

DEADMAN'S TOME

Nov 2009

The Final chapter of the Month of the Dead begins.



Anime City Liquidation!

Check us out on Amazon
We carry everything from DBZ,
Trigun, FMA, and Hentai.

Or try this <http://myworld.ebay.com/legatoblue10/>

Table of Contents

PREFACE.....	3
POETRY.....	4
Unreliable.....	4
By Anne WillowRaven.....	4
SHORT STORIES.....	5
ARMISTICE DAY.....	6
By D. D. Bell.....	6
BUS FULL OF DYING.....	13
By Chris Castle.....	13
LOVED BY NUMBERS.....	17
THE CURSE OF THE KUDZU.....	24
FORLORN.....	33
By Ty Johnston.....	33
WITHIN THE LIGHT.....	37
By Philip Roberts.....	37
THE LAST WALK.....	48
BY MICHAEL W. GARZA.....	48

Have a question or an opinion that you want to stress, then do so here

Dedman@demonictome.com

Legato10@swbell.net



PREFACE

Starting the month without Deadman's Tome (Demonic Tome) carries with it the tainted similarity of an alcoholic without vodka, a video game nerd without an over-energized can of something bound to be unhealthy, a vampire without the lusting for blood, and a 40 year old virgin otaku without a stack of animated pornography. In addition, the contest editions of Demonic Tome carry with it an incredible amount of fresh talent that await to entice you, wrap you into their world of darkness with words that pull on the very nerve of your unconsciousness, tapping into a fear that you long thought impossible to resurrect; however, we are going to need more than just skilled writers to push Deadman's Tome further into the realm of literary entertainment, but what exactly?

We thought about this for a while and engaged in an aggressive hunt in the vast wilderness the internet has to offer, and we found a galore of idealistic possibilities, some reachable, while others only reachable with monetary expenses and that just won't do.

You probably noticed the new website, and the new front brings a wide range of options that were unavailable in the previous format. 1) Easier access to the magazine being optimal. Right from the beginning you have access to the most recent editions. 2) Information being delivered to you through updates that would actually consist of material that exceeds what would be in the magazine. 3) More credit for the authors and stories. 4) Easy access to previews of various Demonic Tome/ Deadman's Tome magazine material. And More...

So this edition sets off the last chapter of the Month of the Dead contest, but who won the previous sessions? Michael W. Garza's "The Harvester" rocked the first session. If you haven't read it, do yourself a favor and Check out the September 2009 Edition. Jonathan D. Stiffy's "The Cuckoo Clock" dominated the second round, check it out in the October 2009 edition of Demonic Tome.

Remember, when you read through these stories, it is important that you vote for your favorite.

I hope you enjoy this edition,

Mr. Deadman

An anxious heart banging signifies my wasted life radiance ending radiance I sense the sinister creeping upon me. Eternal day to night melding in an endless fight for breathe.

Moments, passage measured the quintessential broken clock. Inarticulate screeching through the course of the gloom “BLEED ME!” Shattering the darkness...Gurgling, guttural, ghastly and yet nothing but remnants of the gloom.

Consuming never providing resistance it matters not why. Bite me... I delight in grief, I impart anguish in return. Taste me, you're not so fearsome. Provoke me, I sense your vulnerability. Feed me, I hunger for your anger. Wound me glimpse the blood as it trickles from pallid skin. Endeavor to relieve your issues, spill my crimson logic.

Confessing I adore the destruction, crave your hatred... You remain in the palm of my hand. Erratic, blistering and tyrannical use of my impulse my desires destroy normalcy.

Cease the lunacy, hallucinations, reverie useless whining for experiences never recognized. Ensnared ever consumed oh monotonous void.

No solace for those lingering, understand there is not much hope. We position ourselves for lack expecting an end to the idiocy heaped upon our shoulders. Cascades the venom defiance cannot obstruct the overflow, drowning all possibilities.

Willful, beguiling, mysterious, unbound my intrusive methods, demanding you take what you want or leave me be. Consume me...

THE BLEEDER

COLLECTION

NOW AVAILABLE

[Click Here](#)

THE BLEEDER

COLLECTION

NOW AVAILABLE

[Click Here](#)

SHORT STORIES

ARMISTICE DAY

By D. D. Bell

[Vote For This Story Now!](#)

We are the dead. Short days ago

We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow...

John McCrae (1915)

Today, England:

DEAD FLESH PACKED IN ROWS. Chicken, turkey, rolled pork, brisket, topside, lamb & C. The choice is endless; what am I to buy? We are to have a traditional roast this afternoon – and it's not even a Sunday. Great Uncle Tobias is visiting and he doesn't eat anything foreign – British is best, lad. I walk up and down the chillers like a loon checking the country of origin of each cut – and its ruddy freezing hereabouts. He'll talk about the war - what's new? - whilst he dribbles food down his chin. He is old, however, and I really ought to cut him some slack – after all he did fight for me in The Great War.



Why is everybody gawping? Haven't they seen anyone shopping for a joint before? – it is a supermarket for Goodness sake. Shit! Of course, it is Armistice Day; that is why everyone is stood still and staring. A two-minute silence is being observed to remember the end of World War 1. It is 11am on the 11th of the 11th month – the day after my birthday.

Such stillness; it unnerves me. Anything could be happening, Dear Reader, as we stand as statues – the world must go on we have no time for this; I need to get back to prepare our lunch. We can never bring the old soldiers back to life, can we? And even if we could, they would be too old to be of any use to us. Consider Great Uncle Tobias, he is over 100 years old and shits in his trousers without a damn care.

Today, France:

“What a fine morning this is,” utters Monsieur le Maire to no one as he looks down onto the fields of poppies from the battlements that surround the North Western French town of D____. He takes in a deep breath of air and exhales with a swagger.

“Good morning, Dupont,” shouts Jacques as he passes below. “Are you enjoying your stroll?”

“Aaaa, Jacques, I am surely and how are you today?”

“Good,” he replies brightly. “I’m away to open the café; shall you be joining us for luncheon?”

Dupont nods his long head in smug retort. “I shall be along for a bite later, no doubt, Jacques.”

It is remarkably mild for November and the soft breeze brings unusual warmth with it. The poppies, which have long outlived their usual stay, sway lightly from the wheat stubble and can be seen to pop their seeds if the casual observer cares to watch awhile. Notwithstanding that the sound of gunfire is suddenly heard to the distance, Dupont has no care – hunters about their business, no doubt, he thinks. He fancies he can see them at the horizon and stood in line.



Today, England:

An old soldier wearing a blazer and beret shakes a money tin in my face as I go to leave the supermarket. He stands in front of a table draped in his regimental colours. Neat rows of red paper poppies surrounding a miniature cenotaph, made from stiff white card, stand atop. I have no cash – for I favour my debit card today. I am embarrassed and I choose to ignore him. I can feel his cod eyes burning a hole into my shoulder as keen as any bullet that he has ever taken, to be sure. I have chosen beef for our lunch – it will go well with Yorkshire puddings and a nice and rich onion gravy. Yikes! I am nearly run over by an impatient motorist as I struggle across the car park towards my car. I would kill that bastard if he dared stop his motor. The blasted carrier bags are cutting into my hands by the time I have opened up the boot and dropped them inside. It is nearly 11.15 and Tobias will be arriving shortly; I am yet to put the meat in. My impatience grows as I am stuck at road works for longer than should be expected.

