

THE COMMON ODDITIES

SPECULATIVE FICTION SIDESHOW

Featuring
MIKE DURAN
GRACE BRIDGES
AND MANY MORE

ISSUE 5
AUTUMN 2015

THE COMMON ODDITIES SPECULATIVE FICTION SIDESHOW

Issue 5, Autumn 2015

Jessica E. Thomas, Editor

Cover Art by Odd Mr. T, oddmrt.com

PROVISION BOOKS

WWW.PROVISIONBOOKS.COM

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Pearl in the Sky, by Gerald Warfield	4
The Zubayr, by Jacob Smith	8
Let There Be Stars, by Grace Bridges	16
The First Casualty, by Caryn Studham Sutorus	22
Last Man? by John Grey	38
The Prayin' Kind, by Mike Duran	40
Dead of Winter, by Stoney M. Setzer	46
Trip to the Dead Rock at the Edge of the Universe, by John Grey	71
We Explorers, by John Grey	72
Foe or Forager, Grace Bridges	73
The Scandal, by Rick Jankowski	83

THE PEARL IN THE SKY

by Gerald Warfield

“Prepare to exit on the right.”

The words cut through the darkness and through the roar of the diesel engine. A green GPS screen confirmed the exit. Cyrus Black pulled the gear stick into neutral, tapped the gas pedal, and revved the engine just enough to drop one gear into nine.

Arms leaden with fatigue, Cyrus shook his head to clear it. The radio could have kept him alert, but most stations had turned into talk shows, rant shows actually, and he was tired of the hysteria. It was worse in Texas. The Lone Star State would not go gently into that good night.

He flicked the turn signal, and a light on the control panel winked, one of dozens suffusing his spacious cabin in glows of green and amber. Automobiles began passing on the left, and the pitch of the road noise dropped. The loud, mesmerizing drone seemed to promise that the bright truck would roll on forever, but it would not. Nothing on earth would.

“Turn right on US farm-to-market road one eighty-three.”

When he stopped at the bottom of the ramp, the pneumatic brakes puffed, and liquid shifted in the vast reservoir behind him, front to back to front again like the ebb and flow of an ocean tide.

Farm-to-market roads weren't made for trucks this size. When he encountered a lone pickup, both vehicles slowed, right wheels moving onto the grassy shoulder. The man in the

pickup didn't wave.

The sky lightened, and a low fog hugged the ground. Fields, of course, had never been planted, and here and there, weeds poked up through the mist.

Eventually, he came to a group of small, frame houses, bleak islands that rose above the fog, where people stood on their porches, unmoving except to follow the passing truck with expressionless faces. The shipment was supposed to be secret, but word always leaked out.

An elderly man hobbled from his house across an overgrown path, fog pulling at his feet. Cyrus feared the old man would throw himself in front of the truck. It had happened before on deliveries, although not to Cyrus. Halfway to the road, the old man stopped, leaned on his cane, and shook his fist. His disheveled hair and grimace gave him a wild, demented look. Cyrus didn't acknowledge the hostile salute. Deliveries up north were easier. People down here still prayed for God's intervention.

Ahead, the retreating fog revealed a bright green field and a man riding a tractor. He waved from the midst of his ordered rows. Cyrus grimly waved back. Denialists were easy to spot.

Grover's End: population 2,014. A map of the tiny town scrolled to midscreen on his GPS. The only substantial building was a bank. A red Ford had rammed into it. Bricks lay on the crumpled hood, and an oil stain, black like blood, ran from beneath the car. Only as he passed did Cyrus glimpse the body still inside.

"Prepare to turn left in point five miles on Grover's End Road."

Cyrus turned north. In the blue expanse above the horizon, a small opalescent pearl glowed. On the news they said you weren't seeing the black hole itself, but the remnants of Neptune still being consumed. Distorted light from the stars behind it created the blurry edges. Unblinking, the malevolent eye peered down upon earth.

The church squatted on the right, a modern structure on flat, hard ground. The stump of a cross rose from its steepled roof. They shouldn't use churches for distribution, Cyrus thought. The decision had probably torn the congregation apart.

“Destination on the right. You have arrived.”

A small crowd waited in the parking lot. The fog had burned away, and the people stood pale and stark, watching. He scanned for any signs of ambush or a rapture mob. A driver in east Texas had been burned alive in his cab.

Before leaving yesterday, Cyrus swore to Marge this was his last run. They would spend their final months together at her family's lake house, and the rest of the world would have to get their doomsday cocktail somewhere else.

The sign in front of the church no longer bore its name. Instead, someone had painted, in crude black letters, “ISOD distribution center”. The name of the chemical was too long to remember. Perhaps, Cyrus thought, they should have written “free, powerful, numbing bliss”.

The truck stopped, brakes puffing. In his side mirror, Cyrus saw the little group clustered on the pavement, probably the last of the congregation. They looked like a choir ready to sing. Yes, that's the way he'd remember them. The choir, hopeful of another choir yet to come.

He plunged the gear stick into reverse, expertly backing the great truck into the parking lot while the reverse alarm shrieked its intermittent warning. The little choir shifted to the side. A small girl put her hands to her ears. When the truck came to a stop, its back bumper overlapped the front steps of the church.

Cyrus turned off the engine, but the sound of the truck still roared in his head, and his guts still trembled from hours behind the wheel. He closed his eyes, forgetting to turn off the GPS.

Finally, hand shaking, he punched the “unlock” button and swung open the door.

While stepping down onto the first rung, he looked up. A man stood in the doorway of the church holding a rifle.

“You have arrived,” said the GPS once again.

The last thing Cyrus heard was the gunshot.

Author Bio

Gerald Warfield’s short stories have appeared in *Perihelion*, *NewMyths*, *Bewildering Stories*, and *Every Day Fiction*. “The Poly Islands,” won second prize in the first quarter of the 2011 Writers of the Future contest. The same year, his humorous story “The Origin of Third Person in Paleolithic Epic Poetry” took first place in the nationally syndicated Grammar Girl short story contest. Gerald published music textbooks and how-to books in investing before turning to fiction. His publishers were Harper & Row, MacMillan, John Willey & Sons, and Longman, among others. He is a graduate of the Odyssey Writers Workshop (2010) and a member of SFWA.

THE ZUBAYR

by Jacob Smith

Ayal returned from Egypt with several bags of spices, a perfume that smelled like rotting hibiscus and a peculiar story that a Cairene told him one summer night, after he had spent the afternoon photographing a bloody demonstration in Tahrir square. The story has no doubt been stepped on several times even before suffering the indignity of translation, so I make no pretense of recounting it accurately. However, the agelessness of its central figure leads me to believe that its events are reoccurring, so perhaps my version will strike a mean.

Ayal, who went by Ayman in Egypt to avoid the prickly question of religion, had struck up a friendship with Hossam, who went by Sam for no particular reason at all, earlier that week. They met at a second floor cafe that overlooked Taalat Harb Square, which was not a square but a roundabout in downtown Cairo, a few blocks off Tahrir and a few more from the American University where Hossam was pursuing a degree. At first, they found it easiest to talk about their differences; Ayal was a Sephardi by way of New York City and raised as such and Sam's mom was Wahabi and spent most nights watching Saudi imams on the TV in the kitchen. She had voted for Ikhwan, the Muslim Brotherhood, and had trouble with Sam's departure from Islam. She knew that he protested with the secular Harakat Shabab on Friday afternoons, but hoped more than anything that he'd be safe.

Ayal was a photographer, and after he had grown comfortable enough to share his given name, he asked if Hossam would take him to a demonstration. The demonstrations

took a ternary form, the young, urban Shabab faced off against the elderly Ikhwan who were bussed in from the countryside, while the state militia stood on the sideline and only entered the fray when the order came. On the night in question, Ayal had been struck by a thrown brick and so he limped to a cafe with Hossam, who told him the following tale that had been circulating amongst the gossiping students all semester:

There was a French-Canadian student of journalism at the American University the year prior, let's call him Matthias, who had been following a lead that most would have written off as downright laughable. In the back of a third or fourth-hand tour guide he had picked up from a secondhand book store, there was a note handwritten in Arabic, which he translated clumsily as: *The creature in Manshiyat Naser has amassed a great fortune.* Matthias knew of Manshiyat Naser and its infamous garbage city, a district on the southern end whose inhabitants, the Zabaleen, eked out their living by picking trash from the streets of Cairo and recycling anything salvageable. He too laughed at the idea of a creature and an amassed fortune, but perhaps, he thought, garbage city would lend itself to a human interest story.

He made his way down after class one afternoon with a camera and a notepad and his rudimentary Arabic, and he talked to some of the children in the district. As it turned out, they were familiar with journalists seeking tales of humanity amongst the refuse; a fresh crop arrived every year. Some told him what he wanted to hear, and others took pleasure in turning him the wrong way when he needed directions, or asked for some pounds in exchange for a choice quote or a tour. Matthias, growing frustrated, walked on and the group of children trailing him grew in size, if not in usefulness.

The streets were dusty and lined with garbage, much as Matthias had imagined they would be. The doors of the stout houses were mostly left open, and inside people sorted

trash by hand, separating cans and plastic from paper and food waste and other debris that no longer held utility. Matthias stopped by a roadside cafe for a coffee and most of the children grew bored and scattered. One remained by the table however, and Matthias, feeling the pressures of his relative affluence, bought him a sesame cookie and a soda. It is here, we are told, that the idea struck Matthias, whether borne on a whim or out of desperation, to ask the boy if he knew of a strange and wealthy creature who lived in the district. The boy, named Mark after the Coptic Saint, refused to answer.

Matthias pressed on, in the joking manner with which one speaks to stubborn children, but Mark wasn't having it. He took his cookie and his leave.

Here the timeline grows vague, as Hossam didn't know if Matthias went up to the rock hewn cathedral that overlooks the slum that night, or if he returned dejectedly to his dorm. What is known, however, is that he went to the Cairo Museum the following day and met the woman who would lead him to the Zubayr, the creature that lives in Manshiyat Naser.

The woman's name is lost to us, but Ruwaidah may be a useful pseudonym. Ruwaidah, as I gather it, knew Matthias had gone to Manshiyat Naser the day before, and probably knew as well that he had inquired, however idly, about the creature. Even in a large city, word travels fast, and while the visit of a reporter to garbage city was a common occurrence, an inquiry about the creature was rare. She may have guessed that Matthias would seek answers in the Cairo Museum, or their meeting may have been a coincidence of fate, but nevertheless, they met.

In those tumultuous days, security at the museum was quite lax. The interim government had little time to deal with cultural affairs, and so the security guards had stopped receiving paychecks and as can be expected, soon stopped showing up to work. Matthias and Ruwaidah had the galleries to themselves, though where they met, as before,

is not known. We can suppose that she asked him, speaking in perfect French, what he was looking for, and that he probably responded that he was just browsing. I imagine, as Ruwaidah knew of Matthias' idle inquiry, that she told Matthias she was well-versed in Egyptian lore, so should he have any questions, there was a decent chance she'd be able to answer them. I imagine further, if you'll permit it, that he sighed reluctantly, and asked her if she knew of a creature rumored to live in the slums of Manshiyat Naser who had amassed a great fortune.

She did. She told Matthias, who was duly skeptical, that if he liked, she could introduce him to this creature as she was the only person in Cairo, woman or man, who knew it beyond a rumor. The child you met yesterday, she told him, had probably heard of the creature as a bedtime tale, intended to keep the Zabaleen youth off the streets at night, for fear of abduction. Matthias, who hadn't told her about Mark, was intrigued.

They caught a cab and the driver promised to take them as far as the outskirts of the district as the dirt roads in garbage city were no treat on his suspension and he was unlikely to find a fare back. On the way, she told him the legend of the creature, who went by the name Zubayr.

Ruwaidah had grown up in Manshiyat Naser, and as she had mentioned, the Zabaleen told stories of the Zubayr to scare the children into staying home and in bed even on the hottest summer nights. Even at a young age, Ruwaidah was precocious enough to know the difference between lore and fact, and so one night, when she was perhaps not even ten years old, she struck out to find the Zubayr, if only to prove its nonexistence to her parents who she felt were entirely too wrapped up in superstition. She searched all night in the places it seemed obvious a creature might hide, the gutter, the weigh station, a restaurant shuttered long ago by a kitchen fire, but she found nothing. She set out every night for a month and every night she returned empty handed.

On the night that she decided would be her last, having procured significant evidence to suggest there was no creature at all, she met an old man who she recognized as a beggar who made rounds seeking alms in the district.

“I know, Ruwaidah,” the beggar told her, “what you’re looking for. You can find the Zubayr beneath the rock hewn cathedral, in a cavern where he stores his fortune.”

Ruwaidah squinted her eyes in disbelief, how did this man know her name, let alone about her nocturnal search for the Zubayr? She asked him, petulantly, if he might introduce her to the Zubayr, convinced as he was that such a fantastic creature existed.

“Not for all the wealth it has amassed,” replied the beggar. He fiddled with a golden ring, which stood out on a man who was otherwise drab and dusty and bearing all the markings of poverty, and hobbled into the night.

At this point in her exposition, the cab arrived at the outskirts of Manshiyat Naser and the driver ushered them out.

“Welcome back,” Ruwaidah may have said to Matthias, who again carried his camera and notepad and rudimentary Arabic.

As they hiked up the hill to the cathedral, Ruwaidah continued. After the old man left her, she had made this very same ascent. The cathedral had an open top that let in moonlight, and when she arrived the pews threw tall shadows on the rock walls. She explored the church for hours, finding only the expected antechambers, but no subterranean cavern. It isn’t known where she eventually found a point of ingress, as this detail was left out of the retelling, but only that she did.

“What I found out about the Zubayr that night,” she told Matthias, “is that he has the power to convince any person, woman or man, to bring him something from the world

above, and so he has indeed amassed a fortune singular to this world, full of art and antiquities and of silver and gold.”

Matthias, being relatively affluent, thought more about the story he was uncovering than the treasure. What’s more, he still thought that Ruwaidah was probably lying to him, and was planning on writing a story about the *legend* of the Zubayr told in his disarming first person, rather than about some actual supernatural creature that supposedly held the highest power of persuasion.

They reached the entrance of the cathedral and walked down the stairs between the pews. Again the original raconteur left out how exactly they made it into the depths of a secret cavern; perhaps a certain pew hid a trap door, or a stone in the wall revealed secret entrance when pressed.

What we do know is that Ruwaidah picked up flashlights at the entrance to light their way and they walked together into a deep cave until Matthias heard the trickle of a stream. Ruwaidah told him that the Nile had tributaries that never saw the sun, and these underground streams had dug the network of caves beneath the church.

They eventually reached a large cavern with a spherical ceiling, and as Matthias had expected, there was no treasure to be spoken of, just a large chamber with a gentle stream running through. It was then, of course, that he heard the measured breathing of the Zubayr.

The Zubayr slept against the far wall of the cave. Matthias and Ruwaidah crossed the gentle stream as they made their way toward its sleeping form. I will only pass along the physical details about the Zubayr that I can myself believe, as the rest seem too preposterous to encourage. The creature had the form of a giant lizard, with one closed eye in the center of its head with a mouth beneath it that was so big it couldn’t be closed, even

as it slept. Its body was scaly but its long tail took the form of a human forearm culminating in a human hand, replete with a convincing approximation of fingernails and hair, though the hand itself was the size of the taxi they had arrived in.

Matthias, in the credulous way we often behave when faced with something outside the scope of what we thought possible, asked a simple question:

“Can I touch the Zubayr?”

Perhaps he thought his eyes were deceiving him and touching the Zubayr would extinguish the illusion or perhaps he thought that to make it so far and not touch the alien form would leave him doubting even himself when he recounted the story. In any case, Ruwaidah said yes. She told Matthias that she had cared for the Zubayr since the day they had first met, when she was not yet ten years old.

Ruwaidah stayed back by the stream as Matthias made his way forward. The closer he got the more convinced he was about the reality of the creature that lived and breathed in front of him. When he was less than a step away, he turned and whispered to Ruwaidah, “I must know, has the Zubayr ever convinced you to bring him anything?”

