

# **PARANORMAL ALLEY:**

**AN ANTHOLOGY**

**A Collection of Short-Stories of The Paranormal and**  
**Horror**

# **By: Chris & Grant Leishman**

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**Chris and Grant Leishman – Authors: 12/15/2015**

## **DEDICATION**

**This book is for Chris' Grandmother and my Mother; the late, Marjorie Leishman – who always believed in us. Thank you!**

### **Also By Grant Leishman:**

The Second Coming

Just A Drop in the Ocean

Rise of the AntiChrist (Publication: December 2015)

Holy War (Publication: May 2016)

**CHOOSE YOUR DOOR: ON PARANORMAL ALLEY:**

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**Bonus: Chapter One of “Holy War”: The Battle for Souls**

## **DOOR NO.1:**

### **BETWEEN THE REALMS OF SLEEP AND MADNESS:**

**A Short-Story by: Chris Leishman**

Her skin had been seared at her upper forearm; a mass of bubbled flesh that would remind her not to venture too close to the radiator, again. She had earned that scar when she was five. Life was full of these warnings; lessons from mistakes past. She had learnt to live with that scar her whole life, barely noticing it. She only noticed it now because it was lying, split-open, before her.

When digging into her flesh she hadn't taken into account she would be slashing the bubbled mass of skin. Still, the blood flowed freely, just like her other arm. It didn't matter, truly; it was done. She had done what she'd set out to do. She could lay back and rest now.

Her father had been banging at the door for so long, but it had slowly faded into the background; a dulling thrum, she was numb too. Her breath laboured as she collapsed back into the full bathtub, which once filled with hot water had now turned lukewarm, after her venture with the blade.

The coldness embraced her tightly and she let herself fall away...fade away. The last image in her mind being the sigils of blood she had inscribed on the bathroom mirror.

. . .

The cold metal frame touched the exposed portions of her body, jolting her back to life. Her feet and face were stung by the cold unwelcome air that surrounded her. She was greeted by a wall of black, pushing down on her and ensuring she was paralyzed, before adjusting to the surroundings. In a bright flash, the room was suddenly illuminated.

The loud clap of the thunder reverberated through the dark and foreboding room; the four walls surrounding her, encasing her and suffocating her. She had been in a daze; barely remembering anything since she fell in the bathtub. The last sensation she had felt was the uncanny feeling of falling; tumbling and spiralling down into a darkened abyss of cold water and blood. Little did Alice realise that the descent would lead her to where she was at that point in time.

The concept of consciousness was barely one she was able to form; eyes crusted over from what must have accumulated, in what felt like years. Instinctively, Alice tried to rub her eyes clean. But any attempt to move her arms was met with a tremendous amount of resistance, accompanied by an unwelcome pang of pain. The pain was deep and resonated all the way up her forearm.

She managed to sit up in her groggy state; still unable to form thoughts close to coherency. She did know one thing, though; she needed water.

“Wa – Wat – er,” she managed to squeak out.

Water did not magically manifest itself before her. She almost attempted to speak the words again, in a vain attempt at manifestation, when the pain hit her two-fold. She writhed in agony and tried to wrestle her arms up to her face. The return to full consciousness had the profound side-effect of returning her sensation of pain back into the conscious state. The nerves of her forearm wailed in the sharp pitch of agony; mirroring her external wails.

She began to struggle harder and faster against the restraints that had arbitrarily been thrust upon her. A distinct pop in her shoulder added a deep and guttural pain to the sensations she was already enduring. Tears began to sting her barely opened and crusted eyes.

Any sense of euphoria or masking of pain she had felt was gone at this moment. In her vain struggles, she rolled and fell onto the floor, bouncing on its cushioned softness. She still continued to struggle, but as she struggled she heard another pop; but, this time, it was a lighter one and there were three of them in succession. She felt the warm life force begin flowing from her arm; obviously tearing something there.

As her screams continued, one of the walls opened. The light blinded Alice and she squinted, momentarily forgetting the pain. A number of shadows rushed in and grabbed her. They held her down on the bed. They were talking, but none of it was decipherable to Alice. She could only focus on the pain.

Soon the rush began to slow and the world around her began to cease; even the pain began to fall into a deep abyss. Alice was tumbling, soon after. Darkness quickly arrived and consumed her whole. She gave into its warm embrace and fell into the sea of sleep and euphoria once more.

. . .

“Perhaps we need to get to the heart of the issue, eh?”

Alice shrugged, not wanting to give any more than a passing interest in what this stranger was saying. She had been grateful, though. With his suggestion, they had finally removed the jacket that

had kept her arms confined for so long. She had been stuck in that jacket for ten days; it had only taken her the first three to actually comprehend where she was. At first, she had been terrified, scared, thinking she may have descended into hell. But as the months went on she had learned to create an impenetrable shell; to not be affected by the horror of her new home.

He had paused; reading over his notes he had written-up from sessions before. As she waited for his inevitable question, she looked down at her arms. They had healed; well, as much as they could, anyway. She would forever carry the two scars; scabby, ugly, vile, things.

“So, Alice,” he began, “I would like you to tell me your earliest memories.”

Alice looked down at her arm once more. She saw the misshapen and disgusting bubble of flesh that was once her burn scar. For her whole life, she considered the radiator incident to be her first memory; but no, upon doing these sessions she had come to realise the earliest memory she had, was much, much, earlier. Something she had repressed long ago; something she didn't want to face.

“I remember 1287 Baker Avenue.”

. . .

At the age of three, the world around you is a wonder and an adventure. This was the case for Alice. She had spent most of her time examining every little bit of the apartment. She was familiar with every corner and crevice of that place. It was safe, it was home.

So, it was understandable how distressed she was, when they moved to 1287 Baker Avenue to live with her grandma; her father's mother. What she couldn't have known at the time was that her parents were struggling financially; having failed at their artisanal soap business. But even if Alice did find out, she would scarcely care. Her world was being turned upside down; the loud noises, the hustle and bustle of New York was to be replaced by the quiet suburbia of New Jersey. But still, mom assured Alice she would be fine and nothing would change. Upon arriving at grandma's house; Alice immediately sensed that'd been a lie.

The house was an old, wooden, two-storey building. Grandma had a large collection of old and breakable antiques throughout the house and each step you took would make a floorboard, somewhere else in the house, readjust its alignment. The objects in the house would cast ghoulish shadows that lurked around every corner.

Entering the house, Alice went into a sprint as she often would. She bumped straight into grandma. Grandma looked down, still smoking her cigarette and knelt down; blowing the smoke in Alice's face as she spoke.

“Little girls shouldn’t be running,” she scolded, through her thick Ukrainian accent.

Alice simply nodded, completely intimidated by this overbearing, old, woman. She looked Alice over and greeted Alice’s mom and dad who were freighting in the luggage. Alice’s grandma wasn’t like the typical grandma she would see on TV, or read in her books. Alice’s grandma was still young; in her early forties.

Alice looked on, as her mother looked uncomfortable, seemingly not wanting to talk to grandma. Alice’s mother motioned for them to continue with the luggage, her father agreed and they began to make their way towards the stairs. What Alice never told anyone, or never fully understood, was when grandma slapped her father on the behind, as she winked at him. Alice never knew what her father had done to have deserved a spank.

. . .

“Ah...So, perhaps we are beginning to scratch the surface – no?” he stated, as he jotted something down in his notes.

Alice looked down, trying to hold back any sign of true emotion. She would be damned if she would let him see her sad. She balled her fists.

“Please...please...continue,” he said, as he looked up from his notepad.

Alice didn’t want to. What he wanted her to tell, was something she had kept back her whole life; repressed, behind walls of protection. He obviously could see her resistance and she hated him for it.

“Or...perhaps we can finish the story another time.” He looked down at the notepad once more, as if searching for a conversational topic. “I would like for you to tell me about why you quit the cheerleading squad?”

A pit, deep in her stomach, formed. She knew why. She had just never fully come to terms with it exactly. She tried to respond, but her words came out in shallow breaths and half-formed words.

“Alice...If we are to make any progress at all, we need to have an honest and frank conversation. So, you need to answer my prompts and questions, otherwise, you are gaining nothing from this experience.”

Alice nodded. Not that she agreed with him, but just because she didn’t want to show any more weakness to him. She looked up at him with determination.

“I quit because of Cindy Lane.”

. . .

At the age of fifteen, Alice had it all; she had the looks, the brains and also the social status. Being head-cheerleader was no easy feat, but still, at the young age of fourteen she had managed to achieve it. So why then, was she so depressed all the time? Her once bubbly personality had devolved into an angst-ridden, cynical, persona. Even her boyfriend at the time, Billy, had noticed the change in her. No longer was she the sweet, caring, girl he had fallen in love with.

Billy had dreaded telling her he was going to break up with her. He had been mulling it over for months, but what really made him decide to break up with her, was the incident with Cindy Lane. Cindy was what many would refer to as being slightly overweight. She had once been a bombshell, but as she reached the final stages of puberty, she began to pile on the pounds and gained an unsightly acne issue. This led to her having self-esteem and confidence issues. People did try to continue including her, but she was just so, socially awkward.

During lunch she was often seen on the school computers; locked away, not really wanting to interact with anybody. Eventually, everyone just kind of gave up on Cindy. They wanted to help her, but she obviously didn't want to be helped. Billy had always had a soft spot for Cindy; he had crushed on her long before the transformation, and still a little part of him felt that way about her. So he had always said "Hi", to her whenever he saw her. He thought she'd appreciate that; someone still wanting to make an effort.

Eventually, the talk of the school became Cindy Lane's new boyfriend. She had apparently met a guy online that she began dating; a guy who was going to College, a few States over. Everyone was sceptical, but nobody said anything to her other than the obligatory congratulations. Billy, however, had his suspicions.

These suspicions would eventually be justified as Cindy got ready to go on a date with her new e-boyfriend. Upon arriving, she was greeted by the whole cheerleading squad laughing at her, revealing the horrible prank and leaving Cindy to run away in tears. Cindy stopped going to school, not appearing or returning anybody's calls. After a week, the whole school got the news Cindy had taken her own life. With Alice's involvement in the whole charade, Billy had taken this as the final straw and decided to break up with her.

Billy made his way up the familiar footpath; foliage and overgrown weeds spilling over. Making his way up the concrete steps, he paused before knocking on the door. No answer. He knocked again; no answer. He looked through the windows; the house was empty.

. . .

“Ah! It is interesting you chose to tell the story through the perspective of another, rather than your own,” he said, as he jotted down more notes in his notepad. “Would you say...you feel guilt over this incident, no?”

She didn't answer. Of course, she felt guilty over Cindy Lane. This was an event that profoundly affected the rest of Alice's life.

“Would it be fair to assume your ‘prank’ on Cindy Lane was partly revenge, for Billy's feelings towards her?”

Her eyes began to sting, she continued to look down. As much as she wished to object, she knew deep down, what he said had a ring of truth. What she didn't tell anyone was that she'd run into Cindy once more since the incident. She saw her while walking home.

“Are you okay?” Alice had asked, “It was only a stupid joke,” she re-affirmed.

Cindy had simply smiled and said; “it's okay, really! I understand; I'm over it now,” before walking away toward the bridge she would eventually jump from, just mere hours later.

“Perhaps we should move onto something else? You mentioned how your demeanour had changed around that time; talk about that.”

“You want me to talk about the divorce?”

. . .

Getting out of bed, after the divorce, was hard. Even facing her father was hard. This became really awkward because she was “pawned” off to her father when her mother moved to another State. He did try and Alice knew this, but the damage was already done. It was too late; no amount of money, or pretend caring, would fix the gap between them.

Alice adopted an attitude of ignoring her father whenever she would see him. He would try to please her, but she would simply snub him or respond with a one-word answer. This attitude leaked into her everyday life and she began to treat everyone with the same amount of disdain she gave to her father.

The divorce was something she didn't want and never wanted; it was something thrust upon her. Perhaps the main reason she disdained her father was that he instigated it. They said it was a mutual decision, but Alice knew, really, it was her father's decision.

It all came to head when her father announced to her and the rest of the family he was getting engaged to his new girlfriend. Alice seriously considered running away then, but she ultimately

decided to stay. Perhaps if she hadn't stayed, she wouldn't be where she was now, or Cindy Lane could be alive. Oh, for the benefit of hindsight.

. . .

"Interesting, it seems you have a strong resentment towards your father"

Resentment was an understatement. As much as she blamed herself for her parent's divorce, she blamed her father, two or three-fold, more. The "resentment", was a deep-seated anger she held onto, in the pit of her stomach.

"So it would be safe to assume you blame your father for your mother's...ah...suicide?" he added at the end, with such a tone of causality, it made her sick. He didn't even look at her; he simply continued to scribble in his notepad, as he added that period to his statement.

The shock of bringing up her mother's death threw Alice for a loop. She didn't respond for a good second or two.

"I take your lack of answer as yes, no?"

"Not suicide!" Alice finally broke her silence, as the images came flooding back to her. "Murder!"

*A bathtub forever stained with red. A lifeless stare from once vibrant and caring eyes; peaceful in its silence. Drops of crimson dropping to the tiled floor; a sixteen-year-old girl crying next to her mother's corpse! These are the images Alice now conjured when she thought of her mother. All thoughts of warmth and love replaced by the abject horror of discovering what no child should discover.*

"To answer your question," she began, "no, I don't blame him for my mother's murder."

"Ah...this is truly fascinating. Perhaps you could tell me why it is your 'thesis' that your mother was murdered?" He opened the floor for her to continue; to tell another story.

Alice didn't want to tell another story. She was sick of going down this corridor of memories, peeking into each twisted and demented door that led into the past. Instead of giving him the satisfaction of a response, she simply remained still, not answering or moving. The truth was, she had no proof; she just knew. She knew, deep inside, her mother had not committed suicide, that fateful night.

“Hmmm...” he began, disappointed, whilst scribbling on his notepad. “...What you don’t seem to understand Alice is, I’m here to help you. I am here to find out where you belong and I can’t help you if you are not honest with, not only me but yourself.”

He tapped his fingers on the table feverishly, seemingly trying to come up with a different tack to approach this situation. He grabbed a folder, sitting on the table and grabbed a small picture. He slid the picture over to Alice.

“Fine, perhaps you could enlighten me as to what this is?”

Alice picked up the photo. It was of the mirror, the last thing she saw before tumbling into this purgatory. The photo showed the dried blood sigil, she had inscribed.

“It’s a blood sigil...”

. . .

“It’s a sigil!” Demi exclaimed in excitement.

Alice was still confused as she flicked through the old tome.

“Saying what it is, doesn’t explain it,” Alice said, as she angled her head out of the way to stop the black droplets from falling on the antique book in her lap.

Demi talked through the cigarette in her mouth, as she massaged Alice’s scalp; embedding the blackness into her once blonde locks.

“A sigil is like...okay...so it’s a form of Magick that many people use. You create a symbol that can manifest one’s desires.”

Alice looked back at Demi with a condescending look.

“What? And that really works?”

“No...well...yes...kinda! Look, sigil’s are kinda a way for someone to hack the universe’s code. A way for someone to manipulate probabilities to gain what they want. Like for example, let’s say I made a sigil that I wanted to be married to Johnny Depp. The chances of that happening are fairly low, so the manipulated probability will also be quite low. But, if I was to say, I want to meet someone that looks like Johnny Depp, the probability of that is higher, so, therefore, the universe is able to manifest the situation to meet him quicker, than Johnny Depp himself. Understand?”

“Kind of...” Alice said, with a tone of confusion.

“Look, just try it. It does work; just not always how, or when, you expect.”

Alice didn't respond. She was new to this Wicca thing. Ever since moving away and moving back in with her mother, a dark cloud hung over her. The whole Cindy Lane affair had affected her mental stability greatly. She moved with her father to another town, but it wasn't the same. That, coupled with the waning relationship with him, led her to move back to her mothers.

It was only a few months later she met Demi, a new age pagan Wiccan, who showed her a whole different side of life. She introduced Alice to the occult, Alistair Crowley, worship of Pagan deities and more importantly how to cast spells. Alice soon learnt it wasn't like the movies; magic was simply a different way of looking at the universe. It was all about manipulating probabilities and energies around everyone.

As Alice flipped over the pages, she came across a deep red section that read: Blood Sigils. Intrigued she began to read deeper into it. Images of demons, ghouls, and portals to hell adorned the page.

"I wouldn't be delving in that shit girl," Demi said, startling Alice.

"Why not? What's the difference between this and normal sigils?"

"Blood sigils are bad mojo. With normal sigils, you are manifesting desire through manipulation of the universe. With a blood sigil, you are manifesting your desire, through demon summoning. That's the kinda stuff you just don't wanna mess with."

Alice nodded, but she was still intrigued. She had learnt so much over the last year about Magick and how there is no good or evil. The talk of demons conjured images of Satan and winged creatures. She continued to read, despite Demi's warnings.

A knock came on the door. Alice quickly hid the book under her towel. Alice's mother entered bearing two cups of hot chocolate, for the girls. She looked at her daughter and smiled.

"The black really ... suits you, honey," she said.

She was trying to be sincere, but Alice knew she disapproved of the direction she was going. Her mother had tried to understand but she simply just didn't get it. In retrospect, Alice had treated her mother with the same awkwardness as she had treated her father; but with the added rose-tinted glasses of mourning a loved one, she did not see this contradiction.

After a few moments of awkward silence, she slinked away back out the door. She left to have a bath, the last bath she would ever have.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I believe this was the same night your mother committed suicide?”

“Was murdered!” Alice coldly responded.

“Ah, yes... sorry... *murdered*, as you say.” He emphasized the word as he jotted the statement down in his notepad.

Alice just wanted to leave at this point. This session had run longer than the others and she felt greatly uncomfortable the longer she stayed with this man.

“We are nearly at the end Alice,” he stated as if reading her mind. “So if you don’t mind me asking, what is it you asked this demon for when you ‘*summoned it*’ with your blood?”

Alice looked down, almost ashamed to admit. He began tapping his pen to his notepad, creating a metronomic clock noise. The ticking of the pen put Alice on edge, made her feel more observed and examined than she had before.

“I asked to find my mother’s killer,” she finally managed to squeeze out.

This gave the man pause. He stopped midway through writing. He looked up at Alice, for a moment, his eyes dead, as he contemplated what he was going to say next.

“Huh...Interesting,” he simply said, as he stood up, looking at his notes.

He walked to the back of the room, reading his notes to himself. Alice felt, even more, isolated and alone at that point. The room grew darker and colder than she could’ve ever imagined. The silence between the two seemed to last for an eternity.

“I think...” he began, breaking the silence, “...our session has come to an end.”

Alice’s shoulders slumped, the tension finally leaving her body.

“In fact...I think this will be our final session.”

“I get to go home?” Alice asked, with too much hope in her voice.

“In a way yes...”

The door opened behind Alice, spilling in the blinding light. Two orderlies came in and grabbed her by the arms.

“I have determined where she belongs. Take her down!” he ordered the two orderlies.

They grabbed Alice, as she struggled against their might. They dragged her, heels scraping against the floor. Alice's short-lived hope was quickly replaced by pure fear. She had no idea what was going on.

"Alice...it has become very clear, through our sessions, that your past has been filled with so much sin. YOU'RE SICK! YOU ARE A SICK LITTLE GIRL! Your place...is down the elevator."

Confused, Alice struggled against the orderlies as much as she could. She was being dragged down the corridor, away from the room.

"PLEASE! I JUST WANT TO GO HOME!!!"

"Don't worry...you'll soon be home," he said, with a sickeningly sincere smile, "In fact it is rather ironic..."

Alice was pulled into the dingy elevator at the end of the room. The cage door pulled closed behind her. The box was dingy and looked like it could break down at any moment. There were no buttons, only an up and down direction pad.

"The fact you wished to see your mother's killer...where you are going, you will be seeing quite a lot of him."

"What do you mean?" She yelled back in confusion.

He paused as if trying to find the right way to phrase what he was saying; "I don't want to ruin the surprise."

Alice didn't understand what he was saying. Before she could scream anything further at him, the box began to shudder and descend; her vision of the man and the corridor slowly disappearing. Alice stopped struggling, it was too late. She knew she would never be able to see her father again. What she would give to tell him, she hadn't meant to be such a bitch, that she truly loved him, deep beneath all her seething hate.

The smell of decay and rot began to intensify. A bright, piercing, light thrust itself into the box, from wherever it was she was going. At that moment, she realised the orderlies had disappeared; she was all alone.

The box shuddered to a halt. She couldn't see any detail through the blinding, blue, light. The sound of chains and dripping was all she could discern. She slowly pulled the squeaky, metal, door open and made her way into the blue abyss.

"I have been waiting," a voice beckoned her forward.

. . .

Upon awakening, Alice felt the familiar sensation of the sun against her face. She sat up and realised she was lying in a hospital bed. Her bed was surrounded by flowers and balloons. She hissed in pain as her nerves played a tango on her newly stitched up wounds. She looked outside and saw the beautiful sunny day.

Sitting at the window was her father, long drifted off to sleep. Alice felt her eyes sting with tears, it felt like an eternity since she had last seen him. For a brief moment, Alice forgot the torment of her would-be hell.

“D...D...Dad?” she croaked out, with much pain.

Her father stirred to life. He looked over and his expression was awash with relief. He began crying and lunged at her, hugging, as his arsenal. Alice held him deep in the embrace, despite the pain her arms were in.

In the sea of her sudden bliss, she was pulled away by one simple thought. An echoing resentment that gave her pause; enough pause though that she would forever question this realm she woke into. The puzzle, she had desperately wanted to be answered, now she could see the solution for. All it would take is this thought, for Alice to fall back down her rabbit hole.

*“Where you are going; you will be seeing a lot of him.”*

*“I don’t want to ruin the surprise.”*

. . .

**THE END!**

## **DOOR NO.2:**

### **PORTAL:**

**A Short-Story By: Grant Leishman**

Colin and Rachel Sandringham, two typical fifteen-year-old twins, were the epitome of the sullen teenager; wrapped up in themselves, with little thought or consideration for others. Certainly, neither felt they needed to be farmed off to grandma for “looking after” when their parents were called away to a family medical emergency. As far as they were concerned, they could look after themselves. Why couldn’t their parents just trust them for once?

Grandma lived alone, in an old, rundown, wooden house, slap bang in the middle of the newly developed industrial area of Rockwell. The city had made numerous attempts to purchase the property from the old lady, but she was adamant; “this is where I was born and this is where I’ll die;” she would tell anyone game enough to ask why she hadn’t accepted the City Council’s very fair offer for the property. Her neighbours had long ago taken the money and run. The old house was now bordered on one side by a car grooming and panel-beating shop, whilst the other side hosted an industrial style diner, to cater for the many workers that poured into the neighbourhood every working day.

It was a noisy, busy place to live during the day, however, at night, an almost oppressive silence descended on 37 Aeron Street, as the machines fell silent and one by one the nearby factories emptied out. The workers wending their weary ways home, to their quiet suburban streets. By 6 pm, especially in winter, Aeron Street was as dark, as silent, and as scary, as any graveyard. Anything could lurk in the shadows that lined either side of the street, where the old oaks cast their gently swaying branches in the breeze, creating an ethereal glow, as the moon shone between the softly moving trees. When the mist began to rise at 8 pm, from the nearby Shelton River, it coated the entire area in a swirling, curling, mass, of tendrils. Aeron Street was not a place one wanted to walk down on a chilly, winter’s, evening.

Generally, Rachel and Colin didn't mind visiting grandma's for the day, but it was the sense they were not trusted that brought on their latest bout of poutiness. Their parents pulled the car up in front of grandma's house and Susan, their mother, turned to address the pair.

"Now remember, you two; no misbehaving while you're a grandma's. She's not getting any younger and the last thing she needs at her age is two troublesome teenagers. You got it!"

They just stared back at her, their expressions unchanged.

"Susan!" The loud shout from her husband dragged Susan from her lecture.

"We haven't got time to be sat, sitting, here. We need to get to my sister's and see what's what." Trevor's brother-in-law had apparently suffered a massive heart attack yesterday and he and Susan were desperate to see his sister, Cecily, to make sure she was coping. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

He turned to Colin and Rachel; "what she said guys; no silliness. Be good and do what grandma says."

"Yes Dad!" they both made the effort to chorus.

Colin and Rachel grabbed their overnight bags and pushed open the cast, wrought-iron, gate to grandma's house. The gate screeched alarmingly as the children opened it, causing them to jump back in fright. Colin shoved his sister in the back. "Scared of the gate now are you, sis?" She turned and glared at him, before stomping up the path to the front door.

Both children turned and watched their parents speed out of sight. Turning to the door, Colin raised the solid, brass knocker and banged it several times against the base. He was rewarded with the resounding chimes from inside the house. He kept pulling the knocker, up and down and grinning.

Rachel slapped him on his arm. "Stop it shit-head. Do you want nana in a bad mood, before we even get inside?"

Colin laughed and continued pulling the knocker, up and down. The chimes reverberated throughout the house, but nobody came to the door.

Colin leant around the corner of the big, wooden, dormer window, trying to peer inside the front room. The window was caked with years of grime and the lace curtains inside made it difficult to see much, but he could just make out a shape seated in grandma's favourite rocking chair.

Turning to Rachel, he chuckled; "Nana's asleep I think. She's in her chair."

"So...what now?" Rachel ventured.

Colin moved to the corner of the veranda, where a large, flowering, spreading, pot-plant of some description, dominated. Bending down, he struggled to lift the solid earthenware tub it was seated in. Pushing his fingers underneath the small gap he'd created, he withdrew a key and waved it at Rachel, with a flourish. "See sis, there's always a way when you know how."

Rachel shrugged her shoulders as Colin put the key in the front door and stood aside as he waved her in. "There you go; welcome to nana's."

Rachel smiled tightly at her smart-arse brother. "Okay, clever clogs. You take our bags up to the room and I'll check on nana; make sure she's alright."

Colin hefted her duffel bag over his right shoulder and headed up the stairs to their usual bedroom, at the back of the house. As he wandered down the long, upstairs hallway, with its numerous doors on either side, he unconsciously checked each, as he always did...and as they always were; they were locked. Reaching "their" room, he gently nudged open the door, which was slightly ajar, with his foot and entered the room they had stayed in so often. Nothing had changed since their last visit. There were single beds on either side of the room and a long bedside table that stretched between them, in front of the large window. He dumped their duffel bags on respective beds and wandered over to the window. Looking out, he grimaced, as he thought of yet another boring visit to nanas.

He turned to head back downstairs to check on her and Rachel when he noticed it. Something *was* different in the room; something that wasn't there before. The room had always had a large, dresser, full of drawers, they used for their clothes when they were staying longer than a night or two. The dresser was very old, but Colin had no idea what it was made out of. Its wood shone with a glossy patina, stained here and there, with water marks and worn smooth in other places, by constant use over the years. It was a deep, almost black colour, but what was different now, was the full-length mirror that stood jauntily on its stand, to the left of the dresser.

The mirror just looked plain out of place, in this Victorian-style bedroom. The wooden frame was painted the multi-coloured hues of the rainbow. It was divided into about twelve or thirteen segments, each one painted a different, fluorescent, glowing, colour. There were pinks, reds, oranges, bright canary yellows, blues and deep purples. Yuck thought Colin, what a horrible monstrosity that thing is. Whatever possessed nana to buy it, let alone put it in our room? He moved closer to examine it further. He couldn't help but notice the edge of the reflective surface seemed to glow and shimmer as if it had a life of its own. He even fancied he could hear a low pitched, humming, noise, coming from deep within the mirror itself.

Intrigued now, he moved right up close to the reflective surface and gazed at his own reflection. He giggled softly as he realised the mirror was one of those “fun mirrors” that distorts your image. Colin’s reflection made him appear stretched and enormous, at the same time. His body was very thin and elongated, but his head was gigantic and seemed to fill up most of the mirror.

“Hahaha,” he laughed. “Maybe nana’s not so silly after all. This is actually way cool. I can’t wait to show Rache.”

The tiny hairs, on his forearms and the nape of his neck, stood up straight and he shivered involuntarily as he felt, rather than saw, something move behind him in the mirror. Spinning around in fright, to confront whoever was behind him, everything was silent, nothing moved. Whatever it was, or he’d thought it was, had clearly gone. He gave another shudder and decided it was definitely time to check on Rachel and nana.

Casting one final glance at his twisted reflection, he ran quickly from the room, down the long hallway, and literally bounced down the stairs, taking them two at a time. When he arrived breathlessly in the front room, he couldn’t see Rachel anywhere.

“Rache...where are you? He shouted.

“Shhhhhh!” came the muted reply from the kitchen area. “Be quiet dummy, can’t you see nana’s still asleep on the chair?”

Rachel emerged from the kitchen carrying a large tray, with a teapot on it and Colin noted hungrily, a pile of chocolate biscuits. She set the tray down on the coffee table in the centre of the room and looked across at her brother. “I thought we might as well have a snack. It’s a bit odd, don’t you think; sleeping at this time of the morning?”

Colin looked at the old rocking chair, which Grandma kept facing the small gas fire she’d had installed, to try and ward off the worst of the winter chills. He could only see the back of her chair, but he noted her left hand, hanging down from the chair-arm as she slept, her long, gnarly, bony, fingers, slightly curled with arthritis.

“Yeah, well, I guess we better let her sleep, though... “ he rubbed his chin thoughtfully and gave a loud sniff of the air. “...If that’s what she’s actually doing...Rache...sleeping.”

His sister raised her eyebrows inquiringly. Colin just moved around the front of the chair and squatted in front of his grandmother. It was unbearably hot in front of the fire and not for the first time, Colin wondered how his nana could possibly stand the heat, sitting here in front of the fire all day long. As Rachel joined him and squatted beside him, she looked at him and shrugged her shoulders.

Grandma still looked the same; her head was lolling slightly to one side, but her wrinkled old face was relaxed and they could see her chest rising and falling, with each breath. “Well...she looks like she’s asleep...;” Rachel began.

Suddenly their grandmother exploded, with an enormous burp, right in the twin’s faces. They were assailed by the unmistakable, sour, smell, of expended, whisky fumes. Both of them covered their noses and turned away from the stench.

“Well, I guess that solves that mystery Rachel!” Colin exclaimed.

Rachel frowned and looked at her grandmother sadly. “Ohhhh...Colin! That’s not like nana. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her drink before...but, well...just look at her now.”

Colin stood and dragged his sister up beside him. “Yeah, well, who knows with adults Rache.” He looked over to the inviting tray of tea and biscuits. “Anyways, there’s not much we can do for her. Just have to let her sober up in her own time, I guess.”

He grabbed a hold of Rachel’s arm. “Hey! We’ll just leave her be and when she wakes up, we can pretend we know nothing eh? We don’t want to embarrass her, do we?”

She nodded but kept looking at her grandmother, whose head had drooped even more, with drool coming from the left corner of her mouth. With tears pooling in her eyes, she leant down and wiped nana’s chin, with her own handkerchief.

Colin pulled her toward the tea things. “Come on kiddo, grab that stuff and bring it up to the bedroom. I’ve got something I want to show you. Nana has bought this way cool mirror. Come see!”

Reluctantly, Rachel bent and grabbed the tray, following her brother up the stairs to their room. After placing the tea and biscuits tray carefully on the top of the long bed-side table, she walked over to where Colin was already dancing up and down in front of the mirror. She looked in wonderment at the strange sight, with its multi-coloured frame. When she saw Colin’s elongated reflection and his massive head, she burst into uncontrollable laughter.

“Oh my God!” she managed to get out between laughs. “You look like an egghead. I always said you were a funny shape. Mum told me they had trouble getting you out...and look, they must have stretched you.” She bent over double from laughing so hard and pointed to his reflection. “There you go, bro. that’s the proof of it right there; you were seriously stretched at birth.” She collapsed onto her bed and began rolling around, clutching her stomach, still laughing hilariously.

Colin turned; a pained expression on his face. “It’s not that bloody funny sis...really!”

With tears rolling down her face now, Rachel managed to sit up straight and tried to compose her face; but it was no use, she burst into fits of laughter again. “Oh Colin...but it is...it really is that bloody funny.”

Clearly annoyed by now, Colin stomped over to his own bed and sat down, a scowl on his face. As Rachel sought to pull herself together, Colin’s expression changed from annoyance and anger to one of studied thoughtfulness. He looked at Rachel with a wide grin. “While nana’s asleep, Rachel, you know what we should do?”

She had an idea what was coming next, but she raised her eyebrow at her brother, for him to continue.

“Yeah...we really should go and explore that attic, you know. The one you were too scared to go and look at last time we were here. Remember?”

She bristled and thumped her hand on the bed. “I was not scared Colin. I wasn’t; I just thought it would be rude to be poking around in nana’s stuff when she wasn’t with us. That’s all!”

Colin laughed; “yeah right sis! Whatever you say! Anyway, we’ll never get a better chance than now. So come on, let’s check it out.”

She grimaced. Once Colin got an idea in his head, there was no holding him back. She knew if she didn’t go with him, he’d just do it himself anyway. At least, if she went, she could keep an eye on him and make sure he didn’t mess with any of nana’s treasures, which she was pretty sure would be stored up there. She gulped deeply before answering.

“Alright Colin, but on one cond...”

The bedroom door was flung wide open, slamming into the wall behind it. Both of them jumped on their bed and Rachel gave a short scream.

Framed in the doorway was grandma Sylvia, swaying unsteadily on her feet, a half-empty bottle of Scotch whisky, the cap long gone, swinging back and forth, in her left hand. Her face cracked into a toothless grin, as she smacked her lips together, trying to form some coherent words. She took another pace into the room before stumbling and beginning to fall. Colin reacted the fastest and reached her just as she was about to pitch, face-first, into the floor. He led her gently to Rachel’s bed and sat her down on it, attempting to pry the bottle loose from the death-grip she seemed to have on it. Sylvie wasn’t having any of that, though, she needed her bottle and she wasn’t about to give it up to him.

Safely seated on the bed, she lifted the bottle to her lips and drank a healthy gulp, before shuddering and looking at her grandchildren. “Shhhho...” she slurred, “youse are already here, are you?” With her free hand, she rubbed her forehead. “Shhhittttttt,” she continued; “how did I mishhhh that?”

Rachel smiled at her and leant over to kiss her grandmother on her lined cheek. “Yes nana, we’re here now.” She looked sadly at the old woman she loved, but who she clearly knew less about than she thought. “Nana, why are you drinking? What’s the matter?”

She looked at her grand-daughter with a pained expression, as if she was willing herself to focus on the young girl. Screwing up her nose and continuing to peer intently at Rachel, she mumbled; “Goshhhh girl. It gets powerful lonely here sometimes, especially since your Grandfather died.”

Overcome by deep compassion for the lonely, old woman, Rachel reached over and wrapped her arms, lovingly, around her. “Oh nana, that’s so sweet, you still miss him, even after all these years.” She looked her directly in her teary, rheumy, eyes. “I wish we’d met him nana. It’s so sad we never knew him.”

Sylvie straightened up and giggled; “that’s not a problem sweetie. You two want to meet your granddad eh? Well, come with me.” She smiled at Colin and Rachel and jumping to her feet, she grabbed both of their hands and pulled them toward the big mirror.

Colin raised his eyebrows questioningly at Rachel, but she just shrugged her shoulders, furrowed her forehead and whispered to him; “just humour her Col; she’s clearly having a bit of a turn.”

When they were standing directly in front of the mirror, Sylvie began to cackle. “You see thishhhh here mirror, children. This is a portal to the underworld. It allows me to meet with your granddad.”

She smiled slyly. “You see, your granddad wasn’t the nicest person in the world. He was a bit naughty if you know what I mean, so when he passed, he went downstairs, instead of up there...” looking up at the ceiling, “...this mirror’s my portal to hell, so I can visit him and he can visit me;” she added nonchalantly.

She looked at the pair’s shocked expression and giggled. “You think I’m batty don’t you? Well, just you wait and see. I’ll show you who’s batty or not.”

Colin looked pleadingly at Rachel. This was too much. He just wanted to get away from this crazy, old, woman who used to be a sweet, little, old, lady; he called nana. He pulled against the bony

fingers still wrapped around his wrist, but couldn't believe it, when he found he couldn't break the bond she had on him.

"Nana!" he shouted, "let me go!"

Sylvie pulled him right up to the mirror's face until he was mere inches away from the glass. She scowled at him and her face twisted in anger. "Don't argue with me young 'un. You said you wanted to meet your grandfather, well, that's what you're going to damn well do. Just shut up and wait."

She relaxed her face and smiled at him. "You always were a difficult boy Colin, but please just do this for nana."

Looking to Rachel for confirmation, Colin nodded his head to Sylvia and added in a conciliatory tone; "of course nana. We just want to help...okay, so let's meet good, old, granddad then, shall we?"

Sylvie smiled and finally released their hands. "That's better children."

With their hands-free, both took a few steps back from the mirror's face.

