



**WELLS STREET JOURNAL**  
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# HORROR

ISSUE 18



The Wells Street Journal

# Horror

Issue 18



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# About The Wells Street Journal

The Wells Street Journal is a London-based biannual literary anthology of poetry and prose run by the University of Westminster's Creative Writing: Writing the City MA students. Founded in 2014, it was aptly named after the street in which the department of English, Linguistics and Cultural studies was hosted.

Representing all ends of the globe, the journal's main impetus is to provide its readers—both nationally and internationally—with literary works that represent equality, diversity, and inclusivity. It achieves this by showcasing not only the talents of its own writers, but by sharing its platform with a collection of external writers from a wide range of locales and experiences .

This issue embraces the concept of horror in all its facets and interpretations. It is the eighteenth issue and the eighth in print.

# FOREWORD

Over the last three months, we have met, collaborated, and produced an issue of The Wells Street Journal. Not only that, but we also learnt how to communicate, delegate and at times innovate while getting know each other while creating a journal we are proud of.

We would firstly like to express our appreciation to the Vice Chancellor, Dr. Peter Bonfield, for his continued sponsorship of the journal and enabling us to produce and promote each issue. Without his generous donation, we would not be able to work as freely as we currently can to produce an issue that truly incorporates our vision and our passion for everyone's creative works. Likewise, thank you to the Student Union who have been wonderful in their assistance throughout, as usual.

There are also some other special people we would like to thank, those being Dr Hannah Copley and Dr Monica Germanà for their support and Kieran Yates for her encouragement, not only in person and over coffee, but always getting back quickly over emails. They have their students as a priority, and we are nothing but grateful for their involvement in this issue.

Currently, there is nothing like the opportunity to be able to produce a fully student-lead journal to this extent during a degree, and this is something the university should be proud of, as it allows its students to gain well-needed experience in different roles that can then enhance their CV's for their future careers. This creates an environment that shows what a job in creative writing could be like in a supportive and understanding way, and we are grateful to have had this trust and belief to be able to achieve it.

I also want to thank all the students that have been involved in this issue. Their dedication, perseverance, and willingness to learn has allowed the journal to become what it is today. As we got to know how the journal

worked, we also got to know each other along the way and I am grateful to have had such an amazing, bubbly and happy team on my side to get to the final product. So, I would like to express thanks to the team involved in Issue 18: Isaac Hamilton-Mckenzie, Kanika Choudhary, Lee Bennett, Mamta, Nasnin Selvathu Beevi, Oliver Bugg, Sara Malik, Amber Siddiqui, Andrew Scarborough, Biju Antony, Claire Di Maio, Emily Duff, Gabriel Clark-Clough, Karun Balarajan, Ailani Lovett, Ruth Adjaottor, Simeon Samuel Dinesh, Katie Baker, Sarah Kamil, Vlad Krutikov, and Yesha Dave. Every single member has put their heart and soul into this project, not only with their contributions but also their respect for me. I am so happy I got to work with them and have all their hard work be put into this final product.

We also need to thank the writers who sent in their work. Their work has been crucial to the creation of this issue and I am grateful to each and every one of them having the guts to send in their work for us to be able to publish in this issue.

Last but not least, I would also like to thank Blissetts for being helpful from the beginning when it came to anything related to printing matters. Their help made the journey slightly easier and comparatively smoother for a General Editor who was scared about not having relevant prior experience.

I am astonished at the amount of creativity that went into the works that feature in this journal fitting the theme of Horror. This experience has allowed me to realise how this moment will one day be a memory of the time that we all strived to become, not only better writers, but also friends who encourage and inspire each other to carry on being creative.

**Mehak Zehra**  
**General Editor of Issue 18**



# POETRY



# OASIS

William Bowden

The dirt track stretches out before me—  
half lost in the mirage are raving waves of dust  
in cyclones collapsing over and over.

I can feel these teeth in my mouth,  
crooked rows bone-dry & jutting out,  
my tongue cracked as parchment.

There are shades walking beside me,  
their mouths shrivelled by salt &  
their robes of indigo frayed and faded.

Biting into the body of a Barbary fig,  
crimson beads well up in pinpricks  
on my lips & at the corners of my mouth,  
and the moisture is a comfort.

Of course I can see the oasis,  
I could sense it like an acorn  
lodged in my chest  
the second I arrived,  
yet I am no motley fool  
clad in the harlequin's garb,  
so I don't drink the freezing waters  
or sate my thirst

with vain hope or fantasy.  
I know delusion is a vice,  
rich in sin and fertile  
for sowing more sinister seeds.

In the distance, sand coloured stones  
cut jagged shapes in the sky,  
silhouettes of fractured cities  
coated in dust.

Thoughts of survival and my family  
are scattered at my heels,  
cold and frail as bird-bones,  
they did follow for a time,  
but eventually, they came to lay  
like goose feathers on dry earth.

**William** is 22 years old and is currently working in London. Having completed a BA (Hons) at the University of Exeter, William is now studying an MA in English at UCL. William's poems have previously been published in the Canon's Mouth Magazine, Pulp Poets Press, The Phare Magazine, the Crank magazine, as well as Sein und Werden.

# BUG BITES

Brigid Cooley

i'm sorry that after all these years, most of my poems are still about him  
i have never liked smoking  
but the first time we had sex you asked for a cigarette and it made me feel  
special,  
so i bought a pack.

i have never been a smoker  
instead, i pick at my skin and call the wounds bug bites later  
i bought a pack of ciders today  
ran my fingers along the bottlenecks, hoping they'd make a sound

my doctor says my bed should be for sex and sleep only  
so i guess i will be lonely tonight  
the way you run your fingers along my lips, grinning at the sound that  
follows, that is what i'll dream about

tonight, i am lonely  
he was hanging by a thread when they found him  
a nightmare i cannot outrun

last night, i draped my legs across your chest  
after sex, you asked if i still have the pictures  
i let my mascara run  
i'm sorry that after all these years, he is still here.



**Brigid** (she/her) is a poet, journalist and storyteller based in Georgetown, Texas. She is dedicated to highlighting the stories of others, while also carving out a space where she can share her own truths and experiences in her work. She previously served as co-host for the Sun Poets Society's weekly poetry readings in San Antonio, and currently hosts virtual readings on the Little Things Poetry Read Facebook page.

# CREATING CORPSES

Hélène Ezard

Universities are in dire need of bodies  
For their anatomical studies.  
Resurrectionists dig up cadavers,  
Mortgages are used to ward off body snatchers.

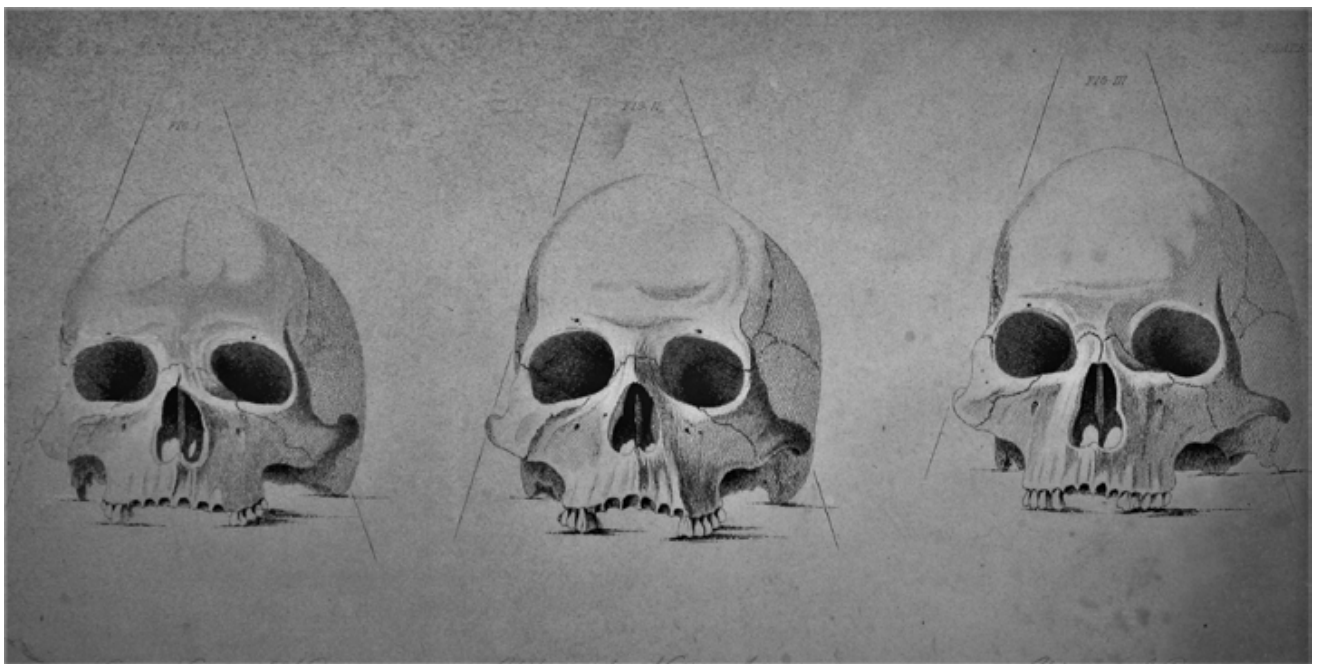
In a lodging house, a man dies diseased,  
He owes rent, leaving the landlord aggrieved,  
Who, with a friend, brings the corpse to a doctor  
Where they get a handsome sum for the former lodger.

Then a feverish lodger becomes delirious,  
It's bad for business if he is infectious,  
says the dear old landlord's wife,  
And so the landlord takes a life.

This sets in motion a cycle of horror,  
As bodies are brought to the professor,  
Who is delighted to have them for his lessons,  
He doesn't even ask any questions.

When a known beggar ends up on the table,  
The professor dissects the body to make it unrecognisable.  
The murderous pair are eventually arrested for killings so vicious,  
As reported by lodgers who became suspicious.

The landlord was protected from prosecution  
For aiding in his old friend's execution.  
His friend is hanged and dissected, betrayed.  
In an anatomical museum, his skeleton displayed.



**Hélène** is a French-German alumna from the University of Westminster. She studied International Liaison and Communications. She enjoys learning languages as well as writing novels, short stories, and poems.

# THE PRICE

Wajiha Qamar

There's a metallic taste  
on my tongue.  
Is it mine, is it his?

There's something red  
on my hand.  
Is it wine, is it blood?

There's a drumming  
in my chest.  
Is it real, is it fake?

There's a grave  
in my backyard.  
Is it empty, is it filled?

I remember his pulse  
beneath my teeth.

I remember a hand  
against my neck.

I remember blood  
offered freely.



I remember  
His life for mine.  
His smile upon my mind.



**Wajiha** primarily writes poetry and prose. She likes K-pop music, and binge watching Korean dramas is her most time-consuming hobby. Her novel is currently in its earliest stage and she hopes one day she gets to publish it. It is her dream to be able to incorporate her own South Asian culture in her writings. Wajiha wishes her words can help others just like how the books she read as a child helped her.

# THE HORROR OF LOVE

Charlotte Appleby

Guilt

is a sticky black tar

once it's on your fingertips,

there's no way it's coming off.

If you scratch, it gets forced under your nails

and if you rub, it smudges over clean flesh

or what little of it is left.

Sometimes, it slides down your throat

like the uninvited tongue of a stranger

the bitter tasting saliva runs

like quicksand filling the lungs,

grains compact to push out air.

**Charlotte** lives in Tameside with her pets in a house crammed with books, working as an English teacher. She is described as *the one who always works and a solitary creature of habit.*

# CUDDLES

Kanika Choudhary

The cacophony of the event still echoes  
Like a loud  
untuned trumpet  
unannounced  
uncalled for.  
But just like it said  
It wasn't him,  
it was her.

You should have been cautious, they said  
to an 8-year-old.  
Explain to her at least  
what caution is,  
what unannounced is,  
what cacophony of life is.

Or you could  
Just tell her  
It's ok  
It's ok to call out his name  
It's ok to scream  
How it wasn't her  
How it wasn't about seeking attention  
Tell her  
how to emerge stronger.

Tell her  
How to walk with pride  
strength  
love.  
And  
How to kick their  
dirty  
mindless  
sadist  
superior  
arse when it approaches again.

I know it is already said  
But keep saying  
until it changes  
because just like some horror movies  
it still haunts at night  
like the monster under the bed  
or a robber with a knife.

Not all scars leave their mark.



**Kanika** is a user experience designer who loves to doodle and paint around the city. Writing has been a coping mechanism and her interest in spoken poetry has ended her up in few open mics. Being a designer, she can't just stay away from her sketchbook, which really helps her enhance her write-ups with illustrations.

# THE DOOR UNDER THE STAIRCASE

Alina Pustai

I heard a noise  
A tumbling of frightening whispers  
A splash of light in front of me  
I look back  
Nothing  
I look forward  
The light is gone  
What was that noise?  
Where was it coming from?

Crippling anxiety  
Shivers down my spine  
I hear the noise again  
I'm crumbling in vain

The noise gets closer  
I see the light again  
Just for a second  
And then it's gone  
What is happening?  
My senses and vision  
A collision

Of thoughts and dread

I hear voices  
They are calling my name  
Pushing me towards the door  
Under the staircase  
I open it and look  
The voices scream at me  
Louder than before  
They screamed at me in chorus  
'You're going to die,  
Your existence is cursed,  
you're deemed to be  
One of the worst  
You're dying, your flesh will burn  
Under the light of judgment  
The repercussions are felt  
By your dear, poor soul  
You're gone for good  
And all is evaporated  
Into air  
Goodbye fellow sinner  
Find your path  
Hades will welcome you,  
Goodbye for the night.'

A song of death  
Was sang to me  
Into the screaming end  
I'm gone  
My life is none  
I'm infinity and nothing  
From the noise under the staircase  
That whispered my curse.



**Alina Pustai** is primarily interested in poetry, fiction, and playwriting, and is currently studying Creative Writing MA at the University of Westminster. Her love for these genres has led her to explore all things gruesome, dark and sinister, creating stories that investigate life and its many intricacies. However, she cannot say that she would fit neatly into any category, since she is genuinely intrigued by life and all of its complex twists and turns, with a continued desire to express her view of the world on paper.



# THE SPELL

Nasnin Sulfath Nasser

In this tale there are two,  
named Sylvia and Assia.  
They rhymed well,  
so did their deaths.  
One found art in dying,  
as her death by oven  
proves a charming horror.  
Because the other  
usurped her king,  
her tall dreamer beekeeper  
snared by the feral witch's voice,  
her velvety soot black lashes  
edged in honey and mystery.

The bewitched animal lover  
so easily glided  
from the poet to Aphrodite  
to engulf them  
in the same flame.  
Sylvia casts her spell  
over the woman  
who took her place,  
lived in her home,  
baked in her oven,  
and slept with her love.

The poet is a phantom,  
a sublime terror  
smearing her pain  
onto the guilty  
like paint or grease,  
to seal it in your mouth  
in your eyes  
in your soul,  
like divine hemlock  
poured into Assia's ear  
whispering to die by coal gas  
of the red hot oven.

They design death  
even after their death,  
same as they sutured  
words, feathers and hearts  
while they lived.

\*Based on the tragic deaths of Sylvia Plath and Assia Wevill.

**Nasnin** is an aspiring poet, who very much enjoys the blossoming of her everyday impressions and thoughts into verses. As she gets deeply inspired by great characters, lines and plot structures, she can't resist retelling/twisting famous tales and literary personas with her own imaginative colouring. After seven years of teaching life, her passion for writing drifted her finally to pursue a Masters in Creative Writing at the University of Westminster, in search of "fresh woods and pastures new."

NON-FICTION



# REDEFINING HORROR

Mehak Zehra

Zombies, vampires, ghosts, things that go bump in the night. This was how I used to define horror. As a kid, I loved those nights when cousins would get together, form a circle, and in the dim night light share their spookiest stories. I would take part too. I would share a story I had heard somewhere, fill it with ghosts, and shout its validity by saying, ‘Oh, I know. I was there.’

It wasn’t just me though. It was everyone. Everyone wanted to prove they had the truest, spookiest story. Someone would have ‘experienced’ it, while others would have heard it from ‘the adults’. And then, if it was winter, a draft would sneak in, proving that the ghosts were listening in.

Long gone are those nights. And long gone is that little girl who believed horror meant supernatural things. This new girl—who is herself an adult now—will not say, of course, that she is not terrified of horror, but for her, the definition of horror has expanded. It’s not that she is not scared of the dark, or of the things that go bump in the night. It’s that the outlook of the things that go bump in the night now include men. Evil men. Scary men.