At last I am at my home. I switch on the oven to heat up whilst I go about the vegetables. The beef looks succulent and I put it into the oven. I look out the window; there is our robin. He comes quite close to the house; his red breast puffed out with benevolence. We did have two robins; I found one dead on the lawn last week; its head pecked asunder – robins are very territorial, I am told.

Today, France:

Because the weather is warm enough to sit outside, Dupont pulls up a chair and sits. Before he is settled, Jacques has his usual drink placed on the tabletop.

“I have a fancy for the boeuf this afternoon, Jacques,” He utters without looking away from his newspaper, which he has spread across the table. He takes a long draught of his wine and slams it back down onto the wood – albeit for theatrical effect. He smiles when he comes across an article regarding the recent euro elections. There is no one else at the café, apart from The Old Lady who dozes in the shade; her wide brimmed hat is lowered to her nose. Dupont turns to her

“It’s a fine afternoon, Madam,” he offers to no return - as is usual.

A group of children run close by – their shrill voices resound about the empty streets. Dupont smiles at their childish antics as they make their way back to school before the bell should catch them out. What a pleasant day this is for me, thinks Monsieur Le Maire?

The boeuf was succulent and the vegetables crisp - a fine feast for a fine day. Dupont wipes his plate clean with a crust.

“I’ll be off then, Jacques,” He shouts to the inner - without, again, not settling his dues.

The café owner forces a cheerful note to his tone: “Same time tomorrow, I expect, Dupont?”

His dark lipped wife sends him a frown that would make mincemeat of the Gorgon’s glare. “Why do you never make him pay, Jacques? Are we overrun with diners?” She nags.

He dismisses her with the back of his hand and goes out to clear the table. He is surprised to see that a small group of men have gathered near to his door – they are strangers; English he thinks. He invites them to sit – which they do.

“Ah, soldiers,” ejaculates Jacques upon noticing their military attire, “You are always welcome at my establishment.”

A tall man wearing a peaked cap indicates that they would like some drinks – beer of course and a small glass of absinthe for the lady sat in the shade. He steps back inside to the sound of raucous laughter. When he returns with a tray full of foaming lager, he notices that the old lady is sat on the lap of the tall man – she is wearing his beret and he, to the amusement of his friends, is wearing her floppy hat in return. Jacques smiles idiotically as he distributes the biers. He has hardly emptied his tray when the shout goes up for another round. The old lady gamely shows the guffawing soldiers her stocking tops.

There is concern that the soldiers may get out of hand - the town’s people step cautiously to the other side of the road as they return from their business.

The church bells ring out; it is nearly 6pm and the soldiers are still at their merrymaking. Jacques wife passes her husband yet another tray of drinks to be consumed:

“Make sure they know of our menu, Jacques,” she says with a broad grin from ear to ear. “All of this drinking must be making them hungry.”

Jacques shrugs his thin shoulders, “I have asked them about their appetite throughout their session, my wife, but they only have an interest in their bier – and The Old Lady of course.”

Today, England:

My wife cuts Tobias’s beef into bite-sized pieces after I have placed his plate down onto the tabletop. Uncle Freddy, struggles to open up a bottle of red wine that

he has brought. I prefer beer and Tobias mumbles that he would rather share my ale than that foreign muck that his son is overly fond of. Our plates are well clean as we sit impatiently and wait for Tobias to finish his meal – I could smash his head asunder with a coal shovel he infuriates me so much with his dining. Eventually he is finished and my wife brings out the trifle – that shouldn't take him long to chew.

The beer is starting to take effect and Tobias begins to cry, as usual. Here it is, My Reader, the story he always relates after his tears. However, do not fear for I will not torture you to hear the full account. I will summarise.

It happened that Tobias and a small group of his soldiers, he was a sergeant, came across a small French town whilst on a break from the front line. He goes on to say how they drank a lot of beer at a café and how a lovely looking French girl had sat on his knee for the whole of the sun-filled afternoon... Sorry, he always throws back his head at this point of the narrative and lets out a wail. Uncle Freddy, as is usual, has to take him back to the home – thank goodness. It would be nice, however, to hear the rest of the tale for once.

France

As dusk should be approaching, Jacques became worried. “Bon Dieu, what if they are to leave without letting us have their payment?”

“You must send at once for Monsieur Le Maire, he should know how to deal with such an incident, if it should occur,” retorts his fat wife, who is also concerned for their dues. Jacques sends a boy along.

One of the soldiers, returning from the lavatory, hears the conversation and is not best pleased with what he has heard.

“Sergeant,” he complains to the tall man, “They fear that we will go without giving our payment.”

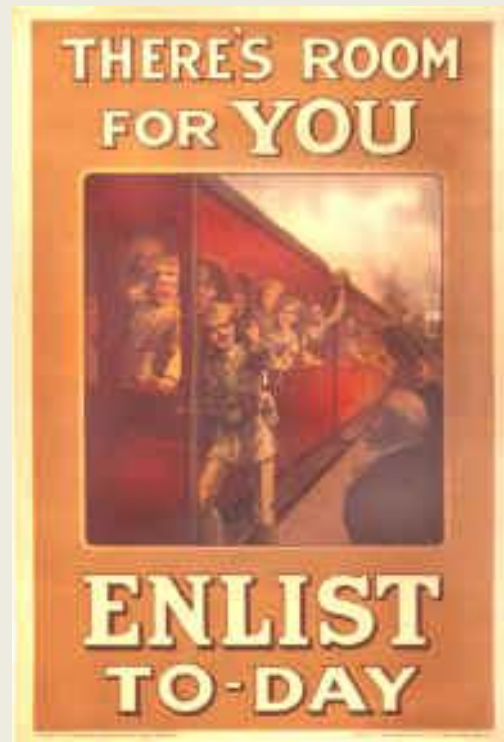
The Sergeant is outraged and stands up so sharply that The Old Woman falls to the floor. He makes his apologies and dusts the poor dear down. He calls out for Jacques.

“You care to insult us.” He rages as Jacques reluctantly steps out from the café and into a brightness that belongs to a long and past summer's eve.

“Pardon, Monsieur?” returns Jacques shakily.

“You think that we will not pay?”

Jacques cannot answer and he hops from foot to foot in his embarrassment. He is just about to apologise when Monsieur Le Maire rounds the corner – the stern looking Prefect accompanies him. A small group of the town's people have gathered at the



church steps, which stand across the way.

“Problems, Jacques?” Asks Dupont.

The young soldiers stand to their feet and make to support their NCO – not one of them yet in their twenties. Dupont takes a step back; the Prefect takes a step forward with his arms opened wide.