Ruwaidah smiled at Matthias the way we sometimes smile at the bereaved.

“Why, you, of course.”

Here we do not know how the story continues, as this is where Hossam ended his tale to Ayal. It wasn't known what happened to Matthias, only that he had disappeared, and Hossam didn't want to speculate. However, as we do have the details presented above, and as I have certainly taken liberties with these, I offer the following ending to Matthias' tale, although it is entirely of my own invention.

After Ruwaidah spoke those revelatory and perhaps obvious words, the Zubayr opened its eye and peered down at Matthias. As I'd have it, the Zubayr grabbed Matthias with its massive hand, held him above its gaping mouth and swallowed him whole, though it's certainly possible that it bit Matthias in two right where he stood.

Ruwaidah, in my estimation, is part of a long lineage of caretakers of the Zubayr, who, the legend holds, doesn't age. The caretakers, all members of the Zabaleen, have lured hapless travelers to that chamber for centuries, sometimes with the rumor of an untold fortune, and other times with the promise of a good story. For centuries they have kept the creature fed by circulating the rumors of its existence around Cairo, perhaps by bribing a beggar with a golden ring or by writing a note in the back of a third or fourth-hand travel guide.

Of course Matthias' absence would be hard to explain, and surely his family back in Canada would have searched for him, but as Ayal mentioned, many journalists disappeared under mysterious circumstances in those days.

Author Bio

Jacob Smith is a writer and freelancer from the east end of Long Island. He currently lives and works in Crown Heights, a few blocks from where his father grew up.

LET THERE BE STARS

A spacer's journal in thirteen parts.

by Grace Bridges

Day 1, January 9, 2193 (subjective Earth time)

crisp crescent moon dips towards unseen void
there is no horizon to stop the sky
Centers of gravity shifting, ever shifting
I tumble about in low-G and learn
my body is a stranger crawling the walls
This desert of night has stolen the world
and we the only oasis of light
hurled ahead into the endless night
In a shipload of partygoers
I dream alone

Day 2

it is black
not even a sliver of bright pierces to my windowless bunk
but the dark, it is not silent
it fidgets like a living thing
with shudders and sighs
and rumblings from the bowels of the ship
the sense of direction in my head, it is confused
it thinks we move backwards
so I face that way and wonder if
travelers of old on the sea felt something like this
my spin and thrust is their pitch and yaw
there is no dawnlight to wake us in this metal den
day comes with the measure of hours
and I rise and pitch myself to a place with a window.

Day 3

I am very afraid to die
and this traveling makes me think of it often
Not that I don't want to accept my fate someday
It's just—there is so much left I have to do
And only I can do it
so many wild dreams yet barely touched
and more, unborn and unconceived—unknown
so I fear my end even as I try to sleep
Yet I am here because I chose to live.
More hours pass
the moon now far behind us
but the stars still unchanged
and I've lived another day

Day 4

I am growing to love this lightness in my steps
even as they grow more outrageous with each day.
as this weightless air lulls me to sleep and wakes me afresh
In speaking my fears they have fled away
I am comforted
there's so much to do, that's why I will live
it cannot be otherwise
this calms the child within and the sun comes out
even though our own sun grows forever distant by the moment.
I take up my pen to write of future plans.
If there is hope for the human race then there is surely hope for me
when we arrive, the past will be no more
and the ache may start to fade.

Day 7

there is only space
space above and below
stars glittering in their places
in stolen glances out of portholes
in my imagination
ever burning
and this vacuum that lets us pass
it calls to me, to shut my eyes on this day
and rise again to dream at morning.
memory chases me
we run from the horrors
in space there is peace.

Day 7—later

I am heartily sick of this ship
and even of the stars
the screaming engines that do not let us sleep
I never thought I'd say this
but four days in the void
have shown the folly of romantic notions
in the face of physical danger
and exhaustion and tedium
that take their toll on gladness of soul
still relief is my greatest comfort; we are well away.

Day 10

I grow used to sleeping in this bunk, yes,
would even do it forever
This is the galaxy—the Milky Way,
mostly empty
this diamond twinkling vista
planet-bound lovers view as they repose.
it is the commonest sight in the whole universe
if anyone were out here to see it
Sunglint grows weak as we slingshot around Neptune
glimpse its blue scudding cloud
ethereal tendrils or ominous ice
and the tepid air in here
it holds me tightly
fear is now a thing only vaguely remembered
no more real to me than the asteroids we pass as I sleep
while imaginary waves crash against the hull
I sneaked onto the bridge today
observed the crew a moment; they were worried
before they threw me out
Well, if I can't spy out the action
I'll just dream of our future home, out there somewhere.

Day 11

the ship now at warp is a strange beast
its dimly lit halls and the stink of sleep
rising up to hug the air in swathes of haze
as in the curtained lounge the well-heeled children shout and dance
One level below, the bridge officers navigate the void towards—
what?
Perhaps even they do not know.
...but we had to get away...

Day 11—later

again and again I am drawn to stand before windows
craning my neck
feel the draught grow more sour
that star looks so close I could touch it
I reach out a hand but it's not there
Eyes closed
smell the sweat of fear
I cannot turn away, not yet
as I have done, but each time I returned
to crane my neck
to reach for stars
to forget for as long as I can
since harder days are coming aplenty
Let there be stars today and tomorrow
until we have gone as far as we can go.

Day 14

it shrinks
my vision of the galaxy
hemmed by bad air
grey water
insipid food
and tempers that sizzle
in grimy rows of bunkrooms
inside, the shared escape has become a pipe dream for some
one brave soul has been singing old songs
this is as good as it gets
so I return to planning my life
in faraway worlds
if it means the present will release me for now
I will just skip a while into my future
and forge onwards along the road I carve in my fancy.

Day 19

is this the end?
I have not stepped on solid ground
but they say it is close
Imagine that, a landlubber again
staggering like a drunk
the first thing I'll miss
is the ever-present smell
of perspiration and antiseptic
stale gases may be endured if not for much longer
I seize my madly tilting bunk
the waves are in my mind
up, now down, then pitching about
far away now
the ocean looks so innocent
yet I am dreaming. It is no more.
I wake sobbing for all that is lost
and this reality is only a little less bleak.
*I'm sorry, I whisper to the ghosts,
I'm sorry I left you all behind.*

Day 22

there is no more air after next week
even on gasping rations
surely we must arrive somewhere soon.
I heard officers argue as they passed my hiding nook
we have one shot at coming out of warp in a place we can survive
and we left before the scientists could be certain where that is.
—we could not wait. There was no time.
just like now.

Day 22—later

Well, they jumped us out of warp.
There's a star nearby, as we hoped,
but no planets in sight.
Don't give up, they say,
they could be hiding on the other side
we'll need a few days to get there
days in which we all must breathe.
I cannot write more.
it simply takes too much air.

Found in a crumbling book during a 2408 archaeological dig on the planet Victory (previously known as Kepler-62f) in what appears to be a stripped landing site near the world's first settlement. The mostly empty book was wedged between bulkheads and thus likely lost by its owner.

Author Bio

Grace Bridges is a dreamer whose muse blows best when it's fresh from the sea. A graduate of the University of Auckland, she translates German for a living, and writes from her hilltop in New Zealand although faraway places call to her just as often. Her stories appear in various international anthologies and magazines, and she is working on a series of novels. She is inordinately happy that her hair has started going silver. Find her at www.gracebridges.kiwi

THE FIRST CASUALTY

by Caryn Studham Sutorus

When I first saw the girl, her image tickled a memory in my mind, but I couldn't place it then. My shock was so great at seeing any person at the edge of the border forest that I froze mid-crouch, hand outstretched over the summer squash, and stared.

The trees weren't real, of course. The border forest was an illusion—a way to make the thick wall look less stark and dividing. It represented our philosophy, that on the good side of the wall we were devoted to rebuilding nature and living with it.

I blinked, wondering if I had imagined the girl in the trees, but she was still there, watching. The intruder wore her dark hair pulled to a tight bun at the nape of her neck. Her pinched face showed fear, as well it should. Her dark, shapeless shift marked her as a citizen of Tribulation. Just her presence here at the border could spell trouble. She looked familiar, but then I had seen so many Tribulators in news reports and documentaries. They all looked the same to me.

Another blink and the girl disappeared. “Did you see that?” I whispered to Caitly. Her dark skin remained dry even after working all morning in the sun. I rubbed my head-wrap to mop the sweat on my own forehead.

“See what?” said Caitly, “All I see right now is a desperate need for some pesticide. I can't take this anymore, Lyra.”

“It was 'pesticide',” I said. “And it made everyone stupid, fat, and sick, so we're better off using the natural way now. Everyone knows that.”

“Hmmp.” Caitly’s family was new here in Neomonde. They had won the immigration lottery only two years earlier, and sometimes she forgot to mind her energy projection.

I moved through the squash fields along with the other seventeen year olds, happy to be out of school for a few days, even if it meant pinching off mites and pulling weeds in the hot sun. We would work the fields all week, taking our turn as providers for our community.

I glanced back to the woods, but they were empty. Two armed guards marched the border, passing by the spot the girl had stood. Butterflies spun in my stomach as they scanned the tree line, looking for runaways, invaders, and spies. I wondered if she was one of those. She seemed awfully young. I shuddered as I remembered the refugees on the Tribulation documentary, repressed, often abused, and starving. It didn’t seem fair that life was so wonderful here behind our wall. If she was running away, I could only wish her luck.

When the girl appeared the next day, I was looking for her, just to make sure I hadn’t dreamed the whole thing. I took my time applying the environmentally-safe sunblock over my arms and legs, even spraying the mist over my brown hair before wrapping it in another band and stretching my shoulders in preparation for another day in the fields.

My patience was rewarded when the tiniest bit of black appeared through the woods. The girl wore the same dress as yesterday, a shapeless brown shift that hid her legs and arms, even in this heat. Poor thing. How had she escaped the walls of Tribulation, and what was she doing here?

I raised my hand to my face, as if to straighten my sunglasses, but instead I wiggled my fingers in a discreet wave. She stiffened, then nodded her head before disappearing once again behind the tree. Did I know her? Something about the girl seemed familiar. Maybe that’s why I felt so drawn to her. Why else would I have disregarded the rules I had so faithfully followed my whole life?

My heart hammered as I thought about what to do next. I had been taught in school to

report Tribulators, but after seeing how their lives really were, that seemed heartless. I knew our two nations had an agreement to return undocumented refugees. Each year we held a quiet lottery, wherein families from either side had the opportunity to immigrate. The winning Tribulators would arrive at the border with smiles despite the fear in their eyes, large families straggling through the guard-lined gate. Their few possessions always included religious texts, which would be confiscated, along with video game systems and other dangerous items. Sometimes Tribulators had to be sent back if they couldn't leave their old world behind. Very few Neomonde citizens participated in the lottery. Life was good here. The air was clean once again, the natural food restored our health, scientific education expanded our minds, and equality was assured for all. Of course some were more equal than others.

Where did I read that?

Anyway, I had heard rumors of border crossings, but the rumors always ended in arrest and extradition. It must have been horrible to be so close to freedom, and then sent back to that life.

“Tell me more about Tribulation,” I said to Caitly, as we started on a new row of plants.

Caitly shook her head. “It’s everything you read about it. Every word is true. The day we won that lottery was the best day of my life. I thank my mom every day for getting me out of there.”

“Why didn’t your dad come?”

“He believes in Tribulation,” Caitly said. “He thinks the unrest was the beginning of the end times, the Apocalypse. You call them ‘terrorist attacks’ over here. Over there, they were the Biblical plagues for real.”

“So what happened?” I asked.

“Dad freaked out when he found out my mom wanted to take us out. He tried to get a court injunction against it, but my grandfather paid off the judge. We had to stay at Grandpa’s house until lottery day because my dad threatened to kill her. That morning, we just ran. We didn’t bring anything. We were scared to go back home.” Caitly closed her eyes. “I hate that bastard.”

“So it was that bad?”

A sigh escaped her lips. “They just drilled this propaganda into our heads, at school, on TV, and if anyone had doubts they were taken away to a camp for delinquents. There was no real biology or history in school—just the history they wanted us to learn. They taught us that Neomonde was full of sinners who lived in squalor, and that life was miserable over here without religion.”

“That’s crazy.”

“It is,” Caitly said, but then she paused. “But you know Lyra, it’s a little crazy over here too. What if I wanted to start a church?”

“Well that would be divisive. It’s not allowed.”

“See?” Caitly arched an eyebrow. “Who’s crazy now?”

“Ha. It’s really easy to win the lottery to go back,” I reminded her, smiling.

“Oh no. I’m happy as a squash bug here. I’m just glad that we can have this conversation without some Monitor running up and separating us.”

“So.” My heart quickened as I spoke the next words. “Would you help someone if you thought they were trying to escape from Tribulation?”

The hot air settled over us as we looked at one another, me trying to play off the inquiry as hypothetical and Caitly’s eyes full of unspoken questions.

“That depends,” she said slowly. She glanced around, but no one was close enough to hear our conversation. “It happens,” she said. “I’ve heard of people blending in.”

“How would they get out of Tribulation?”

“There are freight trains and delivery trucks. I’ve heard of people scaling the walls. Of course those people always seem to get caught.”

“And if they didn’t get caught?” I said.

Caitly pulled off a bug and flicked it into her insect saver. “I can’t tell you his name, but someone that we know, that we see everyday, is an illegal.”

“Really?” My voice fell to whisper as I tried to picture all of the people we knew. “How do you know? How did he do it?”

“One night we started talking about Tribulation. He knew way too much about it. Turns out he left the city in a garbage truck.”

“Wow.”

“I know. Then he slipped over the border at night and someone took him in. He laid low for awhile but then started doing odd jobs here and there. At some point he had enough people who knew him that he got a real job and never looked back,” Caitly said.

“But with no ID?”

Caitly raised her eyebrows. “Apparently there’s a black market for that kind of thing. Who knew, right?”

My heart beat faster. Before I could collect the nerve to suggest a plan, Caitly spoke.

“I would never get mixed up in any of that.” She shivered, looking out to the border. “What if they sent me back? My father would kill me, I know it.”

I looked down at my squash plant. I decided it wouldn’t be fair to involve Caitly. She’d been through too much already.

Movement at the tree-line signified the passing of the guards. I looked over at the timekeeper, a shimmering white hologram close to the shelter. Ten minutes again. They were quite regular.



By the next morning, I had formulated a plan. I yawned and stretched my way through morning exercises, hoping my parents wouldn't notice my distraction. The soothing harp music piped into the city square buoyed my courage, and my satisfied heart surveyed the scene as I imagined an immigrant would. A thousand healthy, happy people, moving in time to the gentle music—arms up, sweep to the ground, half up, lunge, and hold. Other side. Repeat.

Mandatory exercise would be a shock to the girl, but she would learn to appreciate the vigorous wake up call and the sense of community that came from sweating together.

My thoughts full, I swung my body left instead of right, colliding into Mom Kells. Her arms steadied me, and she stroked my ponytail as she set me upright again.

“What’s wrong, Lyra?” Kells whispered to avoid disrupting the others. “You’re all over the place this morning. Didn’t you sleep last night?”

“Um.” I fidgeted, noticing that Mom Leese had stopped also, peeking her head around Kells’ shoulder and brushing back blond curls that escaped from her hanging tortoiseshell clip. “I guess I didn’t sleep very well.” I cringed at the look exchanged between my moms.

Concern radiated from Leese’s clear blue eyes. “Are you still upset about Jaird, dear?”

I tried not to laugh, relieved that their concern was so off. “Jaird? No way,” I said. “We broke up two months ago. He’s not even in my class anymore.” The crowd around us settled down on their mats, lying back for the final rest period. My moms and I followed the movement of the crowd, still exchanging glances.. The crimson clouds faded to blood orange, then yellow, reflecting the sun as it rose through the sky. The steady breathing around me calmed my mind.

Morning exercise ended with the daily benediction, “I will do good today.” I spoke the words with feeling.

I would do something very, very good that day.

As we moved with the crowd back to our homes, I deflected more questions from my moms, only managing to extricate myself from their concern by agreeing to drink Leese's "invigorating" citrus tea before heading off to the fields.