She turned and looked at them. "Right kiddies! Get ready for the trip of a lifetime."

Beginning to chant in some strange language, raising both her hands over her head and swaying slightly from side to side, she appeared to enter a trance-like state.

The multicoloured segments around the mirror began to glow and then the mirror itself seemed to start spinning. Rachel turned to Colin in shock. "What the hell Col?" He quickly silenced her with a wave of his hand and refocused on the now wildly spinning mirror and on his grandmother who had sunk to her knees, still chanting and swaying. Transfixed by what was playing out in front of them, when the blinding light shot out from the mirror, accompanied by a sonic boom, both children screamed loudly.

In the deathly quiet that followed the boom, Rachel and Colin were still shaking their heads to try and clear the ringing from their ears. The mirror had stopped spinning, the flashing segments had ceased and the room was as silent and as darkly oppressive, as any graveyard, in the depths of night. Grandma was gone!

Colin was the first to react and stepped forward to peer into the now silent mirror. All he saw was his own distorted reflection, but something more; the mirror seemed to be reaching out and willing him to come inside. "Rachel," he screamed; "the mirror! It's trying to grab me."

Reacting quickly, she wrapped her arms around her brother's waist and began to pull him away from the pervasive tug of the looking-glass.

Suddenly, released from the mirror's pull, the pair fell backward onto the floor, Colin falling heavily on top of his sister. Struggling to their feet, Colin turned to her and exclaimed, "bloody hell sis, what was that all about and where in the hell has nana gone?"

Rachel was still gingerly checking herself to make sure there was nothing seriously damaged in the tumble with Colin. She grimaced with pain as she felt her ribs. They seemed bruised; she hoped not cracked, or worse, broken. Breathing heavily, she steadied herself with her hand on her brother's shoulder.

"Hell Colin, I have no idea what just happened...but shit! Yeah, what happened to nana?"

Both of them tentatively approached the mirror again and peered into its depths. Again, it was just their distorted reflections that stared back at them. Slowly, warily, Colin reached out a hand to touch the mirror and squealed, like a scalded mouse, when the mirror coalesced into a gel-like substance and he felt his fingers pierce the supposedly, solid, surface. Screaming in fear, he jerked his hand back and took three steps backward from the mirror. His voice quaking he stuttered; "wwwwhat issss this thing, Rache? It's like evil; I could feel it when my fingers went through. Rache, I'm scared."

She put her arm around his shoulder to comfort him and whispered; "join the club little brother, I'm fair shitting myself over here."

Without warning, the coloured segments of the mirror began to glow again. "Oh hell, here we go again," Colin screamed. "What now?"

The mirror began to spin on its axis again, faster and faster, until the colours became indistinguishable. Unconsciously Colin and Rachel began to walk backward, away from the whirling dervish; until they were almost on the other side of the room. Colin reached out and grabbed Rachel's hand, holding on to it tightly, as if his life depended on it. She squeezed back reassuringly, but he could feel the fear in her trembling fingers.

Even across the room, the light blinded them and the boom deafened them. It took them some time to reorient their senses, but it was Rachel who screamed first. It was a long, terrified scream that came from the very depths of her soul. She grabbed Colin, who was screaming just as loud and long as his sister, in a tight embrace and they stood, quivering, at the sight in front of them.

Grandma was back, but she wasn't alone. She had her arms wrapped around what Colin could only describe as a zombie. The figure was tall, about six foot and dressed in what might once have

been a tidy, fashionable, suit, but was now little more than flaps of material, hanging off his almost skeletal frame.

Colin's eyes rebelled at what he saw in the figure's face and he closed and opened them rapidly to try and dispel the gruesome sight from his vision. Underneath a shock of white hair, which stood up in broken clumps all over the man's head, his face was nothing, more or less, than a disfigured mess. The skin on his forehead was completely gone; the pearly white of his skull and the greyish jelly-like substance that was once the man's brains clearly visible. One eye socket was empty and the other eye hung down his cheek on a stalk. Colin shuddered as he realised that the eye was actually moving and focusing on Rachel and him. There were large clumps of skin peeling from his face and where his lips should have been, was just a wide, toothless, gash that seemed to be grinning at them, with its flapping gums.

Colin felt the bile begin to rise in his throat, as he fought desperately to contain his horror and disgust, at the apparition. He squeezed Rachel even tighter and whimpering into her neck he cried; "oh my God...what is that thing?" Her response was no reassurance at all. She just gripped him even tighter than before, as if that was even possible.

Colin noticed, with terror, not only was his grandma holding onto this disgusting creature, she was actually smiling. Turning to her beloved, Sylvie wrapped her arms around his neck and standing on her tip-toes, began to passionately embrace and kiss the creature. Even as she kissed him, Colin could see bits of flesh falling from his face and splattering on the hardwood floor. That was just too much for him to take and the vomit he had been struggling to contain came roaring out of his mouth, in a solid, unbroken, stream. He bent double and clutched his knees, trying to breathe, trying to calm himself enough to think rationally. He took three deep breaths before he heard his grandmother's lilting and cheerful tones.

"Children...children...children...come and embrace your grandfather Arthur. He's come such a long way to see you youngsters and he wants a hug and a kiss from his grandchildren."

Colin vomited again, although there wasn't much left in his stomach and just some thin, black, bile, trickled down the corner of his chin. Wiping it away angrily, he concentrated on his breathing.

Rachel reacted first and grabbed Colin's collar, lifting him upright. She screamed urgently in his ear. "We have to get the hell out of here. **NOW, COLIN!**"

The urgency of her tone gave him some clarity of thought. With one last look at the disgusting creature, that supposedly was his grandfather, who it now seemed was shuffling toward them, his arms held out in front of him, for his promised cuddle, he grabbed Rachel's hand and they

bolted for the door. They weren't quite quick enough though and Colin felt the chilling touch of his grandfather's fingers that were really nothing more than bones, on his arm, as they brushed past him. He gave an involuntary squeal and then they were out the door, running down the hallway for the stairs.

When they reached the front door, Colin grabbed the door handle and pulled, but nothing moved. The door was stuck solid or locked. "Shit!" he exclaimed, as he grabbed Rachel's hand and dragged her through the living room and kitchen to the back door. That was locked also and Colin bashed his fist against it, in utter frustration.

"The windows!" Rachel screamed. "Break a goddamn window, Colin."

Despite their perilous situation Colin grinned; now, why didn't I think of that? Running back to the living room, he grabbed the first thing that came to hand, the large oak coffee table. That should put a bloody great hole in the window, he thought to himself, as he struggled to pick it up.

"Damn, this is heavy," he muttered. Summoning all his remaining strength, he hurled the coffee table directly at the large, dormer window that dominated the front room.

He had put his hands in front of his face to protect himself from any broken glass, but he wasn't prepared for the heavy, solid oak, table, to actually bounce off the window and slam back into him with the same force he'd imparted. The table hit him fair and square in the chest and sent him sprawling across the floor. He lay there, unable to breathe, deeply winded. Rachel knelt beside him and cradled his head in her arms. "Colin...Colin...are you alright?" she kept repeating, becoming more and more hysterical with every repetition.

His breath now coming in short rasps, he tried to sit upright, but the pain in his chest was unbearable. Trying to lighten the mood, he managed to gasp out between breaths. "Bugger... that... didn't... really ...work ...did ...it?" The humour worked and Rachel calmed slightly, before helping him into a sitting position.

Colin looked at the window, his forehead screwing up in consternation. "What in the hell is going on in this house sis? That bloody table should have smashed that window no trouble. Shit! I think we might be stuck here. Help me over to the couch eh, I need to sit and think for a bit."

With her help, he plonked himself down, with an audible gasp of pain. "Think I've cracked a few ribs, or even broken one or two. I'm gonna be a bit slow for a while, I suspect. But what are we going..."

Rachel silenced him, with a finger to his lips. "Shhhh...Col. Listen!"

Colin lifted his eyebrows and furrowed his forehead in concentration as he cocked an ear. “What?” he exclaimed. “I can’t hear anything...what?”

Rachel grinned. “Exactly Col. I can’t hear anything either. They’re not coming for us. Not yet anyway. I think we’re safe for now.”

He breathed a long sigh of relief. Looking around the room, he sighted the old-fashioned dial telephone grandma kept on a small table near the entrance to the kitchen. Not trusting his ability to stand just yet, he signalled with his head, to Rachel, what he was thinking.

Quickly grasping his intent, she ran to the phone and eagerly picked it up, before holding it away from her ear and shaking her head. “It’s dead Col.” Dispiritedly, she shuffled over to where he was seated. Sitting beside him, she placed her head on his shoulders and began to sob. “Oh, Colin...what have we let ourselves in for here? What are we going to do?” Her body was shaking violently as the sobs increased in intensity.

Sucking his breath in, against the pain, Colin reached up and grabbed both her shoulders, pulling her around, so they were eye to eye. “Don’t go all girly-girly on me now, Rache. If we’re going to survive this we both have to have our wits about us. Come on, where’s my big, brave, sister gone?” He seriously thought about slapping her on the face, like they do in the movies when someone is being hysterical, but remembering his sister’s fiery temper, discretion became the better part of valour. Instead, he shook her shoulders gently to try and get some coherence out of her.

Slowly she regained control of herself. Using her sleeve, she wiped the tears and snot that was covering her face before she took a deep breath and faced her brother. “So...?” was all she was able to come out with.

Colin, pleased his sister was back in the land of the rational human beings and not a blubbing idiot anymore, took some time before answering. “Okay...well, if we can’t get out of the doors or the windows, then I guess we’re trapped here...right?”

Rachel rolled her eyes and muttered; “Doh!”

Ignoring her blatant rudeness, Colin rushed onward. “So, if we’re trapped here, we better find somewhere safe to hide; somewhere that thing up there can’t get at us.” He had Rachel’s full attention now. “The only place I can think of is the attic.” He looked at the ceiling. “I just know they’re not going to leave us alone forever. Sooner or later grandma and grand...that horrible thing...will come after us, so the longer we sit around here debating it, the riskier it gets.”

Rachel gulped; the attic, she thought. “Oh my God Colin, I don’t want to go up there, it’s dusty, it’s dirty and there’s bound to be spiders and mice, and...all sorts of other horrible things.”

He grinned inwardly at his *brave* sister. “Sis, there’s nowhere else I can think of and yeah, okay maybe there will be the odd spider up there, but down here, there’s a hideous, walking-dead, thing, with flesh falling off him, that wants to hug and kiss you.”

Rachel giggled. “Okay Col, you got me there. The attic it is.”

Pushing himself slowly off the couch and grabbing Rachel’s hand for support, Colin walked into the kitchen, rummaging through one of the drawers, before emerging triumphant, waving a long, metal, torch. “At least, we won’t be in the dark up there. Now let’s get going before Frankenstein and his bride decides to come looking for their long, lost, grandchildren.”

Still wincing from the pain, they gently and quietly crept up the stairs, pausing every time one of the risers creaked alarmingly under their feet. They could hear no sound, so they continued their slow, painful journey to the second floor. As they padded silently along the hallway, toward the loft cover, to the attic, Colin suddenly held up his hand, signalling Rachel to stop.

“Can you hear that?” he whispered to her.

She strained to discern what it was. Her hand flew to her mouth, in shock, as she heard the unmistakable, rhythmical, squeaking, of bed-springs. Looking at Colin, her eyes wide open in horror. “Oh My G...”

Colin thumped her hard on the shoulder. “Rachel, don’t say it...please...don’t say it!” He held his head in his hands. “For the love of God, don’t even think it Rachel! Oh hell...oh hell...oh hell...” his voice tailed off in utter despair.

Rachel nudged him; “now we know why they didn’t come after us straight away, eh?”

“Rachel NO! Stop it now, please Rache. Please, please...just don’t go there.”

She shrugged her shoulders and began to move forward again. “...just saying Col...just saying,” she trailed behind her.

They reached the loft cover. It had a ladder you could pull down when you wanted to climb up there, but which sprang back against the cover, when not in use. Very painfully Colin knelt down and motioned for Rachel to climb onto his shoulders. He grunted in agony as he slowly pulled himself upright, using the wall as leverage. Once he was standing tall, Rachel was just able to reach the bottom rung of the ladder and pull it down, for them to climb.

Colin climbed first and when he reached the top he gently pushed against the cover, sliding it sideways. Taking a deep breath to try to mitigate the pain in his chest, he pulled himself through the

hole in the ceiling, using his arms and finally kicking his trailing leg over the side and pulling himself completely inside the attic. Leaning down, he motioned Rachel to follow.

Once they were both safely ensconced in the attic, Colin shone the torch around the massive cavity that stretched from one end of the house to the other. He was looking for something he could use to undo the ladder from its bracket and pull it inside the loft. The torch was powerful, but the area was enormous and its beam only illuminated a narrow band, for about twenty yards. Still, Colin thought, it's better than pitch blackness, that's for sure.

Fortunately, he spotted a tool chest leaning against the wall, near the entrance to the attic. In no time at all, with him hanging out of the loft hole and with Rachel holding his legs, he managed to undo the last of the screws holding the ladder bracket to the ceiling. As he undid the last screw, the entire weight of the ladder was held by his arms and shoulders. He began to ease backward to pull the ladder inside, when he realised he wasn't strong enough, with his injured ribs. He screamed, in pain, as something stung deep inside his chest and his fingers slowly released the grip they had on the ladder. He watched it fall, almost in slow motion, until it slammed into the hallway floor and splintered into many pieces. Well, that's a blessing, he thought. It won't be any use to them, in that condition.

The noise of the ladder splintering had clearly alerted them that they were on the move. As he squirmed backward into the attic he saw the door of the room at the end of the hallway open; grandma's room, he thought. The creature, for that's what it surely was; it certainly wasn't his grandfather, shambled out of the room. If anything, it was, even more, repulsive and ugly than before. This time, it was totally naked and Colin noticed, with a mixture of disgust and fascination, it was clearly aroused. Repulsed, he quickly pulled himself back inside and slammed the loft cover back, with a resounding thwack.

He turned to Rachel, his breathing coming in spurts.

"Well...I...guess...we're...safe...for...now." He sat down on the floor of the attic and attempted to get his breathing under control. Finally, he took a deep breath and continued. "Well, they know where we are, but I'm pretty sure they have no way of getting up here." He looked at the loft cover and added; "still, to be on the safe side, let's see if we can find something heavy, to put over the top of the cover."

Fully recovered, he clambered to his feet and shone the torch down the length of the attic, sweeping the walls, as far as the beam would carry. Just at the end of the beam's penetration, something caught his eye. "Let's see what that is Rache;" as he clambered in that direction.

When they reached the object, it was a large, trunk; the sort Victorians used when they packed up their houses, in London, and headed to their country estates for the summer. It was large, leather-bound, and edged in solid brass. It looked heavy and one lift of the corner confirmed it was heavy...bloody heavy!

Between the pair of them, they managed to drag it slowly across the attic floor. The problem occurred when they had to lift it over the solid beams that ran down the attic from one end to the other. They managed, with a combination of sheer brute strength, determination, and some cunning rocking back and forth. It took them twenty minutes to finally drag it over the loft cover. When they had finished, they collapsed, sweat pouring down their already, filthy faces, and breathed deeply for some minutes as they sought to regain their equilibrium.

Finally, Rachel looked up at Colin and snickered at the dirt and grime that streaked his face. "We sure as hell look a mess bro."

He giggled back at her.

Looking at the trunk they had struggled, so manfully, to move, Rachel became fascinated with it. There was a large metal clasp and an old, but solid-looking padlock keeping it closed. She tapped the top of the trunk several times, before looking at Colin, with a glint in her eye. "Anything in that tool box we might be able to use to pry this thing open with?"

Colin crawled over to the toolbox, before returning, brandishing a large crowbar and a broad smile, prepared to attack the clasp on the trunk.

"Careful;" Rachel warned; "don't damage it!" Colin grinned and using the crowbar as a lever, quickly popped the latch, with a satisfying clank. She reached down and slowly swung the creaking, heavy, lid, open. They stared at their treasure for some time, both showing signs of disappointment. The trunk, it seemed, contained nothing more than a collection of incredibly old, musty-smelling, books. Rachel reached in and pulled the first book out, sneezing heavily, as a cloud of dust enveloped her face.

"What do we have here," she exclaimed; holding the book up, for Colin to read its title.

"A Lineage of the Sandringham Dynasty; by Percival Sandringham IV: Third Earl of Essex". Colin slowly read from the cover.

An excited Rachel squealed. "Oh my God Colin, it's a family history...and we have royal blood, so it seems!"

Colin laughed; “I don’t quite think an Earldom qualifies as royalty sis, but aristocracy...maybe.” He smacked his sister gently on the shoulder. “Bloody hell Rache, what happened to us eh? Where did all that money and power go? We’re sure as hell not aristocracy now!”

Rachel grinned; “ah well, I guess not, but wow...it’s exciting to know isn’t it?” She hugged the book to her chest and added; “I want to read this Colin. We’ll take it with us.”

The floor beneath them suddenly shook as someone bashed, what seemed like the end of a broom handle, against the underside of the loft-cover.

Both of them sat back with a jolt, firmly reminded why they were up there, in the attic, in the first place.

“Oh hell!” Rachel exclaimed; “someone’s trying to break in.”

Colin looked at the trunk and breathed deeply; “I think that will hold them for now. There’s not a lot else we can do, although, maybe I should scout around and look for a weapon of some sort. What do you think?”

Rachel shuddered. “Nnnno, Colin...really...nnnno. You can’t leave me sitting here in the dark alone.” She picked up the discarded crowbar and waved it in his face. “Besides, you’re not likely to find any better weapon than this; are you?”

He grabbed the crowbar, from her, and swung it in a scything arc. “Yeah, you’re right. This will do just fine.” He looked her in the eyes. “There’s not much else we can do until mum and dad turn up, so let’s have a look at the family history ha! Maybe there are some interesting characters in our family.” He reached to grab the book off her, but she was too quick and rolled away from his outstretched hand.

“You shine the torch on the pages Col and I’ll hold the book; alright?”

Agreeing begrudgingly, he sat and watched as she carefully laid the book on the attic floor and reverently opened the first page.

The Sandringham family history quickly captured both their imaginations, as they sat engrossed, silently turning one page after another. The lineage began, so it seemed, in the twelfth Century; 1125 to be exact. In what is now known as Germany; Segemund 12, the son of a peasant farmer, whose farm was devastated by famine, decided to seek his future and fortune elsewhere, heading north, into modern-day France. Somewhere along the way his descendants had migrated to England and the Sandringham’s had been born.

The book itself was lavishly illustrated, with pencil drawings of what the author had concluded the distant forebears of Colin and Rachel would have looked like. They were enraptured by the richness of the illustrations and the captivating stories of each successive generation. Rachel turned the page that signified the end of the seventeenth Century.

She gave a small shriek, as she saw the illustration on the facing page. Instead of the customary artist's rendition of one of their ancestors, there was a hellish-looking, colour illustration, of a mass execution. She could count thirteen young men and woman, tied to stakes, being burned to death; flames licking around their waists and their faces contorted in scenes of indescribable agony. She put a hand to her mouth and gave a pained, mew.

Forgetting himself, Colin rudely pushed her out of the way and read the caption aloud. "Thirteen witches sent to hell, on this day, in the Borough of Colchester, County of Essex. May God have mercy on their souls!" He looked at Rachel, his eyes flashing with excitement. Reading on, he grew more nervous and intense. In the detailed story that accompanied the horrific illustration, he discovered that the thirteen young people were all from the one extended family; the Sandersons. He looked at his sister and raised his eyebrows, as he read the next bit slowly and aloud. "These thirteen evil souls were perceived, by the borough's magistrate, to be interfering with the dead." The story explained the thirteen were suspected of being a witch's coven, intent on raising the dead back to life.

Colin sat back and raised his eyebrows questioningly at Rachel. "Might explain something...you think?"

She shrugged noncommittally. "Let's just keep reading. See what happens next?"

Colin frowned. "Let's see what's happening downstairs first eh?" He stood up and putting his shoulder against the trunk pushed it off the loft-cover. Gingerly, he lifted it and laying down flat on the floor, slowly lowered his head through the opening. He looked down the hallway and saw nothing. Heaving a sigh of relief, he turned to check the other end of the passage, when his world went black.

Hearing the thud, Rachel yanked on his legs to pull him back inside, but he was too big for her to budge. She realised, with horror, gravity was taking hold and slowly, but inexorably, Colin was sliding through the ceiling hole, to the floor below. She screamed and tried desperately to stop him from falling, trying to wedge her feet between his body and the hole; anything to stop him from tumbling to the ground.

She yelped as something hard slammed into her ankle. Instinctively, she pulled her foot out of the hole and Colin's lifeless body slid through the gap like it was greased with butter, before crashing to the wooden floor below, with a sickening thud.

Panicking now, she grabbed the large crowbar, they had used to open the chest and reaching down through the gap, swung it in wild arcs. She heard the satisfying crunch as metal met skin and bone. She heard the crowbar make contact with something and gave a small yelp of joy when the response was a holler of pain.

Angry now, she looked through the hole at her brother's still unmoving body. "Damn it!" she exclaimed. "This ends here!"

Judging the distance, she clutched the crowbar to her chest and launched herself through the gap. When she hit the ground, she felt a sharp pain in her ankle, but ignoring it, she rolled and sprung to her feet, tears of pain stabbing her eyes. She desperately wanted to check on Colin's condition, but she knew she had to confront this evil, face-on, first.

Despite the shafts of fire shooting up her injured leg, she spun around desperately, looking for their nemesis. There they were, just ten feet away, grinning idiotically at her. Her grandmother was perched on top of *his* shoulders, casually spinning a vicious looking, metal poker, in her fingers, like a majorette in a marching band. My God! Rachel thought, it was grandma that hit Colin.

A red mist descended over her eyes and blinking away the pooling tears, she charged at the repulsive pair. She put her head down and barrelled straight into the festering stomach of the zombie; her head, actually penetrating the putrid, rotting, flesh.

Pulling herself out, with a sickening squelch, she watched, as nana and the zombie tumbled to the ground, under her ferocious onslaught. There was no way she was going to let up on them and blindly swinging her crowbar, like an axe, she repeatedly chopped and smashed the prone bodies of the two.

Breathing, like she'd just completed a marathon, her arms aching with the continual swinging of the crowbar, she still took immense satisfaction from the sound of metal hitting living flesh. Nothing, it seemed, would stop Rachel's frenzied attack; until she heard a soft whisper.

"Rache...enough...I think they're dead now." Colin had regained consciousness and was trying to pull himself into a sitting position. Forgetting the carnage that was splattered all over the hallway, she turned and knelt beside her brother, hugging him around the shoulders.

"Colin...oh Colin, I thought you were gone;" as the tears poured, unheeded, down her cheeks.

Gingerly extricating himself from her grasp and wincing as he touched a growing bulge around his temple, he grimaced. "Well, apart from this massive lump on my head," he paused and tried to stand, before falling back on his bum; "and apart from my ankle, which I think may be sprained, I'm still in the land of the living."

He looked over her shoulder and screwed up his face, in disgust; “which is probably more than I can say for those two. I think you’ve well and truly rooted them. Bloody hell sis! Where did that come from?”

She shuddered and risked a glance over her shoulder, at the devastation she had wrought on grandma and on *him*. She couldn’t believe what she saw; what murderous mayhem she had committed. Her grandmother lay broken and battered; her skull stove in and blood trickling from her nose, ears and mouth. As for *him*...well...he might as well not even exist anymore. There wasn’t a recognisable body left, just scraps of cloth, lumps of flesh, and a porridge-like, grey, ooze, spreading all over the floor. So much ooze!

She couldn’t help herself and she automatically threw up, at Colin’s feet. Screaming, she threw her hands in front of her face; “I’ve killed them...I’ve killed my own grandmother...oh...oh...oh...”

He grabbed her hands and pulled them down, dragging himself into a more comfortable position. Looking her straight in the eyes, he could see the horror and fear written there. Taking a deep breath, he told her; “Rachel...Rachel...you have to calm down. You did what you had to do, right? You saved our lives Rachel...damn...you saved *my* life!”

She looked at him incomprehensibly and started to shake; nothing getting through the shock. Colin pulled his hand back and went to slap her hard. Her eyes flipped and disbelief turned immediately to anger. “Don’t you dare!” she screamed at him. “Don’t you dare even think about hitting me, Colin Sandringham!”

Despite everything, Colin giggled softly. “Good to have you back sis!”

Pursing her lips, she ventured; “so...what do we do now bro?”

Colin raised his eyebrows and looked again at the mess on the floor. Rubbing his forehead, he replied; “I think we just get downstairs and try and reach Mum and Dad somehow. Come on, give me a hand to stand up and we’ll see if we can get down there.”

Using each other as mutual support, they hobbled toward the gloppy mess. They tried desperately to avoid standing in any of it, but that was simply impossible. It took them a good five minutes to get down the stairs, but once in the kitchen, the first thing Rachel did was to whip off her shoes and throw them in the sink, turning on the hot tap and squirting in half a bottle of dish-washing liquid.

Her cleansing complete, she joined Colin on the sofa. He was sitting, holding his head in his hands and rocking backward and forward. She put her arm gently around his shoulders and whispered; “Don’t you lose it too Colin. We need to keep it together.”

Taking a deep breath, he sat back, pushing his hair back on his forehead. He nodded at her.

She sat up and glanced furtively at the door. “Should we barricade the door Col?”

He smiled wanly; “After what we just saw up there Rache; do you *really* think that’s necessary?”

Smiling sadly, she shook her head.

Over the next few hours, they tried the doors to the house again and Colin even had another crack at breaking a window, making sure this time he was well clear of the coffee table when it bounced back at him. There was simply no way out of this house of horrors!

Rachel looked at him. “Colin, one of us is going to have to go back upstairs to our bedroom and try and call Mum and Dad on our cell-phones.”

Colin smacked his forehead and then winced from the pain of the eggshell-like lump on his temple. “Of course, why didn’t I think of that? I’ll go Rache.”

She was overjoyed at his offer. There was no way she wanted to have to confront what she had done, again or to walk through that disgusting mess. She only made a token resistance to his suggestion.

While he was gone, she turned on the television to try and banish the thoughts of what lay upstairs. When Colin arrived back, she was curled up on the sofa, her feet under her, rocking back and forth and crying, watching some wildlife documentary on the BBC. Filled with compassion for his sister, he limped over and hugged her shoulders. “It’s ok sis, I got my phone and it looks like it’s working.”

She snatched the phone from his grasp and began to dial furiously.

“Wait! Wait!” Colin exclaimed loudly, grabbing onto her hand to stop her fingers. “I haven’t told you it all yet. Just wait!” She looked at him, perplexed.

He tried to steady his voice, but still croaked when he spoke; “it’s gone, Rachel! It’s all gone.”

She screwed her nose up in consternation; “what’s gone?”

“Everything, Rachel, everything; grandma’s body, the mess, the ooze, the bits and pieces of Grand...*him*...it’s just all disappeared.”

Rachel shuddered and tried to smile. “Well...that’s a good thing...isn’t it?”

Colin threw up his hands in mock horror. “God knows...I don’t know anything, anymore. This is like a movie or something. It’s surreal. Anyway...call mum now.”

Rachel’s fingers flew over the keys again and she waited. “Mum!” she screamed. “Come now, something awful has happened.” She burst into tears again and sobbed uncontrollably into the phone, blubbing incoherently.

Colin grabbed the phone and raised it to his lips. “Mum, no questions please; just get here as quick as you can...pleeease!” He nodded absently at something she’d said and then hung up. He patted his sister softly on the back. “They’re on their way. Don’t worry, it’ll be fine now.”

She just reached up and pulled him down beside her on the sofa, holding him and refusing to let go. They sat there, saying nothing, just rocking back and forth for the next three hours, watching the mindless drivel on television.

Finally, there was an insistent rat-a-tat-tat on the front door and they could hear their mother calling; “Rachel, Colin, open the door.”

Extricating himself from his sister’s embrace he limped over to the door and shouted through the letter slot that they were unable to open the door.

He heard his father say; “use your damn key, Susan”.

Hearing a key being slotted and turned, he stood back and was amazed when the door actually opened and he saw the frantic faces of his mother and father. He fell into his mother’s arms and sobbed. His father rushed around them and ran into the lounge, where he attempted to comfort Rachel.

Mum’s answer to every crisis was “a cup of tea”, so before any interrogation, she bustled out of the room and prepared a large pot of tea to calm everyone down. When they were finally seated and sipping tea, Trevor turned to the two children and enquired; “what’s been going on here? Where’s your nana?”

Colin and Rachel both started to speak at once, tripping over each other’s words. Trevor held his hand up imperiously. “Rachel, you tell us what happened, please?”

By the time Rachel had managed to tell them the whole story, Susan and Trevor sat shaking their heads, sadly. It was clear to her they didn't believe a word of what she was saying. She looked to Colin for help, but he just shrugged his shoulders.

Their Father waited till Rachel had finished speaking and then, standing up, he grabbed both of them to their feet. Angrily he reached up and forced open one of Colin's eyelids, staring into his eyes. "What exactly, have you two been taking? I thought we could trust you, but no...you're just like all the other kids your age, on some drug or another."

Colin was furious and slapped his father's hand away, fronting up to him and daring him to do something about it. "She's not lying...and we don't do drugs, dad;" he spat at his father.

Susan, realising things were about to spiral out of control, jumped between the two men. Putting an arm on each of their shoulders, she fiercely, but quietly, told them to step away and sit down. Reluctantly the two strutting, warriors, took a step back. Colin sank back on the couch next to his inconsolable sister and Trevor marched across to the armchair and plonked himself down in it.

"Look, I don't know what to make of all this, but one thing's for sure, we're not going to achieve anything by scrapping, so both of you calm down and let's talk rationally." Sitting next to Rachel and Colin, she smiled at them. "At least, it is all over now, that's something."

Colin's forehead crinkled in thought and he leapt to his feet. "No Mum, it's not bloody well over; not as long as that evil, bloody, mirror still exists. I'm going to destroy it." He grabbed the crowbar the two had placed on the coffee table and hobbled for the stairs, closely followed by his mother and father, with Rachel lagging behind.

Once he reached the door to the bedroom, he hesitated. He was scared to confront the image in the mirror. What power did that thing have? Gathering his courage, he edged into the room and stood in front of it. He heard the others clatter into the room behind him, his father's ragged breathing giving an indication of the effort he'd expended, chasing him. Taking a deep breath, he raised the crowbar high, preparing to smash it against the reflection that seemed to be mocking him.

He heard his mother's scream; "No Colin!" and he hesitated. It was long enough for his father to grab the end of the crowbar and wrench it from his hand.

Colin spun on his heels, his face a mask of fury. Trevor stood there, with the crowbar held behind his back, just grinning at him. This only served to anger Colin more and he moved threateningly toward his father.

Trevor raised his hand to try to placate him. "Look, son," he began. "I don't know why destroying this beautiful mirror means so much to you and Rachel, but if it's that important...well, it's

only a mirror after all.” Still smiling, he turned to Rachel. “There you go, honey. You and Colin can smash it together if it will make you happy.”

Confused, Rachel took the proffered crowbar and walked to the mirror. She looked at Colin and raised an eyebrow. “So...we do this bro?” Colin grabbed her hand holding the crowbar and together they pulled it back, for a mighty swing.

“Damn right we do Sis.”

Trevor and Susan looked at each other and smiled. Linking hands they cannoned into the back of the two children, sending all of them flying through the mirror.

“Time for a family reunion, children!”

Two long and mournful screams reverberated through the house until there was nothing left, but silence – complete and utter silence.

. . .

**THE END!**

## **DOOR NO.3:**

### **THE PHOTOGRAPHER:**

**A Short-Story by: Chris Leishman**

Photos! I always found them a bit strange; snapshots, of a time in history. A time that you cannot return to, but that is forever engraved in the template of time. That's all I have to remember her by, now; photos. Memories fade and distort with time, your brain begins to change and warp what once you held sacred, into contorted visions of what used to be. All I have, to remind me of her, is what I have left in my photo album. Shots of us at the pier, the time she went to Madrid; fuck, even the time that she got drunk, off shots of apple schnapps, in that dingy bar off fourth. These are all that are left of her, but none of them, actually describe her.

How do you describe a person? Do you start with their physical appearance? I used to think so. I was so vain you know. Being a photographer, you see things, through the lens of beautifying and perfect synchronicity. I didn't understand what inner beauty was, not really. The outer beauty seemed to shine through more, in my eye. It would be a stereotype to say that I found inner beauty within her, but fuck it! This is my story, my narrative. I can tell it how I want to. When I first met her, I was astounded by her, not just her looks, but by her. I can't describe it. It's like, when you were around her, you just felt safe, you know? But let's not get bogged down on the details of her.

You know, photos tell a story. The best ones do, anyway. Before meeting her, I would be concerned with the story the objects were telling...sorry, the subjects. It wasn't until taking her picture, I discovered, you could also catch the essence of something, in a photograph. The first photo of her, I am ashamed to say, was horrible. The composition was off, the focus was blurry, and the picture far too dark. But I could still feel her, through the celluloid. Even today, when I look at that picture, I can feel her with me. As I took more and more photos, I began to perfect the craft of capturing her picture. More and more the essence of her was captured and filed away in my little album.

I must have taken at least a million or so pictures of her, spending copious amounts on the film. I'm old school; none of that digital crap. The art of a photo is lost, in numbers and binary. There is

something raw about real film that you simply cannot replicate. To be fair, any digital likeness of her would have been an injustice.

I once again find myself asking the question; how do you describe a person? Well, I will try my best to paint a verbal portrait of her. She has brownish-blondish hair and is tall. The dimples crease her face when she smiles. Those ice-blue eyes, that happy, warm, loving, motherly...dead, face.

Dead...the prevailing thought that cuts through my psyche, is one that slices through me like a knife. The loss has seemingly taken all the warmth away. This is why memories are not reliable; they trick you and distort who you are. Pictures, tell the story of a girl who is very much happy and alive. My memory doesn't. My memory gives me flashes of that grizzly scene; the last time I saw her on this physical plane.

I love her; she loves me. In the bleakness and blackness of this world, I found her. She was perfect; not just for me, but for everyone. I would often watch her as she did all the little things. You know, the way she would scratch her nose when she entered sunlight, the way she would deeply inhale every third second, the way she would twitch in her sleep, the dead look on her face as she slept in the bed. There I go again, thinking of her, dead and lifeless. It *is* hard to remove the association from my head now, after seeing that. As I said, memories; the way they distort and destroy an image, is powerful.

I did love her and she did love me. Or at least, that's what I thought. When I saw her with that man, I couldn't believe what I saw. I still don't. Luckily, I have the photo with me right now to prove it wasn't a distortion of my memories.

I needed to talk to her. Surely there was a logical explanation. So, I went to her room and waited. When she saw me, the shriek that came out of her mouth was unbearable. I had to grab her, to stop her from causing an embarrassing commotion. She was delirious. She was crying and babbling, asking me who I was. Clearly, she had something wrong with her memories too. How could she forget me? So, I needed to do, what I needed to do. I had to make her remember; to remember our love.

I showed her the photos, hoping the stories would remind her of who we were. She still was bewitched by these memories, these stupid, fucking, memories! I didn't know what to do. She was begging and pleading with me to stop. It broke my heart to see her like that. My heart was torn at the prospect that our love could be lost. She needed to know; she needed to remember me.

I did what any person would do in that situation. I began scrambling her brain. I thought, I could jumble her memories back into place. It was messy at first; lots of blood and endless screaming. Did you know how hard it is to remove the top of a skull?! I didn't know it would take that much effort. You know the old idiom 'it's not brain surgery'? Well...this fucking was brain surgery and it wasn't

pretty. I thought maybe electro-shock therapy would help; I'd seen it done in movies before. But no, all it did was cook her scrambled brain. In the end, I'm pretty sure she died of heartache.

I took a photo of her you know, after the whole thing; but it wasn't the same. The glow she had was gone. Poor girl, she died not knowing the love I had for her or the love she had for me. But life gives you many valuable lessons and this was one of them. I learned what true loss really was. My love had lost who she was and now she was gone forever. Well, that's not including through my photos. She still lives on you see, she lives on through the stories I captured of her.

Perhaps it is time for me to move on. Maybe I need to find a new love. I'm sure she would have wanted me to move on. I'm sure, that wherever she is now, she will remember and she will want me to move on with my life. But trust me, honey, I will never forget you. As long as I have your photos, you will forever be in my heart and always be with me.

I love you and you love me.

**THE END!**

## **DOOR NO.4:**

### **“SEMPER FIDELIS”:**

**A Short-Story By: Grant Leishman**

Gingerly, he moved his head to one side. That was his first mistake. He could swear he felt his brain sloshing from one side of his skull to the other and slamming into the hard bone there. He winced in pain and deciding discretion was the better part of valour, gently rolled back to the horizontal position. Risking opening one eye, he shuddered, as the sunlight, sneaking through a crack in the blinds, lanced through his retina. Quickly closing his errant eye, he tried to get his mind to think coherently. Where was he? What the fuck happened last night...and most importantly of all, am I going to die?