“We want no unpleasantness here, gentlemen...”

“And you’ll get none if you treat us with the respect we deserve,” interrupts a wild looking youth with staring eyes.

The Prefect smiles, “I don’t see anyone treating you with a lack of respect, Monsieur.”

“It is not enough that we die on the battlefields defending your homes...” He continues with venom.

This time the Prefect interrupts: “We have not seen any fighting in these parts for 60 years and again 20 years before that. You were not even born the...”

Without further ado, the boy launches himself towards the Prefect. The Prefect falls to the floor with the youth atop. He lets out a high-pitched scream as the youth sets his teeth about his red face. The soldiers laugh and one of them slaps Dupont across the face. Dupont falls backwards and into the dust. With a speed that belies his frame, he gets up and flees. The onlookers run hastily into the church – knocking the Priest to the ground as they go. Just before they shut and bolt the door, Le Maire manages to run hysterically inside. Jacques is glued to the floor with fear – the youth rives at the throat of the Prefect like he was a rabid dog.

“Sit, Jacques,” says the Old Woman as she pushes a chair forward “You will be quite safe with me.”

As Jacques sits down he can hear the terrible screams of his wife coming from inside the café.

“Why, Jacques, you seem to have lost control of your bowels.” she says as she pulls a knife across his turkey throat. The blood sprays from the wound and Jacques clasps his hands to his throat.

“Go call the others,” Orders the NCO as he wipes blood from his face. “Tell them to come at once,” he adds with a grin. He beckons his men to sit down and enjoy their beverages. Jacques screams like a stuck pig before falling lifelessly to the floor. The Old lady is upon him, biting into his throat and plucking out his eyes with her red talons.

Soon the marching of many feet can be heard in the distance – a platoon approaches. They can hear the same heavy footfalls inside the church also. The Priest has them all to their knees and they are calling out to God to save them. They would have prayed harder if they had been brave enough to open up the oaken door and take a look outside, to be sure.

The gates fly open and in they proudly stride. It is truly a parade of the grotesque.

Although they step in tune, everything else is quite irregular. 80 years is a long time to lie under the sod with a broken white crucifix stuck into your skull – they are fond of vandalism in these parts, it seems. They march by the café to the salute of the soldiers as they sit drinking. The command is to halt by the church. They stand long and quiet – their clothes are in tatters and their wounds blue with age. A million flies fly above their heads and a million more maggots eat out their intestines. An officer with a posh accent walks to their front and allows them to stand easy. They relax and chat easily amongst themselves – he makes to the café where he is welcomed. He sits to a freshly poured drink and a kiss from the Old Lady. The church clock strikes 8pm; but the sun has still refused to set. The officer's ashen face breaks into a smile as he recognises the NCO.

“Tobias and how are you?” he asks as an earthworm crawls from his eye socket.

“I'm well,” retorts Tobias, as he sticks his fore finger into a neat bullet hole, which sits centre of his superior's brow. “A sniper?” he adds with a snort. “Bloody good shot too.”

The officer laughs and turns his head to reveal the messy exit wound.

“Nice,” remarks the wild-eyed youth from his bloodied chops.

A low groan comes from the ranks and a Corporal loses an arm – it falls heavily to the ground. It twitches itself to an eventual halt.

“It's been nice seeing you, Tobias, but I must get these lot back underground – this hot weather is no good for us,” says the officer; he drains his glass and stands to leave.

“Wait,” shouts out Wild Eyes, “aren't you going to help us? The town's people; they need teaching a lesson.”

They march up the steps towards the heavy church door. They huddle about the doorway and push. At first the door does not yield. Tobias suggests dousing it in petrol. Some petrol it brought forward and thrown against the door. The Officer follows with a match and it is ignited – along with a few of the platoon, who did not move back far enough. They scream like banshees and are toasted into oblivion. Unfortunately, in their death dance, they also ignite half of their number. The soldiers, whom are still watching from the café, laugh like drains at the comical antics of their erstwhile colleagues.

The door soon burns to cinders and in they march. Much screaming and begging is heard from within. Out they come again with the town's people within their midst - Dupont screams for his deliverance and the Priest begs for mercy.

They are forced to kneel in the square whilst their fate is to be decided. A rifle is brought forward and handed to the officer.

“Shoot the bastards,” shout the soldiers – who are enjoying the spectacle from their drunken viewpoint.

The officer takes aim at Dupont and fires a shot. He is true of aim and Dupont's bonce is all over the square.

There is much laughter and guffawing. He takes aim once more. A thin man with a moustache cries out for mercy.

“Who is that pulling at my tunic?” he shouts in irritation as his aim is spoilt. He looks down to see a young girl. She is no older than 5 or 6 and has a curly mop of golden hair.

“Don’t shoot my Papa, Monsieur,” she begs with the innocence of youth. “For who would look after me thereafter?”

She is clutching a red poppy in her grubby child hands. The officer laughs and turns his aim to her. She does not fold.

“There you are, Monsieur,” she says bravely and without nerves as she pushes the straggly stem of the flower into the end of the barrel.

He pulls the trigger but the bullet remains in the magazine.

“What sort of witchery is this?” he roars in an uncontrollable anger.

He tries the trigger once more and again it does not fire.

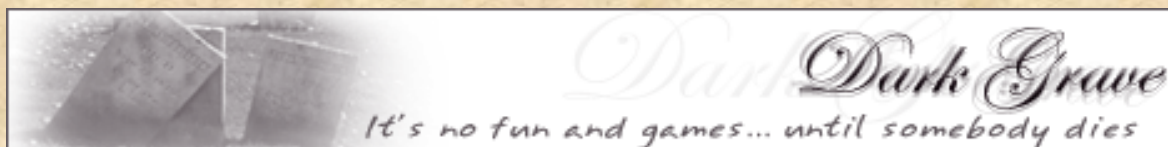
“Damn it,” he yells as he reverses his weapon – that is grasping it by the barrel.

The poppy falls slowly to the ground. Soon it is covered with the blood of the child as she falls with her skull all caved in. With his dander up he finishes off the town’s people with the same base operation – he has no bloody finesse, I fear. When finished with the brutal deed, he turns and salutes. Tobias and his men return the gesture – albeit impudently and with glee.

After they have gone, the gate swings closes with a gothic creak, which resounds about the ghost yard of a town. The old lady moves back into the shade and pulls the brim of her hat down over her eyes once more.

Tobias reluctantly leads his men back to war - isn’t it hell being a soldier?

The End



BUS FULL OF DYING

By Chris Castle

[Vote For This Story Now!](#)

Bus full of dying

The bus was full of dead people.

That was the first thing Jake understood when he opened his eyes. He woke up in the seat at the back where he had been sitting but he knew the truth. He had been sitting reading his book one minute and then there was a sudden snap, like a paper bag being blown up and then burst. Then the dying began.