This girl is envious of people who think of ghost stories when you mention the word horror. This girl is envious because they are not constantly looking over their shoulders when they are walking on the footpath at night and they hear footsteps behind them. It’s not like she is home in Pakistan, where her father will be waiting to take her home as soon as she gets off the bus. She loves London for sure, but she gets scared of the night, of the footsteps behind her, of anything sudden. She rushes home after class because she doesn’t want to walk the streets alone at night. She is scared of that walk from the station. She makes active decisions when stepping out

of the Tube. Go left, and there is a narrow, curved tunnel; anyone could be waiting. Go right, and the roads are empty; no other people, but at least it's a wide road, with plenty of space to run.

It's not like she has had any experiences with evil, of course, nothing first hand. It's not like someone has hurt her. No. It's more like a fear of the unknown; the fear of something looming ahead. Something that can happen to her because of her gender.

This fear was instilled in her, and enforced every time she read a scary piece of news.

“Female fan groped at a concert by a group of boys.”

“Female student harassed by a professor.”

“Female influencer molested by 400 men at a historical monument.”

Horror is not just this, sadly. Horror is being told that it was the girl's fault. Why was she at the concert? Did she act suggestively with the professor? Why was she at the monument? Why was she wearing those clothes? Why did she smile at those boys?

The list goes on.

This is horror.

Now, this grown-up girl isn't just scared of ghosts or vampires or zombies.

She has to be attentive to everything now; where is she standing, what is she wearing, how is she smiling; are her actions suggestive?

It started making sense to her, seeing grown-up women grabbing hold of their 5-year-old cousins, brothers, nephews, or sons when stepping outside every time. Apparently, being in the presence of a fragile male figure was safer than being alone.

Even with all the usual conditioning, she—me, the protagonist, the subject of this story—could still walk home from the bus stop. She did not always need the support of her father.

But that's when something happened that shook her to the core. She couldn't step foot on a dark street anymore. Her heart would start racing. Any sound felt like the sound coming to harm her. Not just walking, but even hailing rides became scary. Now, she would sit behind the Uber driver and not behind the passenger seat. It will be more difficult for the driver to turn around and grope her, you see. She will have a 5-second headstart to get out of the car and run.

So what exactly happened?

The Lahore Motorway Incident.

A woman driving at 2 AM with two kids found herself stranded on the dark motorway with an empty fuel tank. Two men came, broke into her car, dragged her outside, and raped her in front of her kids.

The news was all over the media.

Police started investigating. Journalists would hover around any relevant police official to get an update on the case. And that is when the then Chief of Police uttered the words she could never forget.

‘This is not Paris. Why was she out at 2 AM?’

Thus, while horror can mean that stuffed doll in the corner of your room that you swore was looking the other way a few seconds ago, horror can also mean being raped. Horror can also mean the fear of rape. Horror can also mean being held responsible for the rape.

**Mehak** loves to write short romantic stories, long fantasy stories, and non-fiction articles. She does not want a genre or a format to define her and yet, with every passing day, she gets a reminder that she needs to choose one. Will she? That is a question only time can answer, but for now, she sticks to writing whatever comes to mind.

# THE UNWELCOME BEAST

A True Story

Andrew Scarborough

## I. Fear and terror

For weeks and months it had visited me. Haunting me. Taunting me. Inserting its tentacle-like structures into my consciousness.

Like a shining star in the night, but with a fiery menace that could cause devastating damage and destruction at will. To those who suffer the cruel fate of being a victim, it preys on them, ready to pounce on whomever wakes up and angers the beast.

Is this my life now? To live in fear? Not knowing what lurks around the corner?

It had a vice-like grip on me—body, mind and soul.

Weeks went by with little drama. Suddenly I was left speechless. A feeling of impending doom came upon me as time appeared to stand still. My friend and I laughed nervously as we both realised something wasn't quite right.

I became unsteady, as if on a boat, treading carefully so as not to anger the beast. A lump in my throat and a pins and needles sensation trickled down my neck and across my body. I was under its spell and as quick as it came it was gone, but this wasn't to be the end... not by a long shot.

There was a real sense of foreboding. I had a feeling deep down we

both knew that, though this was the last time my friend and I would speak.

As I tried to run it would follow me. It appears I could run but I could not hide. I was strong and fit, but it chased me down.

I had made it to the carriage, but this time it shook me to my core. Pain like nobody could imagine. Pressure was building and then, all of a sudden, what felt like a massive explosion.

I had no time to say goodbye and I had no doubts that this would be the end. I was going to die on this train.

## II. Mortality

I woke up on the other side of the train... dazed and confused. Surprised I was still in the land of the living.

Was this the afterlife? Had I gone mad?

Glued to the floor, little movement was possible. A dead weight was pinning me down, yet simultaneously I was overcome by a floating sensation. I recall yelping noises followed, as if possessed by a demon before a fade to absolute darkness.

A hazy figure peered over my prone body. I could hear the muffled tone of a man close by. He crouched over me, saying something incomprehensible.

I could feel a dampness, my clothes were soaked right through. I was delirious to the point of being nonchalant... carefree about the world around me. Lucy was in the sky and the diamonds were not far behind.

Then what was bright light faded into darkness once more.

## III. Lights and tunnels

Lights and tunnels. Lights and tunnels.

Everything was an indiscriminate blur once more.

A series of attacks followed, each one more violent and brutal than the last. Dislocated limbs, heavy bruising, speaking in tongues.

As I awoke a swarm of strangers had entered my gaze. Curious  
A series of attacks followed, each one more violent and brutal than the last.



Dislocated limbs, heavy bruising, speaking in tongues.

As I awoke, a swarm of strangers had entered my gaze. Curious creatures with blank expressions. Tubes, wires and bleeping noises everywhere.

All I could taste was blood, and my tongue looked and felt like it had gone through a blender at high speed. My head felt like a medicine ball. As I adjusted my position, an intense pain seared through my body like I had been dropped from an unfathomable height. Maybe that wasn't such a good idea.

#### IV. A ticking time bomb (in my head)

You see, it all makes sense now. A high-grade glioma is an astrocytoma, affecting star shaped cells in the brain called astrocytes. The word glioma is where we get the word glue from; glia=glue. Glial cells are responsible for holding neurons together, protecting cells that determine our thoughts and behaviours—weaving the fabric of what makes us human.

A 'high-grade' glioma is typically fatal. Its tentacle-like structures pierce and invade the healthy brain tissue that surrounds it, with devastating consequences. This disease cannot be completely removed and invariably returns at some stage. Prognosis is bleak and many who succumb to it experience seizures. On very rare occasions it can haemorrhage.

Brain tumours are indiscriminate, they affect every age, ethnicity, rich, poor, even if you ate your vegetables and took time to say your prayers every day like a good boy or girl.

Tumours located at the parietal lobe and along the motor strip area of the brain can cause speech arrest, paraesthesia, numbness and tingling. A common symptom of grand mal seizures, affecting the entire brain, is 'an impending sense of doom'. This can be accompanied by nauseousness, sensory disturbances and feeling unsteady, as if on a boat. A pins and needles sensation in the tongue, back of the throat and in the body is not uncommon and feels like a cross between ants crawling across your skin and an electrical current passing through.

A tumour this vascular is also incredibly rare and can easily be mistaken for irregularities of arteries or blood vessels in the brain. Over

time it can become cancerous and highly aggressive. Like a raging, fiery menace it becomes more inflamed, with cells proliferating at an alarming rate.

In this case it had erupted like an angry volcano, with near fatal consequences.

## V. Reborn

It has been 10 years....

I'm still alive when many aren't.

They didn't ask for this,

they didn't deserve this,

...but this is life.

All we can do is do what we can, share and learn.

This story hasn't ended yet.

**Andrew** is a nonfiction writer with a background in the Life Sciences.

He has worked as an editor for the International Brain Tumour Alliance (IBTA) and has a passion for science communication. His writing seeks to inform the reader, whilst engaging them in subjects that naturally provoke deeper discussion.

# THE SMELL

## A Relived Experience

Gabriel Clark-Clough

A typical May evening in New Orleans simmers somewhere between spring and summer, the lukewarm air lulling its residents into a shallow sleep. Many nights, I sweated myself back awake, kicking off the covers to lay panting and dehydrated. Beneath me, I would hear the gentle whir and whoosh of my downstairs neighbour's AC functioning, and I debated getting up to close the window and turn on the thermostat. I'm not certain what prevented me, but it was not until the very end of the month that I first used mine.

By then, summer had begun to leak into the city with promises of the roiling heat and humidity soon to come. The last magnolia trees shed their petals in a spring snowfall on the sidewalks, and the street corners sported tables selling boiled crawfish and sweetcorn from giant plastic bins. The scents of flowers and food composed a patchwork coloratura, intermittently underpinned by the less pleasant smells of car exhausts and sun-heated garbage. I enjoyed throwing open my windows to let the vibrant city air into my apartment, embracing the good smells, the bad smells; the smells of a living, breathing city.

I think that is why I did not notice it at first, the whisper of death that tickled my nose. It crept quietly into my home, unnoticed, and grew to fill my days and nights with horror. The smell seemed to have a life of its own, if death can be alive.

Death was a dry smell. I could not find it in the moist residue in the back of the refrigerator or underneath the mildewy foot rug in the bathroom. It was not at the bottom of the laundry hamper, even my week-old gym clothes still steeped in the living smells of sweat, exertion, and

post-workout fried chicken. But as the days grew warmer, the windows stayed shut, the thermostat was turned down, and the smell only intensified. The smell was coming from the vents. Death was somewhere in the walls.

The windows flew back open, the vents were sealed with duct tape, and fans blew fresh air in spiralling circles through the rooms. But the smell persisted. It coiled around the apartment and worked itself into my clothes, my food, my hair, trailing behind me each morning as I left. My neighbours seemed oblivious to the miasma that encircled the building, the soft whir and woosh of their units still running day and night. As I sweat and stank and lived with death, some, like my downstairs neighbour, had not been seen to leave their arctic sanctuaries in days or longer.

I contacted my landlady. She arrived early, accompanied by a man I had never met.

‘Thank you for coming, I’m sorry to bother you with this.’

‘No worries, hon. We was just around the block anyhow.’ She strode into the apartment, turning her gaze from me and sniffing the air. ‘Not sure the smell you mean, though.’

I looked at her aghast. There was only one smell left alive in my apartment. There was only one smell that mattered. ‘It’s coming from the air vents.’

‘We’ll have a look.’

The man opened a box of tools, and the three of us explored the walls. First the ceiling vents, each suspiring small puffs of death. We took turns standing on a chair, poking a flashlight into the ductwork and peering around for something, anything, but there was nothing. Next, we pulled open the intake at the base of the hallway wall. The massacre it released forced me to step back into my bedroom, gagging on the fumes. The man stuck his head inside the wall, flashlight in hand.

‘Nothin’ in here ‘sept some dust.’ He pulled himself back out into the hall. ‘Some cracks in the bottom though, couldn’t see down in them.’

‘How big?’

‘Not big enough to be hiding anything. Don’t know what’s on the other side though.’

He unlatched the cabinet access in the wall above the vent, revealing the machine that pumped the air and proliferated the smell throughout my apartment. He started to fiddle with its cover, but my landlady intervened.

‘Stan from the maintenance done told me it’s no use openin’ that up. Nothin’ but metal and wires.’

‘But what if something got inside?’

‘Said nothin’ could’ve got inside, nothin’ that could make a smell anyway.’

Stan from maintenance clearly did not know death like I did, but I deferred anyway. I left the two of them alone to discuss how best to seal up the floorboards in the bottom of the intake vent. Realising where the cracks might lead, I went downstairs to my neighbour’s door and knocked. There was no answer. I thought perhaps he knew the cause of the smell, but all I heard from his apartment was the gentle whir and whoosh of his air-conditioning. Apparently, he was at peace with death.

After sealing the cracks in the intake vent, the smell began to fade from my life. My apartment filled with the smells of bleach, laundry detergent and shampoo, as I scrubbed death from myself and my possessions. Occasionally, I would still catch a whiff, usually just as I crossed my threshold coming home. I decided it was just my imagination, but I never quite shook the feeling that something dead was nearby.

Born and raised in Oakland, California, **Gabriel** attended undergraduate at Tulane University in New Orleans. Originally majoring in architecture, he switched to music, and then to English. Through his experience in a variety of artistic mediums, Gabriel developed a passion for the playful, and his writing seeks to balance important contemporary issues with an idiosyncratic approach.





FICTION

# SYCORAX THE SPIDER

P S Ellis

Sycorax the spider repairs webs in her tree and thinks of what life would have been like without her, if she hadn't crawled from a cracked egg into the form she inhabits. She wonders briefly what it's like to love, for she wiped her children's tears but never loved a male, like a female is supposed to—all hearth and heart.

Her children refuse to roam afar. She wonders how her Calibans could be so kind in their youth, happy to drift on the wind and then as fully-grown arachnids become utterly poisonous. She thinks of all her Ariels, mindful, precise and vengeful and yet, nowadays, they are the spiders who wrap their prey in silk only to forget them, prolonging their victim's end. Her Mirandas, all they think about is their eggs and sprucing up their sticky threads.

Prospero the divider, thinks he knows a woman's rhythms with his false fables, rhetoric and rhymes, but only an outsider like her can truly know what shapes the female arachnid, what excites her, what trials alter her and what errors feed her interiority. How she knows Prospero's smell. How she hates him. How his threats ring inside her mind like the nocturnal, executioner's bell. All her children suspect him as being her past provider, but she was never in the way of husbandry. Long gone are the days when he might excite her. Yet, she remembers his hair and loathes him. Here he comes, like an old boxer. He is smaller and more precise in form than her; a silky spider, a wizened rider, all leathery charms with wrinkly legs like pins, his packed abdomen and segmented little legs all taught, wound up like he fancies springing into her web. However, he may as well have antennae instead of fangs, for as he creeps up behind her, she feels his intentions



project towards her like a belligerent bug's.

*Spiders never share their web*, she thinks.

She knows why he comes. Her venom bubbles but her joints wobble like shammy leather. His arrival announces her departure from this mortal globe. Shall she be rounded with sleep? How he plans to chide her, to wrap her in her web of outdated spells and out-lawed protection. How he would like her to be an old witch caught in her own unique network of multiplications. And yet, she is not just any spider. She is the wind that threatens her web, the dew that christens it and the rain that baptises it with spells.

Sycorax the fighter, inclines her head and draws her limbs towards her. She decides that Prospero will not be king, vicar or landlord of her tree, nor will he suppress her children. She will hide, befuddle him with her absence. Once she has victory over this invader, she will rewrite the history books in his library and she will tell brighter tales to her children's children whilst they sit in her tree, around the most magnificent web they have ever seen.



**P. S. Ellis** is an author of two books. *The Willow Elf*, is a fantasy adventure for children and *The Witch, the Ghost and the Demon*, is a gothic, fantasy novel, written with magical realism.

# CAROUSEL OF SOULS

Sophie Harris

It was only 4:45 in the afternoon, but night was already blanketing London. As the sky turned to an impenetrable black, bright lights lit the streets below and London was abuzz. As Elena walked through the Southbank's Christmas market, she took in the different colours of the Christmas lights. Her stomach emitted a low rumble each time she walked past a food stall. Wafts of chocolate, fudge, cinnamon and mulled wine filled her nose, leaving her taste buds salivating with temptation. It smelt like Christmas, and she instantly felt at peace with her surroundings for the first time in months, after her messy split from her ex-boyfriend, Jacob. She loved the Southbank, but she loved it most in the festive season.

Elena ambled along, taking in each stall's merchandise. She tried talking herself out of buying a bauble from the lovely man at stall number 59 and then doubled back on herself, deciding to start a tradition of buying a new one each year. She smiled to herself as she handed the stall holder five pounds, mentally congratulating herself for coming up with a way of buying Christmas junk she didn't really need, but which she secretly got satisfaction from buying. She carried on walking up the aisle of wooden huts, stopping along the way to buy a hot chocolate and have a look at the hand-carved wooden statues and tinsel garlands.

When the huts ended, the path opened up to form a wide square. In front of her was a deep darkness; the lights of the market far behind her. It was here that she felt the first droplets of unease slowly roll down her back. A breeze tickled the side of her neck, like a spider. She swatted at the imaginary monster, scratching at her neck aggressively. Her breath heightened slightly as she looked around, her eyes darting to each dark

corner, as her mind created imaginary dangers lurking in each of them, ready to pounce on her. She spun around quickly, still holding her neck with one hand and her elbow with the other. As she moved forward, desperate to try and get to the stairs that led up to the brightly lit bridge and away from this eerie darkness, she heard crying whispers coming from under the stairs. Elena stood still squinting into the black void, and slowly edged forward.