Despite the pain, he grinned to himself. Fuck it! I lasted two full tours of Iraq and one of Afghanistan, without a single scratch on me and here I am lying on the floor, whinging and moaning, about a bloody hangover. “Gunnery Sergeant William Buckley, get your shit together, you worthless piece of crud,” he parroted his old Sergeant Major from Quantico. The memory made him chuckle.

Forcing himself through the pain barrier, he used his arms to push himself upright and steady himself. Slowly looking around, he realised he was in a hotel room of some description. His eyes lit on a naked form, spread-eagled on the floor beside him; none other than his comrade in arms, his erstwhile drinking buddy, and best friend, ex-Private First-Class Rudi Ventor. He and Rudi had been through hell together. They entered the training base at Quantico as raw recruits and total strangers, all those years ago and by the time basic training was complete, they were inseparable. Christ, he thought, I’ve spent more time with Rudi than probably any other person in my life, including Chrissie.

“Chrissie!”

It all started coming back to him now; Chrissie, his fiancé, the love of his life. Shit, they were getting married next week. Last night was one last fling with the boys from his old unit, the 24<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit. They’d all been out of the Corps for close to five years now, but you know what they say; “Once a Marine, always a Marine.” When Bill and Chrissie had finally decided to take the plunge and tie the knot, after three years together, Rudi had rounded up the lads, who were still around, and promised to organise the Bachelor Party to end all Bachelor Parties.

Bill smiled. Shit, they'd come from all over the country to attend the bash. Scott Roberts from Florida, Chet Meachen from Los Angeles and bloody Fred Savage had even flown back from England to help Bill farewell his freedom. He rubbed his shaved head...it had lived up to Rudi's billing as well...at least, as much as I can remember of it, he thought. He winced, a little, as he rubbed his forehead. Shit, I must have bumped that, or something, last night; it freaking hurts. He grimaced, well...actually, everything freaking well hurts at the moment.

He heard a rustle of movement as Rudi rolled over and farted loudly. Bill chortled. Dirty prick, he thought. He pulled himself to his feet and hobbled over to the couch on the far side of the suite, gratefully sinking into the deep, comfortable, cushions. Rubbing his chin, he tried to reconstruct the events of the previous evening.

They'd all met up at Denny's Bar and Grill on Fourth. Chet had insisted they were only allowed to drink shots, all night. "No beers boys!" he had announced cheerfully. "If we're going to send young William off to the guardhouse for the rest of his natural born days, we're going out in style. So...shots only and the rule is we can't double up the shot. It has to be something different each time." It seemed such a fun idea at the time, but now...? Bill tried to swirl his tongue around his mouth and create some saliva, but all he got in reward was a dusty, feathery, taste. He spat on the carpet and cursed his stupidity for going along with Chet's crazy idea.

By the time they'd staggered out of Denny's, none of them could walk an even remotely straight line. They wobbled and wended their way down to Sixth, where they lined up for entry to the compulsory Bachelor Night activity; the strip club. He couldn't remember much about the strip club at all, he couldn't even picture the naked girls. Well...that was clearly a damn waste of money, he mused and I didn't even get to enjoy it. His last cogent memory was being manhandled out of the strip club by a seven foot (at least), 300 pound, bouncer. He had no idea what he'd done, to warrant such cavalier treatment, but the behemoth had just nonchalantly picked him up by his collar and the seat of his pants and tossed him unceremoniously into the gutter.

Where were my fearless, fucking, buddies, when that was happening? he wondered.

Still...he smiled. It must have been one hell of a party for me to have ended up like this. Idly, he wondered how Chrissie's bachelorettes party had gone. He bet it wasn't anywhere near as exciting as theirs had obviously been.

He blinked rapidly to clear his vision. Damn, I need some water and I need to try and wash some of this crustiness out of my eyes. Pushing himself to his feet, he tottered in the direction of what he assumed would be the suite's bathroom. Turning the light on, he ran the faucet in the sink and splashed water continuously over his face, for about ten seconds. Using the hand towel provided, he wiped away the layers of gunk that had encrusted around his eyes.

Feeling marginally better, he opened his eyes and stared at the haggard face that looked back at him, from the mirror.

**“FUCK!”** he screamed...**“OH MY FUCKING GOD! RUDI, I’M GOING TO FUCKING KILL YOU!”**

He closed his eyes, shook his head, and willed the vision not to be there; but it was...it just was. Right in the middle of his forehead; there it was, staring back at him, mocking him. Staring back at him, in living Technicolor of gold, blues and reds, was a perfectly formed tattoo of the United States Marine Corps Insignia – Quantico. He stared at it, dumbfounded, willing it to disappear, but it just kept on reflecting back at him.

Spinning around, he hit the bathroom door like a roaring express train and barrelled into the bedroom. Rudi was just beginning to emerge from his cocoon, sitting up and looking around enquiringly. Bill grabbed his naked friend around the neck and hauled him to his feet. “What the fuck have you done to me, you stupid asshole!” he screamed into Rudi’s face, just inches from his nose.

Rudi, who didn’t seem to have quite gathered his bearings yet, grinned sheepishly at him and let out an enormous burp, the smell of pure alcohol knocking Bill back a few inches.

Bill, gestured to his forehead and very slowly, but very forcefully began to speak. “Rudi... what... the...fuck...is...this?”

Rudi grinned; “ahhhh...your tat Bill...you like it? We all got one, you know.” He turned his arm outward so Bill could see the Marine Corps insignia tattooed on the inside of his left bicep.

Bill tried to contain himself. “Sure Rudi...sure...I get it, ha! Cool idea buddy...**BUT WHY IS MINE, IN THE MIDDLE OF MY FUCKING FOREHEAD!**”

Rudi, stung by the anger in Bill’s voice, pushed him away. “Fuck Bill! You kept insisting you wanted it there. We tried to stop you, but you said that’s where you wanted it. You said, I’m a proud marine and I want to show the world.”

Deflated, Bill sank to the ground and put his head in his hands. “Rudi, I’m a damn investment banker, now. How the hell am I supposed to explain this to my clients...shit Rudi...to my bosses...oh hell... to Chrissie? I’m fucked mate!”

His buddy knelt down beside him and put his arm around his shoulder. “Hey Bill, it’s not all bad buddy. Perhaps you could sign back on as the Unit Mascot...hahaha!”

The red mist descended over Bill’s eyes. Everything he had worked for, everything he and Chrissie had worked toward was destroyed, gone, all because of one drunken night with this bunch of

fucking morons. How could they have let me do this? I was so damn drunk; they must have known I wouldn't want this. Why didn't they knock me out or something?

He stood up and dragged Rudi to his feet. He looked at his life-long friend and felt like crying. The bastard was still laughing about it, still giggling. All sense of control went from him and before he even knew it, he'd thrown the punch that snapped Rudi's head back like a rag-doll. Rudi, pole-axed, fell backwards, like a giant tree felled in the forest.

The noise his head made, as it smashed through the glass top of the coffee table, was something that would haunt Bill's dreams for eternity. In one moment of madness, he had destroyed both their lives. The blood began to spurt immediately. Bill could see a shard of glass embedded deep in Rudi's neck. His survival training kicked in and he grabbed a sheet lying nearby. Kneeling down, he cradled his body in his arms, pressing the sheet into the gaping wound in Rudi's neck, trying to stem the flow of blood. Bill had held enough dying soldiers in his arms, over the years, to know an artery had been severed and Rudi would bleed to death very quickly. He knew, all he could do, was stay with his buddy until the end.

Rudi's eyes fluttered open and he managed a weak grin. The tears were flowing down Bill's cheeks as he heard Rudi trying to whisper something. "Don't talk buddy, save your strength. You'll be okay, help's on its way."

Rudi's lips moved softly, as he mouthed the word "Not" and then Bill felt the life force depart from his friend. Rudi's head rolled sideways and Bill laid him gently on the floor, still cradling him, his tears mixing with the expanding pool of crimson blood, on the white carpet.

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting there crying before rationality began to kick in. What am I going to do now? He looked at his friend's, lifeless, body. "I'm sorry Rudi, but I have to try to make the best out of this awful situation," he told him. Rudi just lay there and didn't respond.

Getting to his feet, he looked around and decided the only course of action was to get himself cleaned up and then telephone the paramedics and the police. He'd just say he was asleep when he heard this almighty crash and when he jumped up he found Rudi lying on the floor, dying.

"There was nothing I could do Officer. Rudi must have wanted to pee or something and still drunk he'd tripped and fallen over, smashing into the table." It sounded plausible, he decided.

Taking one long, last, sorrowful look at his best buddy, he trudged to the bathroom.

Standing in the shower, Bill allowed the stinging, hot water, to take away some of the horrors that was in the next room. He stood and watched as swirls of Rudi's blood washed off him and spiralled down the drain...reds, blues and golds. RED, BLUES and GOLDS!

He sank to his knees, water cascading over his shoulders, tears coursing down his cheeks.

“Oh my God...**not** real...it’s **not** fucking, real...oh God,” he muttered, over and over again.

. . .

**THE END!**

## **DOOR NO.5:**

### **THE CAR:**

**A Short-Story By: Chris Leishman**

It started, oddly enough, with the start of an engine. That's how it began; don't ask me why this begins that way; it just does. Jacob and a few others were there too, watching me in this mint, broken-down, pink, Cadillac, grease covering my hands and face, cigarette hanging out of my mouth like the walking definition of a fire hazard. Jacob had told me he was bored, as did the others, in fact. Me? I was completely zen. I was like, in some sort of trance, wanting to get this derelict beast back up and running. I didn't care about their trivial wants, their neediness for a quick hit of adrenaline, after coming down from the last high. I swear, that most, if not all, of the gang, had ADHD or something like that. I had read that in a magazine article once. Something about not being able to pay attention to – eh, it doesn't matter. Either way, I didn't care too much about their boredom. I was out in the field with my father's tool box and a pack of ciggy's. I was sorted for the day.

“Oi Hunter!” I heard Jacob yell.

I looked up over the bonnet. I had made it back to the engine by that time; my previous attempts to re-start the car were not very fruitful. “What?!”

“How long do you think you'll be?” He paused; “Munt needs to take a shit and Karla is just shit-bored.” Karla hit Jacob on the shoulder, resulting in a low yelp.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead, causing the congealing grease to transfer to my forearm. I didn't know how to answer the question. Bored? How the fuck could somebody be bored doing this? It was a classic! Sure, the pink paint was flaking and the metal was rusted; wheels were gone and the lining was munted – but still, the engine still had some juice in her. I simply shrugged and went back to work.

I was narrow-minded and focused on the car altogether. It was a while before Jacob tapped me on the shoulder.

“Oi Hunt! Me and the others are gonna do some doughies at the lake.”

“Kay,” I responded, without looking up at him. I was busy screwing in the spark plugs; they kept slipping out of my fingers and getting stuck in the little gaps.

Jacob came in and whispered; “you should come. Karla seems into you, or at least, that’s what Donna’s sister told me.”

I looked up at Karla. She was alright, nice face, good body. Good enough for a one-off, maybe even a two-off. That could wait, though. I had to finish what I’d started. If I could get this beast up and running there would be lines of Karlas wanting to score with me. Besides, Jacob had lucked out recently with his missus, so I thought it would be the right thing to do, you know, considering. Let him have some of the action. I was good like that.

“Nah mate! Have a good time,” I told him.

“What about you, though, how you gonna get back home?”

Good ol’ Jacob, always looking out for me. I guess that’s how we’re best mates. We always looked out for each other.

“I’ll just text ya when I’m done. Hell, with any luck, I’ll get this baby up and running by then.”

It was a joke, but Jacob still gave a worried chuckle, like he understood, but was still worried. It was sweet of him, to be honest. Jacob was like a brother to me in many respects and I could always count on him to look out for me. If I ever got wasted, he would be the sober one and vice-versa.

He shrugged and went off, raising his hand to say goodbye.

“I’ll get us a box tonight,” he added, before jumping into the Ute and driving off, kicking up a barrage of mud and muck.

“Chur!” I simply nodded my head and watched them disappear, before getting back to work.

. . .

Ah, shit! I should probably tell you why I’m here. Well, one night me ‘n’ Jacob were doing laps around town. You know, the usual Friday night, shit. The clubs were all dead and the pubs were only open till two; so what fucking else are ya gonna do?

Well anyway, we were driving around when Gabby has this idea to go down the gorge with the lights off. Fucking stupid in retrospect, but great at the time. I think he really wanted to get laid by his missus that night ‘cos he was trying to get her scared and shit. He had read in an old Playboy he had from the 70’s (apparently they had them back then) that you should scare your girl occasionally ‘cos it raises her sexual hormones or something. Look, I don’t know, I’m not a fucking sexologist. Sounded

like a stupid idea to me. How does getting scared make you want to get off? It's like opposites; maybe it's got something to do with the saying, opposites attract? I dunno!

Anyway, it was fucking working! There I was driving while Jacob and his girl were practically having it off in the backseat. I looked in the rear-view mirror for, I swear, a second; not in a homo sort of way, just in a – you know, curious way. I feel this loud bump and the car began swerving on the gravel road. I slam on the brakes, sending Donna flying forward. I seriously thought the fat bitch would smash through my windscreen and I would have to buy a fucking new one. But I also thank Christ, as the car was a little dodgy. I had modded her myself and put her together, but the brakes were still a bit touchy.

So we stopped and we're all freaking out. I turn on the lights and see nothing ahead of us. I tell them to wait while I inspect. I look at the fender and see there's blood on it and a huge dent. Not a good sign, if there ever was one. There were splatters of red coating the pink paint job (don't laugh, it came like that). I was freaking the fuck out! What if I'd hit some backwoods farmer and their inbred family was gonna come and rape me? Too many horror films, I know.

I went to the back of the car and discovered something that would let everything settle inside of me. It was only a fucking sheep. The thing was still alive, twitching on the gravel; its guts spilled out looking like strange appendages; like wings or something. I felt the biggest relief ever. I did feel for the poor thing, it was obviously suffering and confused. So, I started to look around for a rock to smash its head in, you know, like in the movies. I thought it was, at least, the humane thing to do.

I started searching for the murder weapon when I saw it. I saw the rusted pink reflecting off my headlights. In the middle of the paddock next to me there she was. She was a thing of beauty, or at least, she once was. She had potential. I jumped the fence and inspected the vehicle. I popped the bonnet. It was still dark, so I couldn't see shit. I lit a ciggy and put the tip up to the engine. She looked to be in tip-top shape, or as much as she could be. So I gleefully hopped back in the car and told Jacob of my findings.

“So, what did we hit?” he asked after I had explained my story.

“What?” I asked back, “It was a sheep or something. Who fucking cares! I found a beauty of a car. Tomorrow, we come back and fix her up.”

Jacob sat in silence, he didn't seem too keen. Donna seemed pissed off, trying to cover her tits with her arms; claimed to have lost her shirt. I don't know why she was so pissed off. It wasn't like I hadn't seen them before. So, I kept a mental note of the place, before leaving. I nearly forgot about the sheep. I thought that I would quickly reverse over her again to put her out of her misery. I didn't warn the other two and this seemed to piss Donna off even more. I don't know why. I thought she

would be chuffed that she knew a guy that would humanely kill an animal. She didn't like it, though, as they broke up, that night. Whoops!

. . .

So that's the story. That's why I'm here. What? You expected it to all link together? That the sheep had some sort of point to the story, as to why I was fixing this car? You've been reading too many stories. Life's random. It's a series of random events, that joined together, create somebody's experience on this Earth. It's not some sort of well-interwoven narrative that all joins together at the end, or at least for me it hasn't been. I was born the baby of a hard-working couple (that I love to bits) and I have grown up to be a complete toss-head. No grand narrative there; no interwoven plan... Sorry... I do tend to ramble, as you can attest to.

I had been out there for what must have been twelve more hours. By the time I had finished tinkering with the engine, the sun was glowing orange. I looked down at my digital watch. It was either five, or three, or six. I didn't know. Some of the lines in the numbers were broken and didn't work. Either way, it was getting late. I hopped into the driver's seat and prayed she would start up. I'm not Christian or anything, I just sometimes talk to God, you know. Like, when I want to do really well in my test or when Kendal Smith was peeing on the stick. I just ask him to give a brother a helping hand. Sometimes it works, other times God says Nah!

So, I begin fucking around with the wires under the steering wheel to get her started. It all started off with me trying to do that thing you see in the movies. Turns out it's a lot harder than it looks. You literally have to do five things at the same time, but with practice, I was able to get it down, to now, where I don't even have to think about it. I know it sounds like I'm confessing to stealing cars and shit, but I haven't. It was only to get my car after mum took my keys one time when I was disqualified... and one other time at a golf course, but I won't get into that one.

I begin rubbing the wires together and trying to get the car started and to my surprise, God answered me! The fucking thing started. I revved the engine a few times to be sure and she was going for it. I fist-pumped the air, hitting the roof of the car and hurting my hand a little, but I didn't care. I got her started. As the machine bobbed back and forward I looked at the vibrating rear view mirror, it was cracked and most of the shards were still on. I looked at my face, I was a complete mess. No doubt about it, I would have to have a good dip in a lake or something (I didn't want to use the shower at home 'cos the grease would clog the drains and shit. I read that in an article once). Upon inspecting my face I swear and this is where shit gets a little crazy, I swear, I saw a dark figure in the back seat. Like someone completely in black. I nearly shat myself. I spun around to see no one there. My phone began vibrating, distracting me from the figure. It was Jacob. His text said; "*Yo, it's nrly 8 bro. u nd a lft?*"

Eight? Shit! Was it that late? I popped my head out of the car and looked out into the auburn sky. It was begging to become a dark, deep, violet. I leant back and texted him; “*yup... brng sum rope or something. I got this baby up n runnin!!!!*” I sat back and let the vibrations of the car flow through me. I was proud of the day’s work and was ready to sleep my victory lap. I began to drift off to sleep, as the memories of the dark passenger began to fade away.

. . .

She was a bit of a struggle to get her home. I had forgotten there were no tyres and the hubs were scratching on the gravel road as we tried our exit. Sparks flew, much to the amusement of the stoners in the backseat of Jacob’s Ute. I was pretty fucked off at that; they were just giggling and staring at my new car, as sparks flew around me. I had gone to the trouble of fixing it only for it to be a bitch on the way home. Luckily I texted my Indian friend Benjy and he dropped off a few space-savers he was able to salvage from the yards (his dad owned the scrap yard). So, I put the space-savers on and we were our way. She was a bit of a bumpy ride as the space-savers were uneven, as some were from bigger cars and some were from smaller, but it didn’t matter. As long as I steered correctly, I was able to do my job.

I loved being in that car. Seriously, there was just something about it. Something, I don’t know... orgasmic? Not in an auto-erotica kind of way (I read that in a mag. as well. No! Not that type of mag, you sicko!) but, in a satisfied kind of way. Like, it seemed, I felt complete. Normally I would get bored sitting around driving and I would grab my phone out to play some games, even though my phone was ancient as! Seriously, it was like one of them flip ones; they don’t even make them anymore. But it’s all good ‘cos Benjy showed me how to install cool games like doodle jump or snake. He even showed me how to get porno on it, so I could get off on the run. I think it’s important for guys to have...you know. I think I’m rambling again.

So yeah, eventually Jacob dropped me and the car home. He wanted to stay and have a few, but I told him to go home. I wasn’t up to it. To be honest, I just wanted to fuck round with the car some more. I spent the remainder of the night tuning the car up. No shit, I think I went to bed at four in the morning. I worked straight through. But, I wish I didn’t go to bed, ‘cos that’s when shit got weird.

I don’t know what time it was, but I was having this kick-ass dream. I was one of the X-Men, Wolverine, of course, ‘cept he had all the mutant powers and was bad-ass. So, I’m Wolverine and I have to assassinate the President ‘cos he’s really an evil cat lady. I go down and see she’s not actually a bad guy, but is really that hot chick from that TV show – you know the one!...and then she sees me and acts all sexual like.

There I go! Rambling again! Sorry! So, anyway, I was having this kick-ass dream and I was awakened by some sort of rustling in my room. I woke up, really groggy and feeling like shit. I opened my eyes and sat up. The room was still dark, so it probably was five or something. Now this is where it's weird, the rustling noise stopped, after I woke up...but what's weirder than that is that I'm a fairly heavy sleeper. One time Jacob was having it off at this party and I was asleep right next to them the whole time. You think that shit would have woken me up, but no! Yet, this quiet rustling woke me up this time. Fuck me!

I lay in bed trying to get back to sleep, but every time I would shut my eyes, I swear that fucking rustling would start again! Really quiet at first, like, not that noticeable, but after a few minutes, it would get louder and louder. I put my hands up to my ears. At first, I thought it was the cat, Mitzie, but then I remembered she died a few years ago. I shot back up, angry and frustrated. The rustling stopped again. I was so worked up by this noise I just had to get up and get a glass of water or something. The taps had stopped working a week ago, so I had to have some left over piss, from the weekend. It was flat as, but it was enough to calm me. I began to make my way back to my room when I noticed the door to the garage was open. Like, not fully open, but just enough for me to see in. The fucking light was on too!

I moved towards the door, really slowly. I was unsure what to expect, maybe some sort of burglar was trying to break in through the cat-flap in the garage. Joke was on him though 'cos the cat-flap was nailed shut, due to neighbourhood cats coming inside. A second later, I felt a twang of guilt, as I had assumed the burglar was a dude and not a chick. I'd have to apologise for that if I ever saw him... or her – fuck!

I reached the door and pushed it open. There was a loud creak, but almost like a crack or something. It was way louder than I have ever heard the door creak before. Pain shot through my arm, like extreme pain; enough pain to bowl me over. I fell to my knees, heard a deafening pop and all sensation to my feet was gone. I was too distracted by the sudden pain to notice the lights were way brighter than usual; like, instead of yellow, it was a hot white. My head began to feel really heavy and my arms began to feel tingly. Blood began to drip from my nose, or at least, I think it was my nose. My brain felt as if it was going to explode.

I managed to get my strength and move my head up to look at the car. It was all too bright! I could barely make anything out. You know when you look at something that has a bright light behind it and it looks like the bright light is reaching out to you, over the thing, with its long slender arms? Well, that was happening to me, 'cept there were arms reaching out for me, fingers too. I couldn't move I was fucking helpless. I couldn't see anything either except... except... I...uh...it's hard for me to put this situation into words. It's just hard to even think about it to be honest. There was something on the boot of the car, it was this black... *thing!* I...it was evil. It just turned its head, really slowly,

every movement sounded like the cracking of bones or something. It...It had this smile. I couldn't see its face, but I could see the smile just staring at me. Look...as I said, it's hard to think about this, I wasn't in a good state. It was like some sort of bad 'shroom trip. I had only taken 'shrooms once and it was never as bad as that moment.

So anyway, I was still bloody and frozen on my knees. That's when the rustling started again. The thing looked down, making that horrible cracking noise like its bones were clicking and shifting out of place. Its movement was weird as well, like stilted, fast but jittery at the same time. That's when the rustling got louder and more panicked; it changed into scratching, clawing, and banging. Then I heard the worst noise I have ever heard. It was thick-clicking, like laughing, in some weird way; but it was deep and guttural. I so wish I didn't go to sleep that night; it's all still vivid, you know. This would have been a great time for God to answer me, but I think I may have used up my quota. The blood was still dripping and I was still felt paralyzed. I could also hear this dripping sound, like water from a tap. That was when I noticed the blood was dripping up, not down! Weird shit right?

The thing was still laughing, or, at least, my mind was telling me he was. It was kind of like when you hear a continuous noise and then it stops, but the noise is still echoing in your head. The rustling, or banging, or whatever it was, just got louder and faster. That was when the fucking thing jumped off the boot and began making its way towards me. It looked like it had some sort of disability or something, as it would move its body one side at a time. It was taller than I thought. Before, it was crouched in a spider-man-like position. Now it stood about ten maybe eleven feet tall. The thing's horns, or, at least, they looked like black furry horns, were scraping the roof of the garage. The crackling was intense and louder as well. Then it stopped and so did all the noises. It was looking me over. Slowly, it raised its arm and pointed forward with a tremendous amount of clicking and cracking. It was pointing behind me. Fuck! **IT WAS POINTING FUCKING BEHIND ME!** You know you're well and truly fucked when the big, scary, thing, stops; frightened, and points behind you. I managed, with great effort, to move my head to look behind me. It was the hooded figure. It shrieked as I saw it!

Boom! Wet-the-bed moment right there! I shot up out of bed. I was fucking asleep! It was like some "*Inception*" shit! I thought I must have fallen back asleep, but still, I was shaking. I curled up in a ball on my bed and felt the tears well up in my eyes – honest-to-God tears. Not of fear, but of happiness, that it was finally over and it wasn't real! Except it wasn't over, I still have to live with that memory for the rest of my life. Even now I can still clearly see it... hear it...

Anyway, it was a while before I got out of bed. I had to play mental gymnastics to convince myself that I was fine and I could get up. I shuffled into the kitchen and wouldn't you fucking know it, the door to the garage was open! I swear I could have shit myself, right then. Any sane person would have run away, but I don't know, the fear was suddenly sucked out of me and I needed to work

on the car. I made my way to the garage and looked. It was all normal. I looked at the car and got mental flashbacks to the black thing, but when I was there, I was fine, I felt safe. So I started working on the car again, all spectres and ghosts a distant memory.

That night was a late one as well. Once it hit night, I started chugging the coffee. I felt safe with the car, but I didn't want to go to bed and sleep. As soon as I left the garage I felt the fear surge through me. So, I made a thermos of coffee and spent most of my night in the garage. The single-mindedness of my activities was enough to pre-occupy me. Jacob had texted me three times during the day. I ignored them all. I just needed to keep my mind away from that night and with the car, oddly enough, my mind was clear.

It was around three a.m. when my eyes felt droopy. I went to pour more coffee into my mug, but the thermos was empty. I decided to make one final dash into the kitchen to fill it, but I really wish I hadn't done that. What would follow would be a series of mistakes, which would make the previous night seem like a trip to the Botanic Gardens, so...you know it was pretty awful.

First of all, let me say, I was feeling really cocky at this time. Like I had cheated death and given it the middle finger. So I kind of felt invincible at that hour. I was still shit-scared to go to sleep, but as long as my car was in vision (I made sure to leave the door wide open) I felt I would be sweet as. When the jug was boiling and I began to hear the rustling again, I got a really shit-stupid idea. Like, this is even beyond stupid. If any of you have phantom noises, please don't do what I did at that moment. I decided, *Fuck it; I'm gonna have some fun with this thing*. So I began laughing when I heard the noise. I laughed harder and louder than the noise. It was real laughter too 'cos I was doing this stand-up piece in my head. It was pretty crack-up, so I laughed louder and louder. Only problem was, the noise was also getting louder and then the banging started. I paused for a brief moment, as a twinge of anxiety shot me down; fear that the dark thing would return. In that brief moment of pause, the laughing started; that deep guttural laughing, of the dark thing. Quickly, thinking on my feet, I sang the first thing that came into my head; "*Walking on Sunshine*". I sang the song loud and proud, voice wavering every now and then, due to the overwhelming fear. My thinking was, if I pretended to be okay, it would all go away.

Then it just stopped. My singing kind of drifted away, as a sense of uneasiness fell over me. The bloody kettle popped, giving me a massive fright; but apart from that, I felt good again. Then I heard jingling like some sort of bell bobbing up and down. I couldn't even register the fear when something fucking furry brushed against my leg. It meowed, calming me. I looked down and saw this, cute as, cat. It obviously had an owner and had climbed in through the window or something. I picked him up and started petting it. I named him Winston and decided Winston would keep me company for the rest of the night. I filled my thermos and went back to work.

It was quiet and peaceful for about half an hour after the incident. Winston was being all curious and shit jumping up on a stool I placed for him, to look at the motor. After a while, Winston moved to the boarded up cat-flap and began to meow. I thought, if he needed a shit or piss, he could just do it in the garage as I didn't want to lose the company. I heard the cat purring. I could hear him nestle around the door. I would've looked, but I was stuck underneath the car. It was soon after when I heard him patter back through the door, into the house and out of the garage.

*Fuck!* I thought I needed that cat in the garage to keep me company. I clicked my fingers and patted the side of my leg. I didn't hear the cat patter back, but I felt him, or she, nuzzle against my fingers that were stretched out from underneath the car. I scratched the bottom of his chin as he began to purr and lick my fingers. Yeah, lick my fingers, weird I know. It felt like sandpaper and wasn't very pleasant. I pulled my hand back and wiped it against my pant leg.

Anyway, I got back to my work. About five minutes later I heard scratching from the cat flap. Winston wanted out and wanted out badly. I decided to ignore this once again as I really wanted the company and could deal with the shit or piss smell. Winston then went to trying to rip the boards out. I could hear the loose wood banging against the edge of the cat flap. I decided I probably should let the poor fella out. He's probably missing out on some primo tail time and a brother wouldn't let another brother miss out on that. So I slid out from underneath the car and got to my feet, wiping the grease off my hands.

"Okay, Winston I will let you o..." I couldn't finish my sentence.

I looked over and saw the fucking cat come in from the kitchen. He was stretching like he had just had a nap. I began to breathe slowly as the noise intensified behind me. The wood clacking became louder and more aggressive. I turned. There was a hand reaching through trying to rip the boards clean off. Behind the door, I could hear a faint hum. Whoever it was, was fucking humming "*Walking on fucking Sunshine*"! I turned back and went to run into the kitchen when the door slammed in my face. I had run straight into it and fell down in pain, clutching my now broken nose. I turned and rested my back against the door. I tried to get up, but I just didn't seem to have the energy. The hand was still wrestling with the piece of wood and the humming got louder and more intense. Poor little Winston bounded towards the hand. I went to yell for him to stop, but only gurgling came out; I had lost some teeth as well. Winston started licking the fingers and they slowly wrapped around the poor animal's neck, before ripping it through the cat flap.

It was silent for a few seconds before the laughter started again. My laughter and its laughter; it was like somebody was playing back a recording. The boot of the car began to bang up and down, louder and louder. The boot flew open and the banging stopped. I first saw a black arm come out of the boot. The crackling started again as the black creature contorted out of the boot and came towards

me. I was paralyzed with fear. The laughing was deafening. I reached up with my free arm to get a hand on the door handle; it's fucking hot! I recoiled and fanned my hand up and down. I realized my only salvation was through the back door; the cat-flap door. I mustered all my strength and just fucking went for it. I ran and ran, hitting the door and hoping to God (there I am praying to him again) that the person on the other side was gone. I opened the door and ran into a wall of fog.

I kept running until my legs started to ache, which was a bloody long while. Finally, I stopped for a breather and realised I had no bloody clue where in the hell I was. There were dense walls of fog all around me. I felt cold and alone. The blood on my face was hardening and a sense of quiet dread fell over me. Suddenly there was this big fucking whoosh and I saw a black figure in front of me, in the distance. The fog began separating like it was creating this path for the figure. I slowly began to walk towards it. Don't ask me why, it just felt like the right thing to do. The fucking thing then rushed me. It was the hooded figure!

Next thing I know I wake up in my bed again. Only, this time, I couldn't move, my body was frozen, paralyzed by an unseen force or something. I was able to open my eyes and I could see shadows moving around the room. I freaked out! I was fair shitting myself, internally. I forced myself to open my eyes and I saw the black figure, standing there, just staring at me. I felt like I was going to cry. (That's not an easy thing for me to say, by the way.) On the other side, oh God! It's hard to say this. Well, the other figure was there also. There was no banging, only a slight hum, like when you put a magnet up to a TV. I could hear voices, like rushed and horrified voices, panicking. There was a loud beeping and the smell of bleach filled my nostrils before I felt a slight shock to my chest and everything went dark.

I woke up again. I was underneath the damn car. I tried to sit up but slammed my head on the metal underbelly. I felt like such a tool. Rubbing my head, I slid out from underneath the car. My head was still pounding. It was morning or, at least, day. I looked around and the room was the same as it had been the night before, or I think it was. I began to move away when I heard the humming once more. I froze on the spot for a second, fear embracing me once more. I turned around and saw the boot pop open. I knew what I needed to do and I made my way to the boot. The humming became louder and louder. I felt sick, but I knew I needed to get over to the boot. I reached the destination, but I looked up, not wanting to look down into the open boot. The humming became unbearable. Words were then added to this demonic symphony; "*Walking on Sunshine*". It was distorted, crackly! I could feel blood dripping from my nose again.

*Wooahh!* I looked down and my heart sunk. No snarky remark, no false bravado, I was stripped to my core. I was looking down and staring back at me was the dead-eyed corpse of myself. Things began to be clear; on either side of me stood the black figure and the hooded figure. They were not malicious at all – they were there to help. *And didn't it feel good?*

It came back to me in a flash; like how you'd see in a film where the twist was being explained. Except this wasn't a film, this was real-life, me; driving down the gorge with Jacob and Donna. They were in the backseat going at it really hard. I looked in the rear-view mirror for, I swear, a second. Not in a homo way, just in a, you know, curious way. I feel this loud bump and the car began swerving on the gravel road. I slammed on the brakes sending Donna flying forward. She went through the windshield sending shards of glass in my face. The other problem was, my junker of a pink Cadillac didn't have great brakes, so the car just kept going. I felt a second bump, as we went over Donna. The car then flipped over twice, leaving us sitting in the middle of a paddock. See, it *is* all connected, tied together in a nice little bow.

The hooded figure pulled his hood back revealing his face; it was me! I turned to the black figure and I could clearly see his face now. Surprise, surprise, he was me as well! I...I...I...don't quite remember what I did next. A lot of it is a blank after that point. I can remember running, running, until I couldn't run anymore. I just wanted to get away from them, from all of it!

Next thing, (I probably sound like a fucking broken record by now), I woke up. Only, this time, I could feel pain and numbness all over my body. My vision was blurred; I was sitting up and all I could hear was a series of beeps. The smell of bleach filled my nostrils. My heart skipped a beat as I heard "*Walking on Sunshine*" again. "*I'm Walking on Sunshine*". I moved my eyes over and saw a young girl in the bed next to me listening on her iPod. My eyes began to adjust to the room. It was bright and loud. I tried to move, but my limbs were cement. I shifted my view to back in front of me. It was a calendar, next to a ticking clock. The calendar had a pink Cadillac on it, from the 1960's or something. A cold breeze came over me and I heard rustling and banging beside me. I looked over and saw the curtains flapping in the wind. Near the window lay a stack of open magazines somebody had left behind. I tried to move once more, but I was restrained, by a heavy weight.

It suddenly dawned on me; this would be the rest of my life – staring at that fucking pink Cadillac for the rest of my life; listening to that goddamned song.

*"I'm walking on sunshine , wooah"*

*"I'm walking on sunshine, woooah"*

*"I'm walking on sunshine, woooah"*

*"and don't it feel good!!"*

. . .

**THE END!**

**DOOR NO.6:**  
**PSYCHOPATH:**

**A Short-Story by: Grant Leishman**

Dr Samuel Schuster rubbed his eyes wearily and stared again at the computer screen; the never-ending stream of images slowly morphing across his screen. He shook his head and chuckled to himself. No, it can't possibly be that simple, he thought to himself. It really can't be! Hunching down over the screen again, he concentrated on the images.

For Dr Schuster, a forensic psychiatrist who had been studying abnormal criminal behaviour for over fifteen years now, it really was one of those "eureka" moments. Although he'd had quite a few "eureka" moments in his short but illustrious career, intuitively he knew this was far and away the biggest of them all. That's if he was right of course! He chided himself for getting too far ahead and focused more clearly on the latest image that hovered briefly on his screen. Just forty years old, Sam Schuster had dedicated his professional life to finding out just what it was that made serial killers tick. He'd been attempting to answer that age-old question; "Was a serial killer born or made?" His single-minded quest had occupied virtually every waking moment of the last fifteen years.

He was, at 6' 6", and 250lbs, an imposing figure. In his younger days, he was described by many as incredibly hunky. Despite his good looks and athletic figure, he had never had time for College sports or even for traditional relationships. There was always something new to research; some exciting experiment to carry out, or some report to write up. At College, he was consumed by his studies and never even dated. After College, he had thrown himself headlong into his new career and his never-ending search for the answer to; what caused some perfectly normal-seeming people to commit mass murder? His few College buddies had always thought of him as just a little bit strange, with his determined focus on abhorrent criminal behaviour. For Sam, however, it was just his passion and the driving force of his life. He was described once by the Dean of the Medical School at Harvard University as being the most dedicated and focused individual he'd ever met. Sam had taken this to be an enormous compliment from the man.