We passed through the door to our sod bungalow, leaving the bright morning sun behind as we retired to the two small bedrooms to shower and change for the day. Our tiny dwelling provided no hiding places, no closets or nooks or crannies in which a person could linger. Just the exact amount of space a family of three could use. My escapee wouldn't find refuge here, but that was okay. Caitly said there were others who might take her in. Getting her over the border would be help enough.

Kells' turbaned head poked around the door into my room. "If you're sure there's nothing else, Lyra, I'm heading to the office, and Leese is filling in at the hospital today."

"Bye, Mom." I waved. "I'll see you tonight. Tell Leese I said bye."

I waited until I heard the door click and the sound of my mothers' chatting through my window. As their voices faded away, I took a deep breath, shook out my arms, and set to work.

I rummaged through the clothes rack, looking for my baggiest clothes, settling on a pair of navy wide-leg pants and a tunic top. I wracked my brain, trying to remember what the girl's shoes looked like. Could they pass? I glanced down at my own sandaled feet. They were smaller than most. Just in case, I sneaked into my moms' room and picked out an old pair of Leese's flip-flops. Even if they were too big, they should still work better than whatever Tribulators wore.



"It's going to be hot again today." Caitly eyed my layers with concern. Already sweating, I stretched back in my seat on the crowded trolley, hoping she couldn't see the

bulk around my waist. I fingered my side under the light cotton cardigan, rubbing the edge of the tunic and pants tied beneath my shirt. I knew I'd have to plant them as soon as we got out to the fields or they'd be drenched.

We zoomed by rows upon rows of townhouses and bungalows, making our way outside the city limits to the open land where the food grew. The landscape burst into bloom, rolling hills striped with lines of tomatoes, peppers, squash, and fruit trees. When I jumped off the trolley, the flip-flops tied behind my thigh made a little clapping sound. I pasted on an innocent expression, hoping nobody noticed.

At the prep shelter we applied sunblock and received our assignments for the day. I stayed back toward the edge of the sod gazebo, surveying the woods and following the path of the armed guards.

My heart hammered as I considered my next move. The voice at the front droned on about the different species of aphids, but the pulse of blood pumping through my ears obscured her words. My breathing grew ragged as I calculated the distance from the gazebo to the tree line. Maybe fifteen yards.

“You okay? You look like you're going to pass out.”

I turned to see Caitly's brown eyes studying me.

“I think I'm going to be sick,” I whispered, wondering if it was true.

Caitly's eyes widened and she stepped closer, rubbing my back. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“No,” I shook my head. “This is so embarrassing.” I crossed my arms to hide my trembling hands.

Caitly's fierce look buoyed my confidence. “Don't worry about it. I'll take care of everyone. Now hurry up.” She patted my back, sending me off with a push toward the wash room. As I sprinted past the door toward the woods, Caitly's voice rose over the

instructor's.

“Where does the squash end and the peppers begin?” she asked, turning the attention back to the field behind the trolley.

Time stood still as I leaped into the shelter of the trees. My brown clothing blended in, but still I played the part of a sick person, making vomiting noises and bending over behind a tree. My fingers fumbled under the tunic, untying the belt around the extra clothes. I sighed as I pulled them off, crumbled them into a ball in my hands, and dropped them onto the ground. I sat up, satisfied, until I remembered the flip-flops. Crouching low again, I coughed, feeling for the tie around my right leg. It wouldn't budge. Giving up on the knot, I pulled the flip flops over my knee and down around my foot, hands shaking. The nausea was no longer pretend. I looked around, my breath uneven. I had never been so close to the tree wall. The buzz of electricity pulsed through its fake, interwoven limbs.

After steadying my breath, I stumbled back to the shelter, rivulets of sweat dripping down my back. I pulled off my cardigan as I approached my friends, tying it around my waist and wiping my forehead. My classmates were still focused on the instructor's words, but Caitly reached out her arm to welcome me back into the group.

“Feel better?” she whispered.

Still breathing hard, I smiled.

I did it.

I tried to focus on the plans for the day, but the woods drew my eyes. Would the girl find her clothes? I thought I saw movement at one point but couldn't be sure. Each time the guards passed, I froze, hoping they wouldn't notice the pile of clothes, hoping today wouldn't be the day they caught the girl in the woods.



I rushed through the door, remembering Mom Leese's citrus tea. She would worry if it

was still sitting on the counter.

“Hello?” I called out, relieved to hear no response. Dashing into the kitchen, I downed the mug of cold tea, puckering my mouth at its tartness. Seating myself on the sofa, I pulled a tablet from the coffee table and opened a botany journal.

“Hi Lyra,” Leese said as she walked through door and dropped her handbag on the coffee table. “The Petrins invited us to dinner tonight, but are you up for going? I ran into Caitly and she said you were sick earlier.”

I smiled. “I feel better now, but I’m so gross. Can I take a shower before we go?”

Leese nodded. “Of course. Kells is going to meet us there in an hour.”

I escaped to my room and washed off the sweat and dirt. A capsule of Leese’s lavender on the floor sent up soothing vapors as the warm water streamed down my hair and back. I told myself to relax, that it was over, but the tension remained. I took deep breaths, trying to alleviate the gnawing of the pit in my stomach.

When we arrived at the Petrin’s low-rise condo, I said all the right things, hugging my hosts, complimenting the ceviche and discussing the latest bestselling novel, but my mind churned throughout the evening. My heart stopped when the subject of immigration was broached.

“I lost my best analyst last week,” Mr. Petrin said. “She was sent back to Tribulation.”

“Oh was Casstyn an immigrant?” Kells said. “She seemed so assimilated.”

“Why was she sent back?” I asked.

“She was caught handing out pamphlets. Religious, of course. When they searched her apartment, they found maps of Neomonde and guard schedules.”

Leese breathed in sharply. “Another spy? What are they planning?”

“You just never know, do you?” said Kells. She turned to me. “Remember the girl that immigrated with Caitly’s family, Elsinne?”

Elsinne.

Her face swam in front of me. The world screeched to a halt. I stopped breathing as Kells' words struck me like lightning. Oh no. It can't be her. Blackness seeped into my vision, blocking out the view of worried adults crowding around me. Their words buzzed around my head, incomprehensible. And then there was nothing.

When I came to, I was lying on the couch, a cold washcloth on my forehead, and both moms hovering over me. The world gradually settled back into focus, but my mind continued to scream. Images of twelve-year-old Elsinne flashed in my memory—the sullen, dark-haired foster child who had entered her own name in the lottery and won. The earnest young Neomonde couple who had agreed to foster the refugee that could not assimilate. The image I most remembered was the day she was sent back, screaming that the Neomondeans were all going to Hell, that she had tried to convert the heathens to no avail. That image and the image of the girl in the woods were one and the same. My stomach heaved and I rolled over onto my side, clenching my body into a ball.

What had I done?



After the second sleepless night in a row, I could only stumble onto the trolley, and hope to make it through the last mind-numbing day of agricultural duty. I had almost opened up to my moms last night. But it was too late. If I told them now they would have to report the breach, or if they decided to protect me, then there would be three guilty, sleep-deprived people in my family. No. In the end, I made a mistake. Probably. Because what if Elsinne changed? What if going back to Tribulation made her realize how much better life was here? The internal dialogue raged for most of the night, but in the end, so what if Elsinne returned to throw some more religious pamphlets at Neomondeans? Our society would survive.

As the trolley pulled up to the last field of summer squash, I stepped off.

“You aren’t feeling much better are you?” Caitly asked.

I concentrated on the tree line, searching for movement.

“Hey Lyra.” Caitly snapped her fingers in my face. “Did you hear me? Are you going to be sick again?”

“No, no,” I said, raising my hand to wave off her concern. “I’m just sleepy is all.”

I survived the instructor’s opening remarks and shuffled to the prep shelter for my sunblock and work gloves, pulling them on and flexing my fingers. Caitly and I took positions at our assigned row and began the meticulous de-bugging process, checking the leaves, monitoring the growth of the yellow squash and pulling weeds.

“Do you remember Elsinne?” I shielded my eyes from the sun as I crouched low next to my friend.

Caitly groaned. “That girl had issues. Second happiest day of my life was when they sent her back. She made us all look bad.”

“So did you know her back in Tribulation?” I asked.

“A little bit. My dad and her dad were part of this ‘Whole World Tribulation’ society. It was a bunch of middle-aged men who smoked cigars and plotted to take over the world. Totally ridiculous, of course. I thought it was weird she’d want to immigrate.”

“Do you think someone put her up to it?”

Caitly cocked her head to the side, letting dark curls fall into her face. “You know, I think there are quite a few Tribulators who believe their calling is to infiltrate Neomonde and either convert everyone or destroy everyone. You should weed them out better.”

“You mean ‘we’.”

“Right, we.” She smiled.

The stretching music rang out from the speakers, so I stood up, rubbing the small of

my back, glad for the moment's rest. "Do you want me to refill your water for you?" I asked Caitly, picking up her insulated thermos.

"I'll come too." We picked our way across the rows of plants, greeting classmates at the water-filling station. I scanned the crowd. Would Elsinne try to blend in here and take the trolley back to the city? Was there an underground of ex-Tribulators there who would take her in?

Seeing no one out of place, I refilled my bottle and walked back with Caitly toward our row. Our steps were slow and deliberate. The more enthusiastic workers already resumed their tasks, even though the stretching music still played over the loudspeakers. Caitly stiffened beside me, and I looked over in alarm.

"What is it?" I followed Caitly's gaze to the figure of a girl, crouching in our row.

"Who's working on our plants?" Caitly asked, speeding her steps. I hurried to keep pace, my heart in my throat as I waited for a better look at the intruder. Please don't let it be her.

"Oh my god," Caitly breathed, stopping short a few rows away. The figure turned toward us, her face in profile as we approached.

My breath left me. My legs turned to stone, and I covered my mouth with my hands. "No, no, no," I whispered, as Caitly's eyes burned into me.

"Why did you ask me about her earlier? Did you know she was here?"

I shook my head, fighting back the fear that pitted my stomach and clouded my vision. "I— I thought maybe it was her..." My voice shook.

The girl from the trees started to rise and speak. Caitly turned to run away.

"Don't move." Elsinne's low voice shook with emotion and her eyes blazed as they shot between us. My clothes fit snugly around her body, and her pale arms seemed out of place, soft and shapeless against the tanned, lean limbs that worked the fields. I watched in horror

as she pointed a dark, metal cylinder at Caitly—a handgun. I had seen them in old movies.

“Why did you come back?” I whispered.

Caitly’s labored breathing pierced my lungs, so I reached for her hand, squeezing it tight within my own.

Elsinne kept the gun leveled at Caitly’s chest. “I came at your father’s request,” she said. A half-sob escaped from Caitly’s lips.

The sudden silence in the fields signified the end of the stretching period, and as if reading our minds, Elsinne spoke again.

“Don’t say a word or I will shoot both of you.”

“My dad sent you here to kill me?” Caitly whispered, pain in her voice. Tears started to fall, but I could barely see, as my own eyes filled.

Elsinne smirked. “He doesn’t want you dead. He just wants you to come home, where you belong. He sent me to rescue you before it gets crazy. I’m here to save your life.” She waved the gun toward the woods.

“Before what gets crazy?” said Caitly. She moved closer to my side, but Elsinne breached the gap between us.

“No time to talk. You’ll hear about everything when we get home. Now, walk.”

Caitly shook her head, but she took a few, tentative steps, looking back at me with wide eyes. My whole body shook with self-loathing.

“You can’t just walk me over the border with a gun at my back,” said Caitly, her arms raised, as she walked a few more steps. Elsinne approached, inching Caitly closer and closer to the woods.

I looked around again. How is no one seeing this, I wanted to scream, but fear silenced my voice.

Elsinne started talking. “We have six minutes before the guards walk by again. And

your friend here was able to get to the woods and back with no one noticing yesterday.” She looked over at me. “Thanks for the clothes by the way.”

I wanted to die. Caitly’s sharp intake of breath accused me, and her eyes raked my face, looking for an explanation I could not provide. “I’m so sorry,” I whispered through tears. “I didn’t know.”

“Oh, Lyra,” she cried. Her eyes left my face and turned to the tree line. “I can’t go back,” but she kept walking.

“No,” I cried out, lunging for Elsinne. The gunshot echoed across the field, fading into a buzz that spread between my ears. I flew back from the force of the bullet. Electric fire seared through my chest as the bullet tore through. The world grew thick with screaming all around.

A second gunshot rang out. The sky became brighter, its vivid blue turning to white. People were running, some toward us, many away from us, but I had to see where Caitly was. My limbs would not respond. I tried to lift myself up, but all I could feel was the searing pain in my chest, the wet sensation of blood on my clothes and the salty taste of it in my mouth. I tried to call out her name, but only a bloody cough came out.

A helmeted face hovered over me. The guard lifted his visor to look closer at my face. “Can you hear me?” he said. I tried to nod. I’m not sure if I did. He started talking into his speaker. “One casualty. She’s still alive but needs help now. CS4 followed the shooter and hostage into the woods.”

I faded in and out of consciousness, but I distinctly remember one more gunshot.

“CS4 is down,” the guard said into his speaker, jumping up. “I don’t see the shooter.” He disappeared from my field of vision.

I could feel each ounce of blood draining from my veins. My heartbeat slowed in response, the veil of consciousness becoming thicker around me. More voices approached,

and pain ripped through me as they picked me up and pressed something against my chest. I fought the haze but couldn't keep my eyes open. Why aren't you looking for Caitly? I tried to scream the words, but they only came out as a groan.

"She's trying to say something," a voice said. "What is it, dear?"

"Just... find... Caitly," I breathed. Murmuring voices surrounded, but no one responded.

The voices grew panicked. "Two guards down."

"There are more. There must be hundreds of them. Get these kids out of here!"

Gunshots rang out in every direction, but they faded as the blackness welcomed me, the first casualty of the War of Tribulation.

Author Bio

Caryn Studham Sutorus lives in Charlotte, NC, and writes tales of Viking villages, medieval saints, and modern day horror. Her stories appear in *History Will Be Kind* from Copperfield Press, *The Rose Red Review*, *The Grotesquerie: an Anthology of Horror*, Darkhouse Books' *And All Our Yesterdays*, and the *Ni Bona Na Coroin* anthology of American stories. As an active member of the North Carolina Writer's Network and the Women's National Book Association, she enjoys creating, editing, and discussing both fiction and nonfiction. In the professional world she writes freelance communication materials for financial companies, but writing fiction is much more fun. For more about Caryn's work, please visit her website at carynwriteshistory.com.

LAST MAN?

by John Grey

Three refrigerators—but not one dwelling.
I opened each of them. Two contained bodies.
The third was chock-full of irradiated meat and milk.

I found a generator that still contained fuel.
So I watched a video on a small TV
until the power died.
Now, I'll never know who killed
the philandering dentist.

The fields are littered with charred corpses.
Some grip another.
Others are fused to table tops
or tree stumps.

I eat the shriveled lumps on branches.
Oh by the way, our vines bear charcoal grapes.

The few buildings still erect
are slowly rediscovering gravity.
I stay out of their way.
“Hit by thirty-third floor
of insurance company tower”
would never fit on my death certificate.

I have my very own Rubens—melted of course.
It looks like Picasso now.
And I've finally pissed in a women's rest room.
So what if it was open on all sides.

I wonder if there's anyone else alive
or is it just me.
Is there someone
in the remains of this city
who hasn't quite developed the necessary
twisted sense of humor
and is actually sobbing over all this?

My father once said to me
there are two things never to lose sleep over.
One was lack of sleep.
I forget the other.
I don't believe it was
the end of the world as we know it.

Author Bio

John Grey is an Australian born poet. Recently published in *The Lyric, Vallum* and the science fiction anthology, *The Kennedy Curse* with work upcoming in *Bryant Literary Magazine, Natural Bridge, Southern California Review* and *the Oyez Review*.

THE PRAYIN' KIND

by Mike Duran

The thermal vice was too humane a means of execution for a man of his ilk. As was hanging. Being the first serial killer on record in the Quarter, and because of the ghastly nature of Victor Hob's crimes, public sentiment veered towards the inhumane.