Each step she took, the whispers got louder whilst the air got colder, but still she carried on forward, enchanted by something unseen. As Elena approached the underbelly of the stairs, an almighty scream echoed around her and she threw her hands over her ears and scrunched her eyes shut. After a few moments of standing and panting, she slowly opened her eyes. A tiny sphere of light was blinking in the shadows of the stairway. Elena slowly looked back over her shoulder, trying to find the source of light and found herself staring at a most grotesque, yet somehow beautiful, carousel, eerily creaking in the wind. It was made of spectacular shades of gold, red, yellow and white. From a distance, the vibrant colours made it look majestic. Yet, when Elena got closer to it, the colours started clashing, and the ugly, metal carvings of people at the centre of the carousel made it look menacing, their faces holding an air of terrified pain.

Elena circled the contraption, each section as ugly as the last. She stopped on the other side of it and looked back towards the way she had just come; Southbank had vanished, the market stalls were gone, the people had disappeared. Gulping, she unwillingly turned back to the carousel suddenly aware that the only thing she could hear was the elevated beating of her own panicked heart. Something wasn't right. Where did the carousel come from? Where did London go? Elena frantically started to run back the way she came, only to find herself going round in circles, the carousel sitting in the middle, unmoved. A hand touched Elena's shoulder. Elena screamed.

'Good evening, madam. I offer you a free ride on my carousel.'

A bony, greasy-haired man with a pock-marked face and shiny skin had appeared at her side. He was leaning towards her, his dirty grin showing brown, cracked teeth.

Elena shuddered in repulsion. The man was hideous. She studied the carousel. There was a weird sound coming from it, a strange humming sound, like muffled voices. Elena started to move towards it.

'A one-time offer, my lady,' the man said. 'Come aboard and take a

ride on my carousel.’

Elena frowned. How ridiculous. She was thirty-three, for goodness’ sake. She was far too old to ride a carousel, especially by herself. She would look like a complete fool, sitting alone on a metal horse going around in circles. Not to mention this man gave her the creeps. She turned away.

The man jumped in front of her, blocking her exit.

‘Don’t say no to the carousel, sweet girl. I won’t take no for an answer. You must have a go. Only the best souls get to have a ride.’

He smiled a sickly grin. He was even worse up close. His breath smelt of bins that had been left out in the rain and, when he lifted his arms to point to the carousel, the stench of dried sweat filled Elena’s nostrils. It took all of her strength not to gag at the smell of this strange man, but he wouldn’t give in and kept blocking her path, stating that she couldn’t say no to the carousel.

‘Ah, little missy is afraid of a harmless carousel. Have you forgotten how to have fun?’ the man teased.

‘No, thank you, I must get home.’ Elena said.

Suddenly he grabbed her wrist in a vice-like grip, his long nails digging into her skin and pulled her up onto the carousel.

‘I promise you, one ride and then you can go home. One ride is all you’ll need.’

‘Hey!’ Elena said, trying to free herself from him. He held her steady. She looked around, her heart beating fast. She stood in thought. Maybe if she had one go, he’d leave her be and she could be on her way home. It was just a silly carousel, after all, and no one was even around to see her look pathetic riding a kids fairground ride on her own.

Putting her insecurities aside, she looked at him. ‘Fine, just one ride and then I really must go.’

The man jumped up and down, clapping his hands.

Elena studied him with a frown on her face. He was unnervingly strange. It was like everything he said came with a sense of foreboding.

Elena followed the man to the inner row and mounted a metal horse, strapping herself in. She saw the words *The Carousel of Souls* carved into the top of the middle section, which was made up of columns of what looked like people with screaming faces. Doubt started to creep in. Even the names of the horses; Damian, Persephone, and Reaper, unnerved her.

It was all very Halloween-like, rather than Christmas.

With fear settling inside the lower part of her stomach, the carousel started moving. As Elena moved around, a sinister piece of music started playing. It was garish and ominous. The hairs on Elena's arms instantly stood on end, beads of sweat forming in every pore. She looked around as her surroundings became a blur.

Surely she wasn't going that fast? A carousel is supposed to be a gentle ride, but this one kept on getting faster with each lap. Scared now, with new beads of sweat pricking her upper lip and the back of her neck, Elena looked towards the faces in the centre. She shrieked in horror as the faces moved in time with the carousel, up and down, their screaming mouths moving in sync to the menacing music. What sort of carousel was this?

'Hey! I want to get off. Excuse me? Let me off now!'

Tears of panic were falling fast. She tried to undo her seatbelt, but it was stuck. She fought with it, tearing at it, even biting it to try and escape, but it wouldn't budge. Why had she come here? She wished she had ignored the night's whispers and just walked up the stairs, instead of under them. She wanted this nightmare to end. The carousel was picking up speed, spinning faster and faster with each second that passed. Out of the corner of her eye, Elena saw the greasy man appear.

'Hey, let me off! I want to get off!' She shouted above the noise, her hand reaching out towards him as a tear ran down her face.

He raised a camera and took a picture of Elena, as he pressed the eye of a tortured man on the middle column.

With a flash of bright, white light and a deafening scream which came from Elena's diaphragm, but stopped abruptly after escaping her mouth, the carousel slowed down. The man walked around to where Elena had been sitting, but she had vanished. With a grin on his face, he got down from the carousel and wandered off into the darkness.

It was 6.30 PM and night had fallen fast over London. The Southbank was lit up by Christmas lights. The hustle and bustle of the Christmas market was filling the area. In the middle of the square, where the wooden huts ended, under the darkness of a bridge, stood a dishevelled carousel. If anyone had been able to see the carousel, they might have been

intrigued by a shiny golden statue of a lady set at its centre. The other statues next to her faded by comparison. She had long hair that fell in waves and a look of terror etched on her face. The details were vivid, right down to her outstretched hand and a tear running down her cheek.



**Sophie Harris** is a screenwriter and published short story author who enjoys using her experiences of places and life to create fictional stories across different genres and formats. She loves writing and especially enjoys delving into new genres and learning new things about herself and her writing process whilst doing so.

# DISMAS

Neil K. Henderson

You know the feeling well—that dismal certainty in your soul that something extra-dimensional is about to happen. That lingering chill conviction... insidious, but undeniable. You sit on the edge of your chair, alone and alert, bolt upright in the starkness of a room bereft of comfort. Acceptance is all. You know that you have no control, that all there is to do is sit and wait.

So you embrace the silence, the absence of event. This is when the slow and painful process begins. The laying open of old sores. The subtle exposure of longing. Almost imperceptibly, the emptiness starts to fill. The silence seems about to break free from itself. The membrane of integrity is ruptured. You move a little closer to The Edge.

It is a very real place, The Edge. Much more real than the world of substance. Yet a veil of mortal dread conceals its presence from all but the specially Chosen. Of course, it's always dark out there—except for the stars. They pierce the shroud of blackness with undiffused brilliance. This means you can witness events in severe half-shadows, through or within a constant glow of electric midnight blue. It is always the Electric Midnight out on The Edge.

Out on The Edge, you dwell in endless commune with re-embodied remnants of all those ghosts you hated, all those shadowy spectres you hid in terror from, on and on throughout the hellish chiaroscuro of your life. It is a dark-lantern dialogue where, because of the glare of the blinding astral twilight, you only see outlines. The side of a head, maybe... an ear, or the back of a neck.

But you know who these silhouettes represent. And you know with concrete faith that you will never let up hating them. You are powerless to

avoid the coming conflict. It is preordained, like the Circle of Eternity. Like death. Like the moment of conception. Like a single breath at the dawn of time...

Like the moment when you argue that a fact is not a fact, which is exactly the point at which you begin to comprehend the truth. The moment you begin to slip into a new dimension. You become part of something bigger than yourself. A subtle motion, a fluidity, a fluctuation, passing through the endless permutations of contact.

Imagine the moment you're walking up the road some distance behind two people whom you know, and as you approach them, you suddenly realise they're talking about you. You pretend not to notice their surprise on turning to see you walking behind them. You act like you just materialised from nowhere in response to their thoughts.

Just like that, then, the antithesis of volition creeps up through the silence, and you find yourself alone among the spirits on The Edge. This is the point of Now, which has to be, and which is only waiting for you to experience it. This is when the Thing You Dreaded Most becomes actual. At once captured in your consciousness and captor of your soul. You have to face it now, but it keeps twisting away, hiding its visage in the shadows of electric midnight blue. You have to rely on memory to force the confrontation.

A picture forms a backdrop to the starlight. It stirs immediate recognition. The backs of your eyes ache as you focus hard upon the scene. You see a demolition site. The deeply-dug foundations of a tenement building. Each floor of the property still clearly outlined on the one remaining wall, now the blind end of the rest of the terrace. You know this place means something to you. That this wall contains some secret which you can hardly bear to acknowledge. You want to turn away, but the bitter ecstasy of self-torment makes you cling to the thought. The concentration of fear and suffering and... loss... around this place makes you shudder. This must be the Scene of the Crime. All that now remains is to search for clues.

A separate strand of recognition flashes through the dream. You remember how you sat at home, cradling the phone beneath your chin, bleeding your vital Message down the line to the tired-sounding cop. You said you knew where the body was, tried to convey the urgency of the horror that was driving you. He was tolerant, taking nothing for granted. After all, the



police had nothing else to go on. The file had been left open. And you hadn't you, too, sought comfort from the dark—that blanket of concealment for a million black uncertainties? It was this that bound you and them together. The point of contact. The tormented couple's feeble search for solace, and your headlong flight from brutal fact, met upon The Edge's common plane. Otherwise, how could you even guess at their anguish? How could the merest hint of that uncomprehending grief impinge upon your desolate psyche? The nearest thing they had to hope was that the dark hid something better than the truths their terror told them—some unseen second chance. But for you, wallowing with ghosts and monsters most would shun, the darkness was a black hole, its maw absorbing all the substance from your spirit. Like a Beast that sucks the marrow from a bone.

You couldn't doubt those nightmare figures would evaporate in daylight. But it wasn't them you fled from, was it—much as you despised them? Wasn't it yourself—your strange, unfathomable *differentness* that you had to flee? And doing so, you made a prison of your freedom. Never to escape your own being, yet always threatened by those insubstantial Others, you were well and truly trapped. That's what made The Edge so cruel. The glare from the starlight made you see—but only just enough to confirm your worst suspicions. And it would take more than electric midnight blue to dispel the things you saw.

All the time on the phone to the duty officer, your mind flashed back and forth from your immediate surroundings to that wall of a demolished house: a former children's day nursery, as you well knew. It's doing it now, flashing in and out, as you recall the confrontation from this lonely chair, this present spartan room. White tiles against a crumbling sandstone wall, drawing the inner gaze across the gaping basement pit... closer... closer... up to the secret place. X marks the spot.

You're wincing now, the familiar is suddenly unfamiliar. The cold grip of knowledge tearing you from the part that was yourself.

You were yourself a playmate in that nursery, when just a little child. Little more than a baby. Small enough to squeeze into the tightest of hidey-holes. Still too small to see above shop counters (blessed angel!). Far too young and innocent to know predestination. You knew about coercion, though. Even to this day, you gag at the memory of that boiled cabbage smell in the 'kitchen', which was what the kids called the dining room. You

never saw any Oliver Twists in there, asking for more. They had to force the stuff down you. You remember that white-tiled patch of wall—still standing when the rest of the place had fallen. It became a permanent memorial to the steaming urns of institution food which once presided there.

An institution like a prison. A concentration camp for toddlers and tiny infants. Death Row for individuality. A soul-destruction factory. The happiest days of your life. Freedom from responsibility. So much freedom that you lose your way completely, and you realise too late that the conveyor only goes one way. So you jump the tracks into the Void, and now the only light to guide you comes from the brilliant glare of starlight on The Edge. It is only by losing yourself in that Other Place that you can find your way back home. And home is where the heart is.

Where your heart beat faster waiting for the unmarked car to the demolition site. The officers were relieved at your disinclination to gibber. Your quiet dignity made life easier for them, and the trip got them away from paperwork for an hour or two. Even the drizzle helped to ground things in the mundane. Only your Message strayed beyond the everyday. Even then, you were not the first to pick up data from The Edge. They'd had psychics and the like before. It was a 'sympathetic' that had led them to the Farmer girl. These days, they kept an open mind.

The journey was hell for you, though—the feelings from The Edge getting stronger and more painful as you neared the earthly locus of the scene that haunted you. Sitting here now, far removed from the pressures of the past, you still re-feel the terror of that tiny victim... the cloying sickliness of the airless dark... the abject desolation of being, for the first and last time, so absolutely alone. You want your mum. You want to go home.

You began to tremble as the car pulled up and you got out. You eyed the tiled layer in the ragged end-wall, unable to control the wave upon wave of nauseating fear which surged up through you from the One who called you from The Edge. Something like x-ray vision possessed you then. Fleeting glimpses of a skeletal nemesis danced in and out of the Electric Midnight's blue horizon.

Of course, you know *now* why you were chosen. Now you understand why the Message sought *you*. It is beyond coincidence that you yourself had been a part of here thirty, nearer forty, years ago. A baby hardly able to walk, and yet endowed with such a power to... with that incredible inner strength

which might do things an encumbered adult had to shrink from.

But that power had yet controlled you. It formed a bond which brought you back year after year, as if in preparation for such a time as—well, what *is* time, anyway? How can you, or anyone else, be sure that what is to come hasn't already taken place; isn't simply awaiting the optimum moment of revelation? How can we trust our memories of the past? Maybe things we *think* happened long ago are really still ahead. Maybe some... influence... merely gives the occasional insight. And maybe some things never *really* happen at all. Or maybe *everything* happens simultaneously, but the human intellect separates the strands of event—like a prism refracting light, trying to make sense of it all...

Whatever the set-up was, you clearly remember those previous unplanned visits here. Sometimes the bus you were on would stop at the lights, and you'd find yourself staring across the waste of foundations at the tiled stretch of wall. Or you would miss your turning in the street one day, and you would come face-to-face with the old place, as if drawn there by... fate. As though, without realising it, you had already begun searching for the missing child. At any rate, by the time you summoned the courage to call the police, you must have recognised the sacrifice you'd been granted to lay the ghost of your unpardoned crime. Here was a changeling victim to take your burden from you, absolve you of your awesome duty... that Sisyphean task which your unasked-for birth had thrust upon you. The re-enactment of karmic law: the compulsion to keep coming back.

Once upon a time, you had a little pal in that erstwhile kindergarten. You remember him now. You used to call him Dirty Dickie Ditchwater, and sometimes he was naughty. Sometimes you had to teach him a lesson. Oh yes, and you know what you finally put him through—and even at that age, you knew it was *wrong*. As years went by, you tried to find forgiveness somehow. But *they* never forgive. There is no relenting, out on The Edge. You cannot run and hide from the glaring light of truth that blazes from the stars. So, you made the final pilgrimage.

The pain of hopelessness and loss around that unholy shrine was almost impossible to bear. You began to sob as you pointed out where guilt lay buried. When the men started drilling, you collapsed in a passion of inconsolable anguish. Oh, Dirty Dickie Ditchwater had his revenge on you then. And when they broke through to the chamber behind the bricked-up

vent, your face became a mask of despair. You screamed out loud:

“Repent, O Dismas! For now is thy undoing!”

It was hard to swallow that look the policeman gave you: that mixture of pity, of scorn, of disbelief and disgust... and finally exasperation.

“Do you want this?” the drilling supervisor asked.

The constable released a deep-held breath, handing you the filthy, battered, thirty-something golliwog, without a glance in your direction. And then, as if it had ever been your destiny, they all packed up and went away, leaving you alone with Dirty Dickie Ditchwater. All alone to face the music.

At least they hadn't charged you with wasting police time. After all, you *had* found *something*, and your emotions were clearly disturbed. The parents of the missing child hadn't been informed at this stage, and the media hadn't picked up the scent. There was no real harm done. Of course, you'd known all those years that he'd be there, right where you put him, patiently awaiting release. Well, he's safe now.

You brought him home and looked after him, until eventually someone came and took him from you. But that's OK. You know they'll provide for his needs, and that's no more than he deserves. Maybe they'll restuff him, since he's almost pulled to bits. Maybe they will stitch that arm back on. You're happy to take the blame for everything that happened. Maybe someday you really will be absolved of your sin.

Meanwhile, here you are, bolt upright in your chair, imminently expecting another extra-dimensional development. It would need to be something pretty special to get you down from your cross again. A clatter makes you start—the sound of a key in that big, heavy lock. Bars drawn back. A tray of food is slid across the floor; the door is slammed and barred once more. They can't take it, you see—the sight of a crucified man.

You reach out your good arm and snatch up a morsel. Oh, no, they don't like that shaft of splintered bone at the *other* shoulder-joint. Very unsightly, that... to worldly eyes. But you had to atone. An eye for an eye: an arm for an arm. Witness the rags of flesh that dangle and fester by your butchered side. There was nothing else for it. You had to tear *yourself* apart, like poor wee dismembered Dickie. Justice has to be done—even if some people don't like it.

Can't stand the smell either, if the truth be known. But smell is a powerful, far-reaching influence. Scent transcends mere physical barriers.