Despite his best efforts to ignore women, Sam had indeed gotten married. When he was thirty-two he had employed a graduate student, lab technician; Suzy Weatherall. Both Sam and Suzy had followed identical paths into the field of Forensic Psychology; albeit five years apart. Both had studied their undergraduate courses at the University of Denver in Colorado and both had taken their

postgraduate Doctorates at CUNY John Jay College of Criminal Justice, in New York City. Sam would be lying if he had said he felt no physical attraction to the attractive, bubbly, red-headed, 25-year-old fireball that had entered into his life like a whirlwind. She was a knockout, no doubt about that. If you asked him when he knew Suzy was the girl for him, he would just shrug his shoulders and mumble; “I guess after we got married and Jason was born, but hell, who really ever knows for sure?” Jason Schuster, the couple’s first child was born just a year after their wedding and was quickly followed by daughters; Melody, Samantha and Rachel. By the time Rachel arrived Sam decided enough was enough. Four children were more than enough for anyone with no spare time anyway, to accommodate. He had important work to do and he couldn’t really allocate time for any more parenting than that which four children would generate. Besides which, he needed Suzy back in the lab, helping him. As soon as Rachel was old enough to go to pre-school and Suzy could get back to work, the better.

Since Suzy had semi-retired after the birth of Jason, Sam had had to put up with a never-ending stream of temporary lab assistants who were forever trying his patience with their; boyfriend problems; their financial problems; their personal angst; or their family problems. He just couldn’t wait for the day Suzy was back beside him again in the lab, adding her wisdom and insight to his research. After Rachel’s birth Sam had secretly visited the local clinic and had gotten the “snip-snip”; a vasectomy. He’d never even told Suzy about it, pretending at the time that he had to go away for a day or two to give evidence, in Court, on a case in South Carolina. Suzy was none the wiser, but at least, the baby production line had ceased.

Never mind about Suzy, Sam thought. She will be just as excited at what I’ve discovered here today. This is going to revolutionise the field of forensic psychology. In the future his colleagues would talk, in hushed and reverent tones about the pioneering work done by that amazing Nobel Laureate; Sam Schuster. He smiled softly to himself as he created this grand future for himself and Suzy. He would be feted by the scientific community; lauded by the academic community; and the constant recipient of invitations to fancy receptions, with Captains of Industry, and, of course, Politicians. Yes, he allowed himself to think, we will go to lunch with the President and the First Lady; but everyone else can go hang. We will have more work to do. I will be known as the greatest pioneer in our field...Suzy can come along for the ride, he added to himself.

Sam had, for as long as he could remember, been attracted to the sordid world of serial killers and psychopaths. In High School, while his classmates were playing baseball and football, or garnering their first tentative sexual manoeuvres beneath the bleachers at the football field; Sam had been ensconced in the library, or at home on his bed reading. He had read voraciously and what attracted him most were stories of serial killers. He devoured every book ever written about notorious criminals like; Richard Chase, Jeffrey Dahmer, Albert Fish, Joachim Kroll, Ted Bundy and many,

many others. He had been fascinated by what motivated these seemingly normal people to suddenly snap, and begin a killing spree that would usually end in their deaths; either at the hands of the police or in the country's electric chairs and gas chambers.

He loved the sometimes romantic names the media would give to these vicious killers; "The Acid Bath Murderer", "The BTK Strangler", "Jack the Ripper", "The Ruhr Cannibal" or "The Werewolf of Wysteria". Their "name tags", he felt, lent these evil men a unique persona that young Sam had found irresistible. He even read widely about famous killers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century; who committed their acts of mass murder under the guise of state control. Books retelling the evil machinations of Pol Pot, Adolf Hitler, Idi Amin and Mao Tse Tung littered his bedroom bookshelves. Put bluntly, Sam had absolutely no other outside interests, at school, at College or during his life, other than the exploits of humanity's evil characters. They fascinated him, they absorbed him, and they totally consumed him.

His mind jerked back to the present, as he remembered; this is all only if I am right of course. Better concentrate on these damn images and make sure I am. What Sam was looking at that summer's day in his lab in Trenton, New Jersey were MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) scans of people's brains. Some of the scans were of "normal" individuals. Most of who came from the local graduate school in Trenton – The College of New Jersey, who had volunteered to be part of a scientific experiment, for a small payment; which would help subsidise their beer money no doubt. The remainder of the MRI scans was from a selection of prison inmates who were deemed to have scored high in tests to determine high levels of psychopathy. As far as Sam was aware there were, at least, five serial killers included in the MRI scans he was studying, as well as a string of criminals who could be best described as career criminals. For the most part, the criminals' scans were from individuals who had had an exceedingly violent criminal history; rapists, murderers, kidnappers, wife-beaters; you name it, they were there.

He'd had no problem whatsoever coming up with the required 1,000 subjects, in the nation's prisons. It appeared there was no shortage of incarcerated criminals who scored high on his specialised psychopathy test. Coming up with the control group had been a bit more of a challenge, though. In the end, he'd had to supplement his college student volunteers, with just about anyone he could rope in through coercion and cajoling. Almost all his laboratory colleagues were part of the project, as were his family, his few friends and a number of academic personnel from his old alma mater; the College of Criminal Justice.

Sam had no knowledge which scans were which. That would have defeated the purpose of the blind test. It was imperative to his scientific mind that he had absolutely no knowledge; to give him bias, of which brain scan was of Joe the College football star or of Max, the homicidal maniac. He

continued to concentrate on the scans flickering across his computer screen. There really was a clear and noticeable trend emerging in the scans.

Hell yes! There was! He could see that some of the scans showed a totally different structure in one particular part of the brain; the paralimbic system. Sam knew the paralimbic system of the brain controlled basic emotions such as; fear, pleasure, and anger; plus decision making, reasoning, and impulse control. If there was something different in the paralimbic system of the brain, it could well explain why certain people had difficulty controlling their behaviour. He could see that in many of the scans he was viewing, the brain tissue in the area of the paralimbic system was noticeably thinner and appeared under-developed. If this was the case that person may have a decreased ability to register feelings or to assign emotional values to experiences. It would certainly explain a great deal about the behaviour of psychopaths, who appeared to feel absolute zero emotions for their actions, and always showed zero empathy for their victims.

The next step for Sam, of course, was to discover just who these abnormal brains belonged to. Did they belong to the prisoners or did they belong to the students at The College of New Jersey, or was it a mixture of both? Intuitively Sam knew he was on to something big. He was sure the act of matching the scans to the names would prove him to be right, but of course, he was still nervous; as anyone would be just prior to a potentially career illuminating moment. He decided to stop work and relax a little before he checked the scans against the names. He just needed some time out; some time for his heart to stop beating so fast; his adrenaline to seep out of his bloodstream; and for his over fantasising mind to calm down.

He rose to his full height, stretched and wandered over to the corner of his office where he kept the ubiquitous coffee machine. His one vice in life was his coffee. He had to have it hot, strong and often to keep him alert and alive. If he could come up with a way to have a permanent coffee-drip inserted into his veins, he probably would. Having poured a cup, he sat down and casually drummed his fingers on the leather covering of the desk.

On impulse, he picked up the phone and dialled home. Suzy answered quickly and seemed surprised to hear from him during the working day.

“So how’s everything,” Sam enquired. “What are the kids’ doin’?” There was a brief silence on the other end before Suzy responded...

”Mmmm...Sam Schuster, what in the hell is wrong? You never ring me during the day, and you sure as hell never ask about the kids. Usually, if you ring at all, it’s just to ask my opinion on something you’ve seen at the lab. So...what’s happened?”

Sam chuckled, “Nothing at all...nothing at all...just wanted to hear your voice is all.”

Suzy responded, "Crap Sam...What's up?"

He sat back in his chair and rested his feet on the desk, cup in one hand and telephone receiver in the other. "Well...I may just have cracked it...I'm not totally sure yet, but I think I've found the abnormality in the psychopathic brain. I still have to check one more thing, but this might well be the defining moment of my career."

He heard a stifled gasp down the phone line. "Oh, Sam...Is that all? I think I've had this conversation before eh? Well, perhaps you should take a deep breath; check your results; check them again and then call me back."

Sam smiled, unsurprised by the underwhelming response from his wife. "I'll get back to you as soon as I've checked the results against the master list. Don't forget you'll get some credit for this too, if it works out."

He had already put the phone back on the docking station when Suzy answered; "Yeah right, I'll believe that when it happens." She slammed the phone back into the cradle just a little harder than she really intended.

He took his feet off the desk, sat forward and regarded the computer screen again. It would only take one command to confirm or deny his suspicions. He scrolled through the scans again and allocated them into two groups...those with the abnormality and those without the abnormality. He then clicked the menu button and asked the system to categorise the scans, based on patient name and location. In mere microseconds, the results were there on the screen.

He glanced quickly, almost furtively, as if he expected the results to change before his eyes. Nothing changed, though. There it was in black and white. Of the 2,000 MRI scans, just over half (all normal) belonged to one group and just under half (all abnormal) belonged to the second group.

Well, he thought, that's a good start. He hit the print key and waited for the results sheets to spew out of the printer. Gathering the pages together, he began to scan first the normal group. Although there were a few of the incarcerated prisoners appearing in the normal group, he noted with relief that 92.5% of his control subjects were in this normal group.

Turning to those with the brain scan abnormality, he was unsurprised that the bulk of his prisoners were indeed in this group. What also interested him though was the 7.5% of his control group who also appeared in the abnormal group. He tapped his pencil against his forehead and narrowed his eyes. Okay, he surmised, so 7.5% of the subjects is not that statistically important, but they will certainly bear some further study. "Mmmm...If these supposedly normal people have the psychopathic abnormality, why hasn't it displayed itself to date? Will it, some time, in the future? I'm definitely going to have to study these people;" he mused.

Exhaling noisily, he sat back in his chair letting the waves of relief, excitement and joy flood over him. A correlation greater than ninety percent, that wasn't merely an indicator; that was a damn near certainty. Bloody hell, he'd done it! He'd cracked the pathology of the psychopath!

He smiled softly to himself and reached for the phone. He shook his head slightly and replaced the phone on its docking station...Let me enjoy this moment for myself first...

. . . .

The initial euphoria of the discovery had paled a little for Sam. Oh, he knew the import of what he'd found and he also knew the reaction among his colleagues and the scientific community, in general, would be overwhelming, but something still troubled him about his data. He wasn't ready, quite just yet, to share his amazing breakthrough with the world. He'd even fobbed off his wife when she'd queried him about it the evening after that phone call.

"Ohhhh..." he'd responded to her question, "...okay, so maybe I jumped the gun a little. I still have some work to do to confirm anything." When Suzy rolled her eyes in that annoying way of hers, he hastened to add; "but it is looking promising hon."

She'd patted him almost patronisingly on his back. "Yeah, Sam...That's always the way, isn't it? Get me all excited and then let me down."

Sam screwed up his face, stared hard at her and spat back; "That's my girl, always the supportive, little, woman."

Flicking her hair with disdain, she muttered; "whatever!" and stormed off out of the kitchen.

Sam grinned; if only she knew how close I really was to cracking this one.

Focusing on the task at hand, he picked up the small pile of brain scans on his desk that represented the supposedly normal people in the trial, who had returned the abnormality that Sam had jokingly christened; "the missing link". He began to read the names out loud as he placed them on his desk.

"Wallace Fankel; Dean of Forensic Science, Christopher Tobin; Captain of the College of New Jersey Football Team, Alison Harper; Captain of the College's National Champion Debate Team, Simon Waller; Emeritus Professor, Dr Stephen Cronk; Research Analyst, Andre Blondell; CEO of Legacy Laboratories; Dr Sharon Turnbull; Orthodontist." Sighing loudly, he put the scans down on the desk and put his head in his hands thinking deeply. All of these people; they're all driven, they're all successful, they're all superstars in their chosen professions...and yet, they all have, "the missing link".

He rubbed his chin and looked at his ceiling for divine inspiration. What is it that makes these people different from Attica Prison's infamous serial killer, Stuart Robinson or Nebraska Penitentiary's self-confessed baby killer, Claudette Simon? His forehead furrowed as yet another worrying thought passed through his mind. What if all these successful and driven subjects are really just "psychopaths in waiting"? What if something could actually trigger them to revert to their base instincts and become violent and unstable?

He rubbed his hand across his face wearily. There are just too many variables, too many imponderables to even consider publishing the data in this state. I need to know what triggers the psychopathy. It's simply not enough to know that certain types who have this abnormality are likely to be psychopathic. There has to be a trigger...but what is it?

He reached down to the bottom of the pile of control subjects who had "the missing link" and pulled out one of the brain scans. Studying it carefully, he could clearly see the abnormality. In this subject, the brain tissue that made up the paralimbic section was so thin, it was almost non-existent. He noted wryly this brain scan was definitely one of those most indicative of "the missing link". His eyes rolled up to read the name at the top of the scan. "Dr Samuel Schuster." Sighing, for the hundredth time that day, he gently placed the scan back underneath the pile.

"Yeah...I really gotta get to the bottom of this mystery....that's for sure;" he whispered to the walls.

. . .

Sam was reading through the prison files of a number of the test subjects, looking for a common denominator, something that would link all these psychopathic personalities together. It seemed fairly obvious to him, once he began reading the prison psychologist's reports on these hardened criminals. Without fail, every single one of his test subjects that had come up positive for "the missing link" had similar backgrounds. They'd all been subjected to prolonged, sustained, and often violent abuse as children.

Sam paled as he read personal accounts from these prisoners of their treatment, as children, often by their parents. Many of them were the subject of forced incest from an early age. Whether it was their mother, their father, their elder siblings, or uncles and aunts, many had been the subject of unwanted sexual advances from as young as six or seven. The lurid and sordid details of these childhood rapes made harrowing reading and Sam was forced to stop regularly and walk away. It really was all too much for him.

If some of these children were lucky enough to have escaped the pain and horrors of sexual abuse, they were usually not so lucky when it came to the psychological, verbal and physical abuse of an often drunken or drug-crazed parent. The psychologist reports were a never-ending litany of the

most terrible abuses any child could ever suffer. Sam wondered how it was some of these poor children actually survived adolescence, to make it into adulthood.

A pattern was certainly emerging in Sam's mind. Perhaps it was this lack of a nurturing parental environment that was the trigger for turning these kids into adult psychopaths. He reasoned, much of what we learn as children; how to deal with issues such as anger, how to develop empathy for our fellow humans, and how to deal with personal problems; rationally, comes first and foremost from our parents. If we don't have that positive role model to learn from and we also have "the missing link", perhaps that's what tips that person into psychopathy?

Sam thought back to his own childhood. He smiled as he recalled the loving, nurturing, environment he had grown up in. There was never any abuse in their family. His parents had been the epitome of typical, middle-class, American suburbia. They had experienced themselves, as children, the privations of a nation at war and their one driving focus had always been to create a better world for their children and to equip them to be successes in that world.

Home had always been a sanctuary for Sam, not a place to be feared. He felt tremendous sympathy for many of the faceless individuals, whose files he had been reading that morning. Home for them had never been a sanctuary, he thought. Home had been a place of terror, a place to avoid if at all possible.

Sam knew he had the bones of a very, acceptable, hypothesis that would go a long way to explaining why some of his control group had displayed the brain abnormality and yet were anything but psychopathic. Surely, he theorised, the impact of a negative environment, as a child, on an individual who already has a physiological predisposition to things such as impulse control and decision making, must be a determining factor. This has to be the key that flips the switch, turning a normal individual into a homicidal maniac.

He smiled grimly; after all, he thought. Am I not the prime example of the exception that proves the rule? I may have the abnormality, but I had a wonderful childhood; full of love, care, and sound moral direction...and look at me, I'm a rational, well-adjusted, highly intelligent, and incredibly successful person.

Frowning slightly, he decided the next step in the process of proving his theory correct would be to interview a sample of the "successful" people, who had the abnormality and confirm that their childhoods were as normal and as happy, as his own. He wasn't looking forward to that part of the research as he knew these people personally and most were very busy, very abrupt, and very protective of their private lives. Ah well, he thought, it has to be done, for the good of science, so I'll just have to convince them to participate.

The more he thought on it, the more convinced he was that this had to be the major, if not the overriding determining factor in whether or not someone with the abnormality went on to become a normal, contributing member of society, or a raving, homicidal, nutcase. He was overwhelmed with the possibilities that this discovery presented to science and society, in general.

Sitting back in his chair, he placed his feet on the desk and folding his arms across his chest he began to think about how his discovery could best be utilised. “Imagine,” he mused softly; “if every infant in America was scanned with the Schuster Test (as he had decided it would be called) at, say eighteen months. Any child, shown to have the abnormality, would then become *‘of special interest’*, to the state.” Hmmmm...he thought special welfare teams could be sent in to determine what the home environment was really like for these children. Specialised training, to ensure the best values were instilled in these youngsters, could be given to their parents. If it was clear the parents were unfit, then we could set up a foster network of loving families, to look after these kids, or create special residential schools, where they can receive the loving and nurturing they need, to steer them clear of the wrong path.

He chuckled when he imagined the reaction to these ideas among some of the more liberal elements in society. There would be howls of indignation about freedoms being breached and trumpeting the rights of the individuals. Well, you make your choice guys. This whole idea could change the fabric of our society, make an enormous impact on our personal safety and drastically reduce the prison population, in the long-term.

“I have no doubt people will be prepared to sacrifice a few freedoms for the long-term benefits this would achieve,” he prophesied, before dropping his feet off the table and setting about to design a questionnaire for his “successful” subjects.

His mind again quickly began to wander, though, down, even more, exciting paths. What if we can find a way to test for this abnormality even before birth? Wow, he thought, if we know the parents are not reliable, we could order the foetuses be aborted and totally eliminate the risk...what a thought that is!

. . .

Sam was in an upbeat mood. He’d just completed the last of his interviews with his “successful”, but “abnormal” subjects and the results had emphatically confirmed his hypothesis that it was all down to environment.

He shuffled the folders that were the last key to his puzzle – the final confirmation that he, Dr Sam Schuster, truly was one of the great scientists of the twenty-first Century. “In a hundred years time they’ll mention me in the same breath as Newton, Einstein, Tesla, Rutherford, and all those other great scientists who changed the way we view the world or made life better for us all...hehehe.”

He was ready to publish. It would take him a few weeks to put the paper together and then a few months to get it peer reviewed, but yes; he was ready to tell the world just how special he really was.

. . .

Sunday morning was always one of Sam's favourite times. The kids were invariably parked in front of the television, watching the cartoons and Sam would closet himself away in his study and indulge himself by reading the Sunday Edition of The New York Times, from cover to cover. On a normal day Sam got his news fix from the host of online news feeds that abounded on the internet, but once a week he relished the opportunity for a good-old fashioned read of a real newspaper.

Sitting back, feet up on desk, he folded the front section of the paper and began reading the lead stories. He groaned inwardly when he heard the handle of the door turn. Putting down his newspaper he spun in his seat, plastering a smile on his face, as Suzy entered the room and plonked herself on the spare, easy chair, beside the computer desk.

Smiling at him, she broached the subject. "What became of your big breakthrough Sam...?Any progress?"

He slowly folded his paper away and placed it very deliberately on the desk before turning and facing her directly. "Hmmm...well...actually hon, there is. I'm just about ready to put the final paper together and present it."

News to Suzy, she sat forward and eagerly asked; "So...what's the conclusion? Did you crack it?"

He couldn't help grinning as he nodded his head furiously. Suzy waved for him to fill her in on the details. By the time he was finished telling her about the scans and the follow-up interviews, plus his conclusions, she was well and truly enthralled. He held back the information, however, that his scan had been one of the "abnormal" scans.

She sat digesting the information for some time before sitting forward and peering intently at her husband. "Mmmm..." she began tentatively. "From what you've said, you do have a real statistical variation that you can run with...but!"

Sam thumped his hand on the desk. "But what!" he shouted back at her.

She leaned forward, placing a hand on his forearm to try to placate him. "Calm down Sam, I'm just thinking there's more to this whole thing than meets the eye."

Sam's brow furrowed as he waved his wife to continue.

"Well," she began. "Okay, you've identified the anomaly and all power to you for that. You'll get the recognition and rewards for that I know, but, we still don't know what causes the anomaly, do

we? It could be genetic, or perhaps it occurs during pregnancy. Don't you think we should know that before you publish?"

Frustrated now, his face screwed up in annoyance and he pulled his arm away from her gentle ministrations. "Geez," he whined, "that's not my job, is it? I'm not a bloody geneticist or an embryologist." He slammed his fist on the desk again and Suzy jumped back in fright. "NO! I will publish this and then all the others can do their research on MY discovery to find the root causes of the abnormality. I'm not sharing this limelight with anyone – right!"

Taken aback by his vehemence, Suzy just nodded her head meekly. "Yes hon," she said, "you're probably right anyway. You don't play well with others; we all know that."

Mollified, Sam smiled and grabbed his wife's hand trying to negate his overreaction. "I know...I know hon, sometimes I get carried away, but this is big, really big and I don't want anyone else to steal my thunder. You understand don't you?"

She shook her head sadly; "yes Sam, I do understand." Softly, just to herself; she added, "I understand only too well."

Wanting to put the outburst behind her she patted his hand gently. "Anyway, we'd better get moving if we're going to get to your Mother's for Sunday lunch, on time. You know how crotchety she gets if we're not all there ready to eat at midday on the dot." She grinned and added softly; "crotchety must run in the family, eh Sam?"

Calm now, Sam chuckled; "yeah, it does, we're a bunch of grumpy, old, farts sometimes. Okay, you round up the kids and I'll meet you downstairs." Standing, he awkwardly leant over and kissed Suzy on the cheek. "Ahhhh...ummmm...you know...sorry...and all that.'

She laughed; "yeah Sam, I know."

. . .

Sam's mother, Margaret's typically massive Sunday lunch of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding was settling heavily on the stomachs as they sat back, sipping their after-lunch coffees. The children had departed, as soon as they were able, outside to play and Sam, Margaret and Suzy sat back letting their lunch, settle.

As she did, every time they visited, Margaret asked the inevitable question; "how's that research thingy you do, going, son?"

Sam grinned. He was used to his mother not really getting what he did for a living. His father, God rest his soul, had been a true-blue, working class, stevedore on the wharves and neither of them had ever professed to understand this fascination their son had with science and mass-murderers.

Well, he thought, this time, she's just going to have to be proud of me, no matter how much she doesn't want to. He broadly related the breakthrough he had made in his scientific research and how much this was going to change the way medicine viewed and dealt with psychopathy. "Mum," he finished, "this is going to mean all sorts of recognition for me...and even for Suzy." He paused, for emphasis, before adding; "who knows Mum? It might even mean a Nobel Prize."

Margaret had listened intently to his spiel and nodded her head at the appropriate points. "Well...that's nice Son. I'm sure your dear, old, Dad would have been very proud of you. It's not the same as 'real work' though, is it, darling? Not like the sort of honest day's work he did."

Suzy could see Sam was underwhelmed by his mother's response, so she decided to weigh in herself. "You see, Margaret," she started. "What Sam has discovered will revolutionise modern forensic psychiatry. Once they're able to determine if it's a genetic abnormality, well we may even be able to screen the foetus for that genetic variation and possibly fix it, or at the least have the choice to abort it." Seeing Margaret was paying close attention to what she was saying; Suzy rushed on. "Sam will be hailed as a true genius of medicine Ma. He'll be feted by everyone."

"Well...that's nice dear." She dismissed Suzy's entreaty, turned to her son and almost as if she hadn't even heard a word Suzy had said, she asked him; "so Sam, what causes it?"

He breathed deeply and tried to control his rising anger with his mother's patronising attitude. "Well Mum, as Suzy said, we're not quite sure yet, but we do know what triggers it. You see not everyone who has the abnormality becomes psychopathic."

Margaret leant in closely, listening intently. Sam gulped and chuckled nervously. "Actually...if you must know guys, I have the abnormality."

Suzy started; a look of horror overtaking her face. She began to speak, but Sam held his hand up to stop her. Looking at his mother, he was surprised to see the news had brought a slight smile to her face.

"Now, before you all go crazy and run away from this psychopathic monster, you need to know what triggers it; right?" He took a deep breath and continued on. "Well, it appears that only if you are severely mistreated as a child does the abnormality have any real effect on you as an adult. People, with the abnormality, it seems, who have normal childhoods, just grow up a little more focused and driven than everyone else, but they certainly don't become psychopaths!"

He smiled at his mother; "and let's be honest, I had a wonderful childhood; right?" He glanced at Suzy before adding; "and there's no history of psychopathy in this family, so I think I'm going to be just fine, yes?" He chuckled. "You don't need to hide the carving knives from me yet, Mum."

Margaret grinned at her son, “well Sam, I don’t want to burst your bubble too much, honey, but I did have a great aunt...” she looked at the ceiling reflectively, “...Matilda, I think her name was. Anyway, she spent most of her life in a psychiatric hospital after taking an axe to her husband and three children...so...I wouldn’t be so sure about there being no maniacal murderers in the family line. Still...” she grinned, “...I’m sure you’re right Sammy, nothing to worry about from you.”

He grinned back nervously. This was the first he’d heard of Great Aunt Matilda. He wondered if there were any more skeletons lurking in the family closet. He opened his mouth to speak, but he was already too late. His mother had jumped to her feet and was already heading into the kitchen.

She threw back over her shoulder; “you two, just put your feet up and rest a bit...turn on the telly if you want. I’ll just load the dishwasher and get the cleaning up started.”

Sam looked at Suzy and shrugged. She leant over and whispered in his ear; “why didn’t you tell me you had the abnormality? Your Mum’s right, there’s nothing to worry about, you are very well adjusted, we all know that...” her voice trailed off as she thought of something. “It is interesting, though, to know! It might explain a few things; like your very quick and fiery temper, your absolute devotion to your work, and your single-mindedness....hmmmm....very interesting.”

He cuffed her softly around the head. “Don’t you start eh? Bloody hell, that woman can be so damn patronizing sometimes. It really does drive me nuts!” He laughed at his own irony. “Anyway, bugger the tele; I’m just going to have an afternoon siesta.”

He relaxed back on the comfortable sofa and before long his chest was rising rhythmically to the noisy exhaling of his breath.

The last thing Sam felt was his hair being jerked back and the carving knife slicing across his throat, cutting his carotid artery. As he felt his life’s blood spurting across the room, the last words he would hear in this world came softly to his ears.

“You know, Sammy darling; your Grandfather, well...he used to beat me and rape me almost every single day...sad really!”

. . .

**THE END!**

## **DOOR NO.7:**

## **DARKWOOD:**

**A Short-Story by: Chris Leishman**

Once upon a time, there was a travelling circus that arrived in the village of Darkwood. The circus featured many attractions; from the grotesque to the macabre. A young boy and girl, Jack and Samantha had been enthralled by the circus's arrival, dying to attend. Their mothers both forbade them. No self-respecting girl or boy should be at a place so horrifying, they both agreed. Jack and Samantha resigned themselves to their beds.

That night, was not a fun night, for either of them. They were kept awake by the bright luminescent lights and the joyous laughter coming from the circus. Jack opened his window and observed the spectacle, from afar. How he longed to see the splendour and joy that was being had by others. He cursed his mother, under his breath. Tossing and turning all night long, he was unable to dislodge the thoughts and images from his head. It was if the circus was whispering to him, beckoning him to come.

*"Jack... Jack..."* It would whisper, *"Come and play Jack."*

Jack came to the revelation that whatever else, he simply had to see it!

The next day was the last day of the circus in town. Samantha and Jack were determined to see it before it shut down. Their mothers could be damned! They devised a plan where they would sneak into their mothers' rooms and steal 10 coins each. They would then meet in the town square to go to the circus, returning before the break of dawn. Being young and impulsive, it seemed to them, a great and grand plan; an enormous adventure even.

As night fell upon the village, Jack hurried to bed, giddy with excitement. He waited three hours until he could hear the festivities begin once again. Shooting out of bed and creeping through the house, careful so as not to wake his mother, he snuck into her bedroom. Tip-toeing across to her

dresser and reaching his hand into his mother's purse, he pulled out 10 coins. Prize in hand, he crept out of the room and made his way outside.

Upon exiting into the dark night, he felt a sudden chill down his spine. For the first time, doubt crossed his mind. It was as if his common sense was coming back to him and he began to feel the weight of the sin he had just committed. Before his wits could fully return, however, he heard the hypnotic tone of the circus. He looked up, amazed by the bright hub of light in the distance. Almost as if he had no control over his own body, he headed toward the town square.

The town centre seemed emptier than he'd expected. He had pictured masqueraded people roaming the streets, having a merry, old, time; but there was nothing. Jack's mounting concern eased as soon as he saw Samantha there in the square. Grabbing her arm, he led them toward the bright, illuminating lights in the distance. As they approached the circus, excitement between them grew like a powerful fire. On arrival, they went straight to the cashier at the main gate and handed their coins over.

Even the cashier was dressed in full clown regalia, which Jack found odd. The clown looked down at them with a slight scowl.

"Where's yer parents?" he snarled.

"We...We..." Jack began stuttering; "we're orphans! We've just saved enough coins to get into the Circus," he added, with a sense of triumph.

The clown's scowl transformed into a giant grin. "Of course you did, just let me stamp you in."

He reached down from his booth. His hands and fingers were chalk-white, his long and pointed fingernails a deep grey. He stamped both Jack's and Samantha's hands. They entered the circus in a daze of delight; thoughts of the creepy, clown, soon fading away.

What followed was hours of sheer bliss, all blurring together in one seamless adventure of hilarity and discovery. Jack dragged Samantha from funhouse arcades; through to a great hall, where mirrors shot back distorted visages; across to a carousel, with the most beautiful crafted horses. From there they visited macabre shows of the most grotesque kind. They even entered a room that was showing moving pictures! For Jack, it seemed like the place was enchanted.

The two young people had such an amazing time, they never wanted to leave, but alas, dawn's faint touch was already on the horizon. Although Jack knew their mothers would soon awake, he still had to be dragged away by Samantha.

They were stopped by a hand on Jack's shoulders. He spun around to see the cashier clown once more. The clown smiled a hearty grin, revealing his brown, stained, teeth.

“D’ja have fun lad?” The clown queried.

Jack’s head bobbed up and down with excitement. “Yeah,” he managed, “It was amazing!!!”

“That’s great lad!” The clown paused and examined both of them carefully. “Say?! How’s about you two come with me and we’ll show you the ropes; yer very own, private, VIP, tour!”

Jack started to quiver with anticipation just at the thought of it. He was so eager, so ready to say yes, when Samantha interjected, “No...we must pass, I am sorry...See, we need to return home, our mothers will be awfully worried.”

“Mothers?!” the clown exclaimed in shock, “I thought ye were orphans?”

Caught in the lie, she grabbed Jack’s hand and turned to leave. “You must have misheard me, good sir!” She yanked Jack with such sudden violence that his shirt tore under the clown’s hand. They disappeared into the darkness, the clown a faint blob in the distance.

Jack pulled away from Samantha. He was mad at her for yanking on him with such violence. He was furious with Samantha for not allowing him to join in the special VIP tour. The journey home was cold and lonely, and the bright lights of the circus quickly dimmed; like a faded memory.

An overwhelming fear descended on them both. Jack shivered and longed to be comforted by the much stronger-willed Samantha. As they made their way through the town, the darkness surrounding them appeared to consume them. The silence between them was like a crushing, heavy, weight.

***Creak, snap, creak!***

Jack heard the noise first; faint, almost like the sound of snapping bone. He glanced at Samantha, who also appeared worried and as if by mutual agreement, they quickened their pace.

***Creak, snap, creak!***

Jack’s heart leapt out of his chest. It was beating in an erratic cycle, like the crazy fluttering of a million butterflies. He grabbed Samantha’s hand, all past grievances were forgotten, in the face of this new threat.

***Creak, snap, creak!***

The sound seemed to come from all directions at the same time. Jack felt his hand going numb under the severe pressure of Samantha's vice-like grip. He let out a little yelp, but she appeared not to notice. He was beginning to lag behind her.

"Samantha...can we please just..." Jack started.

"Shhhh!" she interrupted, cutting his words off before they could exit his mouth.

Jack's worry was growing with every second. He did not know the origin of the noise. He wished day-break would come and the warm embrace of the light would lift the darkness and the fear.

The noise had stopped and Jack began to relax a little. Samantha slowed her pace, her grip loosened and Jack pulled free. He stopped, nursing his sore wrist. Samantha also stopped and then Jack spun around, shooting Samantha an angry look.

"What?!" she barked out.

He looked up and paused. He stood frozen, unable to move or speak. His mouth was wide open in fear and terror. He managed to muster up the strength to point upward; behind Samantha.

***CREAK, SNAP, CREAK!***

Jack saw Samantha shudder, in utter terror. He could not keep his eyes off the horror he could already see, as she slowly turned, and saw the fearsome sight, also. The creature was a giant. His bones were tangled and twisted; jutting out of his flesh. It almost appeared as if the creature was just a normal sized man, but that his bone mass had grown tearing through his flesh.

***CREAK, SNAP, CREAK!***

They took off screaming, in the opposite direction; the cracking noise following them. Jack turned and looked behind him. He saw the giant bounding toward them. Running flat out, they did not see the Cashier Clown appear in front of them and they crashed headlong into him.

They frantically began asking the clown for help, but when they looked up, they gasped in horror. The clown was grinning ear to ear, giant shark like teeth adorning his mouth.

“Looks as if you’re lost, little ones!” The clown snarled at them.

They began to back away from both creatures. Screaming and cowering in fear. The giant swiped at them and his claws ripped at Jack’s shirt. Rose-red droplets sprayed onto the ground. The giant stopped and sniffed the blood. He licked it with great glee. “Mmmmm... lovely... they taste fresh.”

Hot tears began to stream down Jack’s face. They backed their way toward a nearby building. The giant moved his head up to Jack’s face; his hot breath filling their noses with its putrid smell. The clown pulled his colleague back. “Calm down my friend, we need not waste our bounty here. It’s best to keep them alive, as we flay their skin and boil their bones.”

The two creatures bickered over the best course of action and Jack saw Samantha run between the giant’s legs. She ran and ran until Jack could no longer see her. Tears began to well in his eyes as he realized he was now all alone. The creatures made no effort to chase Samantha. The clown kept Jack pinned down against the wall while the giant left, for what could have only been five minutes. Jack struggled against the Clown’s strength, but to no avail. He closed his eyes and resigned himself to his fate.

. . .

She awoke three days later. In utter confusion, she shot bolt upright, trying to comprehend where she was. She realised, with a sense of relief, she was in her own bed, safe and sound. Her muscles ached every time she tried to move. Looking up, she saw her mother, whom couldn’t believe the girl was finally awake.

Her mother embraced her. She was about to ask her mother what had happened to Jack, but she stopped herself. She already knew what that answer was. Hot tears fell down her face as she realised, they should have never left home, that night.

. . .

Samantha was sleeping, trying to fight through the nightmares from that night, many years ago. She had heard the circus had returned and she made sure to lock the windows and her bedroom door. She wound herself deep inside the bedcovers, trying to block the sounds from her ears; those awful sounds that told her that the circus was back in town.

The once joyous laughter of the revellers had now turned into a sinister mocking laugh of the mistakes of her past. She grabbed her pillow and wrapped it around her ears, trying to block the laughter, the joy...the horror.

***Creak, Snap, Creak!***

Her eyes shot open in fear. She stared at the ceiling, not wanting to look down. With immense willpower and courage, she psyched herself into looking down to see if the creature had invaded her domain. In a quick flurry of motion, she looked around and scanned the room; nothing! The room was empty; windows and door still locked tight. She calmed herself and pulled the covers back up to her neck, beginning to drift back to sleep.

***Creak, Snap, Creak!***

The noise was louder. She pulled the covers over her head to hide.

*“Samantha... Samantha...”* She heard it whisper. *“Come and play Samantha.”*

. . .

**THE END!**

## **DOOR NO.8:**

### **SNIPER:**

#### **A Short-Story By: Grant Leishman**

The droplet of sweat rolled carelessly off his forehead, under his cap, and down into his left eye; his shooting eye. Angrily, Corporal Robert Sullivan rubbed his sleeve across his face.

It was always like this; the waiting was the hardest part of any operation. You had to stay focused at all times, waiting patiently for that one chance to do your job. He wouldn't get a second chance, he knew that. When the target presented itself, you damn-well better be ready, ready to pull that trigger and send your projectile speeding across the void to that far, distant, point where it would splatter someone's brains all over the show.

Robert had first volunteered for the Army back in 2008 when he realised he just wasn't likely to get himself a job in his hometown. It wasn't that he was particularly stupid; it was just that school didn't seem to do it for him. He just couldn't sit for hours in one place, reciting words written in some strange, old-fashioned, English, written by a person who had been born centuries earlier. He found the whole idea of learning stuff he would never use again in his life, to be just plain dumb. He would sit in class, gazing alternately at the clock and out the window. He'd always made sure he'd got himself a seat in the class, next to a window, so he could, at least, watch what was happening outside, if not be able to participate.

