She tilted her head to stare upward, bleary-eyed. A female shape hovered between her and Lou. From Marcie's angle, she saw the woman in profile, with short, tousled blonde hair. JoAnn stood straighter than she had in life, her head high with new confidence.

"You're here, babe. I knew you'd join me."

"Think again. I'm here to send you where you belong." She stretched out her right arm and touched him delicately on the chest. He began to fade.

"But honey, I only did it so I wouldn't lose you --" His voice trailed off to a thin squeak.

"Go away, Lou."

Crouched on hands and knees, Marcie watched him turn transparent and dissolve to nothing. The kitchen door popped open, and the front of the garage rattled as the other door lifted up.

A breeze drifted through the garage. She gulped a deep breath. JoAnn gazed down at her, smiling. "Thank you for trying to save me, sis."

Oh, God, if she's here, she must be dead too! Tears welled in Marcie's eyes. Through their mist, she saw JoAnn vanish.

Slowly Marcie stood up. The vertigo and nausea receded. The odor of gasoline was completely gone. Through the open door, she heard the telephone in the kitchen ringing. Only the hospital knew where to find her this afternoon.

They're calling to say she died.

Marcie stumbled into the house and grabbed the wall phone. Swallowing her tears, she answered the caller.

"You'll probably want to come over here right away," said the voice on the line. "Your sister has just regained consciousness."

THE END

LOST SOULS

BY KAT YARES

Kat Yares is known by some as "the 'unknown' earth mother of horror" as many of her stories deal with living in the rural Ozark Mountains. Her work has appeared in *Quantum Muse*, *Stories of Fear III*, *Blood Moon Rising*, *Thirteen Stores* and *Alien Skin*. More about her at: <http://katyares.tripod.com>.

The man stood motionless at the large picture window overlooking the street below. It was a perfect Friday night. A pregnant and heavy full October blood moon loomed over the horizon rising into a brilliant starlit sky. A thin smile was on his lips as he thought of how everything was in place: the moon, the stars, the day. It was All Hallows Eve, the high holy day of the dead. Patiently waiting, he watched the road. Occasionally he saw a child, costumed in the latest cartoon character craze or possibly a more traditional ghost, witch or vampire, run from house to house, candy bag open, expectation of special treats shown in their squeals of delight.

For Amos Mallory, it was indeed a special Halloween night. One of promise, one of expectation, one of special desires coming to fruition. For Amos, this Halloween was the one that his late wife would return to him. To sit in the leather chair beside the fire, share a brandy and conversation. It had taken him ten years to figure out how, but now there was nothing left to do but the ritual itself.

The candles were in place, the pentacle drawn upon the floor and Laura's body placed within the center of the five-pointed star. Amos looked down upon his wife. She was as beautiful as the day she had died. The fact that her body had been stolen from the morgue was now a distant memory and unsolved mystery in the minds of the community of High Gap. The freezer he had purchased to preserve her beauty had never let him down, The gentle hum soothing him in the basement corner while he researched and learned the secrets of reanimating his beloved.

Now, he was confident he was ready. All was prepared. He only needed one soul to exchange for the soul of his dear Laura and she would again be at his side. He would not have to wait long now. Young Timothy Bryan would be knocking on his door, to again

torment him and expect a treat. What the poor young punk did not realize was this year the trick would be on him.

Amos expected few, if any, trick or treater's this year. Since the death of his wife, he had been marked by the town as an eccentric; someone to keep your kids away from. Only the small town hoodlums dared to taunt him, always teasing, always cruel. Those ones would come to his door this night. Amos sat in the rocker behind the large picture window watching the walkway. Timothy was sure to come, he always did.

A few minutes past eleven, Amos' perseverance paid off. The doorbell rang its shill buzzer repeatedly, as if a finger were stuck on the button. Amos opened the door, a broad smile on his usually somber face.

"Hey, Old Man. You'd best have some candy or something to treat me with if you know what's good for you."

"I've been waiting for you Timothy."

"Yeah right. So what's the treat?"

"I don't have one."

"Well, you better cough up some cash then or believe me, old man, you ain't going to like my trick."

"Yes, well...maybe I can come up with something, young Timothy."

"Quit calling me that. It's just Tim. Got it?"

Amos continued to smile. "Why don't you follow me, just Tim, and I'll see what I can come up with."