The holy stink of your spiritual resurrection will flow above the earth and out through the firmament into the outermost ethers of the Great Unknown. Even as far as The Edge itself, to be inhaled by the astral nostrils of the shades and spectres ever wakeful there.

And *that'll* give the bastards something to think about.

**Neil K. Henderson** was born in 1956 in Glasgow, Scotland. He is the son of artist and mountaineer Drummond Henderson (1900 - 1961) and maternal grandson of artist and illustrator Harry Keir (hence the middle *K.* in his name). Neil's idiosyncratically humorous works of bizarre imagination have been appearing in magazines of all descriptions in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, India and Cyprus since 1987. He has written several novels and collections of short stories, as well as comedy TV scripts and radio scripts. He is currently writing flash fiction.

Neil K. Henderson attributes his success to the practice of always carrying about his person a small piece of cheese attached to a length of string. This causes many people to ask: "Success? *What* success?"

# THE PUREST SACRIFICE

Anita Markoff

That day, the blood looked much brighter than I expected. It was sticky and thick, a viscous red like I'd seen in technicolour 70s movies, when my mum told me to close my eyes but I still peered between my fingers.

It all started when C said, 'We should do a rabbit.'

'Why?' I'd asked, already knowing I would agree anyway. He was magnetic, and I was a willing follower.

'Because they're innocent. It has to be a pure sacrifice.'

There was a strange atmosphere in the air as we headed down to the train tracks. I don't know if I'm exaggerating in hindsight, but I remember the air being muggy, hanging heavy around my skin. Every step was weighted. C kept disappearing into the mist ahead of me, but I knew I had to keep up. I couldn't keep pace with him anymore, not after his growth spurt. My chubby little legs had to work twice as hard to keep up with him as he sensed his way through the undergrowth and branches with car tires dangling from them. I wanted to stop and swing but I knew he wouldn't let me. We were on a mission.

I got this feeling of exhilaration every time C had a new idea. It was so intense, it almost made me sick. The sensation was like the uncanny buzz of getting a small electric zap, like when friends at school would pass me a piece of gum that wasn't really gum at all. I always fell for it, and all the boys would fall about laughing, yet I would join in, even though I was supposed to be frightened.

Strange feelings didn't scare me. I liked to feel them again and again—it was an addiction. If I thought something bad might happen in the playground, I would get excited. Once, I wet myself and had to be sent

home.

C and I were similar. He liked to make things happen. He always came up with new things for us to do that wouldn't be allowed, but this was his biggest plan yet.

'C!' I called into the shifting grey. 'Am I gonna get grounded again this time?'

He shrugged. 'Depends if we get caught. You didn't tell, did you?'

'No.' I was offended.

He must have sensed it because he slowed down to wait for me. C put his hand on my arm.

'I know you don't tell.'

'I never would.'

His grey jumper was already smeared with mud. We would have to swap clothes before we got home so his mum wouldn't find out. Mine didn't mind so much; she believed playing outdoors was good for growing boys. C's mum would hit him if she knew.

I liked when we changed clothes. I liked feeling C all around me as I walked home. I would pull the zip over my nose and walk like that so I could smell him.

'How are we gonna find one?'

'They're everywhere.'

'I don't see any.'

'That's because you're not looking.'

I kicked the leaves and my foot thudded against something harder.

'Careful. There's broken glass.'

I bent down to pick it up. Lots of people left shards of bottles by the train tracks.

That's why we weren't allowed here, but all the boys in town went anyway. We just stayed away from the funny-smelling older men with scraggly beards.

The bottle was encrusted with mud but had a jagged end.

'Hey. Look what I found.'

C grinned. I knew we would be thinking the same thing.

'Yeah, we can use that. That's perfect actually.'

He reached out for it then hesitated.

'You wanna carry it?'

I nodded, feeling good inside, like a man. C always made me feel like that.

As we kept picking our way towards the chain metal fence around the tracks, he told me the story of what we were about to do. I kept my eyes on the ground, in case I saw a flash of fur, or stumbled over the cans and blue plastic bags.

‘Legend says that a curse lies on these lands.’

‘What kind of curse?’

‘I’m getting there. Just wait. So, the ancient warriors of the land were once peaceful. They sat every day in counsel around a stone table with a sword that had never been used. That unstained sword was their honour.’

‘What does honour mean?’

‘Doesn’t matter. But they had it. And then one day...’ His voice trailed off. ‘Did you hear that?’

‘No. There’s no one here.’

‘Over there,’ He pointed, but I couldn’t see anything, ‘... a rabbit.’

I didn’t want to find it yet. I wanted him to keep telling the story of why we had to kill one. I wasn’t good at reading, it made me fidgety and restless, but I loved to listen to C. He had a way of saying things.

‘I don’t see anything; it’s too dark. Let’s keep looking.’

I stepped on a rotten piece of wood, and it snapped loudly.

‘Hey! Now it’s gone.’

We trudged down the slope for a bit in silence, grabbing onto branches so we wouldn’t slide in the mud.

‘So then what happened?’

‘With who?’

‘The warriors.’

‘Oh. One day, they were attacked by a sorceress. She tricked them by coming in the shape of an animal, and before they knew it, everyone was dead. Murdered. Only one young warrior managed to save them all. He knew the only way to kill a sorceress was to stab her directly in the heart.’

He put his hand on my chest, and I could feel the slow thudding inside quicken.

‘Right there. That’s where we have to aim.’

‘On the rabbit?’

‘Yes. It’s our sacrifice. It will break the spell and we can stop being



boys and become warriors.’

‘Yeah well, I already am a warrior.’ I grinned at him and ran, knowing he would chase after me.

The ground sank under my feet, but I didn’t fall. Slimy things made noises under my shoes, but I propelled myself forwards, going so fast I could hear my heart beat again.

‘Your sword!’

C’s voice was faint, but I looked at the grimy bottle in my fist. I heard a thud from behind and a scream that hit me like an electric shock, spreading from my stomach through my whole body.

‘C?’

I found him face down on the ground, squirming over something.

‘Don’t just stand there, help me!’

He jerked around like a remote-control race car.

I flopped on top of him and then I felt it. The rabbit underneath. It was frantic, beating up against C’s body, trying to break free. It felt exciting trying to pin it down with him. My breath was hot on his neck.

‘Don’t let go.’

He didn’t need to tell me twice. I was already grabbing onto him and the rabbit all at the same time, feeling moving limbs and fur.

‘You have to use your sword to conquer it!’

I shifted the bottle and he squirmed, and I brought it downwards as hard as I could, with his screams ringing in my ears. I had no idea what he was saying but I felt a frenzied rush. Nothing could kill us. We would always win.

There was a horrible squishing sensation and then I felt very sick. Everything slowed down and the movement stopped. Something felt wrong inside. There was no tingling feeling, no breathless shock. Something very awful had happened, and I knew it right away and could tell C knew it too. We looked at each other and his eyes were wide and glowing in the dim light. Then I started to heave.

He didn’t even move as I retched over the forest floor. I spat after I was finished and closed my eyes and imagined my mum giving me a glass of water and asking if I was okay. C didn’t ask me anything. He was staring at the forest floor. My bottle was stuck into something. I was afraid to look. I tugged on his sleeve.

‘C. C. We should go home now.’

He wouldn’t move. He just kept staring at it. When I saw it, the whole thing felt distant and imaginary. The blood was too bright, too fake-looking. But I knew it was real and that’s why I had this ugly feeling inside.

‘We need to go.’

His shoulders were shaking and then these mangled sounds came from C that I hadn’t heard before. Not even when he broke his leg playing danger tag. We had never felt so far apart. He turned to look at me and his eyes were empty. It was like he couldn’t even see me standing there.

‘We have to do something C. We could... we could make a fire?’

He was always the one to come up with the ideas and I needed him then, more than ever. He had taken us there, to that place by the train tracks, and told me these stories and I had followed him and done everything he said. Now everything was ruined.

I still remember how it looked, twisted in the mud, and how every step we took homewards felt like a step C was taking away from me, even though we walked together. When we said goodbye I almost grabbed his arm, desperate for him to acknowledge me, but he never spoke to me again. We didn’t exchange clothes. Every time I ran into him in the playground, and then years later in the corridors at school, he looked the other way. Now I live miles from my hometown, but I still dream about the trees by the tracks, their long fingers reaching out to snag my clothes, drag me back in. In my sleep I see him and he smiles at me and tells me everything is okay, it was another of his games. In those moments I feel so relieved I start to laugh. I laugh and laugh and when I call his name, he reaches out to me, and as I wake up I am saying, ‘Charlie. Charlie. Charlie.’

**Anita Markoff** completed an MA in English Literature - Film and Visual Culture at the University of Aberdeen and got a distinction in a Creative Writing Masters there. Their poetry and reflective essays have been published in *Spilt Milk*, *Re-analogue*, *Meanwhile*, and *Quarter Life* magazines; *Dime Show Review* Volume 3 Issue 2, and *Every Writer’s Resource*. Femme but not fatale, they spend their time tending to their plants and daydreaming about being featured in a fantastical realism course fifty years from now.

# FOREVER

Lee Bennett

Either the devil lives in London, or they are here a lot. I often see them in Wapping, where I live; but I have seen them all over. I know it is them. It's instinctual, a deep knowledge, like a new-born worker bee knows its queen. Before I saw them in the flesh, I dreamt of them, now and again, and in my dreams, when they appear, I experience fear like no other. Real fear. Like I'm choking and I can't speak, breathe or move. That kind of terror. That's how I feel too, every time they appear in real life.

I call the devil "Them", because they appear in many different forms—the first time, that I remember anyway, was when I had just turned 30. They appeared as a middle-aged man, handsome, in a sharp charcoal grey suit with a cane, sticking to a "classic" devil look for their first appearance. They were at a bus stop across the road from my flat as I left to go to work. They waved to me and hopped on the 100 bus like it was nothing, and my life as I knew it ended. It was a nightmare made real. At a bus stop. Imagine that.

Among other things, they have appeared to me as a small boy in school uniform, a large lady on a mobility scooter, as a rat at Wapping station, as a homeless man laying on flattened boxes near Tower Bridge, and once as a spider in my bathroom while I was taking a shit. The spider was the worst, they spoke to me in Latin as they dangled from my ceiling. Their idea of a joke, I think, reminding me that I could be reached by them anywhere. I'm guessing you have never heard a spider speak. Trust me, it's terrifying.

After those first appearances—because that's all they were at first—they spoke to me. Walking home with some food that I had bought and

knew I wouldn't eat, they were sitting on a bench by St Katharine Docks, looking out at the water. They appeared as a beautiful woman in her fifties, immaculately dressed in greys and blacks, wrapped in a thick scarf with thick red lipstick and pure white hair. They could have lived in one of the expensive flats nearby. Anyone looking at us might have thought they were my mother. The now familiar but still crippling fear shot through me like a taser.

'Here,' they said, patting the bench beside them. 'Sit.' The accent clipped, West London. The voice deep and sonorous as if from too many cigarettes, sexy almost. You've heard stories about the devil being seductive and I am ashamed to say, I understood.

What was I going to say, *no*? I could have tried to run, but my limbs barely allowed me to shuffle across to the bench. I lowered myself down next to them, my muscles rigid and numb, like I had just woken up from a coma. I stared at the water, the late summer evening sun turning the rippling water to amber flames. They smelled of Chanel No. 5. They really got into character.

'I am sure you remember, Sister Marceline? Do you remember what she said to you that day?'

Sister Marceline was a nun that taught Religious Education at my school, but she was nice, not one of the nasty violent ones you might have heard of. I was helping her to move some chairs in the drama studio which doubled as a chapel at lunchtime on Tuesdays, for the few kids that wanted to attend mass. I remembered the smell of school dinners from the nearby canteen starting to fill the room, an indecipherable odour, just that school dinner smell, and her stomach rumbled as we worked.

When we were done moving the furniture, she lifted the blanket which covered the makeshift altar at the end of the room and said in a soft Irish accent, 'There. A lot more room in here now. But do you know, Lee, you might think that there are only two of us in this room but that would be wrong. There are in fact six. There is me, and you, my guardian angel, your guardian angel, God and the Devil.'

I have often told that story to friends at work, or in a pub for laughs. How a nun freaked out my 13-year-old self. I have never told it again.

'She was right.' They laughed, something catching in their throat.

'Sort of. Yes. I've known you for a long time. We are friends. Of a

kind.’

If I could have thought of something to say, I couldn’t have said it. ‘You doubt me?’

My jaw wouldn’t move.

‘Look for a painting. The *Adoration of the Kings*. I won’t tell you which one, you’ll have to work for it. OK, it’s in the National Gallery, I’ll help you a little. Go to the gallery, do not use a computer, and look. If you don’t, I’ll know.’

I thought about the spider incident.

‘Now go. I’ll see you soon.’

I stumbled away. After I had put some distance between us, I turned to look back. They remained on the bench, staring out at the water, then, without turning, they raised a hand in a shooing motion. I staggered on.

The next day I called in sick from work, which wasn’t questioned at all by my boss. I’d been calling in sick a lot since that first appearance, which was understandable. When I was at work, my demeanour matched my poor attendance. I’d lost weight, and purple bags swung under my eyes. My engagement level was less than zero. I looked like a World War One soldier in a trench, waiting for the whistle to blow. I lied and told my boss that I had been to the GP but that the results were ‘inconclusive.’ I was referred to our Private Healthcare provider but made an excuse not to attend the appointment. I was offered counselling but there was nothing wrong with me, I wasn’t mad or depressed. What was I going to say, ‘The Devil is real, and everything now is pretty pointless actually’? My boss encouraged me to stay at home, but after one of their appearances, I didn’t want to be alone, and yet I also didn’t want to see friends and family, who I had started to ignore, not wanting to draw them into all this, whatever *this* was. Should I speak with a priest? I didn’t believe in God. Which is sort of mad when you think about it.

On one of these ‘sick’ days, at home, laying on the sofa, an old cartoon came on. *Northwest Hounded Police*, in which Droopy the Dog terrorises a wolf. Whatever the wolf does, wherever he goes, under the sea, to the top of a mountain, Droopy appears, and each time the wolf screams, his eyes and tongue pop out of his head, scared witless. That was basically my life.

At the gallery, a helpful lady on the information desk gave me a list

of 64 paintings titled *The Adoration of the Kings* which were spread across 60 or so rooms in the gallery. I told her it was ‘research’.

I worked my way through painting after painting, in room after room, scanning every face. Each scene was a variation on the theme: kings and various other parties all dotting on Mary with her downcast eyes and the baby Jesus. In most cases, the baby Jesus looked quite scary—a chubby baby body with a man’s face and a halo, gleefully accepting the reverence of everyone, and sometimes giving them an arrogant little salute.

As I made my way through each room, I noticed paintings in which the devil appeared. These devils were usually being defeated by an angel or being cast out of heaven. I laughed at the ridiculous, cartoonish little monsters these Renaissance painters imagined them to be.

Knowing nothing about art, I didn’t recognise any of the artists’ names until I saw the name *Botticelli* next to a painting on my list. This name I recognised. When I was a child, my Nan had an ashtray on which was printed a reproduction of *The Birth of Venus*, probably a present from one of my aunts, bought on holiday. Never used, it sat on a shelf as an ornament. As a young boy I couldn’t believe my Nan had an ashtray showing a woman’s boob, but then, after this initial thrill, I was drawn to the face, the grey eyes, the slender neck, thick red hair. It might have been the first woman I fancied.

Botticelli’s *Adoration of the Kings* was much like the rest. Classic Virgin in the centre of the action, blue gown, passive, holding the baby Jesus on her knee, while He blesses kneeling kings with his chubby hand, as a chaotic crowd of men and horses gather. But *there*, inexplicably, in the far left of the frame, was a man with my face! I can’t say it was me, how could it be? But it was my face. Faded and obscured by dark varnish, he had my hair, my nose, my lips and my eyes, which were fixed on the baby Jesus. He wore a silly hat and a pink and blue tunic. Next to him, predictably in black, was them, as the man that they had first appeared to me as.