He had been jerked off his seat and dragged straight down the aisle from the back all the way to the front by the driver; in a different world it might almost might have been fun, sliding on the seat of his pants along the floor. He remembered as he hurtled forward the glass panes of the windows had begun to pop, shattering, spraying glass towards the people on the seats. There should have been screaming, there was screaming but it had been lost in the chaos of the vehicle pulling itself apart.

Jake crashed into the front of the bus and lay still, even as everything else was being torn to pieces, or not even quite that; it was almost as if everything was being folded into itself, like God was reaching down and screwing them all up like a paper food wrapper ready for the bin. Jake had looked up and seen the driver, saw parts of him, while other parts were already missing. He had even managed to look back and see the others, about six or seven, to see if they were somehow okay. A girl wearing a blue and white hat he had watched when she climbed on, two stops after him. He looked for her, for them all, but there was only a swirl of glass, like raindrops, and screaming and finally a spark of fire, as if the sun had fallen out of the sky and landed on top of them. And then there was only the darkness.

Jake pulled himself from the seat. He was sitting back in his original seat. He looked around. There were seven of them, as before and they were all sitting on their seats. He looked up the aisle and saw the drivers hand on the wheel. But there was no reflection in the circular mirror above his seat where he was supposed to monitor the troublesome school-kids. That was the first sign.

He pulled himself out of the seat, aware of how hard it was to just do that simple thing. He stopped and suddenly reached down to his t-shirt, pulled it up, looking for the blood, the scars. There was nothing. Literally, his body was a pale glow, almost white but a little too dirty to glow, but not with any of the colour of a body that pumps blood and lives from one second to the next. Jake coughed, trying to hold back the urge to scream. He knew he should have been crying now, but even that was beyond him. Instead, he carefully patted down his t-shirt, suddenly aware of the ...nothingness of his body and started to walk forward. As he did he began to understand the lightness of himself, how every movement would now be a struggle. But he still wanted to walk on.

The other passengers were not moving. More than that, they were not even reacting to Jake moving. He knew they were aware of him, saw a flicker as he passed by them, but it was as if they were too scared to acknowledge him. As he took the next weightless step, it dawned on him why; they were scared of him. Why? Because he was a ghost. Jake almost laughed, ghosts scared of a fellow ghost; it was like a serial killer being edgy around his peers. He felt a strange jolt that made him stop and realised it was his new face trying to laugh. Did ghosts laugh? Could they...Hell, should they? What the hell was a spook going to get the chuckles about? This made it worst and Jake felt the contortions grow worse, until it was almost like pain. He stopped himself and walked on, shaking his head as best he could; so this was the worst torture a ghost could get; a dose of the funny faces.

After his forth step he stopped. He had not looked out of the window. It was too simple a thing to miss and he knew there was something else behind it; fear. There was a reason he had not turned to one side or the other. Maybe it was for the best. Or maybe seeing what was out there now would finally send him to...wherever it was he was meant to go. No. He would not be scared. After all that he'd seen, the thing he had hated the most were the passengers timid non-looks to him. He had gone through the valley and he would not be scared. Instead, he slowly cranked his neck to the left, edging against himself to look out to...the place.

It was almost a city. Jake's first thought was a carnival. A carnival after the show had left for the next town. The place was desolate but still had that murky beam he recognised from his own body. It was not terrifying or ugly, neither was it awe inspiring or...glorious. Jake looked at it hard, not knowing if his body would allow him another look. It looked like a wasteland that was it. But that was okay, he figured; hell, most of where he grew up looked worse. He turned back, noticing the windows were back in their place, but with a thousand cracks on the panes; as if they had been installed by a vandal after the act. Jake felt his face laugh jerk again; as least the wastelands had less graffiti than his home town.

He noticed it running through the whole structure. It had been rebuilt after the accident but on the accidents' terms. The broken seats had been pushed back into place, squashed against bent railings, the way kids defiantly put jigsaw pieces in the wrong slots. The poles and the bells had been drummed back into place, wonky as hell. Jake wondered if the bells still worked, but even he didn't have the nerve to break the silence of the place and try it out. The torn posters had been put back in their frames on the walls, each of them a montage made of a hundred ripped pieces now. Jake kept walking then suddenly looked down and stopped.

He saw the trail of blood on the floor. His blood. Where he had been dragged and sprayed with the raining glass. But the blood was faint, almost glossed over now, more of an idea that a stone cold fact. He was walking over the site of his own death. He was slowly padding over his own crime scene site. Jake felt something in him move around his stomach. He was not going to be sick. He gripped a pole and felt the waves of fear and disgust roll over him. No. He gripped the pole tighter, hoisted himself upright again. This

was something no one else would ever know, that he could never imagine happening. In some way, somehow, this was a gift. Jake kept walking.

He made it to the end of the bus. The driver sat in his seat, looking straight ahead. Below the sleeves his arms gripped the dis-jointed wheel, like boys do bumper cars. Jake saw the trail of scars faintly running along the man's arms, like transfer tattoos. His cap was pulled forward, too far forward, so his face was a shadow. There were parts of his face, his jaw, the left side of his cheek, that were too far forward, at too sharp an angle. The bottom of his ear pointed at a ninety degree angle instead of straight down. Jake tried to open his mouth to speak but no words came out. Everything was broken, he knew that, he understood it, but the driver was something else. He was beyond repair. Instead of asking him questions he knew there would be no answer to, Jake simply turned round and left the man in his darkness.

Jake made it half way down the bus. He looked down; was that the point he began dying as he slid across the floor? Did a glass shard snag an artery then, or was it further along? He looked to the passengers; the crazy lady who got on at the same stop as him, who always carried a mop; it was across her now, the top of it on her lap, the fibres criss-crossed and wrong as if glued back by ten different people at ten different times. There was an old couple who had sat at the front who were still holding hands, as if nothing had changed. There was a teenage boy at the back, near where to Jake had sat, his headphones still in his ear even though there was no music, where before it had been thump-thump-thump. The boy had been a punk, all attitude and foggy movements, sharp eyes. Now he looked like a bullied kid waiting for his mother. There was a man clutching his briefcase to his body, like it would protect him. The bottom of the bag was seared open and whatever had been in there, so precious and important, was gone now; he was holding an empty, battered down case. The man's eyes were so wide opened Jake didn't know if he had eye-lids.

He wondered if the man had looked outside to the wastelands and saw what Jake had seen but didn't find it funny. Maybe he didn't get the joke but instead only saw the truth. Then there was the girl.

She sat to the side, still looking as if she was waiting for the end of the journey. Her hat was still on the back of her head, pushed a little further back, but still there. That made him feel better. At least they hadn't lost that silly, beautiful thing. She wore jeans and a check shirt, trainers. There were flecks of paint on the shirt and Jake figured she had studied at the art college at the end of the city. Her hair was loose and blonde around her shoulders and singed at the ends. She wore a chain along her neck, a silver chain that was welded into the skin now. Her eyes were green, the colour of penny sweets. Jake looked at her, unmoving, still. He looked at the other passengers. Why was he the only one? Or were they all like him; alone trying to raise the others out of their stupor and their seats; were each of them fighting to reach the other across the barriers of the broken bus? He called out to each of them, grabbed them and shook them. He stood close-by the girl and introduced himself. He pulled at the man's suitcase that wouldn't budge. He sat by the boy sat locked in fear listening to imaginary music. Jake sat on the floor, on top of

his own death and looked up the bus to the driver. His arm rested on the side where people put down their money; a criss-cross of scars like veins on his forearm. His finger drummed on the ticket machine like he was... waiting. Jake screamed at him, called him everything under the sun, but it didn't make a dent. He just sat, nothing moving but that one finger, drumming away, waiting for the last one to give up so they could be on their way, Jake thought.