Some suggested he be put in the pillory outside town, and plaintiffs allowed to have their way with the murderer while the gamma wearied his flesh. A petition arose among the Culpepers (whose daughter Emmy was Hob's fourth and youngest victim) appealing for the rack be reinstated and used to publicly disembowel the criminal.

"Let him be an example," said Edward Culpeper. "A testimony to the godless!"

Such impassioned, barbaric demands by the citizenry concerned Doctor Orton Pickering. Especially disconcerting was the invocation of the metaphysical. Victor Hob was, perhaps, the best evidence that deities were the most fickle of all inventions. Nevertheless, the Quarter and its residents remained beholden to religious superstition and its inevitable contradictions.

Since opposing public sentiment was unwise in such a climate, for his part, Pickering suggested that whatever the form of execution, Victor Hob's brain be left undamaged, removed after death, and interred at the chemical laboratories of Beecher Draw. *The Draw*, as he called it, and the Engineers, could rid the world of such social, psychological derangements. Inherited susceptibility due to diseased parents or yet undiagnosed chemical flora would soon be a thing of the past. Folk of the prayin' kind, as was Victor's poor mum,

needed medicament; at the least, reeducation. Lest, like her, they too suffer their ignorance.

“The new medicine demands it!” Pickering would exclaim. “The curative powers now at our disposal promise that such infirmities of the mind, whether nervo-viral or environmental, will soon be a thing of the past. Let our prejudice be disarmed, ladies and gentlemen. Surrender your bloodlust and superstition for Science!”

Yet bloodlust was what guided public sentiment, the Doctor’s impassioned appeals notwithstanding.

Despite having presided at the birth of Victor Hob and holding pacifist leanings, Pickering was forced to concede that a stay of execution for the young man was not in order. Researching the murderer’s brain could, at the least, salvage what had become a blot on the Quarter’s historical roll. But in spite of Doctor Pickering’s crusade for Science and civility, Hob was indeed sentenced to the gallows and his body, head and all its accursed contents, were to be buried alongside his dear mother, who was herself Hob’s first victim.

Which, if Doctor Pickering were queried, was her just desserts.

The pageantry of the Hob’s hanging attracted folk from as far away as Ithica and New Boron. While the Quarter’s lawmakers refused to use such events as a means toward commerce, they were nevertheless delighted to see the influx of curiosity seekers. That early winter morning saw the Zenith deliver a bustling group of visitors donning unusual fashions and currency intended strictly for displacement. A makeshift gallows had been erected across the street from the Quarter Gaol and in anticipation of the bluster, the sheriff deputized three additional men just to handle the ensuing commotion. Sand squalls had battered the northern ridge for weeks, turning the horizon into a wall of bleak grey. The moons dotted the sky with their pale glow like ghost orbs hovering over a lonely cemetery. A fitting backdrop to the dreadful affair.

A festive crowd, bordering on hostile, gathered that morning at the gaol. A group of

pacifists got into a shouting match with the Culpeper clan and had to be separated by officials. Miners hawked salt crystals and merchants opened their doors for potential clientele. A lemonade stand was toppled by the turbulent weather. Barkers remained in their wagons attempting to shield clockwork and ornamentals from the incessant grit.

And Victor Hob, former miracle child, cursed heaven.

Hob had, thus far, refused visits from Reverend Whale, vowing to decapitate the minister and defecate down his throat if he managed to lay hands on him. But as the hour approached, Doctor Pickering accompanied the Reverend, along with four deputies, to the cell of the Quarter's first ever serial murderer.

"Not him!" Hob leapt to his feet and clenched the bars, his eyes jaundiced and feral, fixated on the minister. "Dammit, Pickerin! I told you not to bring him."

"It's procedure, Victor."

The Reverend approached Victor Hob's cell holding a black leather Bible before him. Before he managed a word, Hob reared back and promptly spat in his face. A commotion ensued as the lawmen jabbed their voltage sticks through the bars sending Hob stumbling back into the cell.

"Victor," Doctor Pickering scolded. "Your last hour's upon you, son. Is that any way to treat a man of the cloth?"

The Reverend waved off assistance from the deputies, clasped his Bible under one arm, and removed a kerchief from his vest. He wiped the spittle from his face.

Hob teetered in the middle of the cell sneering. "You damn right. If it weren't fer him, I'da died at birth. Just like I shoulda!"

Reverend Whale stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket, somehow managing to retain an air of dignity. "The Almighty don't make mistakes, Victor."

"No?" Hobbs smiled. "Tell that ta Emmy Culpeper."

“Twas of your own volition that you abused them poor souls,” Doctor Pickering chided. “With apologies to the Reverend, no amount of prayer coulda done what Nature so enacted.”

Reverend Whale smiled painfully at Doctor Pickering’s assessment, countering, “Nor was it the good Doctor’s medical prowess that revived you from death, son. It was because your mum, God rest her soul, was the prayin’ kind.”

“If she prayed me back from the stillborn death,” Hob hissed, “then she done got blood on her hands.”

“Please.” Doctor Pickering heaved an exaggerated sigh. “Can we just get on with this?”

Reverend Whale agreed; he recited last rites, prayed for Hob’s penitence, and spoke of a promised rejuvenation for the chosen after death, all in rather stoic fashion. All the while, Victor Hob cursed, clasped his hands over his ears and howled, as though every word the Reverend spoke were a torment, ripping flesh from his miserable body.

With much effort, Hob was shackled. Doctor Pickering insisted that the prisoner be injected with morphine sulphate, as it was the humane thing to do. Neither the deputies nor Reverend Whale objected. After this, Victor Hob was led to the gallows.

It was the largest crowd on record in the Quarter. Hob mocked them and brazenly endured projectiles hurtled his way. The Culpepers beat their chests and wailed while others pled for more exotic eternal tortures in the afterlife. The noose was placed over Hob’s neck and he was reluctantly given a chance for last words.

“I’m a bad seed,” Hob jeered. “It’s what I was always meant to be. It’s why I done died in the womb.” His head drooped and the crowd grew quiet.

The wind moaned on the distant plain. The gallows creaked as sand swirled skyward.

“She sh-shoulda never prayed fer me,” Hob choked. Then his chest heaved, he looked into the sky and shouted, “You shoulda let me die!”

Though unspoken, none of the witnesses could deny the killer's charge.

As the rabble hissed and booed, the executioner jammed the black hood over Victor Hob's head. Someone in the crowd began shoving, while another began speaking in a foreign tongue. Reverend Whale opened his Bible and read something that was indistinguishable between the wind and the tumult. He closed the Bible and nodded to the executioner. The trap door sprung and the murderer's body snapped to attention at the end of the rope, before twitching into solemn stillness.

Some cheered. Others shook their head, as if in disbelief, while others wept. A few attempted to profane the corpse before deputies sprung to action, hoisting it back onto the platform. The body was hurried away. One by one the onlookers tightened their coats, set themselves against the wind, and shuffled off.

The saloon was full that day, Levon Tate registering his highest single day sales of liquor and brothel traffic. Some were heard to whisper how advantageous serial killing were for business. Others took to philosophizing the meaning of the aforementioned events.

When Cora Bell Hauteur, recorder of the Quarter's County Historical Society, transcribed Victor Hob's official death certificate, she was overheard to ponder the metaphysical implications of the incident. Hauteur's fascination with, and intermittent exposure to, medical mutations did not qualify her to make the pronouncements she did. However, as the recorder noted, spiritual anomalies, like their physical counterparts, do exist.

"If it were my decree," Ms. Hauteur offered to Doctor Pickering, "The woman got what she deserved. Why tempt fate, specially when the verdict is rendered?" And with that, the County Recorder effectively summarized what would become the community sentiment and the historical superscription.

Doctor Pickering's growing disdain for Ms. Hauteur crystallized therein. Nevertheless,

he could not deny the relevance of her observation. He retrieved his trench coat and bag. Before leaving the courthouse, he said, “Were destiny so pliable, and the Almighty’s hand subject to the creature’s whim, I would venture to agree.”

Victor Hob was buried next to his mother, his first victim. An unknown person etched the words, “He reaped what he sowed,” into Hob’s tombstone. The same, however, could have been said about his mother, who was the prayin’ kind.

Author Bio

Mike Duran is a novelist, blogger, and speaker, whose short stories, essays, and commentary have appeared in *Relief Journal*, *Rue Morgue*, *Relevant Online*, *Zombies* magazine, and other print and digital outlets. He is the author of *The Ghost Box* (Blue Crescent Press, 2014), a *Publishers Weekly* starred review item and first in a paranoir series, a short story anthology *Subterranea* (Blue Crescent Press, 2013), the supernatural thrillers *The Telling* (Realms May 2012) and *The Resurrection* (Realms, 2011), an e-book fantasy novella entitled *Winterland* (Amazon digital, Oct. 2011), and a non-fiction exploration on the intersection between the horror genre and evangelical fiction entitled *Christian Horror* (Blue Crescent Press May 2015). You can learn more about Mike Duran, his writing projects, cultural commentary, philosophical musings, and arcane interests, at www.mikeduran.com.

Dead of Winter

by Stoney M. Setzer

PROLOGUE

Thursday, March 11, 1993

4:36 AM

Alertness came, bringing along with it the familiar Urge.

The Host had been walking down the sidewalk when the Outcast awakened and took over. Such bizarre, “in-progress” awakenings used to be quite jarring, but the Outcast was used to them now. Something had triggered the shift inside the Host’s mind, and as soon as the Urge was satisfied, the Outcast would slumber again, until the next time.

How long this time? Hours? Days? Weeks? Years, even? The Outcast scanned the nocturnal surroundings. It was obviously the same town where the Outcast had awakened before, but here in the night there were few indicators of time. As with so many other Mayberry wannabes after dark, the storefronts on this block were as black as the sky itself, and the only sound was the whistling wind.

The Outcast expanded the parameters of the search, looking up and down the street, across to the other side, up and down....

A block down, two buildings were dimly lit within, one on each side of the street. The one across the street belonged to the radio station, a ponderously nondescript storefront save for the big call letters on the facade and the tower sitting incongruously on the roof.

The light was obviously being used by some late-night DJ, dutifully cueing songs for a handful of insomniacs. *Gage Stephenson's Graveyard Shift—but how would I know that? The Host must have listened to it before. Strange that I can remember that but not know how long I've been out.*

A few blocks away, a digital clock situated in front of a bank scrolled the time, date, and temperature. The 3/11 caught the Outcast's attention right away. *It's been five months since the last time. How did I go so long without the Urge awakening me? Surely the Host must have encountered some kind of sinner in all that time...*

...Unless it was a matter of opportunity. Maybe the Urge didn't stir because this was the first time in that span that I would have had a chance to act upon it. That's more believable.

The other light, on this side of the street, belonged to Lamar's Diner and seemed to be coming from the back, probably the kitchen. A quick sniff of the air brought the faintest hint of biscuits baking, a scent that made the Host's mouth water in hunger.

Someone is in there cooking, and they must plan on opening for breakfast soon. People will be out and about before too long, the Outcast surmised, feeling a sense of urgency that pushed the question of the Host's business to the back burner. *What I awoke to do, I must do quickly. Where is the one who triggered me?*

Looking in the direction from which the Host had been walking from, the Outcast saw a darkened alleyway. Just barely visible, almost perfectly concealed, a pair of aged shoes jutted out of the shadows and into the main part of the sidewalk. *That must be the trigger. He almost escaped his judgment, but he didn't count on me having eyes like a hawk.*

The Outcast crept that way, proud of the ability to move with both speed and stealth. Both were crucial if the deed was to be done in this narrow window of time available, but that was no problem. Closing in on the shoes and their sleeping owner, the Outcast saw an elderly man in decrepit clothes, smelled the thick stench of liquor on his breath, and

recoiled in disgust before steadying for the task at hand.

Yes. This is the one. When the Host walked past him, it triggered the shift, and here I am. He's just a worthless piece of human garbage, a waste of space and oxygen. Not fit for anything but judgment and extermination...

The Outcast knelt down and reached out, wrapping powerful fingers around the man's neck. The drunk jolted awake and tried in vain to fight back, but he was already at too great a disadvantage. Squeezing tighter, the Outcast throttled him, careful not to make the target bleed. The shedding of blood brought the forgiveness of sins, and the Outcast did not want this man's transgressions expunged.

The man's resistance peaked and then quickly subsided as his parasitic relationship to the world came to a permanent conclusion. Within seconds, he had been successfully exterminated.

Now came the most important part: Finding a way to leave a note. Luckily, there was an ink pen and an old receipt in the Host's pocket. It wasn't exactly ideal, but the alley offered nothing else.

Standing back up at full height, the Outcast smiled and stepped back out of the alley, savoring the satisfaction of a mission accomplished before yielding to slumber once more as active control of the body reverted back to the Host...

CHAPTER ONE

Thursday, March 11, 1993

7:15 AM

The window blinds screeched in protest as the old man yanked the cord. “Behold the family empire, Wesley!” Homer cried theatrically, as if he were showing this to his grandson for the first time—as if he didn’t make this same presentation three times a week.

Wesley Winter knew enough by now to play along. He wiped his glasses off on his shirt and then peered out the window, trying to neither cough on the dust cloud that Homer had unleashed nor pick up a splinter from the ancient windowsill. “That’s something else, all right,” he said with as much zeal as he could fake as he pushed his glasses up on his nose. At least nobody could accuse him of lying—it was something else, all right.

The truth of the matter was that looking at the “family empire”—which would one day be his, assuming it outlasted his grandparents—depressed him beyond words. He knew that the Dew Drop Inn had once been a much more encouraging sight to behold back in the 1950s, when Homer Winter had first opened it and its adjoining gas station and cafe. It had even been featured on postcards, some of which were now framed and displayed on the walls of both the motel office and the family residence some fifty yards behind it.

Of course, that had been in the days when Georgia Highway 341 saw a lot more traffic, back before Interstate 75 opened and became the primary route between Atlanta and Macon. After that, the Dew Drop Inn began its slow decline into insignificance and disrepair. Both the gas station and the café were long defunct and now sat empty, serving only as decaying reminders of the past. Had his grandmother not finally conceded and allowed extended-stay guests—essentially transforming the Inn from a motel to a dirt-

cheap, utilities-included apartment complex—the motel would have gone the way of its sister facilities.

It doesn't help that this place looks a lot like the Bates Motel, Wesley lamented. And the way this old house looks sitting behind the motel really doesn't help. Nobody wants to rent a room where they think old Norman himself is going to meet them with a wig and a knife. Thank you, Alfred Hitchcock.

He glanced at his grandfather, who smiled broadly at the vista. The Alzheimer's was playing its tricks again, making Homer believe that it was the late '50s all over again. Wesley guessed that he was probably even seeing a beehive of activity to make the illusion complete. As devastating as Homer's decline had been these past few years, at least it was inadvertently protecting him from realizing that his "empire" had crumbled.

The smell of coffee and the creak of aged floorboards heralded his grandmother's entrance from the kitchen. Even without those cues, she wielded a presence that couldn't help but to be felt. When Wesley had moved in at the age of ten, it hadn't taken him long to realize that Mae Winter was the prime mover of this household. Nearly a decade later, things hadn't changed. Homer was still the nominal owner of the motel, and Wesley was the one who did the actual work to keep it afloat, but Mae was still very much the boss.

"It's Thursday, Wesley," she announced, her bulldog jaw set. "Make sure you collect the weekly fees from the guests today." Mae still steadfastly refused to use words like *rent*, *residents*, or *tenants*, despite the fact that all of their current "guests" had been with them for six months or longer. Wesley had given up trying to get her to change terminology long ago; it had been hard enough to convince her to do extended-stay in the first place.

"OK, will do."

"And make sure you get Cole's payment, cash money," she added, her finger pointed right at him. "Don't let him pull anything."

“Grandma, Cole’s always paid on time, hasn’t he?”

“You ought to know by now I don’t trust him. One of these days he’s just gonna hop on that motorcycle and ride out of here without a word, and we’ll never see him again.” Another battle Wesley had long since given up was trying to convince Mae that *motorcycle* didn’t rhyme with *sickle*.