Timothy stood on the porch and stared at the old man. For the first time, the kid appeared nervous. He looked over his shoulder, as if hoping that his friends were around. All he saw was an empty street. Putting his hands in his jeans pockets, he said, "OK, show me what you got." and followed the older man inside.

Amos led him toward the stairway. He turned back and looked at the young man. The boy didn't appear to be so brave now. A look of confusion caused a deep crease to appear between the boy's brow, his dark eyes were wide and he was constantly licking his lips with his tongue as if his mouth were dry. One hand went up to push his stringy blond hair from his face.

"Where you taking me, man?" his bravado attempting to keep his fear at bay.

"Just upstairs where I keep my wallet. It is cash you want, correct?"

"Old man, you better make this worth it."

"Trust me, just Tim, this will be the most valuable treat you've ever received." Amos could see the greed in the boy's eyes. "Follow me."

Reaching the room at the end of the upstairs hall, Amos opened the door. The carefully placed candles made the room fully illuminated and by the time Timothy caught up with him, he was ready.

"What the hell?" the boy asked, catching sight of what was in the center of the room.

Before he could turn and run Amos had the chloroform soaked rag over his mouth and nose. Within moments, the young man relaxed in his arms; passed out cold.

"Well, young Timothy...excuse me, just Tim. You are in for a very special treat tonight. This will be the greatest trick I have ever done."

The older man placed the boy's body in a heavy upholstered straight back chair. Almost lovingly, he tied the young man's wrists and ankles to the arms and legs of the chair. When he was satisfied his captive was secure; he went over to his wife's cold, immobile body.

"Only a few more moments love." he said, stroking her gray, colorless face. He rose to his feet and walked to the corner where a pedestal stood centered within a circle. Walking around the circle three times clockwise, he chanted 'LUOS TSOL ESIR' redundantly. At the end of the incantation, he turned in the opposite direction and repeated the rite with a different chant.

Upon completion, he walked to the pedestal and began turning the pages of the large book placed on the stand.

Reading again the printed words, he nodded to himself and began the incantation. Over and over, he repeated the words until his voice began to crack and his throat ached. Amos felt dizzy. He could feel a presence here in this room with him. Suddenly the chair that held the bound Timothy Bryan crashed to the floor. Amos glanced at the boy, and could tell he had not yet regained consciousness. He continued with his ritual chant.

He watched as his wife's fingers began to move. Glancing at the clock on the wall, he saw it was a minute to midnight. The moment when all departed souls were free to walk the earth once more.

He chanted more fervently, knowing that his wife's spirit was now with him. His wife began moving her arms and legs until finally she was sitting in an upright position.

She shook her head. Her long blond hair flowing loosely. Taking a deep breath, she looked around the room

"I think you can stop now, Amos. You don't want to call back more than you expect."

Amos collapsed in a heap on the floor. Tears ran from his eyes. He had done it. Laura was home now. She was alive. No longer would he be alone.

Laura stood and walked over to where Timothy lay on the floor. "Isn't that the Bryan's little boy?" A frown clouded her features. "Was he still a punk kid? I remember him."

Amos could only nod. She even had her memories. It was more than he could have ever hoped for.

"Laura, my darling Laura. You have returned to me."

For a long moment, the blond woman only stared at the man sitting on the floor in the corner. A smile broke on her lips, her eyes dancing with laughter.

"Returned to you? Not in your wildest dreams. I was leaving you when I had that damned accident. What makes you think I would stay now?"

Amos could hear the bitterness in her voice. He had forgotten that fight years before when she had walked out. All he had remembered was the devastation he felt when he learned she was dead.

"Laura, my darling, I've bought you back. Surely you won't leave me now."

"You make it sound like I owe you something. I owe you nothing. I will not be trapped in a miserable existence like before."

"I promise you Laura, it will be different. I'll make it all up to you."

"Not a chance."

With that, Laura Mallory blew her husband a kiss, turned and walked out of the room. Between his sobs, Amos heard her descend the stairs and the front door slam. He had risked everything to bring her back and now he was left with only more heartbreak, and the body of the teenager to deal with.

Hearing the sound of splintering wood, he lifted his head from his hands, hoping beyond hope that his darling had returned. What he did see was Timothy Bryan, his dark eyes now soulless white, his face contorted with rage walking toward him. It was then, he screamed.