He wouldn't give up. It was that simple, that plain a thought, that Jake felt it course through his body like his blood once had. He looked down to the driver and then pulled himself off the floor. Slowly he walked from one passenger to the next. He introduced himself, talked about himself for a little while, then tried to talk about them; he picked clues off of them; wedding rings, bracelets, the clothes they wore and the colour of their eyes. He tried everything. He did not know how long he spent talking to the frozen people, didn't feel hungry or tired or any of the rest of the trappings, but he didn't give up.

He made his way over to the boy and talked about music. He talked about everything he could possibly think of; his favourites, how it made him think of people he knew and would never know a single thing more about, festivals, lyrics he'd written in science class bored out of his mind. After a while, he pulled the phones out of the boy's ears, as if that would make a difference. He talked and talked until he had nothing else to say. The boy still looked out into the distance, looking for someone to make him feel less scared. Jake put the plugs back in his ears and dragged himself away.

He crouched in-front of the girl and talked. He could have sat next to her, but he didn't want that. He told her about the moment she got on the bus, the way he liked her hat and the way it swayed in time to how she walked. He told her secrets and truths. He looked into her cool green eyes and asked her a hundred questions that he knew she couldn't answer. He asked her who was the first person she loved and what her favourite flavour ice cream was. Everything and nothing. He was on his knees by the end of it, until he finally held her hand in his. The feeling was uneasy, two numb hands brushing against each other.

"Please," he said, over and over. Finally he looked away from her, down the aisle. The driver's finger tap-tap-tapping, quicker than ever. There would be a point where his finger would stop and his hand would slip back behind the wheel, Jake knew. It would be the end of things. It wasn't even that he was scared now; he just didn't want to be so...defeated. He looked back to the girl, saying the same word, over and over. He looked back to the driver, his finger drumming at an impossible speed now, almost a blur. It was almost over. Something lurched inside Jake and he fell to his knees. Back to the place where it all began. He put his fingertips down on the traces of blood. He closed his eyes. He went back to the moment when it had all started to fall apart.

The bell rang. A single, weak shrill blip of a noise. Jake jerked up as if it was a firework. He looked up to the girl, who was still staring blankly to the left of him. He looked around, first forward to where the driver's finger; it had stopped twitching. Then back to see the boy leaning forward, his hand still on the bell, one ear plug hanging down from his ear.

"You like country and western?" Was all the boy said, the scared look slipping from his eyes as he screwed them up in a question.

“Yes! Yes, I love country and western!” Jake said pulling himself off the floor, standing straight and looking to the kid.

“I like it too, but I never told my friends. They think country and western eats ass,” he said and almost shrugged, almost went back to being a punk. Jake felt the jerk of the laughter jolt through his face when he heard the kid talk. He looked back, saw the drivers hand slide back to the darkness, back into position. It had...slunk back, like a bully defeated. The bell rang again and he looked back to the kid but his hand was off the bell now, pushing the free plug back into his ear. He looked round and saw the girl looking at him, her finger on the red buzzer.

“My favourite ice cream’s chocolate. Did you just ask me that?” She said, her face half smiling, half frowning, like she’d just woken up.

“Mine’s mint choc-chip,” Jake said. “What’s your name?”

“Chloe. And you’re Jake. Where are we, Jake? Where are we heading?” She said, slowly looking around. She was confused but she wasn’t scared.

“I don’t know.” Jake said, taking her hand and helping her up off her seat. The boy came up at his shoulder and the three of them began to walk towards the darkness together. His hand was still in hers. But it was no longer numb. Instead, he felt something.

LOVED BY NUMBERS

By Olivia Berrier

“I like mathematics because it is not human and has nothing particular to do with this planet or with the whole accidental universe – because, like Spinoza’s God, it won’t love us in return.”

– Bertrand Russell

[Vote For This Story Now!](#)

I hate prophesies. You want to know why? They’re always correct. Ever read a story where people reacted to a prophesy before it was already too late? Yeah, me neither. Now, don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying that Bertrand Russell was a prophet. He’s not even close.

Even still, that quote’s a funny one. Good ol’ Bertrand didn’t know how correct he was. Rather, how lucky the world was that his flowery love-quote *was* correct. There was a time deep in the earth’s history where math couldn’t have cared less about us. It was a blissfully one-sided relationship: we studied math and math ignored us.

Olivia Berrier is a student at Hollins University working towards a double major in Creative Writing and Mathematics. She is often clueless and always shoeless.

I have attached a picture to this e-mail as well. Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you!

~ Olivia Berrier



You should blame the mathematicians. I do.

But more on that later. I need to concentrate right now. I must have been clinging to at least six threads of thought, which would be easier if they were actually ‘threads,’ but they’re not. It’s all mental. Eight equations, eight unknowns. It’s supposed to be solvable.

Possible solutions floated lazily around me, the only points of light as in this eerie darkness: 7, 194, 11, -15. No, not that. The H variable was definitely not negative. The combined H equations came to $624 + H^2 - 4A = 10909$. But wait, I know A; it was 81, wasn’t it? The uncertainly flared, but I deflated it. No, it *was* 81. So, that meant...come on...4 times 81...324!

My mind throbbed as I began solving the H equation. The term ‘pounding the numbers’ is only cute in our world, the place I used to live. Here, in the Math-verse, actually churning out an answer is literally painful. But I needed the answer. I wasn’t slipping down again. I didn’t want to repeat this level again.

I got down to the square root of 10609, and I stumbled, because that number looked an awful lot like the 10909 I’d hit earlier, so that couldn’t be right, right? I must have messed up somewhere...as soon as that thought occurred, I felt the elaborate web of equations dissolving around me and I started falling.

Stop!

My heart thudded, sending new spikes of pain through my brain. No, I’d come this far. I couldn’t start over. All I needed was one square root and I’d be done with this problem. I had to keep cool. So, about that square root...It was between 100 and 110. If I guessed, I’d have a pretty good shot...

“Don’t be stupid,” Bug informed me. He’s not really a bug. That’s just what I call him. “You can’t just guess. There’s only one answer.”

I gritted my teeth at the ugly demon-fairy. “I’ve got it down to nine numbers.”

“Not good enough.” Bug perched on my shoulder. “And watch your hold on the D variable. You’re losing it.”

“Stop distracting me, then!” I grasped at my $D = 318$ thread and turned back to the square root. My brain kept threatening to lock down, but I didn’t let it. “103!” I shouted to the amorphous cloud.