“Fine, fine. I’ll get all of their payments before the day is up.” He began to walk toward the door when Homer tapped his arm. “Yeah, Granddaddy?” he asked.

The look in Homer’s eyes suggested that once again his mind was in another place. “You don’t ever hear anything from Jack Farmer any more, do you?” he inquired.

“Homer!” Mae exclaimed, her tone so harsh that even she herself seemed taken aback. Taking a moment to gather herself, she continued in a much calmer voice, “Jack Farmer died back in 1978. This is 1993.”

The old man’s reaction was the same as it always was whenever his deteriorating mind pulled such a hateful trick on him. For a moment, Wesley could see sorrow in his watery blue eyes, most likely the same emotion that probably would have been reflected there back whenever he had originally heard of the other man’s passing. Then, mere seconds later, the sadness faded, signifying that Homer had essentially forgotten why he was sad in the first place.

I wonder if that’s what will happen if Grandma passes away first, Wesley mused grimly. How many times will I have to explain to him that she’s gone? Please, God, don’t let it come to that.

He turned from the window and made his way toward the hallway, ready to separate himself from the awkward scene. Just as he was about to exit the room, Mae’s voice stopped him. “Hey, Wesley!”

“Yes, ma’am?”

He turned to see his that the stern look on Mae's face had softened just a little. "If any of them say they're really hard up for money when you go to collect, tell them we'll feed them if we have to."

"Yes, ma'am, I will." She extended that offer every time the rent came due, and invariably one or more of the tenants would take her up on it. That was the sort of economic demographic the Dew Drop Inn catered to nowadays.

The warped front door grunted in protest as Wesley stepped out onto the porch. He closed it behind him and paused on the edge of the porch, taking another long and painful look at the aged buildings squatting by the side of the road. At least Homer had the foresight to build them all out of brick. That was probably the only reason that they were as sturdy as they were, and even then all of the structures showed their age. Wesley never could get over the irony of how much older the hulls of the erstwhile cafe and gas station looked, despite the fact that the hotel itself was built first and was the only part seeing daily use. There was just something about sitting empty that seemed to accelerate a building's aging process.

I wish I could get out of here, he lamented, just as he did every day. Were it not for his grandparents—were it not for all that they had done for him—he wouldn't be here right now. *I could be at college, putting the finishing touches on some kind of art degree, or I could be starting a career—heck, maybe both. Maybe I could be getting my comics published somewhere, or maybe even a graphic novel. I might be married and starting a family right now, or at least have a girlfriend.*

But no, I'm stuck here with none of the above, just a hotel that can't attract "real" guests and grandparents who I'm going to have to put in the ground one of these days because nobody else will be here to do it.

Please, Lord, help me, he prayed, wondering how much good it was going to do. He

had been brought up in church and believed that Jesus was his Savior, but somehow praying over his current situation always seemed a little odd to him. Sure, Jesus could forgive sins and get him into Heaven, but did that necessarily mean that he would fix all of his problems here on Earth? Mae always said that God could fix any problem and that everything needed to be prayed over. All well and good, but Wesley couldn't shake the notion that *could* and *would* were two totally separate concepts. Even the pastor said from the pulpit that everybody would have heartaches to endure in this life; Wesley reckoned that this had to be one of his.

He descended the porch steps and trudged down the hill toward the Inn itself. The parking lot was virtually empty, not terribly surprising for this time of day. Adrianna Drake always worked the morning shift at the Lamar's Diner, while Phil had the graveyard shift at the factory. As for Cole, his motorcycle usually wasn't here at this hour either, but nobody seemed to really know where he went at any time of the day. Though he would never admit it himself, Wesley could see why Mae would be concerned about his dependability.

Thanks a lot, Dad, for bailing out on us, he thought bitterly. *You should be the next in line to have to worry about this dump, not me. For that matter, everything that's on me should be on you, too.* He made a mental note to ask Mae if she had heard from him in the past couple of months, even though he already knew what the answer would probably be.

His bitter contemplation was interrupted by the crunching sound of tires on gravel, and he looked up to see a rather dilapidated 1970s model Buick Skylark pulling into the parking lot. *At least I can get part of this done,* Wesley rationalized as the car parked in front of room Number 7.

Phil Olson rolled out of the driver's seat, grunting at the effort. A permanently stained blue work shirt bore both his name and that of his factory in white script above the pockets,

and the buttons labored valiantly to hold the garment closed over Phil's ever-widening girth. Only his Houston Oilers cap seemed remotely clean, and even that bore a few dark spots on its bill from where its owner had put it on with grimy hands. Phil wore that particular hat at all times, which always struck Wesley as ironic. Had there ever been a man whose football allegiance fit his personality more? "Good morning, Wesley," Phil uttered in an oily voice that always seemed to be insincere. He was the Eddie Haskell of blue-collar factory workers.

"Hey, Phil." As far as Wesley was concerned, it was too early to tell whether this morning was going to be any good or not.

"Well, it's Thursday, so I guess I know why you're out here," Phil remarked as he jammed a meaty hand into his pocket, fishing out his wallet. "And I just came from the Diner. Adrianna knows what day it is, too, and she's ready."

"Oh, really?" Knowing that Phil had already been around her this morning set him on edge. The Diner was definitely going to be on his itinerary this morning, after he had figured Adrianna had time to accumulate enough tips to cover her payment. Now he knew that he not only had to do the unpleasant job of collections, but he was also bound to hear her griping about Phil. In the process, he knew that he would hear things that wouldn't set well with him. *Maybe I should just go ahead and get mad at him now and then find out what I'm supposed to be mad about later.*

"Yep," Phil replied as he handed over his payment. A lascivious grin stretched across his face, and Wesley resisted the sudden yet predictable urge to slug him. "She's weakening. No woman on this planet can resist my charm."

If that's so, why have you been divorced twice? Wesley wanted to challenge, but he held his tongue. Even though Phil couldn't afford much better, the Inn couldn't lose his rent, so it wouldn't do to make him angry. Besides, Phil had at least a one-hundred pound

advantage on him, so any kind of physical altercation would almost certainly end badly. Still, Phil's bloated ego was simultaneously ridiculous and nauseating, especially in contrast to Adrianna's true opinion of him.

"All right, thanks," Wesley responded noncommittally, pocketing the cash. The fact that Phil's money was indispensable galled him beyond words. *If I had just one more tenant to replace his room and board—or better still, if we could have a steady rotation of short-term guests again—I'd kick him out and not give a rip about where he wound up.*

"Yep, old Adrianna's getting ready to cave in, all right," Phil continued, cutting his eyes at Wesley. "Just another woman who wants me so bad she can't see straight. You got anything working in the line of females lately?"

"Fraid not," Wesley retorted, having no desire to discuss it. *Too bad about Adrianna's eyesight, Phil. If she really couldn't see straight, it would probably help your chances with her.*

"Ah, well, sorry, kid. You'd be able to pick and choose if you were half the man I am."

I am half the man you are, Wesley refrained from saying as he looked at Phil's expansive midsection. Biting his tongue was a necessity whenever Wesley dealt with him.

The roar of a motorcycle pierced the air, and Phil's jovial smile dropped, replaced by the expression a man might wear if someone had waved a shovelful of manure beneath his nose. "Well, well, if it ain't the freak show," he sneered. "I suspect I'll go on inside now." He disappeared inside his quarters, still scowling in disgust.

But how do you expect us to have a decent freak show if you're not a part of it? Wesley wanted to counter. He had always felt as if he were a magnet for crazy people, and in his mind Phil fit that profile as well as anyone else.

Cole Inman's motorcycle appeared over the top of the hill just as Phil's door clicked shut. There was no way it could have been anyone else but Cole; the motorcycle continuously swerved from left to right while miraculously never crossing the center line or

careening onto the shoulder. Such maneuvers were Cole's trademark, but nobody could ever figure out if he was merely showing off or if it was truly that difficult for him to maintain control over the bike. Knowing him, it could have gone either way.

Gravel sprayed everywhere as Cole careened into the parking lot, the aged motorcycle meeting the ground at an angle suggesting that it could topple at a moment's notice. Miraculously, he was able to right himself just before disaster struck. Equally impressive, he managed to brake sharply enough to avoid overshooting his parking space altogether and hurtling on through the closed door of his living quarters, like something out of an old cartoon.

Wesley glanced nervously at the house, wondering if Mae was watching. *Drunk as a skunk, or high as a kite, one or the other*, that would inevitably be her verdict if she had witnessed Cole's entry. As far as she was concerned, the man represented the lowest piece of human garbage imaginable, the scum of the earth. She feared him abruptly leaving one day with an unpaid balance, and she always seemed to be on the lookout for justification to kick him out before he had a chance to cheat them. Neither event had come to pass in the ten months he had been at the Inn, but that did nothing to change Mae's attitude.

Cole pulled himself off of his motorcycle slowly, as if he didn't trust his footing. If she had been out here to see it, Mae would have chalked that up to some form of intoxication, but he seemed to stand steadily enough once he had gotten off. He removed his dull black helmet and peered at Wesley over cheap sunglasses. "Howdy," he drawled.

Wesley instantly felt guilty. He had caught himself trying to discern if his speech was slurred in any way, only to find nothing. *I've been listening to Grandma too long. But how do I prove her wrong if I'm not looking for proof?*

"What's up?" he inquired as casually as he could.

"Big bad blizzard supposed to be coming this weekend," Cole replied as he shook out

his sandy blond mullet, a haircut that only accentuated his receding hairline. “We’d all better get ready, ‘cause it’s supposed to be the storm of the century.”

Talking like a dope fiend would have almost certainly been Mae’s comment, and this time Wesley found himself hard-pressed to dismiss the thought. “A blizzard, in Georgia, in March?” he asked incredulously. “Are you kidding me? It doesn’t even feel all that cold.”

Cole held up his hands. “Hey, man, I’m just telling what I heard, that’s all. Do with it what you will.” Although he sounded quite convinced, that didn’t mean much. Cole also believed that Coca-Cola was the only thing saving the world from nuclear war and that the NBA was actually a front for the Mafia. Consequently, one tended to take his assertions with a grain of salt, even though they could be entertaining at times.

“All right,” Wesley chuckled dismissively before pausing. Collecting money was never a fun prospect with any of them, but it was always the most uncomfortable with Cole. Nobody really knew what he did for a living, if anything, only that his motorcycle was usually in front of his door during daylight hours. At least with Phil and Adrianna, Wesley could rest assured that they did have some semblance of income. “Hey, Cole,” he began reluctantly, “you know it’s Thursday....”

“Can I have till this afternoon?” Cole interjected. “Five o’clock, no later.”

“Yeah,” Wesley conceded. While it was true that Cole was never actually late on his payments—much to Mae’s consternation—he also never had it on hand when Wesley came for it. Invariably it would be later in the day when he paid up, sometimes only an hour so later, while at other times he pushed the limits into the early evening hours. *Does he really have to be reminded every week to pay, or is making us wait just a subtle way to buck authority without actually getting into trouble?* Wesley pondered, much as he did every week. Considering how Cole was, someone could make a convincing argument either way.

“OK, thanks, dude.” Cole started to head inside, only to turn back toward Wesley.

“So, what’s Miss Mae cooking up tonight? The usual offer still stands, right?”

“Yeah, it still stands, but I don’t know what she has in mind for tonight. She didn’t run the menu by me or Granddaddy this week.”

Cole chuckled. “Even if she did, you know she’d change it just to mess with everybody.”

“Maybe.”

“All right, well, I’ll get you that money before the end of the day,” Cole promised as he proceeded to the door of his motel room. “But you make sure that you get us ready for that big ol’ blizzard, all right?”

“Yeah, sure,” Wesley replied, not letting on how ridiculous the idea sounded. He glanced over at his old truck, a beat-up 1960s model Chevy that made Phil’s Buick look pristine in comparison. Originally he had planned to wait until Adrianna got home to ask her about her payment, but he really didn’t want to face his grandmother with only Phil’s money in hand. Placating her would require having at least two out of their three tenants paid up. Besides that, he was hungry, and Lamar’s Diner served excellent breakfast....

And besides that, since when do I need to give myself an excuse to see Adrianna? Not that anything would come of it, but that’s never stopped me before.

His mind made up, he pulled open the driver’s side door, wincing at the hinge’s loud plea for some WD-40. Settling onto the tattered bench seat and doing his best to ignore the smell of the upholstery’s innards, he jabbed his key into the ignition. As usual, the third try was the charm when it came to cranking the engine, but at last he was able to back out of his parking space and rumble off down the road.

CHAPTER TWO

Thursday March 11, 1993

8:00 AM

As Wesley crossed into the Briggsville city limits ten minutes later, he had to choose his route to the Diner. Both options offered him their own special brand of torment.

If he took the first turn, down College Avenue, he would have no choice but to drive right past the campus of Van Horn Community College, where he had audited a few basic business courses to help him in his responsibilities at the Inn. However, he found it impossible to drive past without thinking of all the missed opportunities that it represented to him now. Despite their tuition being relatively cheap, he still couldn't afford to take any courses for credit, and the Inn's shaky finances made him leery of taking on a student loan. So, while many of his high school classmates were finishing college by this point, and despite the time he had spent auditing, he technically still had exactly zero credit hours to his name. *All right, fine. Upson Street it is.*

However, that route—on which the Diner was actually situated—offered up its own unique brand of mockery. Before morphing into the main street of town, the first few blocks of Upson comprised a high-end residential district, with huge ante bellum houses kept in flawless condition. Mae used to refer to this as “Old Money Lane,” because each house represented a family that had been loaded for generations. Driving through here always inspired a pang of envy in Wesley's heart, especially in contrast to the house in which he and his grandparents dwelt, which was just as old but not nearly as valuable or well-maintained.

In a way, however, it was more tolerable than what the college represented. He would

have loved to have one of these houses as well as the financial means that they represented, but they were so far out of his reach that his envy seemed almost an abstraction. On the other hand, a college education was tantalizingly closer, yet still just barely beyond his reach, and that was like soaking a paper cut in lemon juice.

Girls are the same way, Wesley reflected as he slowed down to gaze at the palatial homes. He knew that he'd never date someone like a model or an NFL cheerleader because they were so astronomically far out of his league that they almost seemed surreal, so that didn't bother him too much. What stung was the certainty that he also stood no chance with girls who should have been more accessible to him. Back in high school, he had seldom asked girls out because he felt he had nothing to offer. He didn't like his looks, he wasn't a star athlete, and he certainly didn't have a lot of money throw around. Since he couldn't imagine them doing anything other than rejecting him, he didn't see much purpose in trying at all. It would have only served to remind him that they were all out of his reach.

And then, of course, there was Olivia, who rated a whole separate category by herself. It had been odd enough for a guy to have a girl for his best friend back in high school, especially when he didn't have a girlfriend. However, it was another thing entirely when the girl in question was a gorgeous redhead who almost certainly could have held her own alongside those unattainable, surreal models and cheerleaders. Olivia was the best friend he could have ever wanted, but she also represented the ultimate quandary—she was the most beautiful girl he knew, but the nature of their friendship put her off-limits. Besides, it wasn't like she had much trouble getting dates, even if she never had been serious about any of them. She had left town to finish her bachelor's degree two years ago, and despite their former bond, he hadn't heard from her since. *One more thing to "thank" Dad for,* he thought ruefully. *Knowing my luck, she's probably married by now.*

Wesley shook his head. Thinking about the woeful state of his so-called "love life"

never did him any good.

The intersection of Upson and Dallas Street served as the borderline between the residential and commercial districts. In the transition, Upson Street took on the appearance of many other small towns' main streets. Locally owned businesses that had been in operation for generations lined the sidewalks on both sides. Someone had called this stretch the "quintessential Southern small town," whatever that meant, and apparently somebody else had listened. Three times in the past five years, people from Hollywood had come out to film some scene or another in this area. Of course, none of them had elected to stay at the Dew Drop Inn. Wesley had heard rumors that another film crew would be coming in the summer, but he wasn't sure if they were true or not.