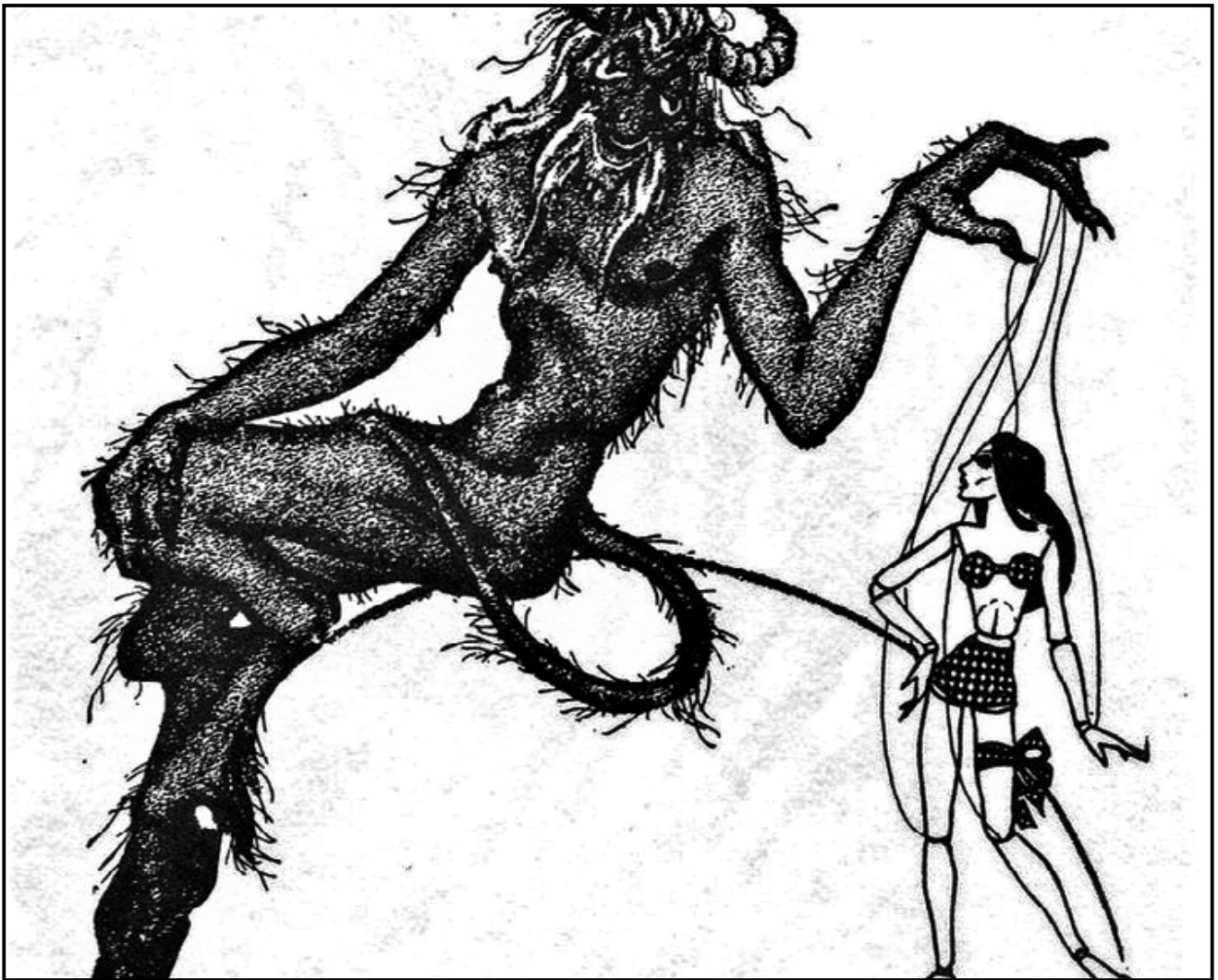
The full fear never came over me as it did when they appeared in the flesh, but it was there, in muscle memory, psychosomatic. They had their head turned to the man with my face, the whole face visible. Was he smiling? It did look like it. I knew that smile—*I know something you don’t*.

I sat down on a bench opposite the painting. It was from 1475. Did they make me view an old painting, just because someone in it looked

like me, and wasn't it funny? Was that what this whole thing was about? I suspected not.

I left the gallery and stepped out into Trafalgar Square, crowded with tourists, office workers eating lunch and gangs of pigeons. I expected one to be them, but they weren't.

When I got home it was nearly dark. The reception to my building was empty. I called the lift. When it arrived the doors opened, and there they were, as him. I got in, the fear I noticed no longer there. As the doors closed, they showed me their true face as they said...



Since graduating with a degree in Film in 1997, **Lee** has been working in finance. Excel spreadsheets have failed to satisfy his creative needs therefore he has undertaken a part time MA in Creative Writing at Westminster. He hopes to finally write that novel.

# ZOMBIA

Adam Durose

Sundown is normally no small mercy in the compounds of Lusaka during the dry season. Slums, projects, *kebonies*; call them what you will, they are without roads, running water, and electricity, and are home to more than 70% of the city's population. One night a little while ago, there was no respite from the heat; it sucked your soul drier than a sun-bleached carcass. In the darkness, punctured by torches and fires, a black rose sparsely flecked with pale yellow paint, Kumanda Compound was a sauna.

That night, Wisdom and Winter were sitting around a torch sharing Chibuku, the combustible sorghum beer sold in a simple blue, white and red carton. The two friends were still aglow with pride, the Zambia national football team having won the African Cup Of Nations. It was a momentous occasion. At the start of the tournament, the Chipolopolo boys were not favoured to do much, but they ended up beating a star-laden Ivory Coast side on penalties after the Zambian lads had played a dynamic football match.

'Eksay, we were not fancied at all,' Winter said about the champions as he gently shook the Chibuku. In the air hung the smell of wet rubbish and refuse.

'Indeed not, Mr. Winter. Indeed not,' Wisdom replied.

'The manager used that to our distinct advantage.'

'Indeed, eksay, indeed.'

After a while, Winter said, 'When they won, it was the best day of my life.'

'Mine too,' Wisdom replied.

'Sometimes it pays to be unfancied.'



Both reflected on how being unfancied has never really helped either in life. Mind, not that it helps to be fancied sometimes either. For example, the World Bank quite likes Zambia, and takes joy in cannibalising its citizens with its austerity policies.

Winter had a grave expression. ‘My friend, on this occasion, declare a toast to honour the victims of the 1993 air tragedy.’

‘Indeed we must, indeed we must,’ Wisdom said.

Winter gave the carton another shake, took a solemn swig, and then passed it to Wisdom.

In 1993, most of the Zambian national team died on a plane on the way to a World Cup qualifying match in Gabon. Tragically, Zambia lost a golden generation of talented footballers.

Some people just liked Kalusha Bwalya, the talented player from Mufulira, while others loved him. In Lusaka, on the day of the tragedy, a first-time father fell in amongst the latter category. With tears in his eyes, this man felt more sadness for the loss of the national team, especially for the great Bwalya, than joy for the birth of his son.

‘Eksay,’ he said to himself, ‘to lose Kalusha Bwalya, on top of the others, is a tragedy beyond words. Bwalya was God’s representative on the pitch. Why has Jehovah taken them all, but especially him? Who will lead the great nation of Zambia to World Cup glory now?’

Various family members were affected by the new father’s visible vulnerability. Many remembered it for years to come and it was a major talking point at his funeral, which would be sooner rather than later. Eventually, someone relayed to the dad that Bwalya was not on the flight, and those tears of grief magically became genuine tears of happiness, transformed like water to wine, and they fell powerfully down his face.

This was a sign. Portents don’t come along often, and when they do, they must be heeded. Kalusha Bwalya was surely divinely protected. Of that, there was no doubt. Thus, for our new father, the name Kalusha became the embodiment of good luck, and by this logic, the name Kalusha’s good fortune would rub off on his son if he was named in honour of the great man from Mufulira. Thus the newly-born boy was named Kalusha.

However, our father was not only a great admirer of Bwalya, he was also a guilt-laden and superstitious man, one who felt great culpability

over loving a footballer more than his newly-born son, and for being more concerned that Bwalya had lived rather than properly mourning the victims of the great tragedy. For this, retribution had to be paid.

So, when his son turned six, his father took him to the small plot of land on the outskirts of the compound which served as a graveyard. There, with just his son to watch, our father made a grandstanding gesture, muttering something indecipherable as his hands quickly moved a whole bunch of different ways at once, kung fu punches of the religiously kooky, and then solemnly said to Kalusha, 'You must never set foot in this resting place of the dead, my son. If you do, there will be great consequences. I have righted a wrong here.'

He then recited a prayer, or oath, or something, combining one part glossolalia with two parts batshit crazy.

And Kalusha never touched that land, not even when his dad was buried there.

Nothing good comes easy, and to paraphrase Shakespeare, fate is a bastard. It had been nearly twenty years since Kalusha Chola had been born. He had grown up, for one thing, poor, as had so many others, and like them, his fate was to die poor. So sad, so unlucky, so typically Zambian. Yet, like his fellow citizens, Kalusha still managed to find a reason to smile.

Unlike most of his fellows though, Kalusha was a gifted footballer, just like his namesake. He was so talented that a scout from Europe wanted Kalusha to try out for a team in Lusaka. It surely was a great honour to be invited, and Kalusha very much wanted to go. However, he didn't have proper football boots, and he wouldn't be able to afford them any time soon.

His friend Dynamo had a plan though. They both need money for *scuts*: Kalusha for football, Dynamo for fashion's sake. Dynamo knew of a couple of local porters who sometimes made a hundred thousand *pin* at the bus station on any given day. You always knew when they did because they had a carton of Chibuku between them. It'd be easy to rob them once the contents of that lethal brew were gone.

Of course, the robbery went south quite quickly. They'd spied on the men from a distance, and once the carton was no longer being passed between

the two, the boys made their move. They had no weapon but for a stick Dynamo had found. It was not a particularly big stick, nor was it pointy, but it was a stick nonetheless, and it would have to do.

Not knowing what to say or do during a robbery, they decided to ask for a loan of fifty thousand kwacha. Once Wisdom and Winter's laughter had levelled off, the two boys then demanded the money. A new wave of laughter came upon the two men, and Dynamo lashed out with his stick. Spry Wisdom dodged the blow, grabbed the stick from Dynamo, and broke it. The two men savagely began to beat Dynamo.

Others who heard the commotion, quickly learned what was happening and either began to beat Dynamo, or search for Kalusha, who quickly ran off, knowing that his poor friend was a goner. That day, Dynamo would be beaten so badly that he would never walk again.

Light from the full moon guided Kalusha as he ran to the outskirts of the compound, eventually finding himself, as he somehow knew he would, outside the cemetery.

So this was it for Kalusha. He could either wait for the ever expanding mob hungry to set upon him like a lame gazelle, or he could break his promise and make a mad dash through the graveyard. He had no choice, and who cared anyway? His dad was mad, and no one in this day and age would believe his ravings anyway.

So he ran over the graves buried under the hard red earth, careful at the very least not to step on the markers whose names had worn off due to the rain that sometimes came in torrents. He ran and ran, and only when he noticed that the mob was nowhere to be seen did he stop to catch his breath.

He had survived.

The moon shone on an interesting rock, an almost fleshy-looking oval that cried out to him. Being a sentimental and superstitious person, much like his father, Kalusha decided he needed a memento to mark the occasion that had seen him avoid a brutal beating. Conveniently, he forgot about Dynamo.

Kalusha gave the rock a slight kick, and was shocked to see that the rock stayed as immovable as the economy that the World Bank lived to feast upon. Surely his football skills had not abandoned him, he thought.

Bending over to pick up the rock, his shock scored a brace as the

rock revealed itself to be a hand.

‘Eksay, I suppose a body part is not so uncommon in a cemetery,’ Kalusha thought. This was loose logic, but his adrenalin was pumping and his mind had found time to remember his poor friend Dynamo.

No time for logic though, loose or otherwise, when the hand snatched his leg.

No time for logic when another hand broke through the hard red earth, and grabbed his other leg. No time for logic as a body, with a ragged worn suit that somehow covered flesh that should have decomposed twenty years ago, broke slowly through the ground. No time for logic as big bricks of earth erupted as the body rose up, causing motes of wet dirt to glitter in the moonlight. No time for logic when Kalusha somehow knew the body was that of the world’s greatest Kalusha Bwalya fan. And definitely no time for logic when his father somehow vacuously growled, ‘You have wronged what I righted,’ and proceeded to feast upon the poor kid’s body. No, no time for logic then.

**Adam Durose** is an aspiring writer who loves strong coffee, travelling, and punk rock. He has written a novel, and hopes that it will be published soon. Adam has lived abroad in a few different countries, including Zambia, where he developed a deep personal connection with its people and culture. These days he likes to skateboard, swear in Spanish, and support Zambia’s national teams.

# NIGHT WALK

Pete Armstrong

Amelia gazed down the corridor where her young man was creeping towards the front door, whatever his name was. Really, it was too bad. She had presumed that her evening pick-up would be a safe bet until morning, but it seemed he wanted rid of her immediately, his idea of afterplay being to eject her into the street, regardless of the time. After all, she'd submitted to his fumbling efforts, choosing to direct the affair herself from on top, when it became apparent he would produce no more than a drunken drum roll and floppy ritardando if left to his own devices. The least she expected was a bed for the night.

Breakfast was beyond her expectations. Breakfast always was, and it was generally not worth the anxiety it provided anyway. Good looks under neon lights and competence in the kitchen seldom went together. But to be turfed out into the dangers of a solitary walk home in the small hours was regrettable. She made a final effort to salvage asylum in the dark.

'The night is young, you know, we've barely got going. Wouldn't another performance with morning coffee be nice?'

It was more than she would normally bother with, but it was cold out, and late. It would be a dark and lonely trek. But he only shuffled barefoot on the sticky rug and opened the door anyway.

'Sorry babes, I need to be up early. It was really great and all. See you around.' Then he showed her his yellow-white teeth in a sloppy smile followed by the peeling paint of his flat door. Amelia was quite disgruntled by this. It would have been more convenient if he had fallen asleep directly. Unfortunately, he wasn't as drunk as she had assumed.

She buttoned up her raincoat and tightened the belt, then navigated

her way through the remains of someone's discarded meal, cardboard and chicken and fried potatoes all indistinguishable from each other. Outside, the temperature was falling, and there was likely to be frost in the morning. At least she didn't go out at night wearing wisps of glittery Lycra, with bare shoulders and midriff. She had never gone down that route. A long skirt and warm cardigan were satisfactory. You don't need an exposed navel to pick out a man for the night. She had long known how to do that; glitter and face paint had nothing to do with it.

Her brown shoes clacked along the pavement as she picked up pace. They were acceptable for dancing and adequate for running; you never knew when *that* would be necessary. She shivered. It was dark, the sky cloudless and bright, with the stars doing their best to provide a magnificent display above the city lights. Her path was lit up by solitary lampposts, and shrouded in gloom between them. Like a rollercoaster, she swept through highs and lows of yellow and black, of safety and God only knows what will happen to you.

Two left turns took her out of the unkempt student flats from where she had been ungraciously ejected, and onto The Bridges. She headed north towards her flat in the New Town, with its dark curtains, locked common entrance and iron railings.

At least on this street she was protected. There was a regular stream of night buses and several open restaurants. The occasional tramp still wandered the streets, along with a few unsuccessful clubbers, who had stayed on until the doormen threw them out unattached, too drunk on beer and down in spirits to bother Amelia.

She emerged into Princes Street and what could almost be mistaken for daylight. An abundance of lampposts shone on both sides of the street. Here, shop windows blazed, while up above, the castle and grand buildings were lit tastefully from the ground, giving each its own, distinctive scowl.

The fastest route crossed Princes Street and continued up the hill, but Amelia detoured a few blocks west, clinging to the light as long as possible. No window shopping; she could do that in the comfort of a weekend afternoon, with the promise of tea and cakes to follow. She kept up a pace too brisk for any wheedling drunk to catch up and accost her. Too rapid even for the occasional slurred proposal to fully land home. She caught the first half of one, the end of another. The insults never varied.

When she finally swung to the right, away from the shop fronts, it was like leaving day for night, summer for winter.

It was suddenly quiet, the pavement deserted, side paths and alleys disappearing into shadow. Occasional movement caught her eye, the odd squawk of a disturbed bird broke the silence. She marched on, leaving alley cats and prey to their nightly games.

She passed a couple up against the gateway to one of the alleys. They were driving hard at it, going like steam pistons only a few metres from the street. The crumbling pointing from the unsatisfactory brickwork would leave bruises in the morning. There would be scratches from gravel, not to mention whatever else from the street, driven into skin and underclothing during the wild dance. Catch her putting up with that!

She hesitated before turning right through another gateway into an unlit alley. She knew this area well. This one was darker and more remote than the main street, but shorter and faster. It was a question of risk management, a decision to be made.

The sharp staccato from her shoes was swallowed up by the damp ground, only faint echoes trickling back. She followed the path instinctively. Her pace never slackened, chin held high, coat pulled tight. Step after step. Already she could see the faint glow of the lamp posts ahead. The light at the end of the tunnel. No need to hurry, she didn't need a false step now. The gloom clung to her. Creatures of the night shrank back as she passed. She was almost there, almost able to reach out and touch the comparative safety of the light, when a lumbering shape staggered out of the gloom and blocked her path.

Amelia was forced to stop. She could hear the soggy, saturated breathing ahead of her; the smell of stale alcohol and danger. The man swayed in silence as each regarded the other. Amelia said nothing, she did not even ask that he stand aside. She only waited, as if she knew what was to come.