I felt solid ground under my feet and released all of the numbers I’d been holding. At this point, the full extent of my exhaustion hit me and I passed out. But hey, I’d made it to the next level. Only 29 left...

So, anyway, I’m Kaleb. My name means ‘the devoted one,’ which is kind of funny, all things considered. You probably already know me, or at least you know someone like me. I’m that guy who sits in the back corner of all your high school classes, even Home-Ec, which you took specifically to get away from me.

I infuriate you. I always have. I'm an arrogant, red-haired jerk who acts like recessive genetics are an invitation to bypass rules. Never mind the fact that you and everyone else actually care about learning, and who do I think I am - disrupting your studies with my oh-so-clever comments?

You bite your tongue every day, wondering why the teachers don't tell me off. But you already know. I'm just too smart. I get straight A's without ever cracking a book, while you're up at 4 AM still revising that term paper. I could have been Valedictorian if I wanted to try, but then I would've needed to stay awake for graduation.

And sometimes, you wonder whatever became of me, but the thought doesn't last long. After all, why should you care? I was never once nice to you. You spit on my memory and walk away, happy to be free of me at last.

Does it help if I tell you that my life's a nightmare now? No. Probably not. And I suppose I can't blame you.

The resting decks between levels aren't terribly big. They're maybe the size of a twin bed, and this makes me nervous because I'm fallen out of a twin bed before. At every level, morbid curiosity makes me crawl to the edge and look down. I always feel nauseous.

"Big drop, eh?" Bug cackled in my ear.

I flung myself backward into the wall. "Don't do that!"

"Oh, c'mon, Kaleb." He buzzed around my face and I swatted at him. "You aren't any fun."

"Go...turn into an imaginary number."

"Ouch!" Bug cried, delighted. "A mathematical insult! The Powers must be thrilled."

"Good for them."

You're probably wondering what, exactly, Bug is, right? Well, I don't think I could relate him to any species we have on earth. He reminds me of those ugly little things in fantasy books called gnomes or imps or goblins, depending on the author. He's small, though – about the size of a mouse – with wings and a *really* pitchy voice.

And, no. Killing him isn't an option. Trust me, I've tried. He exists to keep me moving through the pyramid. If I stay at any level for too long, he latches on like a tick and...well, I try to not let him latch on. It's not good.

By the time he lets go, I've probably slipped back five levels of the pyramid. Repeating levels is the worst thing ever. Actually, this entire place is the worst thing ever. But it's okay. I only have 29 levels to go, and then it'll all be over.

"You should be studying," Bug informed me. "You need to attempt the next level soon."

"What's the topic?" I mumbled, reaching for the familiar book with the triangle pattern on the cover. It exists at every level and serves as a briefing for the next problem.

"Hehe."

“Aw, don’t say ‘hehe,’ Bug!” It’s never good when he laughs like that. I opened the book, saw pages of square roots of (-1) , and groaned louder at the irony of my previous insult to him. “Imaginary numbers! Seriously?!”

Bug perched triumphantly on my shoulder. “Hehe.”

“3:47 AM!” I called out the answer, and almost instantly I knew I was wrong. Slipping down through the pyramid is a very distressing experience. You feel disconnected from everything, even yourself, if that’s possible. That’s not what freaks me out, though. It’s knowing that even though you just spent hours on that one problem, you need to go back and do it all again.

In any given problem, there are hundreds of smaller calculations. If you mess up just one of those, the entire answer is going to be wrong. It feels like pushing a boulder up a greased hill and slipping at the peak. When I found myself, once again on the 93rd level, I felt like crying. I’ve attempted this level eight times, now. It’s the train problem.

Oh, that’s right. You probably don’t know what the train problem is, right? I forget sometimes that studying math is illegal now, even though that’s exactly what got me sucked into the Math-verse. I miss the real world.

Anyway, the train problem: it’s when they give you about twenty books worth of information about the speeds and intersections of a bunch of trains. You’re supposed to use this to figure out what time train A left the station. It’s a pain.

“Not studying?” Bug taunted.

I swatted at him. “I already know train problems.”

“*Really?*” He uttered a screechy laugh. “Then how come you’re repeating the level again, smart one?”

“Oh, shut up! I know the method for the problems. I just made an arithmetic error.”

“Arithmetic! Lovely.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What’re you getting so excited about?”

“Well, if it’s arithmetic you can’t do, then you have *many* levels to repeat. After all, arithmetic is contained in the first ten levels.”

I froze. When I remembered to breathe, my lungs contracted in a terrified cough-gasp. “Bug...you’re not serious...are you?” The thought of falling all the way to the beginning of the pyramid and completing everything again made something in my brain shrivel.

Bug was silent for a moment and then broke into shrieking laughter. “Gotcha! Made you scared. Hehe.”

In a moment of rage, I attempted to flatten him and ended up numbing my hand instead. Even Bug shouldn’t be allowed to mess with me now that I’m this close. If I ever got past the train problem, I’d only have six levels left, and then I’ll never study math again. Ever.

That thought made me smile.

I had reached the 99th level, the top of the pyramid, and I had been here for at least eleven attempts. No, more than that. Twenty? I didn't care anymore. The last level seemed to be a culmination of everything I'd learned before, not that I was surprised by this. The book with the triangle patterns was thick now, like the textbooks I used to have in high school.

Back when I lived in the real world.

Hey, want to know how I got here? You should blame the mathematicians. I've always blamed them. They reached the 'next frontier' of mathematics: a true connection with the numbers. That's exactly the problem. Once the connection was established, scary stuff started happening with math.

No one really recognized the existence of a problem until math started talking. Then, the brilliant mathematicians had this clever solution of sealing all of mathematics into its own world. Hah. That worked well, except that all mathematicians got sucked into the Math-verse and didn't come back.

I'll bet you didn't know that. Know *why* you didn't know that? Because all countries have outlawed recreational math for that exact reason. Anyone who studies math for fun gets sucked into this horrible place. I didn't even like math! I was just-

"Who are you talking to?" Bug asked, buzzing in my ear.

"I'm not talking."

"Yeah y'are. You're always mumbling to yourself. You just explained the history of mathematics. I hope you're not trying to tell *me*."

I laughed mirthlessly and turned back to the triangle book. Bug perched on the book's spine. I tried to shake him off, but he was being stubborn. "What do you want?!"

"Who were you talking to?"

"Why do you care?"

"I'm the spawn of pure math," he explained. "Curiosity is in my makeup. I really want to know."

"Well, too bad."

Bug took flight again, but didn't get far before coming back to my shoulder. "Tell me and I'll explain something I wasn't supposed to tell you."

"No thanks." I said it before thinking, and then reconsidered it. Maybe this wasn't a bad idea. Bug might, for once, be helpful. "What would you explain?"

"Something useful," Bug promised. "Something exciting."

"Something helpful?"

"Oh, yes! Oh, yes."