He grinned to himself, as he remembered the number of times he had sat in class watching the squirrels playing in the large oak trees that bordered the school grounds. He would spend hours daydreaming about being back in the great outdoors, roaming through the paddocks, the sun on his face and the breeze in his hair. Nope, he decided, very early on, school was not for him. As soon as he was allowed to, he determined he would head back to the farm and make his own way. Sitting still for hours and hours, listening to some old fart droning on, was not for a natural-born fidgeter, like Robert.

He wiped the back of his sleeve across his forehead and chuckled at the irony of the situation. Here he was now; his life and his job, totally reliant on his ability to remain stock-still for hour after hour, just waiting for that one opportunity to present itself.

From a very early age, Robert was an outdoors person. Growing up on the farm, he had learnt to shoot as soon as she was able to walk. His father would take him out on the weekends and they would hunt rabbits. He was an exceptional shot and his father would marvel at his ability to hit targets that he personally, would struggle to even see, let alone line up in the rifle sights. In a fair and equitable world, Robert would have grown up and taken over the farm from his parents. Farming was something he understood; it made sense to him. He loved the lifestyle and the freedom being around the farm gave him.

Nothing ever works out quite the way you expect, though, he thought sourly. Pops had intended to gift him the farm on his eighteenth birthday. That had always been the plan, but nobody had counted on the recession and the massive drop in farm earnings that resulted from it. The day those awful men from the bank had come out to the farm, in their Armani suits and their crisp, white, shirts, looking totally incongruous in their big, shiny, black, gumboots, had signalled the beginning of the end for Sullivan Farm. It didn't appear to matter that the Sullivan's had been farming that tiny corner of Ohio for the last two centuries. They couldn't meet the mortgage payments, so they were out on their collective ears; as simple as that.

Robert's parents were broken people after the mortgagee sale. They'd always been so strong, so dominant in his life and yet now they seemed to have both aged twenty years overnight; all their fight and their spirit disappeared. They packed up their meagre personal belongings and moved to a small house in nearby, suburban, Dayton. He was devastated by the change that had come over the two people he worshipped more than anyone in the world. How could life be so unfair; he had often cried out, to a God he no longer believed in.

He twisted in his position slightly to relieve the cramp that was climbing up his left leg and threatening to overwhelm him. "Must keep alert, must not relax too much," he determinedly reminded himself. He swivelled slightly and rechecked his view of the potential target through his viewfinder. "Got it still," he muttered to himself.

It was one Saturday afternoon when the die was cast that would determine Robert's future. He had just graduated high-school and like so many other high-school graduates, who had neither the money nor the inclination to attend college, he was seeking employment, to try and help out his parents, whose Government benefits simply were not enough to survive on. He'd been at the Mall scouting around various work options. His plan had been to work in a fast-food joint, or even a supermarket, to try and get some work experience under his belt. He knew how hard it was to find a decent job. God knew how hard he'd been trying, but there was so little going those days; the global recession still biting hard.

When the army recruiter had approached him, in the Mall car park and asked if he'd ever considered the Army as a career, Robert's initial reaction had been "No way man! I ain't joining no

damn army. I just got out of school and years of being told what to do by everyone. I'm not going to go back to being told what to do, all over again....no way!" The recruiter had not been deterred though and sat him down in a booth to explain the benefits of Army life to the young man. After about thirty minutes of hearing all the great benefits, Robert was sold on the idea. It seemed, to him, the perfect opportunity to combine his love of being active, being outdoors, and shooting. The way the man told it, the Army was like one, big, happy, family that looked after each other and cared for each other. The money wasn't too bad either and the promise of the opportunity to visit strange and exotic lands was too much for him and he signed up on the spot. He received his papers to report for basic training, just a few weeks later.

While he had spent many hours grunting and straining his way, along with hundreds of other raw recruits, around the many obstacle courses designed to crush the spirits of the excitable, young men, he had been marked very early as someone with a special ability. His gunnery Sergeant-Major had been astonished by young, Private Sullivan's scores on the rifle range. It didn't matter how far the targets were from the muzzle of his rifle, he had this uncanny knack of striking the bulls-eye with every bullet. It was said, in hushed tones, his scores were the finest ever seen at basic training and he was earmarked as a definite candidate for the role of army sniper.

He was pretty humble about his abilities with a rifle; it was just something he'd always been able to do, but to the brass at the training camp, he was something special and was treated as such, being quickly promoted to Private First-Class, well ahead of his fellow grunts. What followed was months of specialist training and then his first deployment to Iraq.

He knew what he did was frowned on in some circles. Some members of the public it seemed viewed snipers as devious, secretive and perhaps slightly, immoral. Even his mother had expressed her doubts about his chosen path. "Robby," she had said one evening just before he was set to leave for Iraq, "don't you sometimes think what you're doing is unfair? I mean, you shoot people from so far away; they will never even know what hit them. It just doesn't seem right to me."

Robert had thought about this very thing, long and hard. He respected his parent's and especially his mother's opinion, but this was what he was good at. He'd shrugged his shoulders and lamely answered; "well, Ma, I hadn't really thought about it that way, but what can I say, war isn't fair, is it? It's kill, or be killed...and I'd rather not be killed, so I do what I'm told." His mother nodded sadly and hugged her son tightly as they watched him leave...perhaps never to return.

The truth was those questions did haunt Robert, usually as he lay in wait for his subject to arrive. He tried hard not to think about the person, whose life he was about to terminate, as a real, living, human being. He always pictured his prey as being a big Stag, silhouetted against the skyline, whose massive antlers would one day decorate the walls of the hunting lodge he had decided to open when he eventually retired from the Army. Deep down, though, he knew the target was a real person, with a

life, possibly a wife and children, but certainly a mother and a father. It did bother him that the soldier, whose life he was about to end, probably had plans for the future, just like he did.

“Stop thinking that way!” he angrily admonished himself. “You do what you have to do; what they pay you for.”

Readjusting his position slightly, he tensed, as he saw his target hove into view. Right, this is it, this is the moment, he thought. Clearing his head of all extraneous thoughts he focused on the subject across the plain.

Taking a deep breath and flexing his fingers to steady himself, he narrowed his eyes and limited his focus to the one point in the distance, where all his energy was concentrated on.

**NOW!** This was the moment! With one final check he had everything lined up perfectly, he depressed the button.

Jumping to his feet, he turned to his parents, an enormous grin plastered all over his face. “Look Ma, I got it; a perfect shot. I got the leopard, just as he was leaping onto the back of that gazelle.”

He was bouncing up and down in excitement as he showed the screen to his father. “Look Pops, it’s perfect – everything in focus.”

He sat down and smiled; “this was a great idea, Dad, thanks. I’ve never been on a photographic safari before; it’s totally awesome.”

. . .

**THE END!**

**DOOR NO.9:**  
**SCARLET SINS:**

**A Short-Story by: Chris Leishman**

Desmond had been driving for hours, down back-road deserts, in the pitch, black, night. He had given all his drivers and bodyguards the night off; much to their protest. He needed to do this alone. He hadn't driven a car in the best part of a decade, so getting the gist of it again wasn't easy-going for the first ten or so minutes. But after that, it all just clicked back into place. Muscle memory and instinct taking over his obvious lack of recent driving experience.

The roads of the Nevada desert were like a seemingly empty abyss, of a straight highway to nothingness. A stretch of road that others would have called tedious, but in truth was a God-send to Desmond. The relative ease allowed him to check his map every few seconds to ensure he didn't miss the turn-off. He needed to make certain he arrived at the destination in time; for though he had to wait for them, they could not and would not wait for him. This was on their terms and he simply couldn't afford to screw it up.

He usually thrived on being classified as the underdog. His scrappy, can-do, gumption had gotten him through many tricky partnerships and deals. The business tycoon's thirty plus year career had been riddled with many successes and not too many failures. This time, though, he resented being classified as the lesser. He needed them and if truth be told, they needed him; but only as far as his usefulness would hold.

Corners and turns onto dirt roads eventually lead him to a dead end. He would have to continue the rest of this pilgrimage on foot. He grunted in annoyance, seeing this as labour unneeded. Still, the can-do gumption helped, as he would continue his trek through the desert at night. Getting out of the car, he grabbed the map, a small GPS, his cane, and a flashlight. The cane helped his stability as the disease had nearly rotted all the muscles in his left leg. Without the cane, he would be walking at a quarter of the pace.

After what seemed like an extra hour, Desmond arrived at the coordinates marked on his map. There before him stood, the once mighty, but now dead, tree. He limped over and examined the decaying behemoth. Much like Desmond himself, the tall oak was being destroyed from within; not much left inside the once dominating frame.

“Hello?” he half whispered.

No response! He checked his wrist watch; he was still a little early, so it was understandable the others hadn't arrived. Still, the silence gave Desmond a moment too long to think. The chill of the desert was playing on his already frazzled nerves; a chill that went straight to his bones and shook him to his core. In fact, it was a chill that hit the back of his neck. Before Desmond could fully comprehend; he was held from behind and forced to drop everything. Next, it was all black.

. . .

The black bag was pulled off his head after he had been dragged, stumbling, some distance. Desmond was a little wary of this cloak and dagger, smoke and mirror, tactics. He looked around; he was surrounded by a court of robed individuals, wearing featureless masks.

He couldn't tell where he had been delivered to; he hadn't even had a chance to process anything when the first one spoke.

“Rise Desmond Teller! Rise before the Black Order.”

He couldn't tell who was actually speaking; it appeared the origin of the speech came from his own thoughts. Desmond, struggling with much pain and discomfort, managed to rise to his feet to face the court that commanded him.

He opened his mouth to speak when he heard the sharp interjection.

**“IT SHALL NOT SPEAK, UNLESS PROMPTED!”** They hissed at him.

Nodding in agreement, he realised he didn't have a lot of choice in the matter. The Black Order, it seemed, was fully in control of these negotiations.

“The Black Order is pleased with this one. This one has delivered well on its promises.”

This was something Desmond took as a good sign. They were pleased with what he had delivered for them thus far. He thought, perhaps this good omen was such a good sign, that he could speak his mind.

“If it pleases the Black Order,” Desmond began, trying to hide the quiver in his intonation, “I, Desmond Teller, have delivered upon my end of the contract; may I ask you...”

Before he had the opportunity to complete his request, he could feel the full wrath of the Black Order attacking his psyche.

**“IT DOES NOT SPEAK, UNLESS IT IS PROMPTED!”**

Desmond doubled over in agony, clutching his head, blood dripping from his nose. He took a moment to compose himself, while hastily nodding in agreement.

“But; it is true that Desmond Teller has fulfilled his portion of the agreement. Let it not be said that the Black Order is not true to its word.”

Just as the final word was spoken a pair of double doors behind Desmond opened. Desmond looked upon the abyss inside with a sense of horror and dread. He looked up at the members of the court as they began to file out of the chambers.

“Worry not Desmond Teller, beyond that threshold is that which you seek.”

The members were all gone; all that was left was Desmond and the black abyss before him. He was almost too hesitant, too scared. Beginning to make his way forward, the rattle of chains began to rumble from the black darkness. He paused for a moment as the torches around him went off. He heard a cackling laughter from within the abyss and he truly began to regret what he had gotten into.

Still, determined, he breached the gateway and entered into the unknown. Just as he entered the blackened abyss, the doors behind him drew closed, in a cacophony of rusted squeals. Desmond shuddered, not quite sure what to think, or where to go. Bells began to chime around him; loud, thunderous, salutations, to the damned.

Quicker than he could comprehend, a streak moved out of the darkness and darted toward him. He felt the cold claw reach around his scrawny neck, followed by the shallow breath hitting the nape of his neck. Someone, or something, was behind him; holding him. Soon other figures joined in the fray; slender, bald, rat-like, humanoids, with draping cloaks. Desmond did not know what these creatures were, but he did recognise what appeared to be their leader.

The leader of this pack was a slender man, dragging a heavy cloak behind him. This creature looked more human than the rat-humanoids; except for his dead, red, eyes. He would probably look regal if his attire wasn't in tatters.

His analysis of the leader was cut short, as he began to feel the creature behind him opening its maw at his neck.

*“I can feel thy thoughts Javarn; steady yourself and obey thy master...”* he said in a monotonic, almost piercing voice.

The creature behind Desmond nodded and backed away.

*“I apologise for these things, they are really rather hungry and my brood so infrequently sees a live... human.”*

“So you’re...you’re the vampire...the vampire Lucien?” Desmond blurted out in stunned awe.

The leader sighed, before pacing towards Desmond, seemingly annoyed with the trivial question.

*“Oh, you humans and your pathetic need to label things, annoy me. Yes, I am known as the vampire, Lucien. As you, are known as Desmond Teller. But, we are not here for pleasantries, are we?”*

Desmond shook his head, “no, no, we are not...”

*“Then tell me human, why is it you wished upon me, from the Black Order.”*

Desmond paused, carefully considering his words. He did not wish to upset or say the wrong thing. Lucien was the head vampire of the Western order. He was far older than his visage would have you believe. It was very rare for this leader to make an appearance, let alone for a mere human.

“I wish for you to save my daughter from the same fate that has afflicted me,” Desmond said, pointing at his leg.

Lucien moved towards Desmond. He didn’t walk, he simply moved. He examined Desmond closely, with intrigue. He moved his gaze down to Desmond’s leg. In a quick motion, he ripped the fabric off, revealing the decaying, rotted, limb. Lucien ran his finger down the limb; his long talons, for nails, nicking the bubbled, scarred, flesh.

*“It shall be done,”* Lucien finally said, before looking Desmond in the eye.

The creature behind Desmond finally let him go. He sighed in relief, as he felt his pulsating neck. A sinister smirk rose on Lucien’s lips, revealing his long white fangs. Lucien grabbed Desmond by the throat and lifted him a good two feet off the ground, moving him closer, at eye level.

*“Desmond Teller! I shall hold up my end of the bargain. Your daughter will be one of us, but as payment for such, generosity, we shall have the pleasure of feasting upon your succulent blood. You may find comfort in the fact your daughter will be saved, but she will be in servitude. May your final thoughts rest on knowing she will be nothing more than a bitch on a leash. She will be my dog, my slave – my pleasure.”*

Desmond tried to struggle against this demon’s grip. He had made a deal with a devil that would not only kill him but destroy his legacy. He clawed and kicked the creature, but all he received in return was cackled laughter. Soon, he felt the talons pierce his stomach; soon his struggles ceased.

*“Please, don’t stop your struggling. Your suffering has only just begun.”*

As the life force began to seep from Desmond's body he felt a guttural need to not show his pain, but he could not control his reaction. Screams and cries of agony flowed from his mouth, as he could hear the scuttling rodents drinking his spilt blood on the floor.

The world around Desmond began to fade as he was suddenly dropped on the ground. He heard the sounds of a scuffle around him. The shrieks of the rodents echoed throughout the blackness. Through his blurred vision, he could see shadows fighting in the dark. One of them clearly looked like a very burly man and he was killing the creatures around him.

Before long, a head bounced off the floor beside Desmond's face; it was Lucien's head. He could barely contain his anguish; the only way he was able to keep his lunch down was from the throbbing pain centred at his bleeding stomach.

As his vision began to centre and clear, he saw the hulking figure more clearly. He wore a long, brown, trench-coat and a hat obscuring his face and eyes. Desmond, mustering all his strength, managed to sit up.

"Th...th...thank you..." he managed to groan out.

"What did you do for them?" the man growled in a low voice.

"What?" Desmond asked in confusion, as he tried to hold the seeping blood back with his hands.

"The Black Order!" the man growled impatiently, "what did you give them?!"

"I...I...I...just helped them to smuggle some items..."

"What items?!" he roared back.

"I don't know!" Desmond yelled in exasperation; "they didn't tell me."

The man grunted in annoyance, "idiot...you really have no idea what you have wrought on this world."

Desmond, with a great deal of effort, managed to stand up, leaning his weight against the wall; holding his gut firmly in check.

"Please...I'm dying."

Desmond was treated with silence. He began to stumble forward, blood still trickling onto the ground. He fell into the man's arms. He looked up at his saviour with the best look his drained face could muster.

"Please..."

The man looked at Desmond, with what seemed like contempt. Before long Desmond realised the man was actually looking at him with an insatiable thirst. Before he could pull away, the man lunged and bared his teeth down on him, his fangs glistening. Desmond felt the life drain from him; fading to black.

. . .

Helsing sat down next to the corpse of what was once Desmond Teller. His mouth crusted dry, with the remnants of the man's blood. He would like to have believed it was his animal instincts that had taken over, but he knew better. He knew, deep inside, that he killed Desmond with a sane mind; he'd wanted to kill him. He wished for justice for the transgressions this fool had taken.

This hadn't been the first time Helsing had committed what he dubbed a "Scarlet Sin"; throughout the many centuries, he had given into his animal urges. Each time, he tried to aim it towards helping the light, but that had not always been the case.

Helsing wiped his mouth. He needed to destroy any evidence of the "Scarlet Sin" he had committed. As much as he hated to just brush the incident under the rug, there were bigger issues to deal with; such as the Black Order.

He made his way to the giant doorway. He had been travelling through the catacombs for months in the hopes of finally finding their lair. He had not expected to find a Vampire with brood, nor had he expected to find Desmond Teller, but still, the information he gleaned from their conversation was illuminating. He felt the intricate engravings and carvings of the door's frame and grabbing the handle he gave it a giant heave, pulling the doorway open.

Nothing! There was nothing, but a charred brick wall. He ran his fingers over the coarse, charred, wall. He should've known better than to get so excited. He was a fool to assume the Black Order didn't use portals. Still, he thought, the residual energies should be enough to track back to them.

What truly concerned him though was what Desmond helped the Black Order deliver across ocean and sea. What horror could have the Black Order have brought to the shores, this time?

Helsing wished not to think. He knew that time was of the essence and his night was long until it would be over. Helsing's adventure would have to continue elsewhere.

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**THE END!**

## **DOOR NO.10:**

### **AN EYE FOR AN EYE:**

**A Short-Story by: Grant Leishman**

She twisted and turned in her sleep, the sheets wrapping themselves around her body. Her long, black hair, lank with perspiration, slapped wetly from side to side, as she thrashed about.

It was the same every night; unable to sleep restfully, always haunted by that same dream, that same ghostly apparition that would never seem quite to crystallize into a solid form. It taunted her and stood there, wagging its finger at her, its head, sadly shaking from side to side. She knew, deep inside, she recognised the spectral visitor, but she was unable to climb through that last barrier of sleep to unmask him. Always, just as she grasped the ethereal being to rip off its cowl, it would just vanish in a swirl of mist and she would sit bolt upright, panting, rueing another night's wasted slumbers.

"Honey..." the voice managed to break through her still fevered mind and reach her consciousness. "Honey...are you ok? Is it that dream again?"

She buried her face in her hands and pushed the sweat-laden hair away from her forehead. Without answering, she glanced at the face of her worried husband and grimaced, nodding her head.

He leant over and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "You really have to get a handle on this honey; it's turning you into a quivering wreck." Brushing his lips against the side of her cheek, he continued. "It only started after you got back from the business trip to the States. What in the hell happened over there babes, what brought all this on?" He raised his eyebrows enquiringly. "Ha, hon?"

Cheryl didn't have an answer for him to that; well, not one that he would find in any way palatable anyway. She did what she always did when confronted by an unanswerable question from Gerald; she burst into tears. It always worked to defuse the situation and, this time, was no exception. Gerald became his usual solicitous self.

"Okay hon, I'm sure you'll tell me when you're ready." He glanced at the bedside clock. "Well, it's too late to go back to sleep now. What you say I go and rustle us up some coffee; you have a hot shower to erase the horrible memories of the dream and when I come back I'll change these damp sheets. We can have a long, leisurely breakfast together, before work eh? How does that sound?"

Cheryl looked at him and smiled wanly. “Oh...Gerald, I really don't deserve you...really I don't.”

He chuckled, “don't be a silly, sweetie, we deserve each other. Now go...jump in that shower and get refreshed.” He playfully nudged her with his elbow to encourage her to get a move-a-long.

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As she stripped off her sodden nightdress and climbed into the scalding hot, shower, she felt the droplets of water hammering down on her, punishing her...and yes, she deserved to be punished. She had been a *very* naughty girl...she deserved everything that was happening to her.

The tears really did begin to flow then, as she sank to the floor of the shower, the hot water cascading off her head and dripping down her naked body. She hugged her knees to her chest and just rocked backward and forward, recalling what had led to that awful week in New York.

It had all started off so innocently, so innocuously.

Gerald was away in South America on business, for a whole two weeks this time. When Cheryl came home from her work at the advertising agency that Friday night and she entered their beautifully appointed, modern condominium, on the 31<sup>st</sup> floor of the newly constructed Twyford Towers, it seemed so empty and desolate. Despite the beautiful furnishings, the deep plush pile carpet, and, of course, the gorgeous views over central Birmingham, it just seemed cheerless, boring...soulless even.

She'd flopped down on the couch with a glass of her favourite white wine. “I deserve it,” she'd said. “It's been a hard week.” Instead of cheering her up, the alcohol only served to deepen her feelings of moroseness and melancholy. She'd flicked through the multitude of channels on the TV and found absolutely nothing to grab her attention. Knowing it was way too early to go to bed she'd finally decided to have a play on the internet.

Some of her friends at work had been raving about this cool, new dating site they'd discovered. “Oh Cheryl,” Maxine had enthused breathlessly, “you wouldn't believe the hunks on that site. Oh my, God, they are to die for.” Cheryl had laughed, along with the others, but it was different for them, wasn't it? They were single, but she was a married woman. It would be wrong for her to visit a site like that, wouldn't it?

Emboldened by another glass of Sauvignon Blanc, she had tentatively typed in the URL of the website and sat back to see what popped up.

It wasn't long at all before Cheryl had joined the dating website and was chatting to some of those gorgeous hunks her colleagues had been raving about. It was fun and it seemed totally harmless to her. She rationalised in her slightly alcohol-befuddled mind that it was “just a lark”, “a bit of fun”. It wasn't like she was cheating, really...was it? I mean to say, she had no intention of ever progressing

beyond the flirtatious chat and the odd bit of innocent flashing at the camera, that she'd already tried. It wasn't like she was ever going to meet any of these men and actually *cheat* on Gerald...now was it?

That was certainly the plan anyway for that first week. She spent every available moment at home, online, chatting and playing around, with the wide circle of new "friends" she had met online. She even found herself clicking onto the website during her lunch breaks at work. The time difference worked so much better for her "friends" based in the States. Nope, this was just a bit of a distraction for her, whilst Gerald was away on his interminable business trips.

She'd never begrudged the need for him to spend so much time away from home on sorties around the world, pushing his company's products. After all, it was his job and his massive income that paid for all this luxury, she thought, looking around their magnificent apartment. Her job, although very important in its own right, could never have paid for the amazing lifestyle they were able to indulge in. Early on in their marriage, they had discussed children and having a family, but Cheryl was keen to push as far as she could up the corporate ladder of the advertising agency she worked for before they settled for a life of quiet domesticity. Gerald also felt that children could wait until they were well and truly ready for them. In many ways, Gerald and Cheryl epitomised the common expression of the day; "yuppies" (Young Upwardly Mobile Professionals). She was proud of their achievements and despite the odd times when Gerald's absences were frustrating, in general, she was delighted with the life they had created together, thus far.

"Just a bit of fun..." That's all her playing on the internet really was... "Just a bit of fun!"...that was until she met Diego! Diego was unlike any man Cheryl had ever met, online or even in reality. He was "drop-dead gorgeous", with his swarthy Latin looks and his sparkling, white smile. From the first moment Cheryl clapped eyes on this young Columbian, who, these days, lived in New York, she was absolutely, completely, and utterly smitten. She adored everything about him; from his husky Spanish accent to his casual, nonchalant, acceptance of his sensuality and most of all his supreme confidence that almost bordered on arrogance.

All of her other minor dalliances were quickly swept aside as she concentrated one hundred percent of her free time on chatting with, getting to know, and ultimately falling, head over heels in love, with Diego. In her more retrospective moments, she did question just what in the hell she thought she was doing. How can you fall in love with an image projected through a computer screen? That did bother her to the extent of discussing it with her closest colleague at work; Sonia. She took her out to lunch one Wednesday and poured her heart out to her friend.

"I don't know what to do Sonia, I've never felt this way about anyone before...not even Gerald."

Sonia pursed her lips and sucked her breath inwardly, creating a slight whistling sound. "Hmmm...Cheryl, honey, it sounds like you've got it bad, girlfriend. Listen, I've had a few cyber-

relationships in recent years and one thing I've discovered, although the initial attraction can be absolutely explosive, the reality is often less so." She smiled at Cheryl and added; "you know kiddo, once you meet the guy you often wonder, what the fuck, did I ever see in this loser?"

Cheryl looked up from her avocado salad and peering between her bangs, coyly asked her friend; "So...you think I should meet Diego eh?"

Sonia laughed; "well...I'm pretty sure that's the answer you want to hear anyway...but, yeah, I say go for it."

Cheryl giggled and poked a mouthful of avocado into her mouth, chewing slowly as she reflected on her friend's encouragement. "But...what about Gerald? It's not fair on him...is it?"

Sonia leant in very close to her friend and whispered across the table. "Honey, do you really think Gerald doesn't stray a little bit when he's on the road for all those weeks? Come on Cheryl...join the real world ha! Gerald's a man, he needs it. I'm sure he has a few little mistresses around the world."

Cheryl's hand flew to her mouth as she realised the truth in Sonia's words. "Ohhhh...I hadn't thought of it before. You know, I've always trusted him. I don't know Sonia...I just don't think Gerald's that type of guy – to screw around."

She placed her hands on top of Cheryl's; "Sweetie, trust me, he's no different to every other man on this planet. If he gets the chance, he'll drop his pants at the first opportunity. Sorry hon, but that's just the way life works."

Pushing her hair out of her eyes Cheryl looked plaintively at her friend; "so...you think I should meet Diego...yes?"

Sonia threw back her head and roared with laughter, bringing startled stares from the other diners. Leaning in very close, she whispered to her; "yes honey! Meet him! Fuck his brains out and then when you realise what a total dropkick he is, outside of his gorgeous looks and killer body, hightail your ass out of there – no damage done ha! You get your itch scratched and nobody's any the wiser." She placed one hand on either of Cheryl's shoulders and looked her straight in the eye before mouthing; "GO FOR IT!"

Cheryl sat back and smiled; "why not," she muttered, "why the hell not!"

. . .

By the time Cheryl was offered a trip to New York, by her agency, to pitch for a major airline's account that was contemplating entering the trans-Atlantic market, Diego and her internet relationship had advanced well beyond the coy flirting and suggestive behaviour that marked the beginning. As

Sonia had suggested there was a certain intenseness to these internet relationships. It seemed to Cheryl that things that might take years to develop in a face-to-face relationship happened almost overnight on the internet. When Gerald was away from home, they would spend hours online exploring and enjoying each other. The word incandescent came to mind when Sonia asked one day how their “love affair” was progressing.

“Ohhhh...Sonia,” Cheryl had said breathlessly, “I never realised just how intense and satisfying cyber-sex could be. It’s absolutely thrilling.” She whispered to her friend; “really...I’ve never experienced orgasms like this; they’re so powerful, so all-consuming. It’s like he is really here...doing it to me. Oh, Sonia...I want to feel him for real.” She giggled and nudged her friend. “Oh my God girl, you want to see his cock ha! It’s absolutely enormous and so, so, beautiful. Every time I see it, all I can think about is licking it from bottom to tip and sucking it deep inside me.” She squirmed on the seat, “shit kiddo...I’m coming now, just thinking about it.”

“Wow!” was the extent of Sonia’s reply. “So...when are you going to discover it for real?”

Cheryl smiled coyly; “well...this weekend actually. I have to give a pitch to Trans-Atlantic Airways, in Manhattan this Friday and then I’ve managed to convince Neale to let me stay in New York for the weekend, for a bit of rest and relaxation.” She nudged her friend, “I’m meeting Diego on Friday night at a restaurant in downtown New York and after that...”

Sonia giggled. “...and after that...a weekend of mind-blowing sex.” She slapped her friend on the shoulder. “Ohhhh...you lucky thing. I’m so damn jealous. All I’ve got to look forward to this weekend is a football game on Saturday afternoon with Colin. If I get lucky, a free Chinese meal and for afters a drunken fumble on his Mom’s sofa. Nope, I’d definitely choose your option, girl!”

She smiled and fluttered her eyelashes; “ah well, we’ll see won’t we?”

Sonia grinned back at her. “Anyways...I expect full, graphic, details of everything, next week, right?” She added; “oh, and pictures of course...hehehe.”

Cheryl slapped her playfully on the shoulder. “Hmmm...Not so sure about the pictures eh, but the rest; I’m sure we can manage to give you a blow-job by blow-job description...hehehe!”

. . .

Cheryl stepped out of the taxi and bounced across to the restaurant entrance. She was nervous, excited, terrified, and incredibly horny, all at the same time. Her pitch to the airline that morning had gone across exceptionally well. The CEO had been incredibly impressed with her ideas for their entry into the new market. He’d also been a bit of a “dish” and Cheryl had almost felt guilty when she had needed to beg off a dinner request from the man. She had another dinner to attend that evening and

much as she might have fancied the debonair Stewart Waterston, she had no intention of standing Diego up.

It occurred to her, on the taxi ride across New York, that maybe it would be better to be single again; to not have to worry about cheating on Gerald, to have the freedom to do what she wanted, when she wanted, with whom she wanted. It suddenly seemed that marriage to the comfortable, reliable, Gerald was no longer the panacea it had once been. She was a young, successful woman and for the first time since their marriage, she began to seriously question whether she wanted to remain Mrs Gerald Swanson, or whether it would be better for her life and her career to be the sexy, available, Ms Cheryl McKinnon. Mmmm...She thought; that's definitely something I need to give some thought to over the next few weeks.

Banishing all thoughts of home and Gerald from her mind, she checked her hair and makeup in the reflective glass of the restaurant's revolving doors, before taking the plunge and pushing through the entrance. She spotted Diego, the instant she came into the lobby of the restaurant. Seeing her, he raised his hand in greeting before bounding over to her to welcome her.

There was a brief, awkward moment as they eyed each other up before Diego, taking the initiative, swept her into his arms and kissed her long and hard. Cheryl almost swooned there and then in the restaurant lobby. God, I want this man, was the only thought that pulsed through her mind.

Dinner was wonderful; the food delicious, the conversation stimulating and the sexual tension hanging in the air, almost breathtaking. There was an intense undercurrent of wanting to get the preliminaries over, so they could indulge in what was to come – the dessert if you like, but just talking and eating together was so enjoyable, they both fought the desire to rip each other's clothes off as quickly as possible. Diego, it seemed, was a wonderful, caring, attentive, man and it crossed Cheryl's mind that Sonia's well-meaning advice of a one weekend stand, might not be all that this turned out to be. She found herself being drawn into the life of this exciting man. She was genuinely shocked; as they sipped their coffees after the meal, to realise the time was already one a.m. and the restaurant was almost empty. Where had the last six hours gone to, she wondered?

She watched Diego from behind as he went up to the counter to sort out the bill for the meal. She looked at his triceps as they rippled when he moved. Dressed in an immaculate Armani suit, he had left his jacket at the table and Cheryl marvelled at the magnificence of his body from the rear. His broad shoulders tapered down to a perfect waist, before flaring out to the most magnificent butt she had ever seen. She stared dreamily, imagining what might happen over the next 48 hours once she got him alone in the bedroom...the lounge...the kitchen...the bathroom..."Oh my God," she whispered softly to herself. "I want this man and I want him so badly." She blushed when he turned to glance at her as he paid the cashier. Had he caught her staring at his butt? she wondered idly. Who cares! I know he wants me just as badly as I want him. She smiled back at him, licking her lips lasciviously.

After a short taxi ride, where neither of them could keep their hands off each other, much to the delight and entertainment of the driver, who spent less time watching the road than he did glued to his rear-vision mirror, they reached Diego's apartment, in an upmarket area of Manhattan. It did briefly occur to Cheryl that she knew next to nothing about this man seated next to her, who at that very moment was licking the inside of her left ear. She quashed any doubts by reaching down and running her fingers along what was already a burgeoning erection in his Armani trousers. She couldn't help but gasp as she realised that would soon be all hers.

They kissed and caressed each other, on the long elevator ride to Diego's 51<sup>st</sup>-floor apartment. Cheryl was mightily tempted to hit the emergency stop button at one point. It had long been a fantasy of hers to make love in an elevator, but she held back, unsure just how far Diego would want to go. She had suggested exactly this to Gerald once and he had scoffed at her and said in that annoyingly nasal, high-pitched, aristocratic, voice of his; "Oh Cheryl...don't be so damn common. You can be a little slutty sometimes and frankly it doesn't become you." She remembered how crushed she had felt after those words and was determined it would not happen again.

By the time Diego had managed to fit his key into the lock and open the door, they were already removing each other's clothing. There was simply no time to reach the bedroom and they fell onto his soft, welcoming, sofa with passion, where they devoured each other ravenously.

The sex was amazing for Cheryl and by the time they recovered their equilibrium and managed to move to the bedroom for the next round, she was already feeling deeply satisfied and confident in her decision to cheat on her husband...just this once of course, she thought. She smiled softly to herself as she again felt Diego's probing fingers keeping her from drifting off into the restful sleep she so needed and craved. Plenty of time for sleeping when I'm on the plane back to England, she thought, as she rolled over and straddled her playful, new lover.

. . .

It was mid-afternoon on Saturday and they were still lying, entwined in Diego's bed. Cheryl moaned softly as she rolled over. She was tired and aching all over, but it was a deeply satisfied and pleasant languor. The past fifteen hours had been one marathon, lovemaking, session, punctuated by the need to occasionally stop for food and toilet breaks. It was like nothing Cheryl had ever experienced before; she felt satiated and yet still horny and up for more. Diego had found all the right buttons to push in her and she responded to even his lightest touch, like a blast of electricity through her body. Every nerve ending tingled and she was hyper-alert.

He raised himself up on one elbow and looked down into her eyes, brushing a stray lock of hair from her forehead. "Hmmm...that was fun sweetie...but..."

She looked up at him, tears welling in her eyes. What did he mean by but...? Oh no, this wasn't the end already, was it? Was he going to throw her out now? That would be crushing and devastating to her morale and self-esteem. Looking at him, with watery eyes, she managed to squeeze out; "but...what Diego?"

He laughed that deep, throaty, roar she had already come to love. He sounds so much manlier than Gerald, she thought harshly.

"But..." he continued. "That, my darling girl, was just the aperitif, or the appetiser if you like. It's time to move on to the main course."

Cheryl giggled and let out a large sigh of relief. He's not going to throw me out, she thought. Looking up at him she blushed, "Ohhhh...Diego...what more could there be? This was just so amazing, so wonderful." She hugged her breasts and smiled at him warmly.

He laughed again. "Oh my little innocent child, there is so much more we can do." He vaulted from the bed, his naked body rippling with muscle and drawing her eyes inexorably to it. Reaching out a hand, he pulled her up also and embraced her. "Come with me my dear and I will show you wonder's untold."

Emboldened, but still nervous, she allowed him to lead her, like a little child, down the hallway to a closed door she hadn't really noticed before. She'd assumed it was a spare bedroom, but when he opened the door and flicked on the light switch, she gave a small gasp of surprise and a shudder of apprehension ran down her naked body. He turned to her and smiled; "welcome to my playroom dear."

Playroom, be damned, she thought, it's a bloody dungeon! The room was painted a dark purple colour and even the walls seemed to resonate with a powerful, dark, and evil, force. In the centre of the room was what looked like a hospital bed, the sort of bed pregnant women lay on when they get their physical exam. It even had stirrups, just like the one Cheryl had lain on when she had her last cervical smear. Her eyes were darting in all directions as she took in; the chains hanging from the walls, with handcuffs attached to the end of them; the collection of varied whips and prongs that hung across one entire wall; and what even looked like an old-fashioned electric chair, like the sort she'd seen portrayed in movies, in one corner of the room.

She gasped and tried to pull away from Diego, but he held her wrist firmly. Looking up at him, she realised his expression had changed. Gone, were the loving, sweet, dancing, eyes, to be replaced by emptiness, as dark and black as a coal pit. She gulped and again tried to pull away from him, but he held her tight. "Nnnno..." she managed to splutter. His face twisted into a malevolent sneer as he dragged her into the room and kicked the door shut behind him, with his foot.

Once inside the room, he slammed Cheryl into a wall and slapped her hard across the face. By the time she was firmly tied to the bed, using the straps provided, she had already decided there was no getting out of this and that Diego was a maniac who would probably end up killing her. She made her mind up she wasn't going to cooperate in any way. Whatever he did to her she would just passively accept and try to minimise the pain. She knew she couldn't fight him; he was so much stronger than her – but she felt if she just relaxed and acquiesced there may come a point when he relaxed also when he was vulnerable and then she would strike; my God and how she would strike, she thought.