THE END

SHARKS IN A SEA OF RED

BY JASON BRANNON

Jason Brannon is the author of over 100 published short stories, four short story collections, two novels, and two chapbooks. His writing has appeared in such diverse publications as *Dark Realms*, *The Edge*, *Wicked Hollow*, *Black Petals* and *Dark Karma*.

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“What are you doing to me,” Burton murmured as Tanya finished tying his right wrist to the bedpost. She smiled at him pityingly, and he wondered if this was going to turn into another one of her sex games.

“Shut up,” she said flatly, checking the knots at his feet, tugging on them to make sure they held.

“You drugged me, didn’t you?” Burton mumbled, blinking his eyes slowly, seeing two and sometimes three of Tanya swimming in and out of focus. “I thought the wine tasted a little funny.”

“You’ve been a bad boy,” Tanya replied like a closet dominatrix, and Burton just knew that she was going to pull out the whips and chains any minute now. “The wine is the least of your problems.”

“Are you going to make me pay for being so naughty?” Burton asked playfully, watching the smile spread across Tanya’s face like cancer. “Are you going to punish me?”

“Oh, yeah. You can bet on that.”

Tanya had on a skin tight catsuit made of see-through black lace. She wasn’t wearing anything underneath. Even without the sedative, it would have been hard to concentrate on what she was saying.

“What are you going to do to me first?” Burton wondered, noticing the way the catsuit clung to every tight inch of her.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said coyly. “I thought I’d make you scream.”

“Screaming can be a good thing,” Burton rationalized. He smiled until he saw just how serious Tanya was all of a sudden.

“It can be,” she replied. “But not this time. Not when you’ve been cheating on me for the past five months.”

Burton's eyes widened at the sight of the hunting knife, and he knew immediately that there wasn't going to be one ounce of pleasure in this pain.

"What are you going to do with that?" Burton asked. There was a slight tremor in his voice that had nothing to do with the sedative which held his head fast against the pillow like an orderly's strong hands.

"You'll find out," Tanya replied as she sauntered over to the window and opened it.

"I didn't cheat on you," Burton said, tugging at the ropes to see if there was any chance of breaking out of them. There wasn't. Tanya had done a very efficient job with the knots.

"It's funny you should say that," Tanya answered, "because that's not the story I get from the private detective I hired to track you. In fact, he says there are quite a few women I don't know about."

Burton jerked madly at the ropes like an epileptic in the middle of a seizure, furious that she had been paying someone to spy on him. All it took to quiet him was one glimpse of the knife.

"You know, Burton, most women who found out the sort of things I did would use this knife to cut you up into little tiny pieces. But I'm not most women. I like to think that I'm smarter, a bit more cunning than the average girl. Inventive might be a good word to describe me. I've been thinking on this long and hard, trying to devise some suitable punishment for this sort of betrayal. And then it hit me the other day as I was watching TV. One of those wildlife documentaries was on, the kind where divers are out in the middle of the ocean trying to attract the Great White. After I found out what you had done to me, I felt like one of those chunks of red meat that the divers use to bring the sharks up to the boat. But it did a lot more than just make me feel bad. It also gave me an idea. It made me want to turn the tables."

"What are you talking about?"

"All it takes is a little blood in the water, and the sharks start circling. It really starts to get interesting when they've got a really big fish on a hook, dying in the water, thrashing as if that might save its life. The sharks swim by, taking huge bites out of it, sent into a frenzy at the slightest taste of blood."

"I think you're starting to lose it," Burton said.

Without a second thought Tanya stepped over to the bed and ran the knife across one of Burton's arms, drawing a thin line of blood.

"Jesus!" he exclaimed, staring stupidly at his injured arm. "Are you crazy?"

"Not crazy," she said coolly. "Inspired."

Although it might have been just the wind, Burton could have sworn that he heard something like the beating of wings on the cool, nighttime air. It sounded almost like pterodactyls were circling in the distance. Tanya must have heard it too. She smiled.

"You better hope I don't get loose," he threatened, wincing at the sting of the cut. "There's no telling what I might do to you."

Tanya seemed to be ignoring him. Something at the window had obviously attracted her attention.

"Can you hear them?" she said, a lilt in her voice that Burton had never heard before. "They can smell blood you know. Just like sharks in the water. I'll bet it's really something to see them in a feeding frenzy."