Well, if this would somehow help me, then why not? "Fine. Back before I came here, I, um..." I picked at my hair. This was oddly difficult; it felt too much like I was confiding in Bug, and I didn't want to do that. I want to confide in you and that's it.

“Yes, yes,” Bug pressed. “Go on.”

“I...heard a voice. But not like a crazy-people voice, okay? It was a legitimate second person in my head, talking to me, and he only said one thing over and over. ‘Don’t study math.’ And, of course, as soon as I heard that, all I wanted was to study math. I just wanted to know why everyone was so terrified of it.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“Well, I just figured that if someone was able to talk to me, maybe my thoughts were reaching someone back in the real world, too.”

“So, you’re trying to warn them?”

“Nah. Warning didn’t work for me. I’m trying to give them as much detail as I can. I figure, maybe I should tell them that they *should* study math.” There, I said it. I guess that’s what I’d been trying to tell you all along: study math. Study math.

“It’ll never work,” Bug said. “Some people need to study math. They’re unsatisfied otherwise.”

“Yeah, well this place isn’t exactly satisfying,” I spat. Study math. Do it.

“It is for those who live here. Mathematics loves watching you, Kaleb. They’re fascinated with the way you function.”

“Well, good for them. I’m almost done with the pyramid, so good riddance.” Saying it made me realize how close I was to being free of this nightmare. “Know what? I’m gonna finish it right now. I’m getting out.”

“Wait,” Bug said. “I said I’d explain something helpful to you.”

“I don’t care anymore.” Study math.

“Oh, you should.” Bug landed on the triangle book. “I’m going to explain this triangle pattern to you.”

Okay, so I *didn’t* care. Not really. But I decided to listen anyway, just for a minute. Don’t judge me.

“This,” he explained, “is a special type of pattern called a fractal. See how the three triangles make up a larger one?”

“Sure.”

“And if you look at one of those three, you can see that it’s also made of three triangles.”

“I guess.”

“And, no matter how tiny a triangle is, it’s always made up of three smaller ones, and the pattern continues forever, to infinity.”

“Why does that matter?” Study math.

“Well, it’s interesting.”

“Not for me.” I closed my eyes with new determination and leapt into the last problem once again.

I was right, and this means that I won’t be talking to you again, whoever you are.

I don't know what dimension I'll leap into after the pyramid, but anywhere would be better than here. I don't know who you are, or if indeed my random thoughts have reached anyone back in the real world, but if you do exist, I hope you'll listen to me and not repeat my...

I opened my eyes. Wait, this was wrong. This didn't look any different. It just looked...bigger.

"Hehe," Bug laughed in my ear. "Get it?"

"What..." I squeaked. "I...what?!"

"Congratulations on completing the first pyramid. The first pyramid is only a small part of a larger pyramid: a pyramid made of pyramids, I guess. And once you complete the larger pyramid, you've only completed the first level in an even *bigger* pyramid."

"That's not true!" I grabbed the triangle patterned book and threw it over the ledge. Of course, it reappeared. "No, I was done with this! I was done with math!!"

"Fractals," Bug sang.

"*What?!*"

He pointed at the triangles on the book cover. "This place. It's a fractal. It keeps going for infinity."

"Infinity?" I repeated weakly.

"Hehe."

I gazed up at the pyramid, wondering if mathematics was enjoying this. Probably. Study math. Trust me. Study math.

THE BLEEDER

COLLECTION

NOW AVAILABLE

[Click Here](#)

THE BLEEDER

COLLECTION

NOW AVAILABLE

[Click Here](#)

THE CURSE OF THE KUDZU

By Stephen R. Bonnoil



My name is Melvin, George S. Melvin, and I have but one goal in life, one driving ambition that fuels my very existence. I live each day for one purpose – to burn the

kudzu.

[Vote For This Story Now!](#)

My story begins many years ago. I don't actually remember how many. Truth be told, I don't even remember the year I was born, or how old I am. I wouldn't even know my own name if it weren't for the wanted posters. My face and name is in every post office in the nation. I've even been told that my picture is on that modern technological wonder – the Internet.

I have some partial memories. I remember bits and pieces. The rest was ripped from my life, sucked from my brain by a force alien to this planet. I know I had a beautiful wife and young children who adored me. And now I don't. Where they went I don't exactly know. It hurts to even try to remember, not just a psychological hurt, but also a physical hurt, sort of like the hurt you feel after grabbing hold of an electric fence. I remember the last time I saw them we were walking in the woods somewhere. Where that was or where we lived, I disremember. I know that I went into the woods with my family, and came out alone, a raving maniac. And so I burn.

I move from town to town carrying only a sleeping bag and a backpack full of paraffin wax and matches. I sleep in open spaces, fields, and pastures, far, far away from any

Stephen R. Bonnoil was born, raised, and still lives in Barrington, RI, an upper middle class town on the shores of Narragansett Bay. If you've ever seen the original Leave it To Beaver TV series, that's what his childhood was like. A good portion of his writing takes place in the town or the nearby states of MA and NH.

To date, he has written one novel - OFFSPRING, one children's book, "Noogies are Wild" which tells a message of sibling rivalry, overcoming diversity and how love between siblings can overcome all odds.

He has authored dozens of horror shorts. Many are now part of Brown University's H.P. Lovecraft Collection. He's had one horror short published at www.demonictome.com (March '09) edition.

At present, He's hard at work on his second novel, "Hummingbird Wings," and a series of memoirs, of growing up in the 60's and 70's. To quote the author, "I know this has been done to death but I assure you my story is both amusing and tragic. To say I am lucky to be alive is an understatement."

Steve also enjoys writing comedic "rants" about everyday things that yank his chain and tick him off. Friends and fans alike assure him that these are funny. They may be scared to say otherwise.

trees, even small ones, where that infernal weed might take root and thrive.

As the story goes, the kudzu vine was imported from China in the 19th century by a Georgia farmer, obviously someone with more money than brains. He imported it to provide a revolutionary new feed for his cows. Problem was, cows don't like kudzu. In some unique method of arboreal self-defense, it makes the cows very ill. After but a few bites, they learn never to go near it again.

No one knows what happened to the farmer after this distressing discovery. Neither he nor his cows were ever seen again. It was as if the man and his livestock were lifted off the face of the planet. In the span of less than one year, his pastures, barns, and even his home were overtaken by the dastardly weed. Local folks still swear that if you look closely at the abandoned pastures, you can see green, leafy, kudzu-enclosed shapes, shapes that with a little bit of imagination vaguely resemble a herd of milk cows.

One thing I know about the kudzu is that it is not of this Earth. People read and wonder about a day when aliens might invade the Earth. The aliens are already here. The invasion is already underway, and has been for 400 years. In the year 1530, a gigantic meteor exploded in the air over China's Hunan Province, showering the area with a multitude of iron-nickel meteorites of various shapes and sizes. These fragments are prized by modern day collectors of such things. Some months or perhaps years later, a new vine took root and began to flourish in the mountains of the Hunan province. The elders called it kudzu, or "star child." Little by little it spread, overtaking native trees and bushes, assuming their shape, feeding on them until the underlying plant was gone and only its kudzu-shaped outline remained. Children were warned not to play in or near it lest they become tangled in its gnarly embrace. It was said that sometimes dogs or cats disappeared in the vines, presumably getting ensnared in their leafy tentacles, as a rabbit would in a snare. Approximately 300 years later that misguided Georgia farmer, Richard B. J. Roberts, unwittingly helped the alien plant on its way to global domination.