Now that would be a shot in the arm, he reflected as he stopped at the red light at Upson and Dallas. If I could even get part of the film crew to stay at the Inn, that would put us back on the map. I'd have to do some work to get my vacant rooms suitable, but it would be worth the effort. Any short-term guest would equal instant advertising by word of mouth...

It was then that he noticed the blue lights a few blocks ahead, just a few hundred feet before the Diner.

The light turned green, but Wesley could already see that he wasn't going to get much farther. This particular stretch of Upson had four lanes, divided by a concrete island festooned with trees and park benches, but only the left-hand lane was moving as cars in the right lane were forced to merge over by policemen. Figuring that he would rather walk a couple of blocks, Wesley piloted the truck into the first curbside parking space that he saw and hopped out.

Besides, traffic like this didn't happen in Briggsville every day. He wanted a closer look, and the knot of people he saw on the sidewalk up ahead indicated that he wasn't alone. Such scenes always managed to draw a crowd. As Wesley drew closer, the full weight of the

scene settled in upon him.

The center of the commotion was a dead end alley between buildings, the kind that seemed to serve precious little purpose. On a normal day, most people probably would have passed by it countless times without giving it a second glance. Today, however, ignoring the alleyway would have been impossible. Between the blue lights and the yellow crime scene tape, it no longer blended in with the rest of its environment.

One policeman was positioned at the opening of the alleyway, keeping the onlookers out of the way while other cops—some in uniform, some plainclothes—worked the scene itself. He thought he glimpsed a chalk outline on the pavement, but at that exact moment he bumped into the person in front of him, a middle-aged woman who herself was trying to peer down the alley. They mumbled sheepishly to each other, and Wesley gave up on being able to see anything else. If he tried stopping to get a better look, he would probably get himself trampled, and he wasn't too enthusiastic about having a chalk outline of his own on the sidewalk.

Lamar's Diner was on the same side of the street, three storefronts down. The original owner, Lamar Hunter, had died back in 1989, leaving it to his daughter and son-in-law. There had been talk that they had considered renaming it "the Hole-in-the-Wall" but had ultimately decided against it on the grounds of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." While Wesley understood not wanting to tamper with success, he couldn't help thinking that the name would have fit the establishment like a glove. The food was good and reasonably priced, but there was precious little about the exterior that might catch the eye of the uninitiated.

Catching their noses, however, was no problem. Even before Wesley was past the crime scene, the seductive aroma of eggs and bacon had hooked his nostrils and was beckoning him like a Siren from mythology. With each step, the pull became more irresistible, and Wesley's hunger grew exponentially. Not that it came as any great surprise to him; no

matter what time of day, the smell radiating from Lamar's was mouth-watering. Unfortunately, he always had a limited budget, and today was no exception. Just once, he wanted to go in with money to burn, just to see how much of their menu he could put away in one sitting.

Even though he was going to buy at least a little something, he had to remind himself that his main objective today was collecting money, not spending it.

The electronic device above the door beeped to announce his entry, and instinctively the diner's employees glanced in his direction. The youngest and tallest of the waitresses, a striking brunette, frowned for just a fraction of a second before forcing herself to smile. She motioned for him to sit in a small booth by the storefront window.

Yep, she knows why I'm here, Wesley noted as he slid into the booth, pulling his Atlanta Braves hat off and placing it beside him on the seat. It never ceased to amaze him how differently his tenants acted towards him on Thursdays. While no one was ever overtly rude to him, there was a distinct difference in their demeanor in contrast to how they acted Wednesday through Monday each week. Really, it was quite understandable. None of them made much money—if they did, they almost certainly wouldn't be living at the Dew Drop Inn—and for one day a week, he was the bad guy taking a chunk of what little they did have.

A few moments later, Adrianna flounced her way over. Since she was an attractive woman who depended on tips for her livelihood, she had mastered the art of plying her looks to coax extra money from her customers. Wesley had sense enough to know that she was getting ready to play him too, but he couldn't quite bring himself to put up his defenses. He actually wanted her to play on his feelings, despite knowing it wouldn't go anywhere. Incidents of female attention were few and far between for him, which made resisting her flirtations a lot like a starving man trying not to look longingly at someone

else's steak dinner, even though he knew she wasn't sincere.

"So, Wesley," Adrianna began in her most kittenish tone, twirling a lock of her shoulder-length hair around her finger, "what brings you out here this morning?"

As if you didn't already know. "It's Thursday, you know," he replied, struggling to maintain a poker face.

Her eyes widened in an exaggerated imitation of surprise. "Is it really? Oh, no."

Wesley did his best to steel himself. "And Grandma wants the money on time this week." Shifting the blame to Mae was really his only out. If he left her name out of it, Adrianna would chip away at him until she had at the very least convinced him to give until the next day to pay up. By invoking Mae, however, he didn't have to be the only bad guy, and he also improved his chances of getting the money on time. Nothing in Adrianna's bag of tricks made any difference to Mae.

Adrianna's bottom lip poked out in an expression of defeat, this one only minimally exaggerated. "I'll have it for you by the time I get home from work," she sighed. Then she hit him with her patented puppy-dog eyes. "Are you *sure* that there isn't any way you could...?"

"She said you could eat supper with us if you needed to." Of all his tenants, she was the one whom he most wanted to have accept the invitation.

"If this storm coming in is as bad as they say it's gonna be, we may all be taking you up on that," she replied. She wasn't flirting any more, but at least she didn't seem angry with him—yet another advantage of painting himself as Mae's emissary.

"Do you really think it'll be that bad?" Wesley countered. "We just don't get snow in March."

Adrianna shrugged. "That's what the weatherman says, and it's been the talk in here this morning. But I'm gonna tell you one thing right now: I don't want Phil trying to keep

me warm if that snow does hit. I'll take my chances with freezing to death first."

Wesley couldn't suppress a smile as he thought about Phil's boasting. "Understood."

Finally she pulled her ink pen and waitress pad out of her apron. "So...were you actually gonna order something?"

"Yeah, French toast and a Mr. Pibb, please." Wesley knew that in a way the move was redundant. He would tip her generously, only for her to put it toward what she would have to pay Mae, meaning the tip would come back to his family before the day was done. On the other hand, it made both of them feel as if he was helping her out. If nothing else, it made Wesley feel better about having to ask for her rent.

"OK, no problem."

Handing her his menu, he inquired, "So what's with all the cops at the alley?" Wesley motioned down the street.

Adrianna leaned in a little and whispered, "They found a dead body in there this morning. Don't know for sure, but they talk like it was some homeless guy."

"They've got it marked off like a crime scene."

"Yeah," Adrianna continued, shivering just a little. "I've only heard bits and pieces, but somebody came in here and said it looked like murder. That's the last thing we need, some nut running around killing folks." Without another word, she hustled off to the kitchen.

Wesley leaned back against the seat, taking a moment to process the information. For as long as he could remember, this town prided itself on being Georgia's answer to Mayberry. Last time he checked, murder wasn't an issue in Mayberry. Up until just now, it hadn't been one here, either. Amazing how things could change without warning...

He hadn't been looking at anything in particular when he glanced out the window, just gazing out at the people on the sidewalk as they passed the alley where the police buzzed

like bees around a hive. Just as his mind was beginning to wander, something caught his eye. Wesley sat bolt upright in the booth and peered out the window, trying to get a better look to make sure that his eyes weren't playing tricks on him.

There she was, down in front of the alley where the police worked. Just like everybody else, she was slowing down to get a better look without ever fully breaking her stride. The truth of the matter, however, was that she was like no one else. Even after two years, Wesley recognized her instantly.

It was Olivia Lane.

Wesley leaned closer to the window, knowing in the back of his mind that he resembled a child pressing his nose against the glass. Could it really be her, or was his mind playing tricks on him? He wasn't sure which would be worse.

He blinked rapidly, trying to clear his vision. Olivia was still out there, her auburn hair cascading to her shoulders like a dark-red waterfall. Clearly she had gotten a good job; she was wearing a navy blue suit that made her look simultaneously businesslike and, as far as Wesley was concerned, beautiful. Even though her skirt came just past her knees, it still showed enough of her calves to remind him that nobody had legs quite like hers, not even the surreal girls. Unbeknownst to her, she used to drive him crazy whenever she wore shorts to cope with the summer heat. Wesley always relished the view, but he also lived in fear that one day she would catch him staring and put two and two together.

Wesley could feel his pulse begin to race. Part of him desperately hoped that she would see him and come in to Lamar's to sit with him; at the same time, another part of him wished that she wouldn't even look his way. After all, his feelings for her could make any sort of reunion awkward in nothing flat, at least from his perspective.

Involuntarily he caught his breath. Just as she was about to walk past, her green eyes locked with his, and her double-take was blatantly obvious. For a moment, she froze in her

tracks, as if she were trying to decide whether or not she was seeing things. A second later, her familiar melt-the-North-Pole smile was shining forth, and she started walking again, making a beeline for the door of Lamar's.

Oh, thank you, God. Now please, God, please help me!

A second later, Olivia was standing at the edge of his table, seemingly oblivious to his inner conflict. *She has no idea*, he reflected. *To her, this is just a reunion between two old friends who haven't seen each other in a couple of years. Nothing to be anxious about at all from her end, but here I am, feeling like a nervous wreck and can't let it show. Still, it's great to see her again...*

"Wesley! It's so good to see you!" she began with her trademark smile.

"Hey." *Wow, nothing awkward here at all!* Wesley thought sarcastically.

"And here's your Mr. Pibb, honey," Adrianna interrupted as she sidled over with his drink. Wesley thought he detected a little extra syrup in her tone, but he was ready to dismiss it as merely his imagination until he glanced up at her. For some reason, her body language was even more flirtatious than usual, something he would not have imagined possible before Olivia's arrival.

"Are you joining him?" Adrianna inquired of Olivia, her demeanor changing like the flipping of a light switch, giving the other female nothing but a thinly veiled contempt. *Is Adrianna actually jealous?* Wesley pondered. Even though it seemed ludicrous, the idea intrigued him. She was usually the type who inspired jealousy in other people, particularly the wives of male customers. It was unusual for her to be caught on the other end, for him to be the one in the middle was completely unprecedented.

Olivia's emerald eyes flitted from Adrianna to Wesley and back. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I am. And you can bring me scrambled eggs, bacon, and orange juice. Oh, and I'm paying for his and mine both." Only then did she slide into the seat across from Wesley,

taking time to glance at Adrianna once more. The waitress glowered at her, but Olivia just smiled, looking as if she had to force herself to do so.

As Adrianna stormed off, Olivia nodded in her general direction. “That’s the one who lives in your grandparents’ motel, right?”

“Yep.”

Olivia snickered a little. “Kind of obvious, isn’t she?”

Wesley gave an awkward shrug in response. “Well, maybe...”

“Whoops, I forgot,” Olivia teased. “This is Wesley Charles Winter I’m dealing with here. Still naive as the wall, I see.”

He fidgeted uncomfortably as his cheeks grew warmer. She had ribbed him about that for years, maintaining that he never picked up on subtle clues that girls allegedly dropped around him. Wesley had always thought her claims were ridiculous, but he could never convince her of that. Instead of trying to defend himself this time, he decided to just change the subject entirely. “So, what brings you back to town?”

For a fleeting second, the awkwardness returned as Olivia’s mouth opened without any words escaping. A moment later she replied, “I just got a new job in Van Horn’s accounting department. I finished my degree back in December, and apparently the school is always eager to hire alumni if they have an opening.”

“Even if you finished your degree somewhere else?”

“Well, I got my associate’s from there, remember. Apparently that’s alumni enough for them.” Nodding toward him, she asked, “So, are you still drawing?”

“Here and there, as I have time. I just can’t quite let it go.”

“Keep it up, Wesley. You know I’ve always thought that you’re good enough to have your work published. Maybe Wild-Man could be as big as Batman one day.”

“I doubt it, but thanks.”

“Give yourself a chance.”

Wesley did some quick calculations before inquiring, “So I thought you weren’t going to be finished with school until this May?”

Olivia shrugged. “Well, when you don’t have a whole lot of distractions and can just throw yourself into your work, you can wrap it up faster. You know, signing up for course overloads and all that. That’s why I didn’t come home much. I wanted to get it over with as quick as I could.”

“What kind of distractions?” Wesley inquired, picking up his Mr. Pibb, feeling the wet coolness in his sweaty palm.

She shrugged. “For starters, not having a boyfriend definitely freed up a lot of time for studying. I mean, I dated some, but nothing serious.”

Wesley paused for a moment, pondering her words: *Not having a boyfriend*. The very idea seemed unbelievable. He had always assumed she had met someone by now. How long could a girl like Olivia possibly have to wait before some lucky guy scooped her up?

Maybe I should take a chance, he thought. *Maybe, if I ask her out, she might surprise me*. Even as his pulse raced faster and his palms grew wetter, he made up his mind to go for it. They had gone so long without seeing each other that maybe this wouldn’t be as much of risk now, not like it would have been before.

Wesley took a deep breath. *I may crash and burn here, but if I don’t give this a shot, I’ll never forgive myself*. “Well, since you’re back in town now, do you think you might consider going...?” He wasn’t sure what kind of a reaction to expect...

...But he certainly didn’t expect her to scream before he could even finish asking.

Author Bio

Stoney M. Setzer lives south of Atlanta, Georgia, with his beautiful wife and three

wonderful children. As a fiction writer, he strives to create suspenseful stories with Christian themes. His works have been featured in such publications as *Residential Aliens*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Christian Sci-Fi Journal*, as well as a number of anthologies. He has published two anthologies of his own short stories, *Zero Hour: Stories of Spiritual Suspense* and *Zero Hour 2: More Stories of Spiritual Suspense*, as well as a novel entitled *Dead Man Running*. They are available on Amazon and on Smashwords.

Stoney is employed as a middle school special education teacher. He maintains a blog at zerohourbystoneymsetzer.blogspot.com.

TRIP TO THE DEAD ROCK AT THE EDGE OF THE UNIVERSE

by John Grey

Whooshing so fast through the milky way,
I missed more than a million, lifetimes of remembering,

planets and peoples, creatures and landscapes,
opportunities that will never return,

not with the huge distances
and the brief life span of a man

so I failed to notice, to reach out,
to encompass, to enjoin.

Bound for where no man had ever gone,
I bypassed what it was that got him there.

But still, you have to stick to your flight-plans,
if you want to get this lonely.

WE EXPLORERS

by John Grey

Light breaks apart at the window,
reconvenes inside the ship,
a thousand miniature stars
falling between our bodies,
turning what seemed so narrow,
so confining, into a universe.

Our wisdom feeds on conversation,
on laughter, on imagination,
as we grow worlds in coffee cups,
in homey vases, in the flashing
monologues of control panels.

We reach a point where we no
longer need look ahead at
the vast reaches of space
that stretch before us.
Our exploration pivots on each other.
Will our mysteries never cease?

Foe or Forager

by Grace Bridges

Liam hung around after work, resting his back on the breezeblock wall and jiggling the sole of his foot up against it. He hoped for a word with Mariah, but she must be staying late again and he didn't want to go back inside or the boss might snag him for a word about the argument today with that silly girl Kitty. She couldn't be more than sixteen, with a good brain in her head, that's why she'd been chosen to work in the Belfast Department of Farming Statistic—keeping the government and the distant World Senate fully informed on the successes and failures of food crops across the North of Ireland. It was really nothing more than data entry, but the selected few were excessively revered by a populace generally regressed to an awe of computers.

Young Kitty preened and prided herself in her position, as well as spending much of the day goofing off with her equally young desk-neighbor Elsbeth. The two of them particularly enjoyed poking fun at Liam and Mariah as the most senior members of the office team. Today, they'd been in fine fettle, shooting verbal barbs and giggling something chronic. If it wasn't an insult to all his imaginable relatives, it was a criticism of Mariah's fashion sense. Admittedly her clothes were more practical than attractive, but nobody deserved that kind of constant harassment.

Liam reddened a little. Mariah could wear a sack and he'd still think her the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

The latest kerfuffle had arisen when the office manager had left the room for a moment and Kitty had remarked loudly to Elsbeth that Liam's ma and gran must be ugly as sin to produce him. Everyone in the room heard it, there was no getting around that fact, and several laughed in spite of their efforts to resist. He couldn't hold it against them, but as for the instigator...