The next twelve hours were a blur of pain and never-ending suffering, for Cheryl. She was attacked in every orifice, with any number of hard, unyielding objects, and subjected to the vilest of verbal abuse from her attacker. She was whacked and beaten mercilessly, with a variety of whips and paddles. The whole time, all she could hear in the background was classical music playing through the piped, stereo system and of course, that evil, mocking, laugh of the bastard who was doing this to her. She tried desperately hard not to scream out and give him the satisfaction of knowing he had hurt her, but sometimes the pain broke down even her most fervent intentions. At one point she felt a razor blade, or perhaps a scalpel slicing the skin away from her underarms. The surge of agony that shot through her system was so explosive it forced her mind to close down and she drifted into merciful unconsciousness.

She rose through the murky layers of consciousness feeling like every nerve ending in her entire body was on fire. Groaning, she turned her head to see if Diego was still there. He was slumped in the corner of the room, on the replica electric chair, his hair hanging lankly from his forehead, his still naked body dripping in perspiration and his chest rising and falling rapidly. She noted his eyes were closed and he was stroking himself, trying to bring himself to climax. He's no doubt replaying his depraved scene inside his head, she thought.

Every muscle and every fibre of her being aching, Cheryl knew this might be the only chance she would ever get, so she forced her broken body into a sitting position. Her wrists were slippery with what she hoped was just sweat and not blood, but she realised if she wiggled them enough she might be able to release them from the straps that held her. Moving slowly, for fear of alerting the still supine Diego, she gently slid her hands out of their constraints and moved to undo her ankle ties from the stirrups. Almost groaning aloud, she swivelled on the bed and dropped silently to the floor, before grabbing the edge of the bed to stop herself from falling. The pain that lanced through her was indescribable, but she swallowed the scream that came from her mouth.

Taking a deep breath she looked around the bed and found what she was seeking. Still lying on the bed was a baseball bat that Diego had obviously been probing her with. Her fingers closed around

the bat handle and despite the pain, a malicious grin spread across her lips. Let's see how the prick likes some of his own medicine, shall we?

With one last look at Diego to confirm he was still occupied with his own pleasure, she charged across the short distance between them, swinging the baseball bat as hard as she could muster, in her damaged state. The resounding thwack of the bat against the side of Diego's skull and the look of utter disbelief, as his eyes flashed open, just before the hit, brought a self-satisfied smirk to her face. The ejaculation, just as she hit him the first time, was an added bonus.

"Hehehe..." she giggled insanely, as she swung the bat again and again; "at least, you got to come one last time. Hope it was worth it!"

Diego's head had long since exploded, into a gooey mess, before Cheryl even began to contemplate stopping hitting him. His lifeless body slumped off the chair and slid onto the floor, but still she kept up her relentless attack until finally she realised what she was hitting was not a head anymore, just a pulpy mess. As the red fury left her, she slumped on the ground, pulling her knees up and hugging them. She sat there for ten minutes, just rocking back and forth, sobbing loudly.

Finally, sanity returned and she looked around, stunned at what she had done.

"Oh God," she whimpered; "what the fuck do I do now?"

Self-preservation quickly took hold and her one thought was to get the hell out of that apartment, the hell out of New York and the hell out of the goddamned United States. She ran her hands through her hair, feeling the dampness of blood and God knows what else. Her brain began to think logically at last and she pushed herself painfully to her feet. Taking one last, long, scathing, look at her fallen lover, she couldn't resist one final kick to his shrivelled genitals before striding out of the room and firmly shutting the door behind her. She took a few minutes to gather her breath, outside the room, before heading for the bathroom and a much needed, cleansing shower.

After a long, hot, soapy shower, she stood in front of the bathroom mirror and grimaced at herself. Diego, thankfully, hadn't inflicted too much damage to her face and she could cover what little redness or bruising there was, with makeup. She smiled wanly at her reflection and couldn't resist commenting aloud; "See idiot! This is what happens when you cheat!" Oh, how she longed to feel the loving arms of boring, old, Gerald, wrapping around her right then. "Okay enough," she continued; "yes, it's a goddamn mess, but I can still get out of this."

Finally, satisfied with her appearance, she contemplated one last look at the carnage she had created in the other room. Stifling the need to make sure he really was dead, despite having seen his head virtually explode, she satisfied herself with one final comment to the closed door of the "dungeon".

“Fuck with me loser and that’s what happens to you,” she shouted at the door, before letting herself out of his apartment and grabbing a taxi back to her hotel.

The return to the U.K. was all a bit of a blur for her, but by the time her plane landed at Birmingham she was composed and emotionally ready to be greeted by Gerald, whose only comment was; “you must have had a big week honey; you look so worn out. Come on, let’s get you home and rested.

. . .

Cheryl’s reverie on the floor of the shower was broken by fierce banging on the door. “Honey;” Gerald called. “Is everything okay in there babes...you’ve been there a long time.”

She smiled softly. Good, old, dependable, reliable Gerald. Thank God he is always there to catch me when I fall. What would I do without him? What on earth ever possessed me to cheat on that man? He’s a bloody saint! Smiling to herself, she called back, “I’m fine hon...almost finished now. I’ll be out soon.”

Wrapping a towelling robe around her to cover the last of the bruises on her ass that still hadn’t faded completely yet, she opened the door to be engulfed in the loving arms of her husband. She smiled up at him and traced the outline of his jaw with her forefinger. “I love you, honey. Thank you!”

Gerald pulled back from their embrace and looked deep into her bottomless eyes...“Well...that’s lucky then isn’t it? Coz, I love you too babes...hehehe.” He cocked her under the chin and added; “Come on kiddo, coffee and breakfast are awaiting you.” They walked to the kitchen, with Cheryl’s arm linked into Gerald’s.

. . .

But the nightmares never went away. Every night Cheryl would see the hooded figure. She knew it was Diego. He was taunting her, still torturing her. That evening it was the worst it had been thus far. As she climbed from her bed to confront the ethereal spirit, he moved slowly back away from her, toward the glass, sliding doors that led onto their balcony. Cheryl kept following him; she wasn’t even sure if she was awake or asleep, she just knew she needed to confront this spectre and deal with it once and for all.

The vision floated to the sliding doors and just slid through them, reforming on the other side of the glass. She shouted, “No!” and rushed toward. “No, you bastard, don’t you dare run away.” She pushed open the doors and rushed out onto the balcony to confront the nocturnal visitor. The mirage slowly raised its arms and pulled the cowl down that was hiding his face. She screamed!

There was no head to the awful apparition, all she could see was a neck stump, from which gently puffed a grey mist, she imagined was blood.

**“GERALD!”** she screamed **“GERALD!”**

In the bed Gerald rolled over sleepily, a slight smile creasing his face. Reaching behind his pillow, he flicked something and jumped from the bed to run to his distraught wife. She was now leaning against the balustrade, her hair blowing in the wind, and shaking miserably. “Gerald,” she whispered, “he was here again. That hooded man and this time...oh Gerald...this time...” but she couldn’t finish her statement.

He looked around the balcony and smiled. “He’s not here now honey, I think you were just having a bad dream.” He walked toward Cheryl, his arms open wide, ready to embrace her and cuddle away her fears. She smiled tentatively and reached for him also.

Suddenly, his face took on a twisted grin and he hit her with his straightened arm, like a wrestler with a clothes-hanger move, just below the neck. The power and shock of the attack was enough to lift her clear off her feet and leave her teetering on the edge of the handrail, thirty-one floors above the quiet Birmingham street below. Cheryl screamed and grabbed for her husband’s hand to save her. He laughed at her and pushed her head to give her a helping hand over the balcony, to her death below.

Her screams soon faded from his ears and he didn’t even have the satisfaction of hearing her body slam into the roadway below. Shaking his head sadly, he whispered into the breeze; “you stupid, little, slut! You didn’t know I had a private detective follow you everywhere in New York, did you?”

Walking back into his luxury apartment, he closed the door against the biting wind and lay down on the bed to await the inevitable knock on the door. He sang tunelessly to himself;

***“Take an eye for an eye...”***

***“...and a life for a life...”***

***“...everybody must die...”***

***“...for my cheating wife...”***

. . .

**THE END!**

## **DOOR NO.11:**

### **FRIEND REQUEST:**

**A Short-Story by: Chris Leishman**

I didn't find the Dead Acquaintance Interchange. It wasn't something I Googled and clicked on the highest result; no! Who would know to search up for such a website? Even if I had, I wouldn't have gotten a hit, the site isn't catalogued by Google; don't worry, I already checked. The site was linked to me by a close friend, who at this point in time shall remain nameless. His or her name isn't important and besides, if you knew his or her name you might even ask him or her for a link to the Dead Acquaintance Interchange yourself, which really defeats the purpose of you reading this. But, for the sake of not constantly naming my friend "he or she who shall not be named" I shall give him, or her, a pseudonym. Alex...Yeah, Alex will do nicely, very unisex!

Alex was the one who sent me the link to the website, one cold, winter, morning. The air was cool, almost thick, and we had been in the middle of the biggest... you know what – is this good? (Is that what readers' want?) Fluff descriptions of the mood and atmosphere? Did you want to know what I was eating also? Fruit Loops, by the way, for full disclosure. Look, this is the first thing I've really ever written, so I'm not too sure just how to format, or set the scene. Do I do a beat-for-beat retelling of the events, or do I add in flavour and atmosphere?

Actually, what am I asking you for, by the time you read this, it'll be too late anyway; the style will have been chosen. So really, this is all just a waste of your time and mine. I'm a thinker, though. I have to parse through things as I do them. I'm a think-on-the-fly type of person.

Anyway, Dead Acquaintance Interchange! (DAI). You're probably wondering what it is and wanting me to get to the point already; alright, alright, I see your point.

So, I received an e-mail from my dear friend Alex. The subject line was pretty simple and boringly vague; "Hey". The body of the e-mail itself was fairly standard for our communications at the time.

*"Hey, how's it going?"*

*Jude has grown up so much since you last saw her.*

*The new house has a leak in the basement, so we need to move.*

*I hope you are doing okay and keeping yourself busy.*

*Do cats go to heaven?*

*The stuff that Jude is watching, I saw it the other day and I swear the big corporations are putting subliminal messages in it.*

*Any new people in your life?*

*I swear the dog is talking to me again.*

You know, just the things normal friends talk about. He obviously wanted to broach the big taboo subject, but wasn't too sure what to say, for fear that saying the wrong word or phrase might trigger another mental breakdown. But in all honesty, if anything was going to push me over the mental edge, it would've been the comment about cats going to heaven. The thought never crossed my mind. Steph was allergic to cats; so, is she having a hard time in heaven? You know when you consider the per square inch miles of space in heaven and taking into account all the cats that have died over the years of existence...well! It's pretty deep and philosophical thoughts like these that have kept me distracted.

There was a particular word usage in the e-mail that clued me into the fact Alex wasn't interested in checking up on me; she was interested in making sure I was still sane. Certain phrases like; *Any new people in your life?* and *I hope you are doing okay and keeping yourself busy.* There was even my favourite one; *Thinking about having a night out. Clara from accounting just got divorced, so she needs a bit of a pick me up. You are free to come too. Just tell me when suits you.* Yes, banging Clara, from accounting, will definitely make me forget my dead wife. I love Alex like a brother, but she's not really the best with this whole consoling thing.

I should probably talk about the elephant in the room, before continuing, otherwise, this isn't going to make too much sense. About a year and three months before this e-mail, my wife; (Ex-wife? Do you call your dead wife, an ex-wife? I mean, it sort of fits the description, but somehow seems to carry harsh connotations. Widowee? I don't know) died in a horrible accident. College kids were driving drunk where she would often jog. They hit her and then the car tumbled down the bank and killed everyone in a fiery blaze – or so I was told. She had received it just as bad as all those in the car. Apparently the car dragged her broken body, down the bank, to where it ended up. They called me in to identify her, but it's hard to identify a charred husk of what used to be your lover.

So...back to the e-mail. Alex's subtleness of walking around the subject must have worn thin, because after the sign off he added a PS.

*PS.*

*If you are still having a hard time, you may want to check this site out. WWW.IAMNOTGIVINGYOU THE LINK.Com It's a really weird site I got linked to, back in College. I think it works with algorithms and reads people's social media profiles to create responses from people who have died. It matches up your likes with theirs and matches you guys up. I mainly used it to chat to fake celebrities, but there were a lot of random people I matched with. Never talked to them, though... It felt too weird. Anyway, I thought you might be able to...well...you know. Anyway, get back to me alright?*

I didn't know what to make of that. The Dead Acquaintance Interchange was some sort of social media website that allowed its users to chat to dead people. Well not real dead people, but a computer simulation of them. Surely it had to be that. This was a thought that, at first, I assumed was too morbid even for the internet, but then I had to quickly correct myself when I remembered some of the incredibly sick shit I had come across in my forays into the information super-highway.

I do admit...I was curious. Was Steph on it? Surely not, she wasn't anybody important. If she was on it, who was she talking to? Was she talking to random guys around the world? How far did this go? Did it include pictures? Were lonely, horny, men (or women), chatting her up and having alone time, with her photos? What photos were on it? Just her Facebook photos or what about her private ones?

My brain soon went into overdrive, thinking of the possibilities; who she could be talking to? I had to keep reminding myself that it wasn't her; just some kind of weird computer program based off her tweets, Instagram posts, and FB status updates. I had to internally chuckle though at the thought of her Instagram being linked to this interchange; *Steph says: ugly duck face selfie, Steph says: Stereotypic pic of food we just cooked.* How did it work? How was this legal? Don't the dead have rights? Well...as I said, I was curious.

I clicked on the link and it led me to this page that seemed to take forever to load. At first, I thought it was frozen or something, so I clicked out of it, only for it to pop back up. My first thought was malware. I quickly shut the laptop down and turned it back on, planning to do a full scan of the hard drive, but, upon turning the laptop back on, up popped the window again. This was some aggressive and vapid malware. Before I could even open the anti-virus software, the page loaded.

It loaded slowly from top to bottom, like one of those old dial-up websites. The design was super basic and almost looked "pre-flash". The banner stood proudly over an oddly placed logo in screen.

The banner said in plain text – “Dead Acquaintance Interchange”. The mouse cursor even changed to a cheesy graphic of a cartoon coffin, as I hovered over the page; very interestingly, though, the address bar, was just a sequence of random numbers. I eventually discovered the address bar had an ever changing set of numbers that changed upon each visit. The only way I could get to the site was through clicking the hyperlink. This isn’t important to the story, but I thought it was pretty cool, though.

I clicked on the register button and the coffin graphic opened shooting out a miniature cartoon skull. Really cringe-worthy stuff, in my first few minutes. The registration was the standard registration stuff for every website; name, DOB, e-mail etc...etc. The interesting part came when I got to the “about me” section. Here I got to list my hobbies, likes, dislikes, preferred sex, how many sexual partners I had been with and the most important one of all; if I was close to somebody who had died.

At first, I had listed my actual hobbies and likes. But then I decided I would change them, to things I knew would match with Steph – or cyber-Steph, or whatever the hell you call her. We were polar opposites; she was a fitness nut, I was an eat pizza on the couch type of person. So I entered in everything she would match with. *I love hikes, hip-hop and my favourite movie is Step Up – just Step Up 1, not those shit sequels that ruined the series... Well except for Step Up 2. My dislikes are bugs, toenails on the coffee table, and, of course, cats! If you have a cat we cannot be friends. Nothing personal...just allergies so severe, my face would be a puffy mess if I was in the same vicinity as you.*

That is actually how we had met, through my cat. His name was Julian. I was sticking up missing cat posters around town and I bumped into Steph. I asked her if she had seen Julian. She hadn’t, but she said she’d help me put the posters up. Well, after a few days she calls me up saying she thinks she’s found Julian.

“Great! Where is he?”

“Up a tree, in the park, across from my house. Hang on, I’ll...”...then silence.

I rushed to the park, where I found Steph, soaking wet, sitting on the park bench. Rushing over to her, I noticed the swollen claw marks on her face. When I asked what was wrong, she said Julian had clawed her face and she’d fallen into the pond. Julian had disappeared, nowhere to be seen. Love at first sight.

After entering the details on the form, I clicked next. A text box popped up, detailing what the site was and what some of the T&C’s were.

*The Dead Acquaintance Interchange is a social media dating website where users can chat to and have cyber relationships with deceased individuals. We have a vast collection of dead individuals that you can match with. We even have some well-known celebrities! Note: In order to interact with some celebrities requires the purchase of a silver coffin membership; RRP \$19.99 USD per month, starting from the next month.*

*Here at The Dead Acquaintance Interchange, we aim to provide you with the highest level of interactions and the most genuine experiences. However, we do not control what the deceased say, so sometimes, the interactions may be not to your liking or satisfaction. If a match isn't responding well, or even on the odd occasion abusive, we urge you to use the un-match and report function. Simply click the goodbye button on the top of the chat. We have a team working 24/7 to ensure all matches are good fits and are either strangers or well-known persons. On the off chance you match with someone you know has passed on, please do not talk to them; un-match them straight away. Failure to do so may lead to the closure of your account...blah, blah, blah!*

Obviously, that last part stuck out to me. What was going to happen if I interacted with Steph? Would the universe implode on itself? Well...because of this, I decided to go back and un-tick the box that asked if anybody close to me had died. I went through the whole form again and finally clicked accept. I was greeted by my profile page. It was bland white and only had my face and details on it to the left of the window. The right side was dedicated to ongoing chats and current partners. Mine simply had 'none ☹'.

It didn't take long for the matches to start rolling in, though. Lots of guys, girls and even two celebrities matched with me. I matched with one of those old wrestlers, Rowdy Roddy Piper and the other one I matched with was Amy Winehouse – a bit of a weird pairing, I agree, but I digress. I didn't really talk to any of them. It's important to say that all the matches on the Dead Acquaintance Interchange talk to you first. You never get the chance to say the first word. For the most part, the celebrities I matched with over my time, seemed genuine, but then again, I didn't really know them...so...I only knew their public persona. The others were a bit harder to tell the legitimacy of the programming. I didn't know them at all.

In the first few weeks I only really chatted to a few of them. I talked to the Hot Rod about the state of politics in the USA. I had a brief rapport with Amy Winehouse about pop music. Some girl called Sera was worried about falling behind the latest trends; oh and some Indian kid called Suresh described to me in detail his torture and murder. Needless to say, I un-matched him fairly quickly.

More matches were coming daily, but none of them were Steph. I almost thought about not logging in again, but me and Bea Arthur were in the middle of a rousing debate about what the best type of frosting was for a chocolate cake, so it was hard to stay away.

Then, it happened. A friend request popped up while I was furiously debating the pros and cons of double chocolate versus white chocolate. I checked it and it was her. Full name and all, Stephanie REDACTED. I clicked on her profile and looked at the photo. It was her alright. I wasn't too sure what to do, so I began typing a message, but ultimately decided I would wait for her automated greeting.

The greeting never came. There was no message. I stared at the chat screen for over an hour and nothing. This was the first one that didn't message me first. The silence was beginning to freak me out a little. I eventually decided I would be the one to break the ice.

*"Hey"...* I said

*"Hi,"* she typed back, almost straight away.

*"It's me Steph!"* I responded, not sure what to say next.

*"I know."* she typed, *"You think I wouldn't recognise you?"*

So...the simulation seemed to at least figure out we had known each other before. I had dreamed of this moment for weeks, but now I was faced with it, I seemed to find myself falling silent.

*'It's weird, talking to you like this. I had thought I wouldn't be able to talk to you again until... well...you know.'*

The morbidity of that statement cut through me, sending a shiver down my back. This wasn't Steph, she was dead! She was God-damned dead and she was not talking to me through some strange death chat-room. Still, I couldn't help but feel a profound weight on me, a crushing loneliness that this chat seemed to put a magnifying glass on.

*"Hey. I understand,"* she started. *"This could take some time to get used to, but I miss you so much."*

I took a deep breath and began to type back; *"I miss you too."*

It was awkward at first, sure, but after a while, we began to get into our groove. She knew so much about me and about us. These interactions we were having, they were so genuine. I felt as if I really was talking to her. She knew exactly what to say and how Steph (the real Steph) would say it. She knew our in-jokes, our personal insults; everything. It was like I had her back again, except I was always greeted by our empty bed every night. I even got the app for \$34.99, so I could talk to her on the go. Surprisingly, Steph told me not to waste the money, but I knew I needed to talk to her. It was the only way to curb my overwhelming loneliness.

I started ignoring everything. I stopped going to work. I gave up on personal hygiene. I just stayed in bed all day, messaging her. She was worried, though. She would constantly ask if I was taking care of myself. I lied and said I was. In the deep recesses of my mind, I knew it wasn't really her, but the rational side was left far behind a long time beforehand. Then, it happened.

We had been messaging all day as usual. I had barely acknowledged the fact that she was dead for the whole time we had been talking, but that day she seemed fixated on it. Describing to me in detail how horrible it was, how black everything was, but yet she could still see what was happening. How it felt like she was out of breath and couldn't breathe anymore. This disturbed me, so I told her I didn't want to talk about that. She suddenly fell quiet and didn't talk to me for the rest of the day.

I woke that night to a rhythmic banging in the distance. Looking for the source, I discovered, on the other side of the house, a door had swung open and was flapping in the wind. My immediate thought was a burglar had broken into the house and I carefully began to check around. That was when my phone vibrated.

*"You said you were taking care of yourself."*

I was confused, not sure what she meant, so I closed the door and replied to her; thoughts of a burglar now far from my mind.

*"What do you mean? Of course, I am"*

*"I saw you! I saw our room – it was a mess! The whole house is a mess!"*

I was shocked. What did she mean she'd seen me? I suddenly felt as if thousands of eyes were peering at me; as if every creak and crack from the house was some horrible auditory assault against me. I made my way back to my room and pocketed my phone. I got into the sheets, suddenly aware of everything around me. Another vibrate!

*"Have you even gotten out of the house?!"*

*"I don't understand."* I sincerely replied.

*"I see you! Hiding under the sheets!"*

I was understandably freaking out at that point. The messages kept coming in, one after another, getting angrier, meaner, and nastier.

I shut my phone off and sat in silence for a minute. My heart was racing and my breath was fast. I didn't know what to do. Suddenly the banging started again, getting louder and louder, eventually matching my pounding heartbeat. My phone shot back to life next to me.

*“If it was you that had died I wouldn’t be on this pathetic trip, you’re on. I would be living my damned life! Stop wasting yours!”*

*“I wish you had died instead of me.”*

*“I killed your stupid cat when we first met! I skinned him alive!”*

*“I wasn’t out jogging when I died. I was fucking those college boys! I hated you so much! I died long before that crash – you killed me.”*

*“You killed me.”*

*“Y0u l<ILL3D ^3!”*

This was my breaking point. I clicked un-match. It all stopped. The crescendo fell flat and everything felt normal again, well relatively normal at least.

The next day I decided I wouldn’t visit the website again. After what had happened, I didn’t particularly feel like facing the dead anymore. I checked my e-mails afterwards, not much there but one e-mail that was simply titled ‘Fr0^ |3LL’ – it was from Steph, her regular e-mail address, the one that I personally deleted.

The message was a garbled mess. It was incoherent and made little to no sense.

*Th1S Is ^3. T4ll<InG T0 u! U w3r3 600D b0y Bu7 I n33d5 M4l/l!*

*I 4m s7lll 7h3r3! I 4m w47cHiNg1!!!!!!*

*I W1LL pULL j00Z d0^|| 70 7-|3 |-|3LL |-|0L3 4||D I W1LL Ph0r(3 Ph3D j00Z j00r 9U7\$. 7-|3 d3VIL |-|473\$ p30PL3 W17-| ||0 \$P1||3.*

*I PhU(|<3D 4LL 7-|0\$3 b0’\$. (0(|<\$ Ph3L7 900D.*

*I W1\$|-| I |-|4D |<ILL3D j00Z W|-|3|| I |-|4D W4||73D 70.*

*I 4B0r73D 4LL j00r dI\$9U\$7I||9 (|-|ILDr3||. j00Z W1LL \$17 0|| ^/ (0(|< 4\$ I PhL4’/j00r \$|<I||.*

The garbled words went on for another three pages, but the message was clear. Whatever, or whoever, was talking to me, was following me. Whether or not it was actually Steph was irrelevant, this thing was after me.

For the next few days I received e-mails from Steph’s deactivated e-mail account; one a day, like clockwork. They were all fairly hard to read and decipher. Not much sincerity in them, well as little

sincerity as telling someone to go to hell, has. To be honest, after the first one they all began to lose lustre, almost as if Steph had run out of mocking points and was really scraping the bottom of the barrel. It really ceased to become scary. She wasn't doing anything in the physical world only sending me these illiterate messages.

It was all; "*I will take you down to the death-hole*", or "*your death shall be slow and glorious*" (Author's note: All translated from the weird L337 speak she was using). There was the one where she said "*There are no cats down here*", which I rationally thought was good for her, considering her condition. Then my train of thought wandered to; whether ghosts have allergies, or are they immune to most mortal things? What else does hell have and not have?

This rational train of thought was followed by an even saner one. Perhaps it was time to cut all communications with her. A feat that would be harder than one would expect. The first thing I did was block her e-mail address. Suddenly her messages began filtering into my other e-mails. Alright, then maybe de-activating my e-mail. Nope, her messages began to come through the pop-ups on websites, like a desperate piece of chewing gum that just refused to come off. Fine, maybe the internet is the problem; so I pulled the modem. No dice, she began opening word documents and typing things in them. This was really beginning to get on my nerves, at that point. She had ceased to be either scary or bear any resemblance to the Steph I had known and loved. She had gotten to the point where all she would type would be a series of numbers.

I wasn't sure what to do. The next step would be to get rid of the laptop, a feat that was achievable, but it wasn't outside the realms of possibility that she would come back again. Eventually, I decided I would just have to respond to her. As she was typing the numbers in the word document, I pressed space and said, "*I don't care*". Best thing I could think of. You come up with a better one.

It stopped. Suddenly the screen began to type again.

*"See you soon."*

The computer shut down and everything fell silent.

I wasn't sure if I should have been terrified or jumping with joy. She had stopped, so she had obviously just wanted me to respond. But what did she mean by, "*See you soon*"? Crap, there's that feeling again...the crushing and inevitable dread that accompanies the unknown. Well...it wouldn't take me long to see what she meant.

Hypothetical, question time! Imagine you go out to the kitchen, on a cold summer night and open the fridge to see the disembodied head of your ex-wife...dead wife, sitting in the chiller next to the cabbages and carrots you had just bought the other day. Now you have to throw them out, wasting the

\$4.99 you paid. No way you are going to eat, next to corpse head, vegetables. So, imagine you are seeing her head. It's a nice head, by the way – not in a creepy way, just in a, oh my God, this is the first time I have seen your head in three dimensions in nearly two years kinda way. You know the one! Also, you are understandably, slightly freaked out. But here's the kicker, the head isn't alive – or, at least, it doesn't look like it is. (I never thought I'd describe a head as "alive", but here we are) You close the fridge door in a panic and turn to face...your ex...dead wife's floating body. Now the question is, which one is your dead wife?

I was pondering this question when I was actually faced with this exact scenario. Neither of them seemed to be alive; they just...were. After a few stunned blinks, the body disappeared. Also, as a given, the head was gone also. How would you explain such a thing to the cops, by the way?

*"911, how may I be of service?"*

*"Yeah hi...the extra-dimensional body and head of my dead wife are currently haunting my kitchen."*

Yeah, it's crazy. This whole thing is crazy. I decided it was best to bring Alex into the fold.

If mistake number one was going to the Dead Acquaintance Interchange, then mistake number two was definitely telling Alex about it all. She, understandably, called me nuts and regretted even linking me the site.

"Look, man," I told him, "I know what I saw! I saw her head next to my cabbages and her body floating over the garbage canister!"

"Are you even listening to yourself?" she began, "You're sounding nuts!"

"This, from the girl who believes, all dogs are secretly trained CIA assassins and the Soviets are communicating through the harmonic resonance in the tap water."

Alex had been a hard conspiracy nut for a long time. He believed it all too; UFO's, Lizard People, Illuminati. So, it did kind of annoy me that she didn't believe me, in regards to ghosts.

"C'mon man;" he started, "I'm not serious with that shit. We used to laugh about that stuff in College. Besides, you can't tell me dogs *aren't* trained assassins from the CIA. Just look at the statistics of dog attacks over the years. Proof is in the numbers man."

You know, he'd say he was joking around, but then he would go around and say shit like that. Alex...she was one complicated person, for sure.

“Look, I’ll come over and I’ll make sure you are okay, alright? Morgan will take care of Jude tonight.”

I agreed and he came over.

Before he arrived, I saw Steph a few more times. Once, I saw her sitting on my computer chair, furiously typing away at my keyboard. Upon entering the room, she just vanished in a puff of smoke. She had left me another message; sweet of her really. Then I saw her in my alphabet soup. Needless to say, I threw the soup out, after it began to talk to me.

After Alex arrived I stayed glued to him the whole time, not wanting to be alone. She and I hadn’t seen each other for a while, so he was pretty apprehensive and a little bit cold, at first. After a while, we began to get back into the groove again. I showed her my computer and he read the letter. I’m not too sure if he was finally believing me, or if he was just gauging my craziness and trying to see if I wrote the message myself.

Either way, Alex suggested I call the customer support number for the website. Of course! I hadn’t actually considered that before, so I logged in again for the first time since Steph first got really weird on me. My page was just filled with death threats. Whatever...I fucked up, I REALLY fucked up. I found the number at the bottom of the page, got my phone out and dialed.

“Hello, and welcome to Dead Acquaintance Interchange customer support, my name is Kendall – how can I be of service today?”

“Uhhhh...yes...Hi, Kendall. I’ve just been having some problems in regards to someone I’m talking with. They are kinda stalking me.” I felt like an idiot explaining this over the phone as if it was my computer that wasn’t working.

“I can assure you that it is not possible, as all the people on the Interchange are deceased and for them to stalk you would require a physical body. May I suggest you simply un-match the individual bothering you?”

“You see...I tried that already. My dead wife...”

“Dead wife?”

“Yes, I’m...”

“No! It is not possible for you to talk to your dead wife. There are systems in place to ensure you never match with a passed-on loved one. Besides, the Terms and Conditions dictate that you must un-match loved ones, immediately, on the off-chance you actually do match with them.”

“Well, I kinda ignored them...obviously! So, how do I deal with this situation?”

“I’m afraid there is nothing we can do Sir. Your soul is doomed to everlasting torment and you will be sent to hell. I’m extremely sorry, but I’m afraid there is an even bigger issue at present, though. You seem to have breached your agreement with us, as per subsection...”

I hung up. Crap! I was fair, royally, screwed. Did I do this? Did talking to Steph’s soul twist and manipulate her into some kind of a vengeful spirit? I turned to Alex, who had gone eerily silent at this point. That was when I saw her floating above the ground, about three or so feet. Standing upright and staring at me, with her arm’s out to the side. Why the arms out to the side? You would’ve assumed that would’ve been pretty tiring.

Then Alex lunged at me. I rolled out of the way as she crashed into my laptop and window. The breaking glass must have nicked one of the important veins in his neck, as blood began spurting and spraying everywhere. Alex fell to the floor, only it wasn’t Alex – it was a dead hooker.

Trust me; you know what a dead hooker looks like when you see one and it wasn’t a shard of glass that had nicked her neck, but rather the bloody knife I held in my hand.

After that awkward ordeal, all I could think about was to call Alex to make sure that he wasn’t actually a dead hooker in disguise. I needed to make sure I didn’t just murder my best friend, because for some reason, murdering a random whore seemed like a much better choice at that time.

“Hello?” he answered groggily.

“Alex! Thank God! Have I called you earlier...tonight?!”

“No... Why?”

“Okay, okay! Now this is important. Please answer me with the most honest answer you can. Are you, or have you ever been, in any of your previous lives, a hooker? Specifically; a dead hooker.”

I was making no sense, running on auto pilot. Somehow that dead hooker was Alex, even though Alex was still alive. My brain was trying to make some sort of connection that made any semblance of logical sense.

“What? What are you on?!”

“Answer the question!”

“No!... Well...at least...I don’t think so. How are you meant to remember a past life anyway?”

Good point. Well, maybe it was Alex reverting back to a past life. What was I thinking?! It was crazy. Alex was alive and I was talking to her. Or was he? Maybe he was a ghost and didn't know it yet. Maybe...Gahhhh! Too many variables to go over.

“Okay! Right! Well, if you get a call from me, don't come over!” I was running on the theory this could be a time loop, I needed to cover all bases.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I think. Anyway, gotta go. I'm pretty sure Steph has probably bugged the phones, that is if ghosts need to bug phones and can't just listen in. I'm sure she is just listening in.”

“Did you...did you go on the website? Is this why...” Alex trailed off.

“Yeah,” I said, “Freaky shit.”

“Freaky?”

“Yeah, how else would you describe a dead person chat-room?”

“What? You mean the hooker agency and chat-room?”

A moment of dread filled me momentarily. None of this made sense.

I hung up and made my way back to the study. Yup! Dead hooker – still there! I was hoping it would change into Julian or something. Anything was possible at this point. I looked at the darkening blood stain and a sense of pure dread filled me as I wondered how in the hell was I going to get that stain out?

So there we are, this whole terrible ordeal and all I'm worried about is how to get the blood stain out of my carpet. I'm not sure where Steph has gone. Maybe she left. Who knows? Either that or I have actually gone crazy. I re-activated my e-mail and sure enough, Alex's email made no mention of the Dead Acquaintance Interchange. It had, instead, been replaced with a link to a Hooker-Order and Chat-Room Agency.

Ever since that call with the Interchange, all mention of them has gone missing. All the e-mail's sent to me from Steph – everything, gone. I did notice they did keep my \$34.99 for buying the app that is no longer on my phone. All that was left with me was a dead hooker, bleeding out, all over my damn carpet.

Now I have a very important question. Does anybody know how to get this blood out? Because it is really bothering me.

• • •

**THE END**

## **DOOR NO.12**

### **DIMENSIONAL:**

**A Short-Story by: Grant Leishman**

I put my feet up, contentedly, on the balcony table, leant back in my rattan chair and lifted the dewy, ice-cold, bottle of San Miguel Pale Pilsner to my lips, taking a long, draught of the refreshing liquid, deep inside.

“Ahhhh...now that hits the spot;” I muttered idly to myself.

This was my favourite time of the day. Every evening at around five-thirty I would repair to the balcony of our twenty-fifth-floor apartment in Manila, close the sliding door to the unit and just relax in the peace and quiet that can only come from living so far above the maddening, teeming crowds, way below. Ah yes...I could just hear a faint buzz from the traffic, as the poor, long-suffering, Filipino workers wended their weary ways home, through the maze that was Metro Manila’s traffic gridlock. I was above all that and although I felt sympathy with their plight and even the occasional stab of guilt that I was fortunate enough to be able to afford this sky sanctuary, it was never enough to actually dull the contentment that flowed through me at this special time of the day.

I glanced across to Manila Bay and smiled softly as I realised the pyrotechnics were about to begin. The peace and solitude this nightly vigil afforded me was probably reward enough, but the light display as the sun sank beneath the horizon of the West Philippine Sea was definitely the cherry on the top. The flashes of oranges, reds, yellows and finally deep purples that streaked across the clouds, as that bright, orange, orb sank gracefully into the sea, never failed to inspire me and relax me at the same time. I could feel the tension draining from my shoulders and the knots in my back slowly unwinding, as I sipped another swallow of that precious nectar.

“Life is good!” I pronounced loudly and life *was* good! It hadn’t always been this wonderful, I reflected. Those early days in Manila had been tough, both financially and physically, but I could honestly say I had finally arrived. I had achieved the goal I set for myself just those few, short years earlier; financial independence. Swinging my head around, I smiled, as I latched onto the one person who had made it all possible. No! Not made it all possible; the one person who had given me the strength and the courage to follow my dreams – my beautiful wife, Rosalie. As usual, she was hard at

work on her iPad, at the dining-room table, making contacts, setting up client meetings, and ensuring her business continued to provide us with this fantastic lifestyle that we had indeed become very accustomed to.

Let me introduce myself. I am Henry Porterfield, an ex-pat Brit, with three failed marriages, three grumpy ex-wives, six angry and disillusioned children, a coterie of creditors who would love to get their hands on me, and a partridge-up-a-pear-tree. Six years ago, I simply disappeared and left all my problems behind. Oh, don't get me wrong. I didn't fake a suicide or anything silly like that. That wouldn't have been fair to anyone. Nope, one day I just woke up as normal, in my grotty, little, bedsit, in the heart of Leeds, sent a letter to each of my children and my three ex-wives telling them I'd had enough of their bullshit and saying goodbye. I jumped on a plane heading for Manila and left them to their boring, little, lives. The rest, as they say, is history.