Blood tricked slowly down Burton's arm, staining the bedclothes, becoming sticky as it dried. Tanya frowned. Burton wasn't sure if it was because he wasn't bleeding enough or because he didn't look as scared as he initially had. With a quick flick of the wrist, however, her demeanor changed, and both problems were remedied. A quick gush of red spurted from the cut across his chest, convincing him quite surely that he was going to die.

"We've all heard the rumors that they've moved into the city," she said as she made another cut just above the kneecap, "but nobody ever really takes stuff like that seriously. Not until they've seen the undead up close. Of course, the police have known about them for quite a while now. They started using them to free up the jails. All it takes is a quick turn of the key and an even quicker turn of the head and you've got a dozen death row inmates who don't have to wait any longer for their punishment. Saves the taxpayers loads of money. Nobody has to know that the undead were let in on purpose. A lot of people are starting to catch on now though. Husbands start to get tired of their wives. A little money changes hands. Problem solved. The same thing goes with business rivals.

One guy is wiping the floor with the competition. The loser gets an idea in his head and decides that blood is the best way. The undead are more than happy to oblige him. And the best part about it all is that there's no way to trace the crime. The undead are very thorough."

The sweat rolled copiously down Burton's face now as the realization of death finally began to sink in. Although Tanya hadn't exactly used the word 'vampire' when describing his fate, he knew what she had in store for him. He had heard the same stories she had, the ones where vampires were being handsomely paid to rid the cities of vermin, the stories of entire police forces encouraging them to crawl out of their dark cellars and out into the glorious neon nightlife where they could feed at will on the rapists and pedofiles. Burton didn't think he fit into exactly the same category as murderers and sexual predators, but his opinion obviously wasn't the one that mattered at this point. Tanya, after all, was the one with the knife.

Tanya ran the blade along his wet chest, down the soft lines of his skin, past his navel, near his groin. Burton sighed involuntarily as the tip of the knife pricked his manhood.

"You don't think I would make it that easy, do you?" she said. "Sometimes, masculinity has nothing to do with that little organ that you seem to be so proud of. Besides, I don't want to physically turn you into a woman anyway. I want to break you instead and watch you whimper like a little girl. I want to show you what it's like to be a hunk of meat."

By this time the blood was gliding freely across his skin, pooling in the floor, absorbing into the sheets and the mattress beneath. The cacophony of rushing wind was suddenly much stronger, and Tanya's hair actually moved a little in the breeze.

"At first, it was hard to believe that there were so many of them," she said, glancing from Burton to the open window and back again. "But now that people are starting to discover that they're out there, they're making the most of it. It's so much better than Soldier of Fortune magazine. And quite a bit cheaper."

"Who you been talking to?" Burton snarled, trying hard ignore the pain and the jealousy that was invading his thoughts. "That prick Anderson?"

"Maybe," Tanya said evasively. "Maybe not. But it's always good to have a friend on the police force. You never know when that kind of influence might come in handy. He knows a lot of shady people. And those people know people."

"That tells me all I need to know," Burton growled as blood trickled down his restrained arms and chest like water from a fountain. "That little sleaze Anderson put some sort of crazy idea in your head. I'll kill him when I get out of these ropes."

"That's funny," Tanya said. "But you're too optimistic. The fish usually doesn't get off the hook before the shark crushes him in its jaws."

Burton shifted uneasily on the bed, his wrists badly chafed from his attempts to escape. He didn't like the way this was going at all, and yet it seemed that there was nothing he could do about it.

"Look," he said, trying to sound reasonable. "This whole thing's gone far enough. Why don't you just untie me and we'll go our separate ways?"

"That would be really convenient for you, now wouldn't it? But I don't think so. It's my turn to get a little enjoyment, my turn for some gratification. Too bad for you. It's probably going to hurt quite a bit."

Burton shivered at the thought of what was going to happen to him. He had watched those wildlife documentaries too and remembered the way the sharks thrashed and flailed in the water at the first signs of blood. He wasn't sure how accurate a description it was for the undead, but just the idea of it made him wish for a quick death.