He broke the pause with a slurred insult, stumbling over his words, flecks of spittle reaching her face even from where he stood. At least, she assumed it was an insult, as it was impossible to make out the actual words. Then he rocked precariously away from the path, missed his footing, flung up wild arms and crashed sideways onto the ground. The drowned wreck of him was laid out and still. Safety. But she stepped forwards and stretched

out her hands so that he could stagger to his feet, clutching the unlikely lifebelt of her embrace.

He was heavy and they reeled towards the wall. An unplanned waltz. She twisted at the last moment to ensure he took the brunt. Arms were limp, face moist with liquids she did not want to identify, his flat hands grasped at nothing. A stream of unintelligible filth bled from his mouth, but that changed to a startled hiss as the sharp stiletto dug through his ribs and hit home. The dance was over. Now he was punctured and flat, like a deflated beach ball. The body crumpled to the ground, littering the street.

When Amelia arrived home there was light under the living room door. Therese, her lodger, was still awake. She called out a welcome.

‘Hi, is that you? I wasn’t sure if you’d be home tonight. I’m having a last glass of wine, do you want to join me?’

‘Sure,’ Amelia called back. ‘I might just take a shower first.’ She slipped off her shoes, lifted them into a space in the rack, and stepped lightly towards the bathroom.

**Pete** lives on the shores of Lake Vänern in central Sweden. He spends his days in blue jeans looking after children, reading, writing and playing a little Bach on the guitar. He has been commended in many writing competitions, including LISP, Segora and New Millenium; and won a competition for Globe Soup. His work has appeared in numerous journals, notably Wells Street Journal, Strukturriss and Strands Magazine. He has published a book of irreverent hiking anecdotes. On days off he hikes through Swedish skog, trying not to bump into moose. Again.



# ONE OCTOBER NIGHT

Tom Harvey

I'd been over to the Halloween shop in Croydon, had this idea for a zombie-vampire-queen look, all purple and black. I got there and it was closed because of the snow. This weather, I swear, only exists in Croydon. No buses, so I had to get the Overground back, one stop to Norwood Junction, a waste of money, but the walk would have taken me an hour in the snow.

Walking up the hill from the station to the High Street, it got darker and colder; so cold, you feel you could snap your own hair off. I love that High Street. There was a picture of it in our school hall, black and white, from the olden days, like a still from a Charlie Chaplin film. There were horses and carts, an open-top trolley-bus advertising *Borwick's Powders*, whatever they were. By the old mattress-makers—now a chicken shop—there was a girl with a blurred head. She must have been turning to look at something when the picture was taken; we called her the Ghost Girl at school. You can still make out the old signs from the past; *Noakes and Co*, *Imperial Stout* above the take-away kebab; *Williamson's General Store* became a Woolworths, then an Iceland, and now the old painted sign sits above a Tesco.

I don't know how I know all this, all these ghosts of past shops that sit behind the modern neon. Groper Gary's barber shop used to be a butcher's with massive animals hanging in the window; pigs cut in half, rabbits with their fur on, un-plucked pheasants, and chickens. In the picture, the butcher's standing in the doorway, arms crossed, all proud of his handiwork. Now, it's just Groper Gary lurking in his doorway, like a spider, sucking on a strawberry vape, enticing you into the warm, so he can sit you in his barber's chair and look up your skirt. It's so cold, I'm half tempted; it

wouldn't be the first time, but I just wave to him and truck on.

At the top of the hill, you can hardly see your own hand through the snow, so I dive into Stanley Halls to warm up and get a coffee from the cafe. It's empty and the café is shut. Of course, why would it be open when you're desperate for a warm cup of something? You can get a hot chocolate in the middle of summer or a big slab of carrot cake when you've just started your holiday diet, but in the middle of winter when you're keeling over with cold, it's shut.

There's a tapping in the room by the stairs that looks like a cupboard, but it isn't. I poke my head round the door. There's Mister Tappy, a bald old bloke, forties at least, wearing an apron. Mallet in one hand, chisel in the other, and he's tapping away at a gravestone. I tell him the café is shut and ask if he's got a kettle, 'cos I'm freezing and parched.

He says, 'What café would that be?'

I figure he's new here, from one of those new artisan companies, all about the old-fashioned trades. Making stuff the old way so they can charge twice the price at the Sunday market. I wonder who would want to buy a gravestone. He says he doesn't have a kettle.

It's warmer inside than out, so I try to be friendly, and ask him what he's doing. He says he's working. I ask him what he's working on. He says that it's a gravestone for a grave.

This used to be *CH James Stonemasons*. There were all these big slabs of marble and stone at the back when the new people took the place on. The idea was to turn it into a theatre or workshops or whatever it's meant to be now. Then the penny drops; it must all be part of a re-creation experience, making the Halls into what life used to be like, so we can all revisit our past, get in touch with our history. I ask him if that's what he does, relive history.

He grumps, 'That is our fate, my dear.'

I'm just trying to be friendly but now I'm getting a bit pissed off with his approach to customer service.

I say to him, 'Aren't you meant to be a bit more welcoming, telling me about the past, how you did stuff in the olden days? You ain't even got a kettle, hardly gonna win you the Visitor Attraction of the Year Prize. I'll be straight on TripAdvisor. You get two stars you do, and that's me being generous.'

He says, 'Sorry. I've a royal headache. Mrs Laverty gave me a tonic,

but I drank it the first hour this morning, and now it's back like a carthorse kicking me skull in.'

I offer him a Nurofen.

I give him my last two. He swallows them like my brother, no water. I can't do it like that. They get stuck in my throat, at the back.

'So, who died?' I ask, thinking I've got him warmed up now, so I should keep him chatting. He looks at me, stone dust all over his face, his eyebrows; smeared over his bald head where he's been wiping off the sweat.

'Do we have to do this again?' he asks. 'This torture.'

Now I know I go on a bit; I can talk the legs off a pit pony. I should have my own podcast. But torture? That's a bit far. I tell him that if he's going to be like that, I'll take my chances in the snow, head back down to Groper Gary, sell a peek of my knickers for a cup of tea, and leave him to his lump of concrete.

'It's finest marble,' he says. 'From Calacatta. Same marble used by Michelangelo and Donatello. Romans used it for the Parthenon. Good stuff. Not too hard, not too soft, steady and even, all the way through, no flaking. Month of a man's wages, just for this bit here.'

Now this is more like it, I think. Getting a bit of the old history and that.

I look more closely at his fancy bit of stone. My head starts to spin, like I want to throw up after a bottle of vodka. Like someone has pressed fast forward. He's got my name on his stone, my name and my birthday, plain as day—Kendra Roach, 1st November 1995.

That's clever, I think. That's really clever. How did he do that? I start to laugh. I love magic. David Blane on the tele, he does things like that, like this. But then the old penny drops.

'Very funny. Had me going there for a minute. Where's the camera? Will this be on YouTube or is it a TikTok?' I'm laughing aloud now, a bit manic with relief probably. He's holding his head. I'm shouting. This is Punk'd. The South Norwood version. I'm looking around for the cameras. This is brilliant. It'll be viral, this one. I'm screaming a bit, thinking I should big it up, get an effect, get more hits that way.

'Quiet!' the bloke yells, standing up, shouting in my face.

I've had enough of this. I get my phone from my bag, and stare at it. I can't remember what a phone is or how to use it. I feel like someone's

spiked my drink, but I haven't had a drink. I ask him how he got my name, my birthday. If this is a joke, then this is the bit where he tells me. I'm freezing and freaking out and it's not funny anymore.

'Every year, Katherine,' he says, all quiet now.

My head is throbbing, fit to burst. Everything's gone a bit blurry. I wish I hadn't given him my last Nurofen. Maybe Mrs Lavery might swing by with a bit more of her tonic. I know this man. I must have seen him in one of the old pictures; the photograph the man with the top hat took on that October day. Everyone dressed up fine for the picture. This man, this stonemason, must have been there. I must remember him from that. I must have caught a blurred glance of him somehow, in the picture.

I hear the sound of his mallet. Close. I reach up and feel the blood. Amazed, it's still warm. I'm always amazed it's still warm. I feel the eggshell pieces of my skull, my own skull. I remember now. Like I always do. Each Halloween night. I remember how I know Mr Quill.

'I'm sorry,' he says.

'You're always sorry,' I say. Sure enough, the gravestone says Katherine, not Kendra. I thought Kendra sounded a bit more modern, so I started calling myself Kendra twenty years ago. It doesn't say 1995, it says 1895. I can't use the phone because I've never had one and don't really know what it is. Murdered by a mad man, my skull caved in with a hammer. But it wasn't a hammer, it was a mallet. That's how I know Mr Quill. They found me in the alley at the back of Stanley Halls, under the melting snow. They never found the man who did it.

Every year. Halloween night, she'll be back. Wittering on. Like an angry old starling. Squawking and pecking. She wore her clothes loose then; now it's worse, she's half naked. Most of us stay as we are when God takes us, but she's picked up bits and pieces from every decade since, like a magpie; her make-up, her phone thing, her strange turn of phrase. Gathering the years about her like a beggar with a blanket.

I don't know how it happened. She was loud, too loud. Wouldn't shut up. I can see her ankles, her cleavage. I just wanted to do an honest day's work, finish the stone and get home. I thought they'd find her and then me, but the snow was deep and took a month to melt. She was all preserved,

white as this marble, skull cracked in two. Funny thing was, I got the job of making her headstone. If only they knew.

I bought the best marble for her. The very best. As I'm carving it, each chip of the stone, I could feel her skull under me mallet. Shut up, will you now? Crack and crack again. Me head, pounding. I couldn't finish it, the gravestone, and I've not finished one since.

I used to eat me pie of a lunchtime down by the lake in the Royal Park. Feed a bit of it to the ducks if they're lucky. That day, I'd done her name, Katherine Roach, her birthday, I was forcing meself to do the date she died, actually, the date they found her body. But I couldn't. I went for a paddle with the ducks, gave 'em the rest of me pie. It stuck in me throat anyway, dry at the back. I just kept paddling on. It doesn't look deep, but it is. I just wanted to stop the pain, so I kept going. It was easy. It sucked me down, quite gentle. It was cold and black. I liked it there and that's where I stayed. 'Til years later, after the first war, they were dredging it out, and up I popped—well, what was left of me.

I thought me pounding head would calm, well you would, but no. Now, every year, we meet back here. She never remembers, I play along as best I can. It's the least I can do. Let her forget for a moment what happened. What I did.

It's a funny place, this. Full of history.

Tom lives in London and is a playwright, writer and screenwriter. Tom is new to short fiction, and so far, he has had work published by Litro Magazine and Mercurious. Tom's grandfather, William Fryer Harvey, was a writer and this story is inspired by his story August Heat from The Beast With Five Fingers collection.

# THE WEDDING GOWN

Anila Basha

She fluttered with the inexplicable ease of a leaf, a wave, a cloud. Not quite in the manner Shelley would have wanted, as it was clear she had lived off the floor all her life.

‘It never occurred to me that she even walked. In fact, I remember distinctly, she never did. She gently drifted up to the place where she wanted to be. Her tresses lay behind her like waves; they seemed to fly about her effortlessly, always obeying her command. She was the gentlest being I had ever come across in life, your grandmother Alice, my loving sister.’

Rachel and Janice looked up at the lifelike portrait of their dead grandmother. Dead in her youth, a flower that seemed too delicate even to touch, that to hold would be a dream. Her wedding gown looked regal and tender like her, at once creaseless, unblemished, and surreal. She seemed like a three-dimensional painting to Rachel, just like her great uncle had said; floating and drifting out of the frame.

The air around them was growing cold, Rachel and Janice sat there, amazed to discover the story of their dead grandmother. They had often heard the story of their grandmother and how she had come back to haunt her family but they never really believed any of it.

Rachel leaped up in alarm, only to find Janice’s hands trying to find companionship. She chuckled to herself. Outside, the wind was growing colder and the breeze cluttered against the window panes.

‘And what happened to grandma, dear?’ Janice wanted to know. Her cheeks resembled her dead grandmother’s pale white cheeks topped with strawberry cream. And the great-uncle settled heavily and breathed noisily through his nose. He seemed distant and more serious now.

‘Well, she drifted and floated all her life. Ever since she was born. She was an angelic baby. Yes, she never really belonged to the Earth. She had clearly descended from the heavens. And as she developed, so did her aura and gentleness. Nature loved her more than we ever did.’

Rachel thought of her as a character, like Snow White, Cinderella or Rapunzel; as someone out of a fairy tale, dancing and singing with the deer and sparrows. Now and again, she peeked at the portrait hanging right above her head.

‘And then, she got married to the gentlest soul on Earth, your grandfather Joseph, and they drifted together throughout the whole house, like two angels, hand in hand. Like Catherine and Heathcliffe, two characters madly in love. It was said they lived in two bodies but shared a soul. They never parted nor were they together. They looked into each other’s eyes and saw themselves. So they lived and travelled throughout the house.

‘The night she died was a cold December night, and the house quivered and sobbed. Your grandfather sat beside her bedside. She had given birth to a beautiful angel but had not opened her eyes to see the miracle that she had brought to the world. In her delirium, she chanted meaningless prayers. At last, she opened her eyes and we thanked the heavens. She called her husband to the bedside and sought her one final wish, her dying wish. She wanted to be buried in her wedding gown. She never asked to see her daughter, not even a glimpse of your moon-faced mother. She only insisted that her wedding gown would be her companion in the afterlife. She said she couldn’t do without it and then without another word, her soul drifted away into the unknown, for we saw her parting and not another word did she speak.’

Janice seemed very eager. ‘Oh, so you buried her with her wedding dress on.’

‘No we didn’t.’

They raised their eyebrows.

‘But why?’ They wanted to know.

‘For some reason, your grandfather didn’t want to part with her gown. He said he didn’t believe in the afterlife nor what his wife said. He refused to grant her final wish and buried her in a plain gossamer dress. He kept her wedding gown draped in a bright scarlet-coloured velvet.

“‘It shall remain there forever,’” he declared.

‘My Mother cried in grief, holding the infant close to her bosom. What pained her was not the death of her daughter, but that her dying wish was never fulfilled. She cried day and night, while your grandfather refused to look into the face of your angelic mother.’

Janice and Rachel began to sob too.

‘Then began the ordeals of our life. In the beginning, it was mere pranks and craziness. Tricks we couldn’t attribute to anyone. The milk went sour within hours after boiling, toys seemed to rattle and scream in the middle of the night, and then one morning, the huge flowering tree in the orchard went all dry and lifeless. Master’s favourite cat went missing and was found dead two days later leaving no clue to the murder. Then there were the darker days. The crowing cock fell into the well, which had been specifically wired and protected. It was pretty clear that the cock had been thrown in. The dog was found poisoned inside his kennel and an investigation was called for. Mother was busy with the infant and your grandfather remained inside his room all day, gazing at the scarlet wedding gown.

‘I started staying up all night, thinking of how to destroy the man who had ruined my peace of mind. And yet, I could never discover the slightest trace of the lunatic responsible. Days passed by, but there seemed no end to the miseries we suffered. Then one day, the cook fell ill all of a sudden. In her delirium she complained of a spirit that she had seen near the kitchen door. We refused to believe her, of course, but mother made certain calculations inside her head. The cook died of a heart attack two days later. The old mansion stood all alone and earned the reputation of being haunted. There were less visitors. The milkman and maids stopped visiting the mansion, which became a lonely place.

‘Months passed by and Mother began to see visions of Alice hovering around the corridors. At first, I didn’t believe her, then one day I saw her descend the stairs—’ and he pointed to the flight of stairs. Rachel and Janice looked uncomfortable. ‘In her fragile gossamer gown she looked very pale and sick. I spoke to your grandfather but he refused to believe me, nor did he ever come out of the bedroom. He stayed shut inside and sat there all day, trapped in his own world.

‘An albino fortune teller appeared one day, out of nowhere. He seemed distressed and felt uncomfortable being in the house. He appeared possessed and repeatedly asked us to free the soul that was trapped in the



house. The soul that never tread on the Earth but always hovered around. Mother remained calm and unmoved, but there were more calamities. We began falling sick one after the other. One day, Mother marched up the stairs and knocked on your grandfather's door. It was the first time Mother had left young Alice after her death.

“Joseph, open the door,” and when he did, she said, ‘We need to return what belongs to Alice, or she will never leave us alone, we need to return her wedding gown.’

Joseph did not budge, but was more stubborn than ever before, as well as being completely resigned to his solitude. Then young Alice fell ill one day. No doctor, nor medicine, could help her. Mother kept worrying and crying. Joseph still did not move. Her fever shot up and she suffered from pneumonia. Mother pleaded with Joseph, but he still wouldn't part with the gown. One night, little Alice fell into a coma and the doctor declared that she wouldn't survive the night. We had no heart to watch her die. I approached Joseph, who finally agreed to take one last look at his daughter. We spent the night with young Alice, sponging her every now and then. It was the first time I saw Joseph break down after Alice's death.