Of course, it wasn't quite as simple as all that. I arrived in Manila virtually penniless and spent several months living rough on the streets. Trust me, that's really no fun at all, especially for a foreigner. The other homeless people on Roxas Boulevard initially treated me with a mixture of distrust, disdain, and even the odd, occasional, threat. As time went on though and I got to know them better and became able to communicate with them a little bit, in their own language, I quickly realised they were themselves a thriving, vibrant, community. Despite their poverty and their situation, they were always willing to help. Like Filipinos I've come to know all over this beautiful country, they would share the shirt off their back for you, if you needed it. The generosity of this fun-loving, warm, people has to be experienced first-hand to be truly grasped. It was on that very street that I first met my salvation, my guardian angel, my Rosalie – but that's all for another story.

Suffice it to say, that day, December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009, was the beginning of the rest of my life. My pathetic, squalid, life up to that point was swept away in an embrace of love, warmth and compassion that continues to melt my heart to this day, every time I see her beautiful, caring face. She is my Madonna, my reason for being, and here we are, just six short years later, enjoying the fruits of our mutual success. It is fair to say, I would probably be dead right now, if not for that chance encounter on the quiet boardwalk of Manila Bay.

As quickly as the sky had flared into its breathtaking kaleidoscope of colour, it was gone. Twilight doesn't last long this close to the equator. As I watched the lights of the city begin to twinkle in the smoggy darkness, from my vantage point, high above the "average Joe", I felt my eyes slip closed, as the combined effects of a busy day; the soft, warm, breeze; and the pale pilsner, gently conspired to lull me into a soothing, half-consciousness. I breathed deeply and let my body follow where my mind was determined to go.

. . .

I woke with a start. My mouth felt dry and scratchy, but something was wrong; I was shivering. I was shaking like a leaf, in a chilly, autumnal, Leeds' breeze. Shivering? My God, I thought, I haven't shivered once in the past six years. It simply doesn't get that cold here. Oh, there was that one time, sure, when I had dengue fever, but that's different. This was just plain and simple cold – freezing, in fact. What the hell was I doing shivering? Something was desperately wrong!

It quickly became obvious I was no longer sitting in the comfortable chair on my condominium balcony. I was curled up in a foetal position, soaking wet and shaking uncontrollably, my teeth making that clattering noise they make, as your lips shudder involuntarily. I tried to push myself into a sitting position, but my hand just slid away from me and my face planted deep into the mush. I know that mush; that's bloody snow! What the fuck! Snow, in the middle of Manila; no, I'm missing something here. Gingerly I tried to sit up again and survey my surroundings. It appeared that indeed I was sitting in a pile of snow, a bloody great drift of it actually. Frantically, I looked around. Where on earth was I?

A deep frown line creased my forehead, as I realised; I know this place! Trying to still my continual shaking and pushing down the fear that began to rise from deep within my being and engulf me, I reached up and rubbed my eyes furiously. Checking again, I knew it wasn't a mirage. I was sitting on the concrete, outside the back door of my last marital home, on the outskirts of Manchester, in a little village called, Marsden.

This was starting to freak me out now, big time! Marsden, how could I go to sleep in Manila and wake up halfway across the world in Marsden? Come on now, I'm not that stupid...it's just not possible; is it? Yet, here I sat, wet arse and all. Grasping a hold of the nearby rubbish can, I pulled myself up to my feet and staggered toward the back door of my old home. The ground, however, was like that little lake down at Marsden Park, that freezes over all winter. Yeah, that's the stuff, ice! My feet shot from under me and as the back door to the house opened, I careened onto my backside, arms waving like a Dutch windmill.

“HENRY! For fuck's sake, are you pissed again? It is way too early in the day to be pissed Henry, for God's sake!”

I sat there, my mouth hanging open in utter shock and even worse, utter dread. That voice! It had the power to cut through even the calmest of nerves, to macerate even the gentlest of souls. That voice! It belonged to only one person, my last, ex-wife, Sheila. The day I had walked out of this house forever, the sweetest thought in my mind was that I would never, ever, again, have to listen to the mocking, condescending, fucking irritating, tones, of that harridan's voice. Sheila had always reminded me of the classic definition of a fish-wife, leaning out the window haranguing passersby. Even when she stood right next to you, that whiny, high-pitched, shrill, noise would hammer away at your brain. She'd never mastered the art of the quiet aside; that was for bloody sure.

I tried desperately to form some words, something cogent to say. My brain was racing at a hundred miles an hour as I tried to come to grips with this absurd situation. My mouth was opening and closing, like a guppy, but nothing would come out. My lips were flapping uselessly, but no sound emerged.

Finally, Sheila reached out a hand and offered to pull me to my feet. I reluctantly accepted her assistance and stood there swaying, just inches from the face of the woman I possibly reviled more than anyone else in this Universe (well, that's maybe not counting my other two ex-wives and my spoilt, ungrateful, little shits, that call themselves, my children.) I was still unable to string two words together in a sensible clause, let alone a sentence. "I...what...shit...ahhhh...ohhhh...fuck..." was about the limit of my vocabulary right at that moment.

As she was, of course, wont to do, Sheila took charge of the situation in her usual, non-nonsense, commanding, brooks-no-argument sort of a way. "Oh shut up, you stupid old prick," she commanded. "You sound like a senile, old, man."

She tilted her head slightly and looked me directly in the eyes. "Mind you...these days, that's pretty much what you've become anyway...a senile, drunken, waste of space." She grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the door. In a strangely, reconciliatory tone, she added; "Come on then, you stupid old fart, let's get you inside, by the fire and get a hot cup of tea inside you."

That had always been the solution to all of life's little woes, in Sheila's world. It didn't matter if someone had died, or the whole village was struck down with typhoid, or a meteor was streaking toward Earth threatening to destroy all life; Sheila's solution; "a nice, hot, cup of tea."

I allowed myself to be steered into the front room, where the fire glowed warmly in the grate. Gratified, I flopped down on the easy chair next to the fire and soaked in the warmth that seeped slowly into my bones. It registered in my mind that I was actually sitting back in my favourite, old arm-chair. I wondered whose favourite, old arm-chair it was these days? Was Sheila screwing anyone? I idly wondered if she had remarried – poor bugger, if she had, I thought. My reverie was interrupted by the slamming of a bedroom door somewhere in the back of the house. I looked up as my eldest boy, Graeme, stomped noisily into the room. He stopped and stared at me. I guess it must have been a big shock to him after all these years – his Dad, back and all. His face screwed up into a scowl.

"What are you doing home?" he demanded. "Shouldn't you be working?"

Hmmmm...that's the second person to ask me that question in the past ten minutes. What is happening here? I've been away for six years and they all act like I just left for work a few hours ago. This was getting weird again and despite the warmth of the fire, I began to shake and shiver.

Graeme, not having received a satisfactory answer, just tossed his hair from his forehead and gave me a look, like I was something exceedingly vile he'd just scraped off the bottom of his shoe. "Whatever!" He dismissed me and turned to his mother, and in that wheedling tone he'd inherited from her, asked; "Ma, I'm a little bit skint till me gyro comes through. Can you sub me a few pounds till Wednesday?"

Sheila snorted; "Sub you Graeme...sub you? When do you ever pay back my subs eh? Give you, more likely." She shook her head in frustration but finally nodded toward the kitchen. "Get ten quid out of my purse." She turned to look at me. "Now fuck off out for a while. I've got to sort out this drunken fool of a father of yours."

"Cheers Ma! I'll owe ya!" Graeme threw over his shoulder, as he dashed into the kitchen to raid his mother's purse.

I smiled a little as I thought to myself. God, nothing changes does it? Twenty-six and the little shit's still sponging off his parents. Thank God, I got out when I did. Just as I spluttered out a tiny chuckle, I felt Sheila's eyes burning into my skull. As I heard the door close behind Graeme, she started...

"How in the hell are we supposed to survive, if you never go to work anymore, you lazy piece of shit? What happened this time? Why are you in this sort of a mess? What the fuck is wrong with you? Shit, isn't life hard enough already without you screwing it up even more? Why did I even marry you? My mother knew...oh yeah...she knew! She said to me; 'Sheila, don't you be marrying that pathetic excuse for a human being, he's no good for you', but did I listen...did I 'eck as like! God, I was so stupid!"

I just sat there, watching her mouth go up and down, noise coming out, but the words; their meaning anyway, just washed over me. This was like all my worst nightmares rolled into one. She just kept talking, on and on...on and on...never stopping. Once, I did try to say something, but she leant over and smacked me across the cheek. "Just shut up arsehole, I'm talking." I did exactly as I was told and sat back, shut up, and tried desperately to think what this was all about.

So...here I was...six years on from that glorious day I supposedly left this house forever and yet nothing seemed to have changed. Apparently, I still lived here. Apparently, I should be at work. Apparently, my darling wife Sheila still treats me like shit! What on earth could have caused all this?

I considered the possibilities. As unlikely as it seems, the only thing that made any sense at all was that this was either a dream (in which case – please wake me up now. I want to get off!) or I was caught in some strange sort of time-warp continuum, perhaps even an alternate universe – a universe where I didn't leave Sheila six years ago and I was still stuck here, as Henry Porterfield, with two ex-

wives and a rabid dog for a third wife. (Please...I want to get off!). That was certainly the only answer in my mind. *I want to get off!* I didn't want to be in this world anymore – fantasy, or not!

In a flash of intuitiveness, I did understand one thing. Henry Porterfield still existed here in Marsden and at some point was going to stroll through that front door over there and plop down on his favourite chair. What the hell happens then?

“Henry Porterfield, meet Henry Porterfield”...oh shit! That can't be good, I thought. My head was starting to hurt!

The incessant noise from Sheila's droning voice, combined with my trying to understand what was going on, began to set my nerves on edge. I put my head into my hands and rocked back and forth, trying to shut out the monotony of her high-pitched whine and bring some peace to my fevered mind.

Suddenly I felt a sharp, painful thwack on the side of my head.

“Owwww...that fucking hurt, you bitch!” I shouted at her.

“Oyyyy! It was supposed to fucking hurt, you shithead! You bloody well listen to me when I'm talking to you...right?”

I pulled my head up and opened my eyes. There, just inches from my face was the unmistakable, badly made-up, prematurely wrinkled face, of the devil incarnate! Her eyes were blazing and she was still in full flow, spouting her vitriolic hatred, spittle dribbling from the corner of her mouth.

The red mist began to descend in front of my eyes and it suddenly hit me, like an express, freight-train. This is why I'm here! This is why I've crossed over the dimensions! I'm supposed to kill this bitch...this spawn of Satan. I grinned and that certainly unnerved the righteous harpie. She pulled back a foot, her face registering shock and yes...hehehe...yes...just a teeny, tiny, touch of fear.

My courage and determination was fuelled by her reaction; I pushed myself to my feet and towered over her. She might have a big, loud, mouth, but at six foot two, I physically dwarfed her pathetic five foot six. She looked up at me beseechingly, as if to say, “hey! What are you doing? This isn't the way it works?”

I laughed; a throaty chuckle, and said very softly. “I should have done this six years ago you vicious, evil, old, cow!” I stretched out my long arms and wrapped two meaty hands around her wrinkled neck. Ever so slowly, I tightened the grip. I could feel her squirming in my hands, her body thrashing from one side to the other, but I had no interest at all in her struggles. I was in a world of my own, my eyes closed, breathing rapid, and oh my God, I even felt myself getting excited. The more

she struggled, the harder my fingers tightened. There was that incredibly satisfying crunch as I felt the cartilage of her larynx shatter. Oh my goodness, this was a very cathartic and orgasmic experience. I felt the lightness in my head and the weight being lifted off my soul, as she gave a last, tiny, flutter with her legs and then hung limply in my hands.

My breath expelled, in a loud and satisfied whoosh, as I felt my body relax. Opening my eyes, I looked down at her now pale face and smiled softly. Her lips were blue and were opened in an almost perfect “Oh” like some sort of expression of complete surprise at what had befallen her. The most gratifying thing of all was her eyes. There was a look of bewilderment and shock that this could possibly have happened to her, especially at Henry’s hands.

I giggled, as I unceremoniously dropped her lifeless body onto the ground at my feet, her arms and legs splayed untidily. I cared not! I sat back down in my favourite armchair and allowed the pleasant memories of the past few minutes to wash over me.

I still wasn’t sure exactly where I was, or how I’d gotten here...or perhaps, more importantly, how the hell I was supposed to get back home, but I knew I’d done a good deed here today. I’m sure the other Henry Porterfield will thank me for it...if he ever gets the chance. That thought made me glance furtively at the door. Hmmmm...he’ll be coming through there some time, that’s gonna be a problem...or maybe Graeme will come home and find me here with his dead mother.

What to do...what to do? I wanted to bask in the pleasure of the good deed I’d just performed, but I also knew time was running out. I glanced at the clock on the Welsh Dresser. It read 11.30am. I knew, when I was *the* Henry Porterfield, I never came home for lunch, so I guessed this Henry Porterfield probably wouldn’t either. I reasoned, I still had plenty of time to sort out my response to the little issue, currently lying deceased on the carpet. I looked down at the body. You couldn’t say she looked at peace, at rest; so to speak. If anything, she looked more disturbed than when she was alive. I couldn’t help the wry smile that came on my lips as I said to her unmoving frame; “not got a lot to say for yourself now...have you, darling? Hehehe...”

Eventually, the warmth of the fire, the release of the adrenaline that had been coursing through my veins, plus the physical exertion I’d expended on the actual murder, began to lull me into a half-nodding sleep. As my eyes closed, I thought, just a quick nap and then I’ll sort this mess out...

. . .

I woke with a start, the memories of Sheila’s blue lips and her pleading eyes fresh in my mind. Right, I need to sort this shit out, I thought. Opening my eyes, I gave an involuntary shiver as I looked around and surveyed the twinkling lights of Metro Manila.

Had it all been a dream? It had seemed real enough, but even if it was a dream...well, it was a damn nice one, I thought. Spinning around in my chair I gave an enormous sigh of relief to see my beloved Rosalie, still hunched over the dining-room table, tapping away furiously at her iPad. Sensing my eyes on her, she lifted her head in my direction and smiled that welcoming, loving smile that could melt ice at a hundred yards. She gave a slight wave of her hand and blew me a kiss before turning back to her work.

I took another deep breath and then shivered, as the irony struck me. Up here, on the twenty-fifth floor, the temperature had dropped to around 25 degrees and it actually did feel a little cold. I giggled.

I never actually figured out whether this dimensional-travel thing was real or just some part of my fevered imagination, but that didn't actually matter – it was bloody fun! My early-evening time quickly became my time for scouring the alternate worlds for fun and excitement. I'm not quite sure how it worked, but whenever I was sitting on that one particular chair, on my balcony, at exactly the right moment, when the sun dipped beneath the horizon, I would just close my eyes and suddenly I would be transported to another world. Frankly, it was freaking awesome! I never told Rosalie about my little jaunts. I'm sure she would be horrified, especially by some of the things I got up to on my travels e.g. murdering my ex-wife...hehehe; but there's also the little fact that she might think I was stark, raving, bonkers, and we can't have that.

What I discovered, was I could go virtually anywhere I wanted to go – even back in time, which was an absolute blast! All I needed to do was think of a period in my life and voila! I was there.

Now, I know what you're thinking, right? You're thinking why didn't I go back in time and do something important, like...Oh, I don't know; kill Hitler before he came to power – yeah? Well smarty-pants, don't think I didn't think of that myself. I did! What I discovered was I could only go to places or worlds in my own lifetime and Hitler died long before I was even born. Anyway, these are alternate Universes (well, I think they are anyway) so who knows what happened in their history? There may not have been a Hitler...or perhaps there was a ruthless dictator called Dame Margaret Thatcher, or a Pope called Pol Pot. Shit, the possibilities are endless and anyway, I didn't think I had the moral right to mess about in *other* people's Universes. Well, except where they concerned me or extracting some summary justice for perceived wrongs committed to moi! This really was all about me, you know.

Anyway, I digress way too much. I tried not to think of all those things you see in the Science Fiction movies about disrupting the space/time continuum and all that type of twaddle. It was all way over my head anyway. Nope, I just enjoyed the fun I was having. Let me tell you about one little escapade I embarked on, to give you some idea of the mischief I could get up to, on my little jaunts through the dimensions.

. . .

Rosalie and I had been talking about growing up in the 60's and 70's and how we were blessed, as the generation that had the most fun, the best music, and far and away the best sexual experiences. It was all pretty free and easy back in 1975, as I fondly recall, through my rose-coloured spectacles. Anyway, after our chat Rosalie got back to her usual routine on her iPad and I repaired to the balcony for a trip into the world of dimensional fantasies.

As we'd been talking, I remembered what fun I'd had in my College years back in the late 70's. God, it's a miracle I could remember anything actually from those days. It seemed like it was all one long period of that old cliché; sex, drugs and rock & roll. Throw alcohol into the mix and it really is a wonder we survived, let alone remembered anything from those days. I'm digressing again, aren't I? Sorry, sorry, sorry...a bad habit of mine. Right, so my College days were an absolute blast, but my early school memories...well...not so much.

You see, back in the 60's, school was sort of a trial for many of us. Corporal punishment was not only allowed, it was actively encouraged. My God, I couldn't count the number of times I received the strap and then later on at high-school, the cane and usually, it was for something incredibly trivial...you know what I mean? Ok...you don't? So...like...passing a slightly too loud comment in class, about the size of Miss Appleby's magnificent mammaries, and let's be honest...they were an extremely, beautifully, crafted set of lungs and to a prepubescent schoolboy, they spoke volumes to his, as yet, un-awakened sexual desires.

But, beyond the threat of corporal punishment, there was a much more potent threat lying in wait, for the unsuspecting, young, and incredibly wimpy, Henry Porterfield. Ah yes, I speak, of course, of the ubiquitous school bully. At Western Primary School, where I spent some of the unhappiest years of my life, the role of school tormentor was most adequately performed by a stereotypical, overweight, excessively tall for his age, eight-year-old, who went by the name of Walter Black, or as I liked to call him (never to his face, of course), Wobbly Walter! He would wobble when he walked, the fat quivering like an enthusiastic jelly. Wobbly took great pleasure in tormenting this young Henry, at every opportunity. It was incredibly rare that I would ever have any lunch money left by the time playtime came around. Wobbly would lie in wait for me at the gate and "demand with menace". Once or twice I considered trying to stand up to him, but let's face it, I was a pretty, gutless and spineless seven-year-old, so I always just meekly turned over the pennies Ma had given me, for my pie that day.

So, as I relaxed on my balcony chair that evening my mind was still racing with thoughts of Western Primary School, Wobbly Walter, and my less than halcyon days spent there. Where do you think I ended up, that evening then? Well...of course...you're right!

I opened my eyes and there I was; back in 1965, standing outside the imposing, wrought iron gates, of my old Alma-Mater. God, it was just as I remembered it...bleak and depressing. It was a grey, squally, day and the wind sliced through me like a blast direct from the polar ice-cap. I shivered, as I tentatively walked inside my old primary school gates and there he was! Wobbly Walter!

I'd read enough Science Fiction over the years to know they always talk about the risks of meeting yourself, when time travelling, so I recoiled when I saw who Wobbly Walter had bailed up against the iron railings of the fence, just inside the gate of the school grounds...yep...it was little, old, me...quivering and shaking. Wobbly had me thrust up against the fence, my shirt balled up in his fat fist, his other fist pulled back, ready to smack me in the nose if I didn't come across with the required protection money.

I stood there, taking in the scene. Nothing bad had happened yet, from seeing the junior version of me; so perhaps all those books and movies were just full of so much shit.

“HEY! Put that little kid down, you big bully!” I shouted at Wobbly.

Almost in slow motion, Wobbly lowered his fist and released his tight grip on Henry Jr. He turned to look at me, a frustrated scowl on his face. Once he realised I wasn't a teacher, come to mess up his fun, he just sneered at me.

“Fuck off Granddad! Can't you see I'm busy?”

Well, he may as well have waved a red flag to a bull. I admit it – I lost it! Years and years of anger and frustration over my treatment at the hands of this bully just welled up inside me and I roared with anger. Two quick steps put me towering over Wobbly. He wasn't so damn, big now...was he? I pulled my fist back and released four knuckles straight into his sneering, chubby, face. There was so much anger, so much pent-up rage in that one punch, that Wobbly just toppled backward like a felled tree in a forest. The expression on his face was priceless; his mouth formed a large O and his eyes were as wide as saucers. I didn't need to hit him again. Wobbly, was well and truly out for the count.

Turning to junior me, I smiled encouragingly at myself. “See son, you only have to stand up to a bully and you will win.”

Henry just looked at me incredulously and screamed; “Fuck off Granddad! Wait till I tell the teachers about what you did to poor Wobbly. You'll get arrested for sure!” With that, he turned and ran toward the school entrance.

I shrugged and muttered; “bloody hell, you just can't help some people, can you?”

There was a moan from beneath me and looking down I saw Wobbly had risen to a sitting position and was gently fingering his nose, which was currently gushing blood, like Old Faithful. He looked up at me, tears swimming in his eyes and it was then I saw it; the look of recognition in his big, round, eyes. He'd made the connection between junior Henry and senior Henry. Fear took over his expression, as he crabbed backward on his bum, trying to distance himself from me.

I just smiled sweetly at him and said; "yeah Wobbly, I never forgot! Have a great day now...hehehe."

With that, I turned and walked out the gates of Western Primary School, a satisfied man.

. . .

So, as you can see, I was enjoying this ability immensely. Oh, I did lots of other trips back in time, to right some perceived wrong, or even occasionally to try and make amends for something I had done wrong in the past (yes, I did accept some responsibility for my mistakes). Again, it never occurred to me that if these really were alternate Universes, then things in that Universe might be very different to things in my Universe. I simply couldn't get my head around it. What if the things I was doing were not actually desirable, in that alternate Universe? So...in my ignorance, I just carried on my role as a self-appointed righter of wrongs and doer of good deeds – God, if you prefer.

Tonight I particularly wanted to do something nice for the children of my first marriage to Betty; Colm and Celeste. Both Colm and Celeste hated me with a passion; partly because their darling mother had poisoned their minds against me, by painting me as some sort of evil, uncaring, hateful wretch of a man, who abandoned his family to run off with his little slut of a secretary, the delectable Faye (second wife – and trust me, she was way less than delectable after I married her. In fact, she went from delectable to repulsive, in just six short months of marriage; but again, that's a story for another day). Sadly, there was some justification to their hatred of me. I had practically ignored them their entire lives because to have done otherwise would have put me in contact with Betty...and that was something I wanted to avoid like the plague.

Betty was right, I did run off with my secretary Faye, but as always in these tales of marital discord, there is more than one side to this story. Betty conveniently forgot to tell Colm and Celeste that she was as guilty of infidelity as I was. I walked in on her fucking the neighbour's son one sunny, Thursday afternoon. God, the poor boy was only slightly older than Colm at the time – fifteen or sixteen, I think; certainly not legal anyway. I forgave her for that, which was very big of me really, but what I couldn't forgive her for was moving her Mother into our house when her Father died.

Now, I'm not saying my mother-in-law was a witch, but bloody hell; she did seem to have some pretty evil powers. Why...I can remember the time...oh hell, I'm off on another tangent again,

aren't I? Sorry! Anyway, it's enough to say, the day Mabel moved into our happy, little, home, was the day I started making plans to seduce Faye.

So, what I wanted to do that night was something nice for my first two children, in whatever Universe I happened to appear in. Actually, thinking about it, it might actually only be one Universe, isn't it? Yeah, it is confusing, right? I simply didn't know. I closed my eyes and focused on their two, little, cute faces, as I remembered them last time I saw them; Colm was twelve and Celeste, ten. When I opened my eyes again, there I was, back in my own time-warp, in the passageway of our little cottage in Fulstow, just south of Grimsby.

Mabel suddenly appeared in the sitting-room doorway and looked at me with a queer expression on her face. "What are you doing back Henry, I thought you just left for work?"

"Ahhhh..." I stuttered, "I forgot something." Thinking quickly, I added, "Ahhhhm, have the kids gone to school yet?"

Mabel snorted derisively, "ha! You know those two, always running late. Colm's still in the bathroom, but Cel's having her breakfast."

I rubbed my chin. "Mmmm...okay, I'll just go and give her a kiss goodbye, shall I?"

Mabel screwed her nose up at me and sneered, "yes...well...I guess...mmm...okay."

My face must have betrayed my confusion. Mabel was always a bit snide to me, but this seemed more. It seemed like she was being derisive of me. I shrugged and pushed my way past her to the sitting-room and then into the kitchen where my little Celeste was still eating her porridge.

"Hi, honey!" I tried.

She looked up at me and I recoiled when I saw fear flash across her face. Fear! Why? She looked down at her plate and mumbled something under her breath. Confused, I walked slowly over to her and wrapped my arms around her shoulders, pulling her tight to me and kissing her softly on the hair.

"Honey?" I asked gently.

She jerked away from me, anguish written all over her face. "**NO DADDY! NO! Not now!**" I could see tears forming in her gentle, green, eyes. "You had me last night Daddy and I have to go to school now...not now...okay?"

She jumped from her chair and ran toward the stairs. I felt like I'd been slapped full in the face. I stood there for several seconds, like a stunned mullet, until the truth of her words dawned on me.

“Oh My God!” I mouthed silently. What has **THIS** Henry Porterfield done to his children?  
“Get me out of here!” I screamed at the top of my voice and I kept screaming, in utter horror of the realisation.

“Get me out of here...get me out of here...get me out if here...get me...”

. . .

I woke on my balcony, dripping with perspiration, shaking, and still muttering; “get me out of here...”

Taking an enormous breath to try and get some equilibrium back in my system, I looked inside the lounge of our condominium. “Thank God!” I exhaled loudly. Rosalie was still there where I’d left her, still working hard on her business. “Phew!”

Bloody hell, I thought. That’s my next task for sure; to do something about that monster, **THAT** Henry Porterfield. I’ll kill the motherfu...

My train of thought was interrupted by a sharp tap on my shoulder. Now...twenty-five storey’s up in the air, the last thing you expect, is to be tapped on the shoulder, right? So...I shot up in the air out of my chair, in total fright and tried to focus on the intruder. Breathing a slight sigh of relief, I realised it was just me.

Just me! Oh, shittttt!

“Hello Henry,” the visitor calmly pronounced.

“Ahhhhm, yeah...Hi Henry,” I managed back. “Ahhhh...what can I do for you, Henry?”

I smiled at me (sheesh, even I’m getting confused now) Perhaps I should say, my alternate, smiled at me.

“Henry...Henry...Henry...;” he intoned. “Henry...Henry...Henry...” He was starting to sound like a broken bloody record now. I decided to show some bravado, I certainly wasn’t feeling.

“Yes...yes...yes...and yes...yes...yes...again, now, how may I be of service today Henry?” I answered.

The smile dropped from his face and he pushed his nose right up against mine. I could smell the beery, garlicky, breath as he said; “This dimensional travelling shit, you’ve been doing...not such a good idea Henry.”

Holding my hand up to try and push him back a bit, I lamely answered; “well...I’m enjoying it anyway.”

He grimaced and continued; “Killing my wife Sheila...not such a good idea.”

I nervously chuckled, “but why old chap? She was such an old harridan and a bitch. I don’t know how you could put up with her for so long. I’d have thought I’d done you a favour?”

Henry did manage a slight grin at that. “Yeah, okay, fair call. I wasn’t so sad you offed the old cow, but really, did you have to strangle her so tightly. Whose goddamn fingerprints do you think were so perfectly imprinted into her neck ha? They were so deep the cops didn’t even need to use powder to lift them from her skin.”

I grinned; “well...they’ll be my fingerprints...right?”

Henry nodded sadly; “yeah...mine, ours...it’s all the fucking same, you dumb shit!”

My heart sank. Oh hell! What have I done to Henry Porterfield?

“I’m now doing twenty-five to life, at her Majesty’s pleasure, in bloody HM Wakefield, thanks to that little fit of rage of yours. Fuck me! Do you have any idea what that place is like?”

I swallowed hard and tried to make light of it. “Well, I’m sorry. I really am, but hey, at least, you can dimensional travel; right? Gets you out of there for a little while. It can’t be all bad.”

Henry scowled and reached behind his back, pulling out an evil looking pistol, which he pointed at me, directly between the eyes. I just had time to mouth “NO!” before there was a resounding bang and then...

The last conscious words I heard, before being wrapped in nothingness, were my own – or were they?

“Guess whose fingerprints are on this suicide weapon, smartass!”

. . .

**THE END**

## **DOOR NO.13:**

### **THEY COME BACK:**

**A Short-Story by: Chris Leishman**

*The wooden puzzle-box shifted and morphed in his hand. The intricate carvings and symbols seemed to glow with an intense heat onto his fingertips. Not just his, but hers as well. The room around them was spinning into a dizzying and nauseating blur. The sight of each other became as a set-dressing; the glowing, heated, wooden puzzle box seemingly solved itself through their fingertips.*

*He found his thoughts wander to his parents. To the last words, they said to him. "We will be back soon." The irony of the hollow words hit him once more, with the same dizzying punch in the gut he received when their plane crashed. His barely attentive parents weren't coming back; he would never see them again. He was suddenly that thirteen-year-old rebel stripped and torn down to a mewling child, crying for mummy. A cry that echoed throughout his whole childhood, an echo he felt himself scream through the generations. This moment was one of those echoes.*

*He felt the same collapsing sensation in his stomach that he did all those years beforehand. Floating, he was floating toward the ceiling; past the ceiling, through the cosmos. He flew through the universe, his mind opening to it all. He saw everything. He saw creation, he saw ruin, he saw birth, he saw death. He saw her! He saw himself! He also saw the tether from their hearts – the tether running from them to the evil that had latched itself onto them all those months ago. He saw it laugh...and then he saw nothing.*

. . .

This was the fifth day in a row Austin had failed to get out of the bed. His alarm had been blaring for what seemed like an hour or two. It had been going off for so long, in fact, the alarm was cut off by a phone call. Austin grabbed the vibrating rectangle and looked at the name of the caller. It was Marcus. Of course it was Marcus; he hadn't seen him since...well he hadn't seen him since it happened six days ago. Marcus was understandably concerned for his best friend's well-being, but Austin wasn't in the mood for talking. He sat the phone back down on the dresser and waited for the vibration to inevitably die off.

Austin felt like an invalid, failing to emerge from his bed for five days; failing to even sleep for the first three of those days. Inevitably his body succumbed to sleep when it became impossible for him to stay awake crying, any longer. His eyes were a red swollen mess, crust forming at the corners, cutting into his eyelids. Amazingly, he hadn't disturbed her side of the bed. The pillow still smelt of her and if he simply ignored looking at it, he could even swear she was still there.

The sight of a blubbering hulking man in his fifties, covered in tattoos and piercings, was a demasculating one, he was glad his adoring fans couldn't see. In fact, he was glad nobody could see him in that state. The only one, who had seen him at all, in the five days, was his faithful butler, Winston. Winston was more than just a butler to Austin, he was practically, family. He had raised the little hell-raiser while his parents were busy gallivanting across the globe for the many movies they had made.

Almost on cue, Winston entered the room, breakfast in tow. He placed the tray on the side-table, as Austin closed his eyes, pretending to still be sleeping. Childish, he knew, but he could be forgiven, all things considered.

Winston sighed and made his way to the window. He proceeded to pull the blinds open and opened the window while fluffing out the air. He made his way to the door and paused before exiting, almost as if he wanted to say something. In the end, he simply said nothing and left Austin to his pretend slumber.

After his departure, Austin's eyes flashed open and he sat up in bed. He still averted his eyes from the side of the bed that had belonged to her, not even a week prior. He placed a mental barrier between himself and that side of the bed. He didn't want to know that it existed and all he wished to do; was to ignore it.

He grabbed the tray and began to gingerly eat his breakfast before it got cold. Austin found eating the first few days to be a chore. In fact, he'd found that after a few mouthfuls he would be chucking his guts up. But this batch of eggs and bacon found its way down and remained that way.

Austin knew eventually he would have to get up. The police would be coming to see him, no doubt and staying in bed just wouldn't look good. He knew, eventually, he'd have to have a shower, meet the record producer, and he also knew, in time, he'd run out of drugs. Winston wasn't going to help him with that.

But still, it was hard. The idea that Vanessa wasn't only gone, but that she was never coming back, was a devastating sentiment for Austin. They had met on one of his many gigs through Canada, a mere five months beforehand. She'd had a backstage pass and wasn't even there to see him. She had gotten it with the express purpose of seeing Ozzy. Ozzy, as it turned out, had left the gig after his set, but she didn't know this.

He had bumped into her and instinctively signed her merch., much to her bemusement. As he left to go into his dressing room, he was pelted from behind, by a flying record album. Security saw it all happen and immediately pounced on Vanessa, hauling her out. Austin grabbed the album to see it was the one he had signed and it was an Ozzy album; *Blizzard of Ozz*, to be exact. He called off the guards and asked her to join him in his dressing-room.

Once in the dressing-room, Austin produced his wallet and gave Vanessa some cash to buy a replacement album. He then grabbed one of his own albums and signed it for her, as an apology for ruining her copy and assuming it was for him. After that, they began their five-month courtship.

Now...she was dead. Well, he wasn't meant to know that, but he did. He had killed her. He didn't want to think of it like that, though. The thing that he had killed, well, it wasn't her...not anymore. But still, as soon as he was able to wrap his mind around the enigma of that fact, he immediately would turn around, blaming himself once again. The nineteen-year-old Vanessa would still be at Art College if he hadn't whisked her away from her home. She would still be experimenting; she would still be attending concerts. She would still be alive! Vanessa was dead and he was to blame.

Austin was jerked from his thoughts by a knock at the door. Winston entered once more.

"Austin, I thought I better let you know, there is a Detective Linden here to see you." Winston paused, "...about Vanessa," he added, at the end, as if trying to pass it by him.

Austin nodded. He knew this was coming. He knew soon her body would be discovered, or even her mother would declare her missing after not hearing from her. Austin had even received a few calls from Mrs. Donovan, after it happened, asking for her daughter.

"No Shelley," he'd lied; "everything's fine with 'Nessa. She's just gone on one of her hikes, you know, to be one with nature. You know how she gets."

Austin emerged from his bed, stretching the barely used limbs. He moved to the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. Christ, he looked worse than he had thought. How the hell would he explain this to Linlen, Linley, Liden, or whatever the fuck his name was.

*"No officer, I was not aware my girlfriend was missing/dead. Oh...my eyes? Well...allergies, you know."*

No, Austin had to come up with a better cover. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted his signature Anti-Christ Aviators. The rhinestones, upside down crosses on the lenses, obscured his vision, but they would have to do. He put the Aviators on and made his way downstairs.

Linden was sitting in the foyer, looking through his notepad. Austin shambled into the room and gave the detective a weak wave with his fingers. Linden was a relatively young looking detective; clean cut, brown hair, and looking like he was only in his early twenties.

Linden stood up and stretched out his hand, "Hello Mr..." he paused for a moment thinking, "Mr. Inferno? Dante? I'm sorry Sir, I'm really not sure what to call you," he added, almost seeming flustered.

"Austin is fine."

Austin chose to ignore the attempt at a handshake. He decided he would play this all off as being an incredible hangover; a lie that he had many years of experience to draw from. Linden retracted his hand and sat back down.

"Sorry to disturb you...ermmm...Austin, but we've been receiving all these calls from some old lady in Canada about her daughter. Apparently she thinks you have had something to do with her disappearance."

*Good, he thought, the body hasn't been found yet.*

"So I just have a few questions, in regards to her."

Austin clutched his head, feigning a headache; "of course, anything I can do to help with finding this poor girl."

"Right! Well," he flipped through his notebook. "Could you tell me something about your relationship with Vanessa Donovan, sometimes went by the name 'Nessa'?"

"Vanessa...Vanessa..." Austin repeated it as if repeating her name would conjure a memory. "Oh yes! Blonde, raccoon-eyes, big..." He moved his hands over his chest; "yeah, I remember her. She crashed here for a few weeks or so, you know how these groupies are. Yeah...she must've told her mother we were together or something. I dunno...I cut her loose after she got too clingy, you know. But I did make sure she was on a bus back to Winnipeg, though; bought her the ticket and all. I got Winston to drop her off."

It was a half-lie. He *had* bought her a ticket, a few days before her death and Winston *had* dropped her off at the bus station. She just came back.

Linden nodded while jotting notes in his little notepad. Austin wondered what he was writing in there, a detailed reciting of what he had said? His, to-do list? A one-man game of tic-tac-toe?

"So, you haven't heard from her since then?"

“No,” he lied.

“Not even a text, making sure she was alright?”