"Can't we talk this over?" he asked, screaming as Tanya shook her head 'no' and cut him once on each cheek with the tip of the knife. Blood ran down his face like maroon tears and he wondered if he would have been safer in the ocean surrounded by a bunch of thrashing tiger sharks. He could hear his assassins laughing as they came for him, their wings beating against the air like helicopter blades.

"I want you to admit that you cheated on me," Tanya said, inflecting her voice in such a way that it gave Burton some hope of survival provided that he cooperated.

"Fine. You want me to admit it. I will. I cheated on you. More than once. More than twice. In fact, I don't really remember how many times I've done it."

Tanya pushed the knife in to the soft tenderness of Burton's belly. Understandably, he squirmed, bucking his hips at the flare of pain in his midriff.

"Be still," she said. "They haven't gotten here yet. If you cooperate there may still be time."

"Prove it," Burton said, sweat running down his pale face to mix with the blood. Sighing, Tanya went back to the window and shut it, effectively containing the harsh smell of freshly opened wounds.

"That will confuse them. But if I open the window again, you're as good as dead."

Burton nodded his head in understanding, and Tanya went back to what she had been doing, cutting her name into the soft flesh of Burton's belly.

"Why are you doing that?" he cried out, broken by pain and the thought of what was to come.

"If you do manage to get out of this alive, I want every woman you're with after this to see what I've done to you and ask about me. This is going to leave scars. I'll make sure of that. You'll carry my name around with you for the rest of your life."

Burton nodded regrettably and took a deep breath, the veins in his forearms bulging and throbbing as he pulled against the ropes. Fresh blood spurted from the cuts, and Tanya smiled as he groaned.

"Tell me more about what you were doing behind my back," she said, finishing up the 'y' that she was carving in Burton's gut. "And be honest. It's the only way you've got a chance of getting out of those restraints."

"I should have never gotten into anything serious with you," Burton confessed. "I wasn't ready. But things were too good when we were together. So I stayed."

"Meaning that you had your fun with me and when I wasn't around you got it from whoever was willing."

"Pretty much," he conceded.

"I want names," she said, starting to work on the 'a,' whittling delicately with the knife as Burton growled like a feral cat.

Burton rattled off a handful of names, none of which Tanya knew, but then he came up with one that she was more than familiar with. The knife slipped easily into Burton's heavy gut, and he shrieked at the pain.

"My sister?" Tanya said in disbelief. "Jesus H. Christ. Could you possibly stoop any lower?"

"She didn't know that we were together," Burton moaned in the woman's defense.

"Of course," Tanya said reasonably, her voice much calmer now. "But you did." And with that, she flung the window open wide again.

Burton shivered as he heard them approaching, only seconds away, their wings beating heavily against the still night air like vultures waiting on him to die. Tanya's name glistened on his abdomen in bright, red maroon.

"I guess since this seems to be my night, I should go ahead and tell you my little secret. After all, you've only got another minute at the most before we get to see just how accurate my little shark analogy was."

Despite the hurt that wracked his body like a sickness, Burton felt a thin rage building inside of him at the sight of two small puncture wounds on Tanya's neck. The room was largely dark, and until she had decided to show them to him, they had gone largely unnoticed.

"You haven't been the only one fooling around," she said, obviously proud of herself. "And all those stories about the undead working for payment are true. In this case, however, payment doesn't necessarily mean money."

Burton gasped as Tanya slid out of the catsuit a little to reveal several more evenly-spaced sets of holes in her pale, moonlit skin.

"How many?" Burton asked weakly.

"I've lost count. Kind of like you."

Burton jerked against the ropes one last time, rattling the bedframe as he heard the thud of feet on the outside ledge. They had found him. Suddenly, the breeze stirred up by their beating wings died down. One of them stepped into the ill-lit room, his eyes red and glowing like burning embers. Six more followed. And then, drawn by the scent, they went to the blood.

Burton screamed as he found himself floating on a sea of red, surrounded by heavily-fanged mouths. He wanted to tell Tanya that she hadn't been that far off base when comparing these monsters to sharks in murky red waters. But he was sure that she understood well enough when the fangs sank into her neck and thighs and breasts, and her savior assassins began to tear her apart. Sharks, it seemed, weren't discriminative when it came to blood, and Burton shut his eyes with the grim satisfaction of knowing that Tanya's assessment of these beasts wasn't that far off the mark.

Another set of fangs sank into his leg. This time Burton didn't feel a thing.

THE END