‘Young Alice, it was clear, would not make it through the night. She did not respond to our pleas. Her breathing became noisier and then, gradually, began to fade away. She was on the verge of death and would meet her mother soon. I urged Joseph to save her life. It was the only thing left to save young Alice's life. We had to do it. It was either her life or the wedding gown.’

Rachel and Janice couldn't control their emotions. Their hearts were beating fast. ‘Did Grandpa part with the gown?’ they inquired.

‘No, he didn't. In the morning, little Alice opened her eyes and smiled weakly. Joseph was hysterical. “See I told you! There are no apparitions, no ghosts. There is nothing.” He was shouting. He wasn't making sense anymore. He was jumping around the house.’

Rachel smiled coyly. She looked at Janice, who had an evil grin on her face. ‘Didn't I tell you? This house is not haunted.’

‘No wait,’ their great-uncle interrupted. ‘As Joseph was doing his little dance, Mother appeared from the garden, drenched in mud and rain from the night before, worn and weary, a shovel in her hand. She had dug up Alice's grave and placed the velvet draped wedding gown inside!’



**Anila Basha** is an IELTS trainer based in India. Writing is her passion. Through her writing, she hopes to bring alive the mundane.

# ALL SOULS LONDON EXPRESS

Biju Antony

## ACT ONE

### Scene One

*A garish travel agency with posters of Tower Bridge and dead members of the royal family adorning the wall.*

*The name All Souls London Express lights up the wall behind the Information counter.*

**Salma** is at the counter. **Mrs Walker** walks in and takes a seat.

**Salma:** *(adjusts her hijab, seemingly annoyed)* Mrs Walker, didn't I tell you yesterday? You cannot travel this year! Why don't you understand? The train is fully booked until January!

**Mrs Walker:** I cannot possibly wait for another four months! I have to be there this weekend. My husband is getting married to that Chinese masseur of his, who poisoned and killed me! I have to scare him away!

**Salma:** *(with a less annoyed and more apologetic tone)* I know that and I am terribly sorry for you. But I still cannot help you, unless I have a cancellation. Please keep checking our website or call center.

**Mrs Walker:** Your call center sucks! They are hard to get through to! And when they do, they are useless, trying to sell me ridiculous wigs and fangs! I am sure you must have outsourced the calls to some cheap Asian ghost city!

**Salma:** However you might hate the idea of outsourcing, we simply had no other options. The pandemic in the living world has created a population crisis here. *(points at the computer)* And the bookings on the All Souls London Express are going crazy. Looks like many have unfinished business in London!

**Mrs Walker:** Life is an unfinished business, isn't it? That's why some of us, rather than taking the bus to Pearly Gates, choose to stay here, to go back to the living world as nightmares and ghosts. But listen! I came here well before the pandemic crowds came pouring in with their corona-choked lungs! And I have waited too long already to get on that train.

**Salma:** You are wailing about a few months! Do you even know how excruciating waiting can be? Have some respect for Prince Charles!

**Mrs Walker:** Oh dear! Poor Charles! But you know, he may have gotten used to it and in all probability, he might be clueless, once the wait is over.

**Salma:** *(laughs)* I agree. But not to worry, we have been promised one more train, to ease this congestion. But then the engineers need more time to develop a new green technology. The old one uses Russian technology and you know, we have our solidarity with the Ukrainians.

*Salma puts on a charity smile. Then she points to her badge.*

**Salma:** We are a zero-carbon footprint 'green' ghost society! Elon Musk, whenever he comes, will do wonders here in the netherworld!

**Mrs Walker:** All I know is that my husband's masseur served me green tea and I woke up on the last compartment of the All Souls London Express to this goddamn place!

**Salma:** Well, reality sucks! Clearly you don't have what your husband wants! *(she leans forward)* But do you know what you should do? Just let them live their shitty middle class life in the teeming tubes, worrying about their gas bills and a clueless Liz Truss. *(puts on a smile)* And then, you can make it before their first anniversary!

**Mrs Walker:** What am I going to do until then?

**Salma:** Learning Mandarin might be a good idea. *(nods her head to make a point)* You know, these days you need to know the language of your target audience and the local dialects too, to make your performance stand out. Netflix has spoiled humans. What are these Netflix writers smoking, anyway? Do they think we have the resources to pull stunts like that?

**Mrs Walker:** Oh, don't tell me about that dear! It's such a competitive age we are in. Gone are the days when our ancestors could just stand in a corner and stare with broken necks!

**Salma:** While we are on that, the sound and makeup teams have a tedious schedule these days. So please look up their schedule online and book in advance, if you think you will need them. *(pulls out a leaflet from a folder, offers it to Mrs Walker)* We have a new rate card too! Please take a look before you decide on a budget and theme for your performance.

*Mrs Walker reads through the flier and is furious.*

**Mrs Walker:** This is ridiculously priced. I could get the Budapest orchestra for this price! And the makeup artist rates! What are we? Hollywood?

**Salma:** Prices have gone up, Mrs Walker. You need the best team to put together a decent scary act these days. Since you have time, I would suggest you follow some of our influencers on Ghostagram. Their reels provide good tutorials on how to scare these café-sitters who barely lift their botox-filled faces from their phones and have come to London from all sorts of places.

**Mrs Walker:** I am not going on a fancy trip to scare some creepy tenants living in my ancestral house or to wander the cemetery of my local church. I am pretty clear about my plan.

**Salma:** Speaking of the church, I would highly recommend you skip visiting your local church. I heard from our returning passengers that nobody visits them these days and the churches in London are being sold off at roadside real estate offices to rich Arabs and pub owners.

**Mrs Walker:** That's dreadful!

**Salma:** But you know, religion is big business in Asia and Africa.

**Mrs Walker:** (*pointing to Salma's hijab*) Yeah, I can see that's still stuck around your head, even after all these years!

**Salma:** (*adjusts her hijab*) It's a habit, you know.

**Mrs Walker:** (*seems to have thought about something*) I just realised, why aren't there any Muslim ghosts in London?

**Salma:** Oh, we do exist! But we are not into drinking blood. That's not *hala!* We just make them do weird things and scream in our voices. It's fun, you know! (*laughs*)

*Salma looks at her watch and hurriedly grabs her handbag and locks her drawers.*

**Salma:** Alright, Mrs Walker. It's break time. Keep a tab on cancellations. Meanwhile, you could use the free nightmare coupons and give that Chinese masseur some sleepless nights.

**Mrs Walker:** I tried a few times. But that freaking censor board blocked my nightmare acts stating that they were anti-minority and violating community guidelines. It's all about '#minoritylivesmatter' these days! What about us! I tell you, as a white dead society, we are more dead than ever!

**Salma:** Well, firstly, white men should have let the coloured people mind their business in their far away lands! There are consequences, you see. Secondly, you couldn't figure out that your husband, for twenty-five goddam years, was gay. That was as good as being in a dead marriage too, Mrs Walker.

## Scene Two

*Salma is back in her seat and scrolling through her phone.*

*Mrs Walker returns with an Indian nurse.*

*Salma looks at them and can't hide her frustration.*

**Salma:** Oh, come on, Mrs Walker. I have two people waiting outside. You cannot just barge in like that!

**Mrs Walker:** *(chuckles)* When was the last time we took appointments, dear? We are known for our unexpected appearances, aren't we?

**Salma:** *(feeling it useless to argue)* What has changed in the last hour?

**Mrs Walker:** Let me introduce Molly Thomas. She was a nurse with the NHS and has a confirmed ticket on today's train.

**Salma:** *(in deadpan voice)* And she has agreed to give it to you?

**Mrs Walker:** *(surprised)* You are indeed smart. Well, thanks to Molly. She has agreed to cancel her ticket.

**Salma:** *(ignores Mrs. Walker and looks at Molly)* Mrs Walker seems to have charmed you, Molly.

**Molly:** Well, not just that. I was there at the hospital when Mrs Walker was fighting for her life. I took good care of her. She had almost survived. But

then...

**Mrs Walker:** Really! I did? What went wrong then?

**Molly:** You kept saying 'green tea' while slipping in and out of a coma. And there was this good friend of yours, who brought some green tea. I fed you a few spoons of it and then, you were gone!

**Mrs Walker:** (*horrified*) Oh, good lord! Was that a Chinese man?

**Molly:** Yes!

**Mrs Walker:** That monster!

**Salma:** If you cancel this ticket, you are not on that train until January, even with your NHS quota. You know that, right?

**Mrs Walker:** (*confidently*) Of course, she is aware of that! I already told her.

**Salma:** Well, it's your choice, Molly. But what changed?

**Molly:** I got a call from the Blood Bank for an interview. The pay is good and I get a free supply of blood too!

**Salma:** And what were you planning to do in London?

**Molly:** Nothing much. Once in a while, I take a trip to London to scare my son's maths teacher. He is mean to him; and then there is this white boy, who bullies my son. I pay him a visit too. They both behave now. But you know, they are human and they need reminders. But that can wait for now.

**Mrs Walker:** So that's resolved then. (*she points to the computer in front of Salma*) Now get on that thingy and get going.

*Salma hesitates.*



**Mrs Walker:** Now what, Miss Headscarf? (*losing her patience*)

**Salma:** It's too late for a cancellation. I would need to get approval from the cancellation team.

**Mrs Walker:** Get it done, then. What are you waiting for?

**Frankie:** Cancellation cannot be processed!

**Salma:** This is an emergency. Really appreciate it if you could help.

*Salma dials the phone. After a few rings, Frankie answers.*

**Frankie:** Hello!

**Salma:** Calling from the information center. Need approval for a cancellation.

**Frankie:** You are speaking to Frankie. Ticket number please.

**Salma:** LX 12B0809

**Frankie:** Please enter the date of travel.

**Salma:** 08/09/2022

**Frankie:** Cancellation cannot be processed!

**Salma:** This is an emergency. Really appreciate it if you could help.

**Frankie:** Not possible!

**Mrs Walker:** (*overhearing the conversation*) What a rude fellow! Sounds chilling like a Russian!

**Molly:** Please don't give him my details. I don't trust communists! They

don't believe in God and democracy.

**Salma:** Will you both shut up! He is an AI. Frankenstein! They are designed to be cold and heartless!

**Molly:** Well, I was almost right about him!

**Mrs Walker:** (*sarcastically, to Salma*) And you were pleading to him! You need to argue with logic and facts with these new age labour class!

**Salma:** (*taking a cue from Mrs Walker*) Well, clause number 12.a.i states that if the cancellation is backed with a spot reissuance, cancellations can be approved.

*There is a long pause at the other end. After a few seconds.*

**Frankie:** Cancellation approved!

**Salma:** *Mashallah!* Thank you, Frankie!

*Salma disconnects the phone.*

**Mrs Walker:** (*ecstatic*) That worked! (*she turns to Molly*) Thank you, Molly. But you do owe me this!

**Salma:** Mrs Walker, once I finish the process, your ticket will be ghost-mailed to you. Be on time and be ready to go scare the soya sauce out of that Chinese snake! And you Molly, good luck in your interview. Perhaps, you could give the addresses of the maths teacher and the boy to Mrs Walker. She can put on a decent performance, good enough to keep the reminder going!

**Mrs Walker:** That's on me, Molly dear!

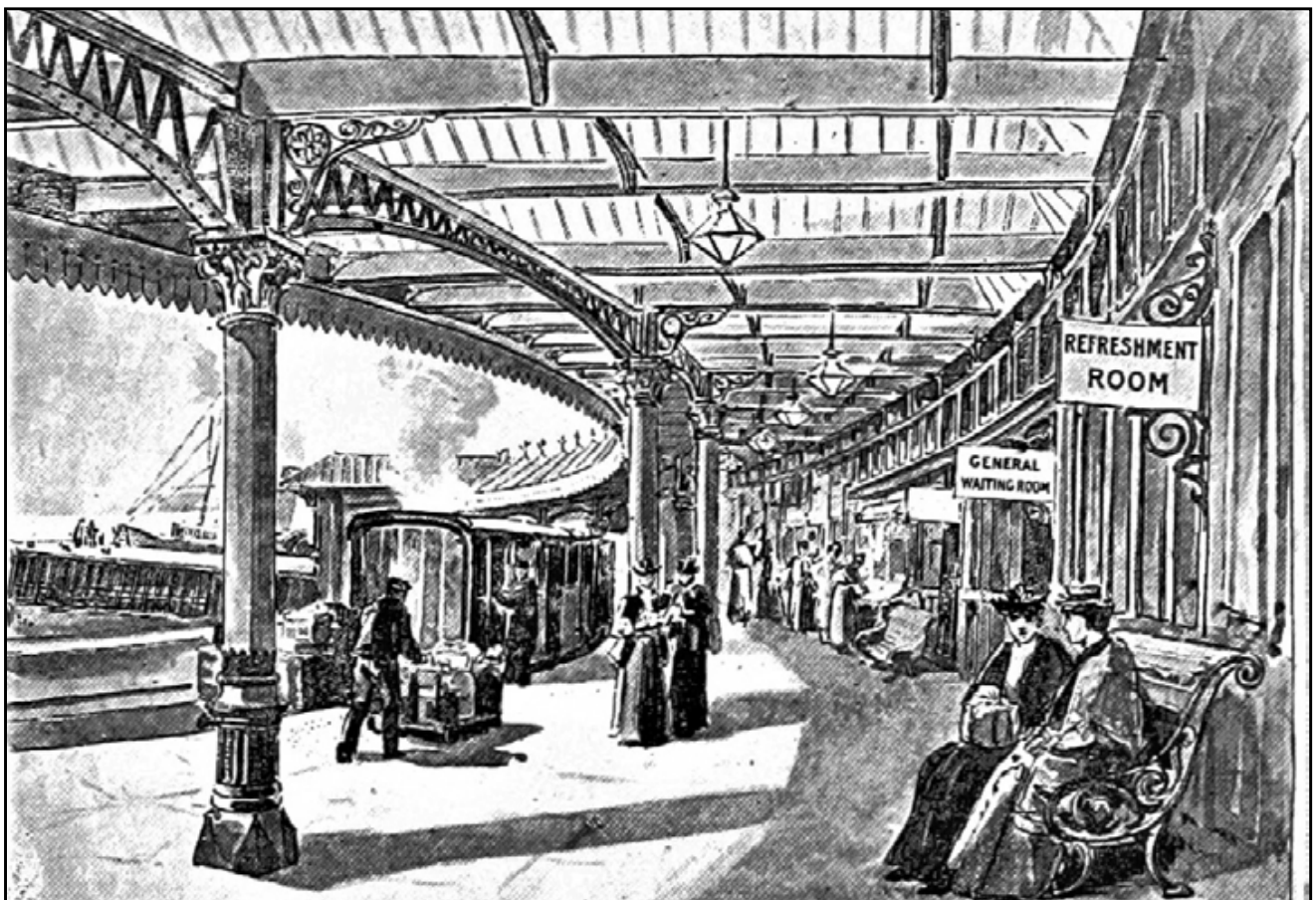
**Salma:** Oh wait, there is something wrong. I cannot complete the booking. The system is freezing!

**Mrs Walker:** This is a nightmare!

*Announcement Speaker blares: "Important announcement. The 'All Souls London Express' train scheduled for today, 8<sup>th</sup> of September has been cancelled, as Her Majesty, the Queen, will be finally arriving this evening! God save the King!"*

**Mrs Walker:** (to Salma) Next time, I am not going to let you rave about Charles!

*Lights fade away.*



**Biju Antony** is an ex-banker and content strategist. He is a published author and his writings explore characters and places that collaborate to create their own flawed languages, unsure conflicts and incomplete joys.

# FAREWELL MAMA

Ruth Adjaottor

Death is always the villain—despised, avoided, spoken of like the town's leper. It beats me how people speak so longingly of heaven but hate the deep sleep that takes you there.

Before I tell you this story, there's something you need to know. I am not the villain. Unless your definition of villain includes the teenager who is dedicated to making the lives of those that matter better. This mostly means sending another person on their way to heaven, or hell, or nowhere (depending on what your beliefs are).

Whenever you think I'm beginning to sound malevolent, remember that it's all for the greater good.

The first time I took a soul, I was twelve. It was my mother's lover, Greg. He would come home drunk, smashing bottles against the walls before threatening to stab my mother if she so much as breathed.

One night, I followed him on his way from the pub. The road was quiet and the moon was in full support of my intentions—I had never seen it burn so bright.

When I sneaked behind him and planted the knife into the left side of his neck, I knew I had done something good. For the first time in two years, I noticed the colour of his eyes. The pretty ones always do the most terrible things.

To be fair, I didn't do badly for my first time. Turns out I'm a natural.

Morning came and the news made it to town. Well, no one suspected the

ugly son of his lover.