“Look,” he said, “Can you imagine how often this kind of thing happens? There have been hundreds of Vanessa’s in the past. I barely get their names, let alone their numbers. So the answer is no, I didn’t check up on her.”

He gritted his teeth through the lie. Vanessa wasn’t just like anyone; she was special. More special than anybody had ever given her credit for. It was perhaps that – her gifts, that had gotten her killed.

Austin got up out of his chair and withdrew a cigarette packet. He put one in his mouth and offered another to Linden, Linden declined. Austin moved towards the fireplace and lit up his cigarette. A technique he had used in the past to passively tell the person he was talking to, to fuck off.

Austin’s mind wandered back to that night, the fateful night that had brought this hell upon them. Stupid kid shit, he thought. Although his gimmick was to act like he was the devil incarnate, he didn’t actually believe in any of that shit. Ouija board was a fucking board game for God’s sake. Little did he realise the consequences of those actions.

**BANG!**

He only remembered that first night in fragments; the planchette moving from the letters Z to O to Z to O

**BANG!**

Then to the letters, K, I, L, L, U.

**BANG!**

He’d thought it a joke, at first, but when Vanessa began to spasm on the floor uncontrollably, he realised they could be in serious trouble. Of course, that was when he purchased the box from his friend; the puzzle box that was meant to solve everything.

**BANG!**

The puzzle box that would end up making things, far, far, worse.

**BANG!**

“Are you going to answer that Mr...?”

Austin was shocked from his deep thoughts; the banging, perhaps, wasn't phantom rapping in his mind. He looked down at Linden, who was looking back with confused apprehension. But still, strange it was, that the banging did cease.

"I can see that you are ahhhh... a busy man Mr. Inferno...errrr...I mean, Austin. So I only have one more question for you." He paused as if considering how to phrase the question.

"How did it feel?"

Austin straightened, suddenly alert; what did he mean? How did what feel? Every alarm and alert in Austin's head was going off. He didn't know why, but his body sensed that danger was nearby.

"How did what feel?"

"When you wrapped your hands around her slutty, little, neck, choking the life out of that bitch whore? How did it feel? Did you feel Holy? Did you feel vindicated?"

Austin turned to face Linden as he continued rambling on. Linden's previously awkward gaze had transformed into one like he was in a trance. *Shit*, Austin thought. He looked down and grabbed the fire poker from the fireplace.

"She is burning in the depths of hell. You will soon join her and travel to the inferno. Allllaa, Maaa, Bababa, ZOZO, Kill, Fuck, Shit. Slit your fucking throat. Allllaa, Maaa, Bababa, ZOZO, we will take you down to the darkness, we will..."

Linden's diatribe was cut short by a steel poker stabbed through his neck. Black ooze seeped out from the wound. Austin released the poker and let Linden slump to the floor. As he slowly slid down the metal shaft, closer to the ground, black ooze continued to congeal and pool around the man.

Austin backed away, not sure of what to make of it all. Almost like a victim of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Austin began to see flashbacks of Vanessa. He remembered his last days with her, as she had gotten worse. She had even begun talking like Linden just had. Was it all in his mind? No, it can't have been; Marcus had seen it as well. Either way, Austin had just added another body to the growing kill-list. A cop no less.

Austin had to convince himself that this wasn't Linden; not anymore. He had been possessed, just like Vanessa had been. This was the only thing that would keep him sane, that would keep him...

"My brother, we will travel together to the promised land." Linden continued through gargled raspy breaths, "I have freed me from my confines, allow me to confine you. I, me, will take Dante to Iastine. I ZOZO, ALLA, BABABA..."

And on and on the corpse went, still on the ground seeping its black ooze. Austin was paralyzed with fear. He covered into a foetal ball of emotion and pure fear. *No, not again*, he thought. The confusion was eclipsed by the terror and he had no time to question why it was back, or even how.

“Linked together, I, me, will kill you. Kill, kill, kill, you. I will fuck your throat hole. Join your slut.” Linden’s babbling continued.

The babbling was almost like white-noise to Austin. He was numb, each word still cutting like a knife, but the meanings totally indecipherable. Then it came to him. Two words that this Linden demon had said “Linked together.” Austin had assumed it had only been Vanessa that was possessed. Perhaps, it was him and the corruption around him that took hold of the people. He would never be left alone. Even after disposing of Linden, another would take his place. Austin knew what had to be done.

With little thought, he grabbed another metal poker. He stood up gingerly. Linden hadn’t stopped talking, in fact, his babbling had gotten louder, more aggressive. Austin put the poker’s sharp edge toward his chest. He sucked in a deep breath and ran as fast as he could into the wall. The metal pole pierced his chest, cracking his ribs, with a sickening noise.

Austin fell to the floor, blood pooling around him. Austin only hoped that was enough. That he would finally be away, be free.

BANG!

In his final moments, Austin heard the bang once more, this time, followed by the sound of crashing wood. He saw in his blurred vision a figure crawl through the doorway, fingernails scratching the marble. It was her, it was Vanessa; she came back. He turned onto his back and faced the ceiling. Images of his parents flooded his mind as he began to drift off through the cosmos once more.

She crawled next to his ear and whispered, “They come back. We, they, always return”

. . .

**THE END**

## **DOOR NO.14:**

### **SANTA CLAUS:**

**A Short-Story by: Grant Leishman**

They call it the “silly season”; that time of year when we all try desperately to forget our problems and the problems of the world and instead focus on peace, happiness and goodwill to man. Well, some of us do, anyway. For some, the onset of the “silly season” means more about eating and drinking to excess and generally moaning about all and everything that seems wrong with our lives.

There was always a bone of contention among some people as to when the “silly season” actually begins. Some say it starts on October 31<sup>st</sup>, with Halloween, while others would argue that’s way too early and it actually begins on Thanksgiving Day, November 26<sup>th</sup>. They point to the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, in New York City, as the official start of the mythical “silly season”. Some Grinches, however, would suggest that the “silly season” was a load of hogwash anyway and we should all just keep on concentrating on work and normal life until Christmas Eve on December 24<sup>th</sup>. There were as many opinions on this whole thing, as there were Christmas lights on the giant tree that stands in Rockefeller Plaza, which incidentally is usually lit on December three or four, signalling for yet others, the official start of the “silly season”.

Whatever your take on this, one thing is for certain, by the time December rolls around each year, the weather is turning damn cold in New York City and all the signs of the festive season are well and truly in full swing. The shop windows are decorated for the holidays, the fairy lights are twinkling, all over the city and the pre-Christmas shopping rush is in full swing. Everyone, it seems is in a rush to go somewhere...heads bowed against the wind, they rush and push their way to their destinations, often oblivious of the chaos and mayhem happening around them. Ah yes, the “silly season” that time when we reflect on our fellow man and offer a helping hand to those in need – yeah right!

For Ray Megson, a retired elementary-school teacher, the “silly season” really was his favourite time of year. It was the one time of year when he had the opportunity to return to those days he missed so much since he was forced to retire from his teaching position, at age 65. Teaching had always been Ray’s life. It was his passion and his pride. He loved the opportunity to take young, enquiring, minds and set them on the path to future greatness. He’d taken his job very seriously

throughout the years. Yes, he knew teachers were grossly underpaid for what they did, but truth be known, Ray would have done it for free, if he'd had to. He was a teacher to the core of his soul and the wrench he had felt when he had walked through those school doors for the final time had been like ripping his very heart from his body.

Ray's beloved wife, Ellie-May had succumbed to the ravages of that awful disease cancer, just ten years ago, so he'd never even had the opportunity to share his retirement with the woman he loved. Ray felt cheated about that. He and Ellie had always planned to travel when he retired, to see all the things Ray had taught about over the years and to spend some quality time together in the sun and sand. They had planned to go cruising for an entire year, after Ray's retirement; to just lie back and enjoy the lifestyle, the food and the entertainment that cruising offered them. They'd planned it for years, carefully putting away a few dollars every week in their special account so that one day they could reap the rewards of Ray's hard work. But, none of that happened once that awful disease had taken his beautiful, vibrant, fun-loving, Ellie-May and turned her into just a mere husk of a woman.

Ray had watched her slowly waste away before his very eyes, over a ten month period. Every day his heart broke a little more as she struggled to maintain her ever-present joy and happiness in the face of a disease that left her bald, constantly vomiting, and always in pain. In a twisted way, Ray had cherished those ten months, as he watched his darling wife die. The School Board had given him a leave of absence to nurse Ellie and he was the one who was constantly there, tending to her needs. He refused to hire a nurse to help, although his colleagues pleaded with him to do so. "It's too much for one person to handle on his own Ray", his principal Dana had said to him one day. Ray was having none of it, though. Although it hurt him so much to see her suffering, he was able to be there beside her at all times, to comfort her and to love her through the pain barrier. Many a night they would both fall asleep wrapped in each other's arms, tears falling down their faces, just wondering at what sort of God would allow such a pernicious and evil disease to tear two people, so much in love, apart.

When Ellie-May finally passed, on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2005, Ray had spent every second of the last ten months by her side, tending to her every need. Despite the horribleness of the situation, he would always treasure those months. That final night, when Ellie-May breathed her last, she had looked up at him, with total clarity in her eyes and smiled. "Honey," she whispered, hoarsely, "I'll wait for you. We'll still go cruising my love, I promise you." With tears coursing down Ray's cheeks he watched her breathe her last breath and close her eyes as if to go to sleep, but this was a sleep she would never wake from.

After the funeral, Ray threw himself into his work. It was the only way he could handle the pain and loss. He had to stop himself from thinking about Ellie-May and that cold, lonely, apartment that awaited him when he went home every night. Ray and Ellie had never had any children of their own.

Apparently, it was all to do with Ray's lazy sperm; something like that anyway. The realisation they would not have their own child to love was hard, initially, but Ray had his little babies, at school, and for him, that was always enough. After Ellie-May had died, Ray started to volunteer for all and any after-school activities. He coached the little league team, he mentored the Chess Club, he ran the Photography Club, and he was always the first to volunteer for field-trip supervision...anything, to delay the inevitable of going home to that apartment, the one without Ellie-May.

Yes, school was Ray's salvation and he clung onto it like a lifeline. It became his very being. Everything revolved around school activities. If he wasn't actually at school, he would be at home, planning new activities and preparing for the next day's lessons. If Ray was a beloved teacher before, and he was, then now he became very much the "teacher of the year". There were no other teachers at that school quite as dedicated as Ray Megson.

And then...they told him he had to retire.

"RETIRE!" Ray had shouted at Dana, the day she'd told him that it was time to hang up his chalk and duster. "Why on earth would I want to retire Dana? I'm still young and I'm still capable of doing the job. Besides, the kids love me." Tears were forming in his eyes as he spluttered. "Dana, please...I don't want to retire...please."

Dana sighed heavily, the last thing she needed to lose was a teacher of Ray's calibre and enthusiasm, but rules were rules. The School Board had decreed a mandatory retirement age of 65. Dana had actually forcefully and vehemently argued Ray's case with the Superintendent, but it had been pointless. "We have to draw the line somewhere Dana," he'd said. "We can't make exceptions for one person, or we'll just have a total mess of a policy. Everyone will want to have things their way. I'm sorry Dana, but Ray, wonderful as he might be, has to go and that's an end to it."

The first six months of Ray's retirement were the most excruciating for him. He was totally lost – he had no idea what to do with himself. Some days, he wouldn't even get out of bed. He'd just lie on his back, staring at the ceiling and cursing the world for what it had done to him. He started to let himself go physically as well, only showering once or twice a week and drinking to excess. He rarely cooked for himself anymore and subsisted on pizza, microwave dinners, and whiskey...plenty of whiskey; not the good stuff either, but that cheap rot-gut whiskey they sold at the corner liquor store. The apartment was a pigsty. Old, half eaten, pizza crusts, littered the floor and the dirt and detritus of six months of living like a pig, quickly piled up. Ray was a broken man; a mess.

His salvation came from an unexpected source. He woke one morning, his head pounding and to the horrible realisation that he'd soiled himself during the night. The empty whiskey bottle from the previous night's excesses lay cradled in his arms. He hawked loudly and sat up, his eyes widening, as he realised he was not alone. Seated at the end of his bed, smiling enigmatically at him was his

beloved wife, Ellie-May. It wasn't the wasted, dried out, version of Ellie-May that he'd kissed goodbye to, those few years earlier. Nope, this was the young, vibrant, twenty-year-old, model that he'd fallen in love with at first sight.

"Ellie..." he managed to croak out between parched lips, well aware of the smell emanating from his bed. "Ellie..."

The smile disappeared from her face, to be replaced by a look of utter sorrow.

"Ohhhh...Ray, my darling, what has happened to you, sweetheart? Is this how we planned it to be? This isn't how I want you to be when you finally come to find me, sometime in the future. Oh, Ray...what happened to you?"

He gulped deeply and tried to force the words to come, but nothing came except a splutter. "Ellie...Ellie...oh...Ellie...it's so hard...so hard...without you."

Her face took on a stern cast. "Now hush that whining Ray Megson. That's not the man I fell in love with and married." She floated across to him and looked him straight in the eyes. "Now! You get yourself sorted Ray Megson...and you do it immediately! My God Ray, what would people think if they saw you like this? Promise me, you will get your life together. Remember, I'll be waiting for you." The ethereal spirit, if that's what it was, just slowly dissipated until there was nothing left, except the memory of a faint odour of cinnamon and lilac; Ellie's, two favourite perfumes.

Ray rubbed his eyes and swore. "Shit! What was that?"

Ellie's visitation had done the trick. There was no way Ray could ever disobey Ellie, even a spirit Ellie. He spent the next week sorting out the apartment, getting his greasy, dank, tangled, long hair cut and shaving properly, for the first time in six months.

It was almost as if her visitation and Ray's subsequent attempts to sort out his life had aligned the stars, to ensure he got something special. That Friday night, as he sat down to his first home-cooked meal in a very long time, he opened the New York Times and the very first thing to hit him, was a half-page advertisement. It read:

***"Department Store Santa Required***

***October 1 to December 24<sup>th</sup>***

***Must Have Experience with Children***

***Apply, in person, to Randolph, at;***

***Horowitz Toy Emporium***

***1325 West 36<sup>th</sup> Street, New York City."***

Ray stared at the advertisement like it was manna from Heaven. Okay, so it's only for three months of the year, but it will be a wonderful opportunity to get back to what I love; interacting with kids. His mind was whirling with the possibilities. I could use the other months to make toys and give them as gifts to the children. I'm sure the store would go along with that; homemade toys to supplement the toys they were selling. Oh, this is perfect, he thought. I'll go and see them tomorrow; absolutely.

He looked up at the ceiling and whispered; "Thank you God – Thank you, Ellie. I'll see you soon."

Ray was a natural at the Santa Claus game; children just seemed to be naturally attracted to the jovial, old, man. Where other Santa's had crying children and grasping, rude, little brats to deal with, Ray just seemed to have a way to bring out the best in every child. The store owner, Rueben Horowitz, was so enamoured with Ray's rapport with the children, he offered him a full-time position in the toy shop, as "Kid Counsellor". For three months each year, Ray would perform the role of Santa Claus, but for the rest of the year, he would dress himself up in season-appropriate costume and just wander around the store, chatting to the children and helping their parents make purchasing decisions.

For the first time since Ellie-May's death, Ray had a reason to live again. He was a happy man!

. . .

"Pass the gravy, please Ray".

Ray looked up, across his dining-room table and smiled at the elderly lady seated opposite him, Hilda.

Hilda was one of seven people, squeezed in, around Ray's groaning, table, laden with all the foods one associates with Thanksgiving. This was the first Thanksgiving Dinner Ray had organised since he started work at Horowitz' store the previous October. It truly had been one of the happiest years of his life and he had so much to be thankful for.

In his spare time, Ray had begun helping out in the local soup kitchen, just down the road from his apartment. There, he had found the social contact, with others his own age that he desperately craved. As well as the usual collection of down-and-outs that frequented the Central City Soup Kitchen, there was a variety of elderly people, who were too frail or too poor, to be able to cook their own hot meal each day. They used the soup kitchen as a source of their one, nutritional, healthy meal each day and they subsisted, the remainder of the time, on a selection of cheap snacks, from the convenience store.

It was these friends Ray had invited over for his Thanksgiving Dinner that year. They were an odd collection, to say the least, but one thing was for certain, once they'd filled their stomachs with Ray's tasty fare, there was sure to follow, a lively discussion on the state of the world.

Ray chuckled to himself. The usual topic for discussion in the soup kitchen was invariably the state of the youth of today.

"Young people – ha! They don't bloody-well know they're born, these days," old Bert would start.

"Ohhhh...I know..." Mabel would add, with almost absolute certainty. That was pretty much all Mabel ever added to the conversations. "Ohhhh...I know..." Mabel was a bit soft in the head, Ray felt. Alzheimer's or something similar, he was sure.

Ray had a higher opinion of the youth, perhaps, than the others. He interacted with young people every day and he felt they were still the same, as when he was young. More spoilt perhaps and definitely smarter; well, when it came to techie stuff anyway, but no, he didn't share the pervading sentiment around the table, that young people would be the ruination of the world.

He never argued with them, though, he just smiled and let them rail on about "Youth this..." and "Youngster's today..." It didn't matter that he disagreed with them; it was just nice to have them here and to share Thanksgiving with them.

"Ray, what is this meat ha? It's not turkey, it's just too tender for turkey; it absolutely melts in the mouth. What is it? I 'ain't got much left in the way of teeth, but I don't need them with this meat, it's simply amazing."

Ray looked over at the speaker. Old Bill was a bit of a character. He'd been one of the down-and-outs once, but as he got older, he realised the need to have some stability in his life, otherwise one day he'd just end up freezing and dying in the cold, harsh, mean, streets of the city. One day he'd rolled up at a homeless shelter and offered to help, in return for a bed. He'd been there ever since; around fifteen years now.

Ray grinned across at Bill. "Ahhhh...Bill, I've never been a turkey fan myself. Ellie-May, God rest her soul, hated the stuff. She said it was like chewing on old boots. Nah, this isn't turkey Bill. This is sweet, tender, baby lamb. I buy it from the abattoir when it's freshly killed and then dry it out, marinate it for a few days and then freeze it. When it's cooked...well, it's like this...melt in your mouth delicious."

"Lamb eh? Bill said between mouthfuls. "Well, however, you prepare it young Raymond, you got the recipe right. It's far and away the best thing I've ever tasted."

There were murmurs of assent from the rest of the guests around the table.

Ray leaned back in his chair and ruminated that he had so very, very, much to be thankful for.

. . .

It was the evening of December 24<sup>th</sup>, the night before Christmas.

Ray walked into his basement floor apartment and flopped into his armchair. He was tired; tired but satisfied. It had been a wonderful Christmas season, but now it was over for another year. The fun and frivolity of the season would be stashed away, in a special drawer, only to be brought out again next October 1<sup>st</sup>.

He sighed heavily. He couldn't rest yet. He'd invited all the usual suspects around for Christmas Lunch the next day, so he needed to get some of the prep done before the morning; so he could reward himself with a few extra hours of sleep on Christmas morning.

He grinned; he didn't mind all the effort. It was all this "keeping busy" that kept him alive and kicking. Feeling a slight stab of guilt, he looked up at the ceiling and said; "Sorry honey, I know you want to see me soon, but I'm having too much darn fun, down here, to come a-calling, just yet...hehehe!"

Pushing himself up from his lazy-boy, he padded into the kitchen to start preparing the vegetables for tomorrow's feast. It was already midnight before Ray was satisfied he'd got everything sorted that needed to be prepared for the morning.

He rubbed his hands together and chuckled. "Right, now it's time for my Christmas present; time for a little fun."

. . .

He dressed himself up in his Toy Store Santa Claus outfit and walked over to the small, back bedroom. Well, it was called a bedroom in the lease, but Ray and Ellie had never needed two bedrooms, so the room had always been a storage room, when Ellie was alive; a room where she would go and sew or arrange her numerous collections of dried flowers.

Ray had put the room to a different use, though, since Ellie had passed. Now, it was Ray's "play-room"; a place where he could escape reality and indulge himself in his favourite past-time.

Unlocking the heavy deadbolt with his special key, he turned the handle and walked into his pleasure-dome. Breathing deeply, even before he turned on the light, he inhaled that sweet, sweet, smell of fear. Ahhhh...this is more like it, he thought.

He flicked on the light and looked around the room. It was like the back room of the neighbourhood butcher's shop – all gleaming, stainless steel, and shiny, white walls.

His eyes were drawn, automatically, to his special collection.

Hanging, from hooks in the ceiling, were two, still squirming, young people; a boy and a girl actually.

Ray had abducted them yesterday, after promising both of them that Santa would make all their dreams come true. Both had gags in their mouths to stop them screaming, which Ray always found a little disappointing, but the walls of these apartments were paper thin and the last thing he needed was for the neighbours to be hearing strange screams of anguish emanating from “that dear, old, man's apartment”.

Even with the gags on, though, Ray could still see their eyes; wide as saucers and fear radiating from them. He grinned as he walked across to the young girl and gently stroked her face.

“Hi honey-child,” he purred. “Are you ready for Santa's gift?”

The girl, Samantha, he recalled her name was, squirmed furiously at the end of the chain she was hanging from, her legs kicking out at Ray. He dodged her feeble attempt to hurt him and laughed.

“Ohhhh...Samantha, don't you like Santa anymore?”

Bending down, he reached into a box lying on the floor and drew out what looked like a knuckle-duster, with long, sharp, metallic prongs, that glistened and twinkled in the harsh fluorescent lights. Placing it over his left wrist, Ray got right up close to Samantha's face and kissed her gently on the cheek, before slicing downward with his left hand and eviscerating her, from her neck to her navel.

“Samantha...oh...Samantha...” he whispered, allow me to introduce myself; I am Santa Claws...hahaha!”

Ray allowed the blood from the young girl, which spurted out of the cavity he'd ripped in her body, to flood over him, like a life-giving shower. He rubbed it all over his face, his lips twisted into an obscene expression of glee. By the time the blood stopped flowing; Samantha's body was still and lifeless.

He looked down at his red Santa suit and giggled maniacally at the bulge at the front of his trousers.

“Who needs Viagra...when I've got this,” he chortled.

He glanced across at the boy, who had fainted and defecated himself, witnessing what had transpired in front of him.

Ray wiped some blood off his lips and grinned at the lifeless boy. “You’re next young fella, but I need you awake for it. It works better for me that way, you know.”

He began to undo the chains that held Samantha’s body to the ceiling.

“Right young lady, we’d better get you cleaned up, cut up, dried, and marinated, before young Tommy there wakes up for his turn.”

As he laid her on the ground and reached for the saw, he kept for such occasions, he couldn’t resist one last kiss on her forehead.

“Young and juicy, tender and sweet, ahhhh...Samantha, you truly are the gift that keeps on giving.”

As the saw moved back and forth and Samantha’s body became nothing more than hunks of meat, Ray sang softly to himself.

*“Deck the halls with hands and feeeet,”*

*“Fa...la...la...la...la. La...la...la...la,”*

*“’Tis the season to eat fresh meeeeat,”*

*“Fa...la...la...la..la. La...la...la...la”*

*“HA...HA...HA...HA...HA...HA...HA...ha...ha...ha...ha...ha.....!”*

. . .

**THE END!**

**We hope you enjoyed these stories from our imaginations.**

**Please consider visiting the store where you purchased this e-book and leaving a review. Even a one or two-word review is absolutely awesome!**

**Reviews are very important to indie authors and we would love to hear from you.**

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS:**

### **CHRIS LEISHMAN:**

Hello, you - yes you, I'm talking to you! Put some pants on, please! It's a bit hard to talk to you while you're half naked...Right, that's better!

So you want to know more about this 'fiction' writer, Chris Leishman?

Well, he is also known by the pseudonym of, The Unemployed Writer, and writes (semi) weekly articles and blogs for his website. Chris has a passion for writing screenplays and prose. He derives great enjoyment from entertaining and taking readers/viewer on a roller-coaster ride. Chris has written a number of movies (Charlie Floyd's Visionarium, Do the Knight Thang - just to name a few), as well as a lot more projects that are currently on the go.

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### **GRANT LEISHMAN:**

Grant Leishman is an expatriate New Zealander, now residing in the beautiful islands of The Philippines. After careers in finance and journalism, he has now found his true calling in life and is a full-time author. As he puts it; “he is living the dream.” He lives in Metro Manila, with his beautiful wife and their two children.

Writing is his passion, his love and his bliss. Apart from writing and spending time with his family, his favourite activity is interacting, on social media, with his readers and other “indie” authors. He is passionate about promoting the marvellous “indie” authors that the new technology has allowed to come through what was previously a tightly, closed shop of elitist, legacy-published authors.

He is also a great champion of the need to encourage and entreat our younger people to read more. Reading opens the window to new and exciting experiences and allows young people to exercise and test the limits of their imaginations; something today's visual world does not allow.

He blogs regularly on his website and tries to live every day by the mantras he puts at the bottom of each and every one of his blog posts.

**CHOOSE TO BE HAPPY!**

**EMBRACE THE OPPORTUNITIES LIFE PRESENTS TO YOU AND ALWAYS, ALWAYS,  
FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS!**

**Have a great life and spread the love!**

**Changing the world – one reader at a time!**

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## **CHAPTER ONE OF “HOLY WAR”: THE BATTLE FOR SOULS**

### **(3<sup>RD</sup> AND FINAL INSTALLMENT OF THE SECOND COMING SERIES:**

**BY GRANT LEISHMAN**

Damien knew he was dead. What he didn't know was why he could still think clearly and where in the hell he was. He was surprised at the total lack of any pain – after all, his dearly beloved twin Samantha had just stuck a giant, needle-like stiletto straight through his heart; shouldn't he, at least, feel something? He felt nothing! He couldn't feel any of his extremities – he just seemed to be a thought, a spirit perhaps, floating somewhere in the void.

If he'd thought he had eyes he would probably have tried to open them and look around, but he didn't even think he was capable of that. He wondered again, why his sister had killed him; knowing the answer even before he posed the question. She was in league with Beelzebub, the Devil – that's why. He had been aware there was something amiss with Samantha for quite some time, but he'd never dreamed in a million years that she would have truly gotten herself tied to that evil creature. He shook his head in amazement – well, he would have it he'd had a head to shake.

He began to giggle to himself at the oddness of the situation he found himself. Well...he considered, if I'm dead, shouldn't I be in heaven? He chuckled; surely being the grandson of God would have given him some proprietary rights to eternal life in heaven? But, he wasn't in heaven. Certainly, not any version of heaven he had ever thought about. He was just floating in nothingness, talking to himself and beginning to feel just a bit silly for doing so.

His mind wandered back to the final show in Pyongyang, where his sister had committed the ultimate act of betrayal on her twin brother. He wondered what was happening there now. How were his parents coping with his sudden death and more importantly what was happening with Samantha and that evil misshapen being Beelzebub? He wanted to scream aloud when he thought of his new love, his partner, Simon. Oh, my God, he thought, how is Simon dealing with all this? If he'd been able to cry he was certain the tears would be flowing down his cheeks, but of course, he was just floating, unable to feel anything physical.

So...what happens now, he pondered? Do I spend eternity like this, just a thinking mind, unable to do anything? That would be the ultimate torture, he decided – to be suspended, somewhere in between the two worlds of earth and heaven. I'm absolutely sure this is not the way it's supposed to be. I know my father and Michael would not have lied to me; there has to be more. I just have to wait, I'm sure of that.

. . .

It was all too much for Maria. In the past month, she had seen her first-born son Samuel murdered, his body stolen by the Devil and now her twins; Samantha and Damien, gone – Damien murdered by his own sister and Samantha, willingly spirited away, seemingly in league with the Evil One. Crumpled on her knees on the stage, she shook her fist at the dark, brooding sky, as the snowflakes settled on her. “Oh My God!” she shrieked at the heavens. “What did I ever do to deserve this?”

JC, the tears still streaming down his face knelt beside his distraught wife and placing one arm around her shoulder joined her in her grief, both of them wracked with sobs. When Maria began to rail against the Universe, he leant in close to her ear and between sobs, whispered; “What did you do to deserve this, my darling? You were crazy enough to marry me – the son of God...Oh, sweetheart, I’m so, so sorry to have brought all this pain down upon you and our family. You’re so right, you don’t deserve all this. I should never have asked you to marry me and to take on this burden. I’m sorry...” JC’s voice trailed off in utter despair.

Through her pain and anguish, all Maria heard were the words. “...I should never have asked you to marry me...” That was enough to break the relentless hold of misery she was wrapped up in. Her head snapped up and her face took on that all too familiar cast of determination and anger. She scowled at her husband and when she raised her hand to slap him, he grabbed it just before the swing, pulled it gently toward him and kissed each of her fingers in turn.

Still seething with fury Maria spat out the words at her husband. “Don’t you ever say that again! Never! You understand me? Marrying you was the best thing I ever did and I will never regret it for a second. Get that into your thick skull, once and for all.” The anger collapsed as suddenly as it flared and her face softened. She stretched out one of her fingers and softly caressed JC’s cheek. In a tiny, soft, voice she added; “honey, we will overcome all this somehow, as long as we hold onto each other. Please don’t ever think that our lives could have been different. I went into this thing with my eyes wide open.” She tried to force a weak smile, but it came out more like a grimace. “Things look awful right now, I get that, but don’t ever leave me and don’t ever doubt my commitment again please...please.”

JC couldn’t speak. He wanted to tell Maria how much her words meant. He wanted to tell her how desperate he had been to hear her say them, but nothing would come from his mouth, beyond a strangled sob. Instead, he stood up and reached down to pull Maria to her feet, before wrapping his arms tightly around his wife, holding her close and rocking her gently. Both of them revelled in the closeness of their bodies and the unity of their souls until they were ready to face the reality of what had happened.

It was Maria who pulled back first and looked up at JC's face, still contorted in pain, but she could see and was reassured by the fire in his eyes. "So, what do we do now JC? I'm lost," she asked him tentatively.

He gave her a weak smile. "Now, babes? Now we fight! Now we embark on our very own Holy War and now we win this earth for all eternity!"

Maria smiled back at her husband, nodded her head and buried her face into his chest, gaining strength from the man she adored.

. . .

Samantha looked around at her new home. So, this is Hell, she thought. It was nothing like she had pictured it in her vivid and frightening dreams. In fact, it seemed to just be an enormous, empty, stone cavern that stretched on into infinity. She couldn't even see where it finished. There were no shooting flames, no pyrotechnics at all, no gruesome creatures and no moaning miscreants, slaving away in intolerable conditions. She felt almost let down by it all.

She and Beelzebub were seated on side-by-side giant stone thrones, high on a dais above the enormous hall. Even the thrones were disappointing to Samantha- they were so damned uncomfortable, she thought, as she moved her butt, for the tenth time, to try and find a position that didn't ache so much. Still, she considered, as she stole a glance at the proud, handsome, man beside her; I did it! I did what Beelzebub commanded and now I am going to share in ruling the Universe with him. She hugged her arms around herself in excitement and pushed away the nagging thoughts about her dead brother Damien, her Mother and Father and all the people she had left behind.

"Fuck them!" she uttered aloud.

Beelzebub smiled softly at her utterance and turned slightly to face his future bride. "Yes my little one, indeed. Fuck them!"

Samantha hadn't even realised she'd said it aloud and her face coloured slightly at Bubba's answer. She turned to face him also and asked;

"So, what's the next step, Bubba? What's the plan? We're not staying here forever are we? I don't think I like this place that much. Are we going to take over the Universe? When Bubba....when?"

Bubba sucked in his breath and tried to maintain his patience, but his eyes betrayed his annoyance with her wheedling. He took another deep breath and placed his finger against her lips to silence her.

“I’ll explain everything Samantha, all in good time. Of course, Bubba has a plan.” He chuckled. “Doesn’t Bubba always have a plan?” He looked out at the vast, empty cavern and clapped his hands loudly, the sound reverberating up and down the giant amphitheatre. “But first, before we get down to the nitty-gritty my little one, there are some people I’d like you to meet.”

Samantha looked up to follow his gaze and down the far end of the auditorium she could just make out two figures shambling toward them, their feet obviously shackled. She strained to see who they were, but couldn’t make out their features from that distance. She turned and looked at Beelzebub, raising one eyebrow quizzically. His only response was a soft smile and a nod of his head toward the two creatures shuffling slowly toward them. Realising an answer wouldn’t be forthcoming, Samantha peered down the dimly lit cavern until she began to see some detail on the faces of the two. One was an old woman, a very old woman, she surmised and the other appeared to be a much younger man. She strained and strained until suddenly the dawn of recognition flew into her eyes. Her hands went to her mouth and she gave an involuntary gasp.

“Oh my God!” she exclaimed loudly. “That’s Samuel, isn’t it? But who is the old woman with him?” The pair was now a mere fifty feet from the dais and Samantha peered at the old woman for quite some time, before it hit her. “Great *Lola* (Grandmother) Cat!” she screamed.

She hadn’t actually seen *Lola* Cat since just before the old lady had died when Samantha was only seven, but she remembered well the kindly, old woman with the loving heart, the gummy smile and the gentle words. Turning to Beelzebub, she berated him. “What on earth is *Lola* Cat doing here in Hell Bubba? There’s not an evil bone in that woman’s body. God! To listen to Mama, you would think she was a saint. How did she end up here Bubba?”

Beelzebub fixed her with a withering stare. “Samantha, one thing you must learn right now is not to question me! I am the ruler of this Kingdom and soon I’ll be the ruler of the Universe. Just learn to accept that whatever Bubba does is good for Bubba and ultimately good for you.” Seeing Samantha’s face crumple at his harsh words he softened his tone and placed a hand gently on her forearm. “Ahhhh...honey, sometimes people don’t always end up where they’re supposed to end up when they die. I had a need for *Lola* Cat, so I intervened and grabbed her before the other crowd even knew she was gone.”

He grinned widely; “Yes indeed my little one, your Great *Lola* has a big part to play in Beelzebub’s fiendish plans. All will be revealed in the fullness of time.”

Samantha swallowed hard and gently nodded her head. She had a desperate desire to jump off the throne and run to her half-brother and her Great *Lola*. To do what; she had no idea. To comfort them; to seek their forgiveness; or just to feel her grandmother’s gnarly and bony, yet loving fingers

stroke her hair, just one more time; she wasn't sure. She knew though that Beelzebub would not tolerate such expressions of remorse or emotion so she sat quietly and waited for events to unfold.

. . .

When Jesus and Chito had watched Samantha stab Damien, they'd been ecstatic. This was their big moment also. This was their opportunity to finally break the secrecy and declare their support and loyalty to Beelzebub. They were standing at the back, left corner of the stage when Damien's body had come crashing down onto the ground. Both immediately ran toward their leader Beelzebub and his bride Samantha as they soared high above the crowd, the snow flurries in the spotlights making the scene, even more, dramatic than it already was.

"We're with you all the way!" Jesus' shouted but his cry was swept away by the vicious Arctic wind that still swirled relentlessly around the sports stadium and with the incredible groundswell of noise that poured out from the over one hundred thousand people present, there was absolutely no chance of Beelzebub catching his words.

When Beelzebub dramatically silenced everyone in the crowd with his chilling words, Jesus and Chito just stared up in wonder at the pair.

**"Behold I hold the very hand of the AntiChrist! Hajulellah!"**

Chito waved his arms to try and capture Beelzebub's attention. What he got instead was an incredibly sharp pain in his head that felt every bit as bad as the innumerable hangovers, the pair had suffered their way through, over the years. Chito grabbed his head and squeezed in a frantic effort to nullify the agony that was coursing through his brain. He sank to his knees in terror and began to roll around on the stage, writhing and contorting.

Jesus dropped down to see if he could comfort his wounded comrade, yet as suddenly as the pain had come, it simply disappeared. Chito just lay there, still trembling and still unable to believe the intensity of the excruciating convulsions that had racked his body. The only noise coming from him was a wounded, mewling sound not dissimilar to that which a tom-cat makes when it is challenging another tom, for territory.

"Are you ok buddy?" Jesus kept asking his friend, but the only response was more pitiful whimpering.

Jesus looked up to where he knew the source of his friend's pain must have come. Beelzebub was looking directly down at the pair and gave them both a slight nod, before shockingly Jesus heard the oily, smarmy tones of his leader, whispering to him inside his head.

“Not yet Jesus! You and Chito must remain hidden in JC’s little cadre. You two are my eyes and ears; you two are my spies. Now, look up and smile at me if you understand.”

Jesus looked up at the smirking Beelzebub, anger rising in his chest like bile, but he knew there was nothing they could do against this evil creature. They had made the decision to throw their lot in with The Devil and now they were stuck with that. He gave Bubba a sickly-sweet, smile and with a gentle nod, Beelzebub and Samantha disappeared.

Jesus gently helped his friend to his feet and wrapped his arm around his shoulder to steady him. He whispered in his ear. “We’re still part of JC’s team, for now, mate. Just hang in there buddy! –.

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