Liam, at the end of his tether, stood to his feet and faced her. "You little gobshite! You —"

A look of triumph crossed her face as she peered beyond him, so that he buttoned the rest of what he'd been about to say, and turned in time to see the boss frowning in the doorway. He dropped into his seat and Mariah shot him a sympathetic glance.

Surely the boss would not punish him for being driven to madness by that harpy. Still, he wasn't so sure it was a good idea to wait around here longer on the off chance she'd give him a verbal warning. Reluctantly, with a last glance backward in case Mariah should appear, he pedaled off around the corner.

So the first strawberry was gone. Given away in the heat of the moment, in hope of something more. Liam couldn't imagine a better cause...there would be other fruits in good time. He smiled as he thought of Mariah's sweet face, astonished, when he'd placed it in her hand yesterday. Surely she realized now what she meant to him, had an inkling of what he felt for her. After all, the authorities frowned on what they called independent food production. He might even get in trouble for distributing seed. More than once he'd seen his neighbor, Peter, watching as Liam grubbed in his pathetic bit of backyard. Not that it would ever come to anything.

He'd known Peter since they were wee lads in nursery school, but that was no guarantee of decency. They'd played together, visited each other's homes, and gone exploring in the days when wild blackberries were still to be found in the foothills and around the coastlines.

The scoldings had been sound when they'd returned with their clothes stained purple. How deceptively easy it was—to spend countless childhood hours with someone, and yet not know at all what sort of man he'd grown into.

But these were perilous times. Folks did what they had to do in order to get that little bit of extra food that might be the difference between life and death for an elderly relative.

In a way Liam understood when people gave in to the temptation, but it didn't in the slightest reduce his own danger as he searched for illegal nourishment in the byways of the city. There was no way to be certain that his old acquaintance wasn't a Senate informer out for a reward.

At least Mariah was usually the soul of discretion, not to mention the grandest girl he'd ever met. His heart melted at the thought that she might yet fully respond to him, that she might be his one day. He still had some wooing to do. And woo he would, with all his care and charms, just as soon as he could distract her from her worries about life in general.

A difficult proposition in the current circumstances.

It would be hard to find anyone left in this whole country that was still carefree and content. If anyone deserved it, it was Mariah. His heart beat faster as he thought of her, imagined a life together... No. It was too soon for that. He didn't want to ruin his chances by appearing too enthusiastic.

He paused near his secret alley to make sure nobody would see him turn in. The summer evening closed in tight around him, its swiftly fleeting warmth like a traitor's caress. He peered this way and that; the small, mean houses were silent for once, and Liam wondered if everyone had gotten the same idea and all left together before the dimming of the day. It was more than a little disconcerting. He told himself they probably just weren't home from work yet, or they had already arrived and were taking a quiet moment to rest. The breeze softened, gentle with just a touch of evening's chill among the suburban canyons, the

muddy expanses of dead yards, the back alleys that ran between the crumbling concrete walls and gappy wooden fences. Above, wispy layers of cloud revealed streaks of jewel blue just beginning to take on a hue of evening glow. These long summer days were at their most impressive when the rain cleared away by sunset; thankfully, this was often the case through May and June. Liam sighed and dragged his eyes back to the ghetto before him.

Was that a scuffle up ahead? The street was still as empty as his stomach, so he entered the alley. On his bike he was tall enough to see over the walls to the forlorn backs of houses to the left and right, where cracked windows protected faded and tattered curtains. Nothing moved except a little water in the ditch from rain earlier in the day. Just once he glimpsed a boy sitting on his back step, tossing a stone into the air and catching it again. The slack-faced child didn't even bother to glance up as Liam passed.

Otherwise the yards were no less deserted than the street. Liam hunkered down over the handlebars and pedaled hard towards the odd little niche with its square patch of viable earth where a tree had once stood within the uneven frame of brick and concrete. He guessed its rotting roots provided much in the way of sustenance for the tiny strawberry plant that had miraculously grown there, and the paving stopped other plants from encroaching and infecting the area with termination genes.

He wheeled around the last bend. In the shadows, a dark figure knelt over the plant, muttering. Liam threw down his bike and tackled the stranger in a single movement, taking him completely by surprise so that a headlock was an easy matter. Near-starvation notwithstanding, Liam's arms were still strong enough to seize the advantage from behind.

"Let me go," the intruder grunted.

"Yeah, right." Wait. Liam knew that voice. "Peter? What the bleedin' heck are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing." Peter shook himself free and the two faced each other.

Liam fisted his hands. He'd prefer not to beat him up, but he would if he had to. "Swear you're not gonna rat on me or by all that is holy I'll lay you low."

"Rat on you—What idjit would do that? I'm just lookin' for food like everyone else. There was a strawberry ripening here the last time I passed."

"Well, eh..."

"You wouldn't happen to know where it went?"

Liam wrestled with himself. He'd known Peter forever, and yet...he didn't trust him. Trust was dangerous. He mustered the other man as he shook himself and rubbed at his neck. Glanced in his eyes to look for any sign of dishonesty. He saw nothing, but he knew himself he wasn't always the best judge of people. Suddenly, Liam sighed. Why couldn't he have been born a hundred years earlier, free to choose his own path in life? Sure, there had been Troubles then too, but not like this, of that he was sure. He was tired of standing alone, tired of holding everyone at a distance in case they learned of his mutinous attempts to feed himself and his gran. Surely only the basest of humans would betray another for a basic survival instinct. And he was fairly certain that Peter did not number among the basest.

"You do know." Peter stepped closer, almost into Liam's face. "Scared to tell? Go on wi' ye. I'm about as much a Senate informer as you are a ballerina."

Both burst out laughing. Liam twirled his hand in the air with a flourish, even as he understood that Peter had seen right through him to discern the reason for his hesitation.

Liam looked at his feet. "I gave it to a girl." He flushed a little, but couldn't help smiling as Mariah's face floated in his mind's eye.

Peter clapped him on the shoulder. "Wooo! A girl you like?" At Liam's silent nod, he grinned. "She must be a beaut. Wouldn't mind seeing her myself. Not gonna steal her," he hastened to add.

They laughed again. Liam leaned over to check on the next strawberry—it was still miniscule and greenish—white all over. “That’ll be a wee while coming.”

“This’ll help,” said Peter, and uncorked a bottle he’d pulled from his pocket. He poured a quantity of dim liquid onto the earth, releasing a strong smell of ammonia.

Liam screwed up his nose. “Is that what I think it is?”

Peter only nodded. Sure, it made sense. Liam wished he’d thought of it.

“Bit o’ that every night and she’ll grow stronger.”

Liam regarded his lifelong friend and realized once again that he knew him not at all. “How’d you get to be such an expert?”

“You don’t remember I went away every summer to me Da’s farm...”

“I know you live with your cousins, but I was too small to remember much, you know, from before.”

“Me, too. But Da made me learn how to care for the soil, an’ I never forgot that. Some things are just in my blood, even though we’ve got practically nothing to work with now. The principles he showed me still apply. I can hear the memory of his voice, telling me how to treat the greenery with kindness so that it will grow best.” Peter looked away. “Then the Troubles came again. They vanished him.”

Of course. Anyone who knew anything about farming had been taken to secret research centers to aid in finding a solution to the dead earth and unresponsive seeds. No one knew exactly where they went, since no one had come back in all the seven years of the Senate’s regime.

“I guess I’ll be off home, then,” said Liam, slapping the ripped plastic cover of his bike seat. Unless... “Can I offer ye a ride?”

Peter regarded the rear carrier rack. “That’d be brilliant, actually.”

Liam swung into the saddle, and Peter positioned himself on the rack over the wheel, gripping the post, feet wide for balance. “Ready?” asked Liam, and at Peter’s curt nod, he kicked off and sent them sailing down the bumpy driveway. At its end, Liam turned left, then soon after that left again, crossing a vast and empty intersection with space for several lanes of traffic. These days, he didn’t even need to look and see whether anyone was coming; he simply leaned a little and coasted around the corner without turning his head.

Neither spoke as they passed between rows of houses for a while, homes no doubt once worthy of the tag “quaint”, with their plaster or brick and timber fronts. Chimneys of varying sizes jutted from roofs, but no smoke rose from any of them. It was too close to summer even if the residents were able to find rare burnable wood. Lisburn Road, the old A1 highway, was once fully lined with trees at regular intervals; an occasional one still stood, its leaves more occasional still, dragging sustenance from old, undisturbed soil deep below the pavement that walled its trunk. Other trees were cut off near the ground, taken to provide an evening or two of warmth for a family. Bright paint in red and blue still adorned some of the shop fronts that occupied the lower floors of the houses, though they too were residential space of late. Worn painted lines everywhere indicated directions and parking spaces for motorized vehicles, the like of which were hardly seen any more, used only by Senate officials. It was hard to comprehend the sheer volume of cars that would have needed all these delineations and arrows.

The Black Mountain reared up in the canyon left by each crosswise street they passed. Another series of ex-food stores whizzed by, most still bearing an inscription revealing the previous purpose. Pizza. Fruit. Spices. To think that people had been free and able to visit any of these places and buy whatever they wanted. Liam shook his head and sighed.

“I know,” said Peter from behind him. “Right rotten shame, what’s become of us.”

Past St. Thomas's church, looking a little the worse for wear since folk had been pilfering bits of it to repair their leaky dwellings. Liam figured St. Thomas most likely wouldn't mind. After a couple more blocks of houses they reached the corner of the vast City Hospital complex, now mostly abandoned except for those parts turned into Senate factories and workplaces. Here Liam turned right, away from the hospital, and trundled down a tidy street of brick houses. Another church. And then the Queens University campus.

They passed the main building and Liam momentarily released a hand from his bike's grip to point at it. "Friend of a friend was the last person to graduate from there. An' Naomi was the only one in her class, so she was."

"What's her degree in?" asked Peter.

"Biology." The last department to be shut down by the Senate, only a few years ago, as there'd been hope the students would have made some kind of breakthrough in terms of rejuvenating the soil. But they hadn't. Naomi at least was employed in a fertilizer laboratory, an area she'd studied.

He cut through into the open area between the university and the Ulster Museum, ending up in the Botanical Gardens although nothing really grew there now. Just a few very scraggly trees.

The path spat them out at the embankment, where the River Lagan glistened blue and silver under an equally patchy sky. Liam followed the riverbank north past countless three-story brick apartment blocks and single-level row houses painted white with doors in faded bright colors. Low brick walls bounded some of the yards, while others had only gaps where hedges had been. Here too were some of the city's most modern houses, built only fifty years before with smooth white walls and flat roofs.

The riverside street came to an end, but beyond the black metal bollards the cycleway continued. They followed the snaking river for almost a mile and a half in total, forgoing the first bridge to cross by the second, close in to downtown. Liam steered them over the River Lagan on the old highway leading almost straight to their destination.

A few more miles brought them to the edge of their suburb of Connswater—past the derelict fast-food joints and the enormous empty shopping mall—and a few more turns to their own street.

Liam braked by his front gate and glanced at the door. His gran would be waiting, and he'd saved some of his lunch for her. "Listen," he said. "I've been trying to forage a bit here and there. To help feed my old gran, she can't work any more. What say we join forces, compare notes?" It was a big ask and he knew it, for he stood to gain more than Peter did. His friend was simply the more knowledgeable.

But Peter grinned broadly. "Sure, an' why not? More fun that way."

"Right y'are."

"Let's meet Saturday after work by Crawfordsburn pub."

"All the way out there?" It was a trip of at least ten miles, and not over flat countryside.

"The old golf course's got loads of potential. I've been meaning to check it out."

Liam blinked. He would have a lot to learn. Now he had a proper ally in his quest to support Gran and impress Mariah. He smiled and offered his hand. "Sorry about the headlock before. I didna know it was you."

"No offense, brother." Peter gripped Liam's hand and shook it. "Here's to good foraging."

"To good foraging."

See other titles in *The Vortex of Eire* series: www.gracebridges.kiwi/fiction

Join Grace's Mailing List for monthly updates and free stories: eepurl.com/bmYv5v

The Scandal

by Rick Jankowski

Nathan glanced at the flat screen TV above the packed bar, then at Jimmy's fat, white outstretched hand.

Jimmy wriggled his fingers. "Pay up, Nathan, me boy," he said. "Your lookin' at the TV ain't gonna change the score and your coverin' the team on the wrong side of town certainly ain't gonna change the score. We won again."

Sighing, Nathan slid his hand into his pocket, extracted his wallet and removed two crisp bills. Elbow on beer-stained wooden table, he rolled his eyes, looked away and waved the Alexander Hamiltons toward Jimmy. Using thumb and forefinger, Jimmy plucked them from his hand, held them aloft, and then smacked them against the brim of Nathan's White Sox cap. On screen, a bearded giant in a blue Cubs hat explained how he had struck out the side in the ninth to preserve the win.

Jimmy swiveled in his chair, held up an empty beer pitcher and caught the eye of a long-legged waitress in micro shorts and a blue pinstriped baseball shirt with the top three buttons strategically unfastened. He beckoned her with an index finger. Avoiding pinches and gropes, she squeezed through the crowd and flashed teeth and cleavage as she bent to take Jimmy's order.

"This round is on me good friend Nathan, Alexis, me dear." shouted Jimmy above the raucous crowd. He deposited the two bills on her tray. "He's tied his fortune to the wrong

team this year, but we're gonna turn him into a true blue, Cubbie believer yet."

Alexis retrieved their beer pitcher. "Quite a year," she said, smiling at Nathan. "Great new manager, great team, great for business."

"Buy yourself a shot with that extra bill," said Jimmy.

"If you don't mind," she said, "college is expensive."

The bill disappeared between her breasts. Jimmy ogled her bottom as she wiggled away, then he turned his attention back to Nathan.

"I don't get it," said Nathan taking off his cap and running his fingers through long dark hair. "If the Cubs were bringing in new talent, it would make sense. But it's the same payroll with the same mopes from last year. And now they're sixty games over .500? How does that happen?"

"Don't know," said Jimmy. "Stop being a reporter all the time. This manager just knows what he's doin'. He's gettin' the best out of 'em. No more lovable losers! Maybe it's magic. Maybe it's voodoo. Who the hell cares! They're beating the pants off everyone. They're the best team in baseball, the best team in years. World Series here we come!"

He stood and his belly jiggled. "C'mon Alexis," he yelled, holding an empty beer stein aloft. "Winning makes me thirsty!" He leaned back, opened his mouth and wailed:

"Go Cubs go, go Cubs go! Hey Chicago whadda ya say, the Cubs are gonna win today!" He waved an arm at the crowd, "C'mon everyone, sing it so Harry, Jack and Stevie Goodman can hear!"

"Go Cubs go, go Cubs go! Hey Chicago whadda ya say, the Cubs are gonna win today!"

The glass in the windows reverberated. Nathan stuck his fingers into his ears and slowly shook his head. The Cubs the best team in baseball? This can't be happening, he thought. This is just plain wrong.



“A sports hypnotist, Tom?” said Nathan. “Really? That’s how they’re doing it?”

“That’s what Bauer says.” Tom pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose and scratched the top of his bald head. “And Bauer should know. He’s been covering the Cubs for years. Why do you care anyway?”

Nathan picked a stack of papers off Tom’s desk chair and plopped down.

“You’re the editor and I’ll cover what you want, but something’s going on. This doesn’t make any sense. Plenty of sports teams have tried the hypnotist route. It might work for a guy or two like it did for that Bear’s quarterback, Tomzcak, when I was a little kid, but not for a whole team. No frickin’ way.”

“It’s not the whole team,” said Tom. “There’s still a guy or two not hitting.”

“A couple of guys?” There’s a dozen players hitting over .300. The team could win 120 games. When has that ever happened? Never. And these guys? C’mon? None of them have ever shown any potential. They’re bottom feeders. Let me do a little digging around. I smell some kind of—I don’t know—steroid scam maybe. We break this story, we’ll get a year’s worth of internet traffic in a couple of days. Think what it’ll do to our advertising rates.”