My mother mourned for about a week, but I slowly watched her become her bright bubbly self again. She's very welcome! The second person I gave a ticket to heaven was Mrs Bugg, a 78-year-old woman who suffered a stroke for five years. She was the grandmother of John, the only boy in town who was nice to me.

John would invite me over to their house to play video games. It was right when the game was getting good that Mrs Bugg would need a nappy change. She ruined all the fun times I shared with John, so I decided it was time to get her out the door.

I sneaked in one afternoon when I was sure John was out to pick up some groceries. I found Mrs Bugg in her wheelchair watching a show on the television. Without making eye contact, I went right behind her, turned her towards the wall, and sent her flying at top speed. A groan, a little whimper, blood painting a crimson flag on the wall, and she was gone to la-la-land. The send-off took less than ten minutes. I went home to watch The Big Bang Theory.

Of course, John came running to me. He came to meet his poor chunk of liability and needed a shoulder to cry on.

Before you think I killed the poor hag for my selfish gains, just remember that people don't usually know what they need until you offer it to them. John can definitely use the free time, though I know it will take a few weeks for him to appreciate it. Well, like I said, I go all out for the people I care about.

I hate to brag, but I've issued seven tickets so far. Why haven't I been caught? That's a mystery you might spend your entire life trying to discover. I'm about to issue the eighth and my stomach keeps turning at the thought of it.

I wake up every dawn to the sound of my mother throwing up. I would peek and see her behind the computer. Making her way through boxes of tissues, she would try to be as quiet as possible.

Lurking in the dark, I would see her tear-stained face illuminated by the light from the screen. During the day, she acts as though everything is fine.

The rule in our house is 'don't ask, don't tell', but even if I did, she

wouldn't have told me, so I mustered the courage to explore her browsing history. My mum has a type of cancer that spreads extremely fast.

I read stories of how people suffered terribly, in just about a few weeks of having received their diagnoses. The poor woman was in for a bad ride and I wouldn't have any of it.

Seeing her go through the emotions every night broke my heart, and I couldn't bear to see her suffer. So, I made a plan.

The hard part was deciding which way to let her go.

I could cut her throat, or plant a bullet in her head, silencing it with a pillow while she slept. I also thought of poisoning her, but none of them felt right.

After careful contemplation, I decided to try something different. This may be my most difficult one yet, and probably my last. It all happened just when I was about to change my mind.

She was about to cross the road when I hit the accelerator hard. Our eyes locked for a split second, though not long enough to register all the emotions she must have felt.

Shock, fear, surprise at the sight of the driver, and God only knows what else. She went flying into the air, landing somewhere behind me. I heard the thud and a cry from the crowd. I could have sped off, but not with my mother lying there breathing her last.

I went over and scooped up her mashed skull in my palm while I fought the urge to cry, throw up and run—all in one breath.

It must have hurt, but it was instant and now she is free.

Death comes for us all, I just gave her a quick pass. No long suffering, no more restless nights. Journey on, mama. I know heaven couldn't wait.

**Ruth** considers herself a Jill of all trade, mistress of none! With a journalism background, she is working at charting a career path in Copywriting and with some luck, publishing a bestselling non-fiction book in the near future. For the time being, she is fully committed to building a creative muscle; one word at a time.

If she isn't on Google trying to find the meaning of very random words, she is probably engrossed in a Michael Robotham novel.

# THE RICHEST MAN IN SEASONG

Buddhima Weerawardhana

The richest man in Seasong shifted in his chair as he stroked his saffron-stained beard. He sat atop his ivory throne, its inlaid jewels twinkling in the moonlight that illuminated the grand hall. Rudra Pratap was kneeling down below.

‘Oh, please great Batiya, take pity on me!’ Rudra Pratap cried out. His eyes were wet and his voice thick. From high above, Batiya only chuckled back. The two guards that stood beside his throne snickered from behind their metal masks. ‘Oh, please great Batiya,’ Rudra Pratap said once more. ‘This is all I can offer this harvest,’ he said as his outstretched arms groped at the single sack of saffron that lay before him.

‘Take pity on me and accept this, my lord.’ Tears streamed down Rudra Pratap’s face. He wrapped his arms around his face, trying to cover up his shame.

‘A pathetic display,’ Batiya said as a broad smile crossed his face.

‘Suppose it’s fitting considering what you have brought me.’

‘My lord, you know of the troubles this season, the locusts were particularly bad—and I’m sure you have heard of the raids by the mountain imps.’

‘Imps? Ha, he blames the imps,’ Batiya guffawed.

‘Oh, that’s quite rich, my lord,’ one of the guards said. The hands wrapped around his spear trembled as he tried to control his laughter.

Rudra Pratap looked up towards them once more. He did not know

what to say, what to do.

Batiya cleared his throat once, then twice in an attempt to control his laughter; it didn't work. He shifted back and forth on his seat. His great belly hummed below him and the folds of skin and fat that hung loosely under his silk shirt flapped about as he continued to laugh and laugh.

'Oh, my dear Rudra Pratap,' Batiya finally said, wiping a tear away from his eye. 'You sure do know how to amuse a man.' He let out one last chuckle before his face hardened. 'Please remind me of what we agreed upon when you asked to settle down here in lovely Seasong then.'

'My lord, please,' Rudra Pratap began to weep.

'No more of that!' said Batiya, in a booming voice that echoed across the grand hall. 'I've seen quite enough of your groveling performance, I must say. Now then, the agreement—what was it?'

Rudra Pratap averted his eyes and held his silence for a few moments longer.

'Well? Have you lost your tongue now as well?' Batiya called down. 'Speak now or I'll make sure it's ripped out for this insolence.'

'My lord,' Rudra Pratap stuttered, 'I—I was to present you with twelve full bags of saffron at the end of each harvest season, for—for the generosity you've shown in allowing me and mine to settle down in beautiful Seasong.'

Batiya began to clap his hands together. The two guards joined in, still trying to muffle their snickering. 'So you do remember, Rudra Pratap,' Batiya said. 'Pray tell me then, why have you come to me with just one—and I warn you, bring up locusts or mayflies or imps or goblins or whatever other inventions you can think of, you will regret it.'

Rudra Pratap had no answers. 'My lord, this sack is all I can offer,' he said in a voice so low that Batiya could barely hear.

Batiya shifted his gaze sideways and looked out of the grand window pane. It was a brilliant view tonight—Seasong's sloping hills bathed in the light of the full moon that marked the final night of the harvest.

'The night is still young, Rudra Pratap,' Batiya said. 'I suggest you find me that missing saffron before daylight comes.' Rudra Pratap was looking up at him, his eyes completely lost. 'After all, I don't think I need to remind you of what awaits you and yours otherwise, eh?'



Rudra Pratap lay his head against the grand oak tree that stood by the crossroads that led to the Seasong Tavern. His head was pounding and he could feel the meagre contents of his stomach aching to be retched up. He took another deep gulp from the sack of toddy he was clutching in his right hand and looked skywards. The full moon was low in the sky—any moment now, the first rays of light would creep up over the Western Mountains. Off in the distance, the lights of the tavern still burned away and there were still songs of merriment echoing as the people of Seasong celebrated their night of harvest. Rudra Pratap closed his eyes and tried to drift away with distant music, wishing he would wake up from the nightmare he found himself in.

‘Rudra Pratap,’ a honeyed voice called out, breaking him away from his momentary trance. Rudra Pratap opened his eyes to see a man standing before him. He was dressed in tattered gray robes and had a kind face that was shadowed under a loose grey cowl.

‘Do I know you?’ Rudra Pratap asked.

‘I don’t think so,’ the man replied, offering a warm smile. ‘But I seem to know you.’

‘Who are you then?’ Rudra Pratap shot back; he was in no mood for this sort of thing tonight.

‘It doesn’t matter, really,’ the man said as he drew back his cowl to reveal a smooth bald head. He squatted down beside Rudra Pratap and looked at him with cool grey eyes. ‘It seems you’re in a bit of trouble.’

‘A bit?’ Rudra Pratap scoffed at the man. ‘I owe Batiya eleven full bags of saffron, and everyone knows you shouldn’t owe the richest man in Seasong a damn thing.’

‘Yes, it’s a terrible thing to be in someone’s debt, isn’t it?’ the man said. ‘But it seems you’re in luck tonight, Rudra Pratap.’

‘I don’t see how that is,’ Rudra Pratap said, managing a sad smile.

‘Well, it just so happens that I have to pay the Great Batiya a visit myself tonight,’ said the man, standing back up. ‘And I do have quite the way with words, it’s a gift, really.’

‘What are you saying?’ Rudra Pratap asked, his head was throbbing from all the toddy now.

‘I’m merely suggesting that I could put in a good word for you and get my Lord to forget about this little bit of saffron you owe him,’ the man

said.

‘Batiya is not the forgetting kind.’

‘Oh, I assure you, I know how to drive a good bargain with him,’ the man said, with a twinkle in his eye. ‘What do you say then, my friend? Shall I put in a good word for you?’

Rudra Pratap stared back at him for a moment. The man simply gave him a gentle nod and offered him his hand. Rudra Pratap took it.

The great valley of Seasong shone a brilliant shade of purple in the midday sun. Harvest night was fast approaching and the saffron fields were in full bloom. Rudra Pratap rode atop his great red stallion with an entourage of guards riding by his side. The people of Seasong lay down their work tools as he rode past and waved at him. A few even hailed his name in cheer.

‘The Creator be praised!’ one old saffron farmer yelled out. ‘Our Lord Rudra Pratap has come to see us.’

Rudra Pratap offered him a curt nod as he rode along the dirt path that cut through the fields. All the sights pleased him to no end. Come harvest, he was entitled to three bags’ worth of saffron from all the working men that called the Seasong Valley home. With his spirits high, Rudra Pratap kicked his mount into a gallop and began to race up the hillside that overlooked the fields. Soon he had left his guards behind in a trail of dust as he breathed in the warm summer air. Only once he had reached the top of the hill did he bother looking back down to see where his retinue was. Their lesser steeds were still labouring away near the foot of the hill. Rudra Pratap grinned to himself and took a second to admire the view. The gentle breeze hummed through the valley as the sweet scent of blooming saffron filled the air.

‘Gorgeous sight, isn’t it?’ a voice called out from behind.

Rudra Pratap whirled his stallion around. He faced a man dressed in a grey robe and cowl. Rudra Pratap drew his breath as the memory came racing back to him. Below him, his stallion began to whinny in agitation.

‘I know you,’ Rudra Pratap said as he gave his mount a swift kick.

‘And I know you, Rudra Pratap,’ the man said. ‘Tell me, how long has it been?’

Rudra Pratap held his tongue for a moment and then answered, ‘Six years, more or less, yes?’

‘Six years, two months and one half-day to be precise,’ the man said.

Rudra Pratap’s stallion whinnied once more huffing as it tried to free itself from its reins.

‘That’s a fine animal you got there,’ the man said. ‘It seems you have done quite well for yourself these past few years.’

‘Batiya killed himself that night.’ Rudra Pratap cut straight to the point. ‘Left his estate and all his worldly possessions to me. He wrote all that in a letter, signed it and then stabbed himself in the eye with the pen.’

‘He was always a creative sort, that Batiya,’ the man said, a wry smile shining from underneath his cowl.

‘I’m guessing that was your work then?’ said Rudra Pratap, struggling to hold onto the reins of his horse.

‘Oh, I like to think we both played our part in all that,’ the man said. ‘But dues need to be repaid, my dear friend.’

‘Ah, so that’s it?’ Rudra Pratap said. ‘Go on then, name your price. Saffron, is it? I’ve got entire shacks full of the spice. I can give you some good lands overlooking the fields too, and you look like you could use some good company; I can have some of the bathhouse girls visit you in the evening.’

‘You’re most generous, my lord, but I have no need for these worldly possessions,’ the man said, his pearl-white teeth still glistening in a smile.

‘What is it that you ask of me then?’ Rudra Pratap asked.

‘Oh, I think you know, my lord,’ the man said, and lifted his cowl to reveal a face that was white as chalk. Dark red splotches stained a bald head as if they were droplets of wine. But it was the man’s yellow eyes that struck Rudra Pratap, and the slit pupils that sat at their centre.

Rudra Pratap’s stallion shrieked at the sight and reared up on its hind legs. Rudra Pratap tried holding onto the reins but it was too late; the horse bucked him and he came crashing down onto the dirt below. Flat on his back, he could feel his head throbbing something fierce as the taste of metal began to trickle into his mouth. By the time he sat up his horse had already raced away downhill, leaving behind only a cloud of dust. The man stood over him, his yellow eyes ogling him.

‘What’s the meaning of this?’ Rudra Pratap demanded as he spat out a glob of blood. ‘Do you have any idea who you’re dealing with? I am the—’

‘The richest man in Seasong,’ the man said, in a voice that sounded

eerily familiar. A second later, his visage transformed. Wispy white strands sprouted from his bald head. His cheeks grew full and then turned into great big jowls. A magnificent beard began to take shape over his lips and mouth that was finally dusted with a helping of sweet saffron.

‘Batiya?’ Rudra Pratap gasped. ‘No... how?’

‘The richest man in Babylon,’ Batiya’s visage said as two more heads sprouted from the creature’s shoulders, morphing into a shape like flower buds blooming. One grew into a square-jawed face with a heavy brow and combed black hair. The other was a bulbous head with mottled skin and wine stained teeth. ‘The richest man in Seasong,’ they all sang.

‘Guards! Guards!’ Rudra Pratap screamed as he crawled backwards.

The singing abomination inched closer. A dozen more heads began to morph into shape. Seconds later, it started growing a new pair of arms and then a couple of legs to match.

Rudra Pratap turned away in horror to look down at the path which led up to the hill. Down below, his guards and their steeds were frozen in place. Sweat began to run down Rudra Pratap’s face as he gazed out over the fields. Even the breeze had come to a halt and the blades of saffron were still and stiff.

‘What... what is...’ Rudra Pratap’s words drowned away as he saw the monstrosity that loomed over him, its body coiling around itself as dozens of limbs groped for him.

‘The richest man in Seasong,’ a hundred voices sang out in chorus. Hands locked around each of Rudra Pratap’s limbs with steely grips that burnt like hot pincers. He heard his joints snap out of place and howled as the pain began to wash over him. A new face sprang out from the monstrous crowd, smooth and featureless. It craned itself so that it was right above Rudra Pratap, as his own features began to swirl into existence on the smooth skin. His own face contorted into a smile as it looked down at him.

‘The richest man in Seasong,’ it sang.



**Buddhima Weerawardhana** is an aspiring games-writer with an interest in the sci-fi, fantasy and horror genres. He aims to use his interest in writing to craft engaging video game narratives in the near future.

# THOSE IN PERIL

Katie Baker

‘Stand by.’

The bullet cracks through the air. Another follows quickly in its wake.

From the moment my boots land on deck, the stench of fish is overwhelming. I pick my way over the detritus of fish guts, hooks and scraps of net until I reach him. War has made me no stranger to death, to once bright eyes, now glassy and unseeing; to final breaths taken alone and without witnesses. The man’s cheeks are flushed and ruddy from the cold but the colour is draining quickly. Blood seeps from the bullet wounds in his chest.

Beside him, having slipped from his hand when he fell, is a fishing rod, his catch still reeling on the hook. Eyes bulging, mouth wide, it slaps its body against the deck while gasping frantically for air. Careful not to step in the blood that has begun to pool around the man’s body, I unhook the fish and hurl it into the water.

Williamson appears beside me. I see my own shock mirrored in his pale features. Our orders were wrong. He wasn’t a jerry in disguise or an enemy on patrol. He was a fisherman. One of the civilians we were here to protect.

Wordlessly, we get to work wrapping his body in tarpaulin taken from the cabin. It’s easier once we can no longer see his face. Together Williamson, Jones and I heave his body up, our faces red with exertion, sweat pouring down our brows. On my count, we swing him into the sea below. The tarpaulin slips as he falls, revealing a sliver of his olive green boots as he splashes into the water. For a moment he floats face down,

before his weight takes hold, and he slowly sinks to the depths below. As we stand there, watching him go, the words of a hymn come to me.

*O hear us when we cry to thee,  
For those in peril on the sea.*

My father used to well up when we sang it in church. Even in the salty sea spray, if I close my eyes, I can still smell the cloying incense wafting from the thurible. I can see Father's knuckles turning white as he clutches the hymn book, the light from the candles dancing in the reflection of his buffed silver buttons. I hear the words in his deep, melodic baritone, words I hadn't paid much mind to until now.

Every Sunday, I used to push my brothers aside, desperate to be the one to sit beside him in his pressed officer's uniform. I can hardly bear to think of him now. Not because of his illness or because the war has kept me from him in his final days, but because for all those years he was wrong. There is no pride, no glory to be found out here. Only death. Only horror.

**Katie** is a history graduate who has dabbled in a variety of book-related jobs before deciding to pursue her lifelong love of writing. She hopes to one day turn her notebooks full of illegible ideas and characters into a novel.





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