Tom’s lips ticked upward.

“Same old Tom,” said Nathan, a dimple appearing in his right cheek. “I knew that would get you.”

Tom scratched his head again, leaving red streaks across his dome. “Okay,” he said. “You’re right. This stinks. The whole town is so excited about winning that no one is thinking scandal. You got one week. See what you can find. Talk to Bauer. He’s got that hypnotist’s name. Start there. Dig around. See if he’s ever been involved with steroids or illegal injections.”



While the slender, brown-haired man sitting behind the desk finished his phone call, Nathan swiveled in his seat and glanced around his office. On one wall were signed and framed pictures of football and basketball stars. Beneath the pictures was a glass case filled with autographed baseballs. Along the other wall were two blue stadium seats with metal frames and wooden slats. A plaque on each declared that they were from the original Yankee Stadium.

Wow, thought Nathan, authentic and expensive.

Behind the brown-haired man was a tall window with a view of a small suburban lake and a side wall of diplomas attesting to the credentials of one Dr. Scott Bennett, a psychologist and a hypnotist. Two days of digging had turned over no dirt on the good doctor. Nothing. No drugs and no involvement with athletes on drugs. He seemed squeaky clean.

Dr. Bennett finished his phone call, placed his cell phone on the desk in front of him and raised his eyes to look at Nathan. He had a thin face, a narrow nose and warm, liquid-brown eyes.

“Sorry,” said Dr. Bennett. “My clientele are rich, important and demanding. When they call, I answer.”

“I get it, Doc, I know what professional athletes are like. I appreciate your spending a few minutes with me talking about your work with the Cubs.”

As if praying, the doctor tented his fingers and touched them to his lips. He gazed at Nathan and his eyes seemed to grow larger, more moist. “I saw you admiring my Yankee Stadium chairs. I was looking for something to really finish off my office. I found them in an antique shop on the near North side. Odd little place called Seifer’s. Couldn’t believe my luck. The place was empty. I think it’s gone now. It was obvious that business was bad. I had a devil of a time dickering with the owner, a weird, eccentric guy named Lou, but we

eventually worked out a deal. Those chairs mesh perfectly with what I do and my clients really appreciate their history, their tradition. The New York Yankees. The greatest sports franchise ever. Forty World Series appearances, twenty-seven World Series championships. When I work with the Cubs, I have the players sit in those seats.”

“Sort of like walking in their shoes?”

“Exactly, there’s a vibe, an aura of winning embedded in those seats.”

The doctor stood and glided to the seats. He touched one reverently. “I want the Cubs to feel like they’re Yankees.”

Nathan turned toward the doctor. “But, they’re not Yankees, are they? They’re still Cubs. Losers. And they haven’t won a championship for over a century.”

“I think,” said the doctor, his voice like warm oil, “that we’re going to change that this year.”

Nathan stood and walked toward the doctor. He stopped and touched one of the seats.

“I don’t feel any vibe,” he said. “Don’t see any aura either.” His right cheek dimpled. “They do smell kinda smoky though. Kinda sulfuric. Guess that’s from all the victory cigars the Yankee fans lit.”

Dr. Bennett smiled. “You’re being flippant,” he said. “But what I do works.”

“And what is it you do that works?”

“I change the Cubs into better versions of themselves.”

Nathan stared out the window at the lake for a moment and then he narrowed his eyes and looked at the doctor. “Really, Doc, hypnotism does that? A little hocus pocus and they’re winners. I don’t believe it. But I think steroids might do that. Maybe some new drug combination that the tests can’t check?”

Dr. Bennett continued to smile. “I’m clean,” he said, “and so are the Cubs. Check my background. Give them drug tests. You’re not going to find anything.”

“I’ve already checked into you and the league has checked into the Cubs. There’s nothing there.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Something’s going on. I’ve been a reporter long enough to know that. And I think you’re at the bottom of it. But, I’m a fair guy. I’m here because I like to meet my quarry. Give 'em a fair chance before I expose them. This is your fair chance, Doc. You got anything to tell me?”

The doctor’s smile faded. He looked away from Nathan and glanced at the Yankee chairs. Then he looked back. “Dig all you want,” he said.

Dr. Bennett’s cell phone vibrated and he placed it to his ear.

“Yeah, Mary,” he said. “We’re done in here. Send Leon right in.”

Nathan tilted his head. “Leon? Leon Martinez? The Cubs catcher? Calls a good game, but can’t hit? He here to get hypnotized?”

“Yup,” said the doctor. “He’s the last hold-out, but the pennant drive is on. And now, if you’ll excuse me...”

The door to the doctor’s office banged open and its frame was completely filled by a crew-cut man with a scar on his left cheek.

“Hey, Doc,” the large man’s voice boomed, “let’s do this. I decided I wanna join the .300 club.”

The doctor introduced Nathan, who shook hands with Leon, and watched his hand disappear into the larger man’s grip. “Nice to meet you,” said Nathan, rubbing his knuckles. “Good luck with the rest of the season.”

“Might not need luck if Doc here does his job right,” said Leon, his voice deep and strong.

As Nathan exited the building, he glanced back. No one watching, he thought. Good.

He scooted around the side of the building and retrieved a small rubber and metallic object from his pocket before stepping into the bushes that lined the office's outer wall. He worked his way to a tall window, peeked inside and then jerked his head back. Yup, he thought, the window to the good doctor's office. Positioning himself so he could not be seen by Leon and the doctor, he firmly pressed the object he carried against the window. He tugged at the round rubber suction cup that secured it. Perfect, he thought. Backing away, he hurried through the bushes to his car. Once in the car, he lifted the lid of a laptop, powered it on and navigated to his spy camera software.

I warned the good doctor, he thought. I always warn 'em before I strike. This camera is so good I'll be able to count Leon Martinez's nose hairs.

On screen, the doctor's office appeared in high resolution. No sound, thought Nathan, but if the doctor sticks a needle into him, it'll all be recorded. Don't want to hear him squeal anyway.

The doctor leaned forward in his chair. Across from him, Leon seemed to be listening intently.

The doc's probably discussing how many cc's of steroids the big lug will need, thought Nathan. That's easy, just give him the same amount you'd give a rhino.

In high resolution, Leon rubbed his scar thoughtfully, then he nodded and stood. While he did this, the doctor reached into a drawer and retrieved a long metallic container.

Bingo! thought Nathan, the moment of truth. There's probably needles and a vial of steroids in there.

He watched as they both walked to the Yankee chairs. Leon sat while the doctor stood in front of him and opened the container. Nathan leaned close to the screen. C'mon Leon, roll up your sleeve so the doc can poke you.

The doctor set the empty case on the chairs next to Leon. In his hand was...

Damn, thought Nathan. It's a friggin' pocket watch.

The doctor began to wave the watch slowly in front of Leon's face. The watch picked up speed as it rhythmically arced back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Leon's eyes followed it and soon his face turned waxen and then slackened. The doctor continued waving the watch for a few seconds, then he stopped. He slid the watch into his pocket, placed his fingers directly in front of Leon's face and snapped them. Leon didn't move, didn't blink. He snapped again. No reaction. Then he turned, picked up the metallic case and sat in the seat next to Leon.

Why's he doing that? thought Nathan. Then his eyes grew wide.

"What the..." he said. He placed his face within a few inches of his screen. "Stupid Bluetooth," he said. Everything in the middle of the screen was becoming pixelated. Leon, the doctor and the chairs wavered and turned to tan, brown and navy lines. The lines broke into dots, the dots shimmered, the entire screen became cloudy, and the dots disappeared.

"What the hell," said Nathan, his voice a hiss. He swatted the laptop with the back of his hand. "C'mon, where's the signal!" He smacked the screen again. The cloudiness began to dissipate, the screen wavered, the dots reappeared, streamed and gathered into lines. Then the lines coalesced and Leon, the doctor and the chairs blinked back in high resolution.

Finally, thought Nathan. I must need a new cam.

On screen, the doctor stood and snapped his fingers. Leon's face animated. He blinked rapidly and then rubbed the scar on his right cheek. The doctor said something. Leon shrugged, stood and shook the doctor's hand. The doctor nodded and they walked out of Nathan's range of vision. When the doctor returned into camera range, Leon was gone and the doctor held a check in his hand.

Hell, thought Nathan, that's it? The whole session took what, five minutes and nothing

really happened. How could this be helping the Cubs? How could it help anything? Maybe I missed something, he thought. Let's take another look. He moved his cursor to the play bar and pulled it all the way to the left. The scene replayed. Nathan frowned, his brow furrowing. When the replay finished, he stared at the screen and shook his head.

This can't be, he thought. I gotta be wrong.

Twice, he replayed the video. Each time, the lines on his face grew deeper.

Okay, he thought, I'm either going crazy or...well, let's check one more time.

He moved the scroll bar back to the beginning. On screen, Leon sat across from the doctor, leaned forward and rubbed his scar. Nathan froze the picture, clicked twice and Leon's face filled the screen. Large forehead, dark set eyes and scar on his left cheek. He clicked again and Leon's face grew small. Then, he sped through the video and stopped just after he'd lost the Bluetooth signal and the pixelated faces had returned to normal. He took a deep breath, double-clicked and the faces on the screen expanded. Nathan's head shot back and air shot out of his lungs.

"No shit," he said. This can't be, he thought. It can't be. When Leon first sat down, his scar was on his left cheek. After the Bluetooth malfunctioned, it switched sides! What in holy hell is going on?



Nathan turned the steering wheel and his car bumped into place along the curb. Moonlight filtered through the driver's side window, casting half of his face in light and half in shadow. He rummaged through a small black bag on the seat next to him and extracted a pair of driving gloves and a small leather case. Snapping open the case, he revealed a set of flat metallic tools with narrow points on the end. When you're a reporter, he thought, you've got to be a jack of all trades, including a lock pick. He selected two of the tools and slipped them into his jacket pocket. Exiting the car, he strode briskly. The sidewalk was wet

from the recent rain and a humid, moldy scent permeated the air. He turned the collar of his jacket up and glided down the block, past the front of Dr. Bennett's building, along the side wall to the tall window. Once there, he slipped on the leather gloves and inserted a pick into a small lock that secured the window. A spider scuttled from inside the lock. Nathan pressed a gloved finger against it, crushing the life out of it. He wiped his glove against the window, leaving a translucent trail of blue ichor smeared on the pane, and then he returned to his task. After a couple of seconds, he heard a small click and the lock opened. He grasped the sill, tugged and the window slid noiselessly upward. He returned his tools to his jacket pocket and stepped inside. His pupils dilated after a few moments and he could see the doctor's desk a few feet to his right. On the desk were two manila-colored folders and the Chicago Tribune. The newspaper was turned to the back page, which proclaimed, *Last to First—Cubs Climb Continues!*

Nathan pushed the paper aside and opened a folder. Inside was a photo of Leon, his dismal hitting statistics, and a copy of a check. Nathan pursed his lips. Wow, twenty grand was a lot of money for five minutes of the doctor's hocus pocus. Nathan opened the other folder. What the hell is this, he thought. His dimple-cheeked face stared back at him. Why's he have my LinkedIn photo? What does he want that for? He closed the folder and slapped it back on the desk. Then he bent and tugged open the desk drawers. Pens, note pads, business cards, envelopes. Hmm, he thought, where's that silver case? He stood and surveyed the room. Of course, the Yankee chairs. He paced across the room and bending to one knee, checked the seats. Nothing there. Okay, he thought, I gotta figure out what to do next. Rising, he placed his bottom on one of the seats and slid back. He wrinkled his nose. There's that smell again. Sulfur? Then, his vision seemed to blur and his stomach grew queasy. He grasped the metal arm of the chair. Odd, it felt warm. After a moment, the queasiness subsided and his vision cleared. He shook his head to clear it. Damn, all this

humidity, must be my sinuses, he thought. He got to his feet and brushed off his pants. As he did, he glanced toward the doctor's desk. It can't be, he thought. He balled and un-balled his fists, his attention focused on the top of the desk. The newspaper was still there, but the two folders were gone! He glanced quickly around the room. The door to the reception area was closed and the window was just as he'd left it. He strode to the desk and walked around it. No files anywhere. Looking at the newspaper on the desk, his hand quivered as he read the article:

First to Last—Cubs Plummet Continues

How the mighty have fallen! The most storied team in the annals of baseball, the Chicago Cubs, have hit on hard times. The Cubs, the winners of twenty-seven World Series Championships in thirty-seven tries, were swept in interleague play this weekend, by the lowly Yankees, the perennial doorstop of the major leagues. Our men in blue seem to get worse as each game passes. Today, it was the mighty Martinez's turn to join the ranks of the lowly. Until now, he had seemed to be the only player immune to the contagious disease that seems to be sweeping through the team. Two passed balls and four strikeouts...

Behind him, Nathan heard a cough. Looking up, he saw the door to the reception area was open. Two figures stood in the doorway.

"Doc," said Nathan. "Imagine meeting you here."

The doctor stepped into the room. In his hand was a steel gray revolver.

"I did. Imagine meeting you here, I mean. You're a reporter and you're curious. I figured it'd only be a matter of time before you came back to snoop. Which is why I'm here tonight—and I brought a friend."

A slim man with dark hair and a White Sox cap stepped from behind the doctor.

"What the hell is this?" shouted Nathan. "This ain't funny!"

"No, it's serious and it's big business. But where are my manners? Nathan meet Nate."

The man next to the doctor smiled and a dimple appeared in his left cheek. He proffered his hand. The doctor swatted it. “Probably best you two don’t shake hands. I’m not sure what will happen if you two touch. Maybe nothing, maybe...” The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

A deep scarlet flush ran up Nathan’s neck and spread across his face. He pointed an index finger at the doctor. “What the fuck are you up to? I know there’s some kinda scandal brewing, but...”

“But I told you what was going on when we first met.”

“You what?”

“I told you exactly what was going on. Remember, I said—and I quote, ‘I change the Cubs into better versions of themselves.’ I said it and I meant it.”

“Yeah...I remember.”

“I wasn’t talking about hypnotism though. I was talking about the multiverse. You know what that is?”

Nathan frowned and the lines in his forehead deepened. “You’re talking about some kinda parallel universe?”

“I’m talking about an infinite number of parallel universes.” The doctor smiled. “Imagine again. But this time, imagine a parallel universe in which the Cubs are the best team in baseball—and another in which they’re the worst. Nate’s and yours.”

Nathan glanced at the Chicago Tribune, then at the doctor, and then at Nate.

“And then imagine,” the doctor said, “methodically swapping the players from one universe to the other. A man who could do that could become rich, don’t you think?”

Nathan glanced at the Yankee chairs. The doctor’s eyes followed his gaze. When they did, Nathan lunged. He brought his fist down on the doctor’s arm. The doctor groaned and his gun clattered to the floor. Nathan swung his other fist into the doctor’s midsection. Air

shot out of the doctor's lungs and he collapsed to the floor, gasping for breath. Nathan turned frantically, his eyes searching the floor.

"This what you're looking for," asked an eerily familiar voice.

Nathan looked up into a reflection of his own face and the barrel of a revolver.

"The doc made me an offer I couldn't refuse," said Nate, shrugging his shoulders, "and there's only room for him and me on the Yankee seats."



Nathan glanced at the flat screen TV above the packed bar, then at Jimmy's fat, white face. "Hot damn," he said. "One more game and we got the Series!"

Jimmy smiled back. "I told you, me boy. And sure enough, if you didn't listen. How much money have you made wagerin' on the Cubs."

Nathan waved a couple of bills over his head. Alexis glanced his way, smiled and undulated toward him. She bent, exposed her cleavage, and kissed him moistly on the lips. "This next rounds on the house, Nate," she whispered and there was a hint of things to come in her husky voice.

When she'd wiggled away, Nathan answered, "Enough to start life over, Jimmy, me boy! Enough to start life over. And since I'm starting over, please call me Nate. I think it fits my new persona better." A dimple creased his left cheek as he raised a glass in song:

"Go Cubs go, go Cubs go! Hey Chicago whadda ya say, the Cubs are gonna win today!"