Nowadays the kudzu is everywhere. It can readily be seen at the edge of our nation's highways and country roads. Most of you drive by it in your Volvos and your SUVs and remark on its beauty. You marvel at the various shapes it forms. I see it in a different light. I see it as a threat to all Mankind.

I know this not due to extensive research done in libraries during my free time. I learned this from the plant itself. It's not that it told me, although it is capable of communication. As the plant had me in its clutches, sucking the memory out of me, feeding on it, I resisted and pulled back, and was left with this knowledge. And that is where I entered the fray.

My wanted posters don't feature some notorious name like "Son of Sam" or the "Unabomber" or anything catchy like that. They simply state "George S. Melvin – Wanted for Arson - \$100,000 Reward." I'm actually very proud of the reward. I've worked very hard for it. They say I'm responsible for the destruction of over 400,000 acres of old growth forest. It may seem like an impossible amount, but it's what I do day after day. Some people work in offices Monday through Friday, 9 to 5. I burn trees, and I don't take weekends off. Most of my fires are just small brush fires, attributed to careless smokers or kids, so my real acre-count is a lot higher than the authorities believe.

Occasionally though, I get lucky, like the time I burned down over 200,000 acres of Prince William National Forest in Triangle, Virginia. I actually had a little help with that one. After sneaking into the park via an unused, overgrown service road, I came across a

woman, a forest ranger actually. There she sat, sobbing, in front of a small campfire. She fed this small fire periodically with letters, which she read first, producing fresh outbursts of tears, before adding them to the flames. I sat there quietly watching her for the longest time, wondering just what a trained forest ranger would be doing lighting a fire in the middle of one of the driest summers on record. I stayed there a couple of hours, biding my time, waiting for her to leave so I could begin my own work. That time came soon enough when she wiped her eyes, stood up, poured her canteen all over the small fire, and left, following the old service road back into the park. I waited agonizingly, for another 15 minutes and then went over to perform my work, thanking her silently for helping me out.

I stirred up the still warm remains of her fire and was not surprised to see sparks jump. I quickly got some small twigs, and after shaving some paraffin onto a still warm area, I made a little tee-pee with the twigs. Getting down on my hands and knees, like a devout Moslem facing Mecca, I gently blew on the warm remains of her fire. In mere seconds I had a flaming pile of twigs to which I added bigger and bigger branches and entire blocks of paraffin wax. In less than 10 minutes this fire was an inferno more than 15 feet high. I pulled some of the larger logs out of the fire by their unburned ends and threw them about the forest nearby, ensuring that this fire would be a memorable one. As I left the forest by the same route I had taken in, I could hear the screams of the kudzu inside my brain, a sound like the wail of a wounded deer, as its very lifeline was attacked. As I started running, the kudzu blocked the path in front of me. I could actually see it moving in, cutting off the path, intertwining around itself in an effort to keep me in, to make me fall victim to my own fire. I would have none of that though. I whipped a disposable lighter out, turned the flame on high, and began scorching the leaves and vines.

This time the sound was audible, a sort of “EEEEENNEEEENENEEEE!” as the tortured vines withdrew from my path. As I ran down the once-blocked path, I had half a mind to turn and piss on these vile vines to show them who was boss, but thought better of it. Far better to get while the getting is good, I reasoned. After all, there would be other days, other fires. I needed to keep on truckin’.

And so I left the area quickly and hid out nearby, in an abandoned cabin, for a few days while professionals fought to put out what I had started. Now the great thing about my mission is that as prolific as this nefarious weed is under normal circumstances, it cannot survive a fire. Although the weeds originally came to Earth in the fiery crash of a meteorite, the plant itself cannot survive in the aftermath of a forest fire. Whereas fires actually are good for promoting new tree growth which feed on the various nutrients contained in the ashes, this serves as a natural barrier to new Kudzu growth and in fact acts as a poison, causing any root systems that may survive the fire to wither and die. Through my fire and destruction, I am the utmost environmentalist, promoting new growth and staving off alien invasion and consumption of our Earth’s botanical gems. Instead of a price on my head, they ought to place a crown there.

It was a bit of a surprise, when a week or so later, after scooping a discarded newspaper from the dumpster of a local Dunkin’ Donuts, I read that the fire had been blamed on the forest ranger burning her love letters in some act of soul-cleansing. There was no way the authorities could have actually believed this. Number one, they would have easily spotted the paraffin residue and the fact that the original flash point or fire was a carefully constructed log fire, not just a pile of love letters. My thought on that is

that it was simply easier to blame the resulting inferno on some dumb bitch and her love letters than it was to admit to the public that a crazed arsonist - that would be me, had struck again. After all, she had admitted to lighting a small fire in the same spot. I was okay with that. My job was done. I had destroyed one of the thickest stands of kudzu in the entire state. Time to move on down the road – to greener pastures, so to speak.

Two weeks later found me in a place called York, Alabama. At least that's what the five-foot-tall letters proclaimed on the water tower that stood over the rest area where I laid my head for the night. Actually I stayed a bit north of the rest area, in a cotton field devoid of trees. The rest area was a different story, however. There were dozens of pine trees towering at least 75 feet over the secluded camping area. The kudzu had been methodically trimmed away from each of the four stone fireplaces, the picnic tables, and the roofed dining area. The entrance and exit to the area resembled a tunnel through the otherwise benign-looking weed. Most people would have thought it romantic and beautiful. I saw it as prey.

I awoke before dawn the next morning and stealthily sneaked in and set to work. The pine needles at the base of the trees made an excellent fuel and, combined with bits of paraffin here and there, proved to be almost like natural gasoline. In no time at all, flames were licking up the trunks of the trees, feeding on the sap and flaming ever higher, devouring the kudzu even as it attempted to withdraw from the flames. Again I heard the otherworldly “EEEEENNEEEEEENENEEEE!” as the tortured alien presence was mortally injured by the hell that I had wrought upon it.

As the first yellow streaks of dawn were beginning to invade the night sky, signaling competition for the brightness of the roaring inferno, I walked for several miles in the woods adjacent to the highway. It wasn't too long before I heard the sirens of approaching fire apparatus. Through the trees, I caught a glimpse of two fire trucks roaring by on highway 41. Both of them were old, one of them World War II-vintage. “Hell, they're gonna need a lot more than that to fight this fire,” I said out loud. As I said this, I could feel the strong breeze of air rushing in to fuel the fire behind me. I thought of it as a heavenly wind, an Earth-borne thing, helping me in my ceaseless fight against the invader.

It took me almost 10 minutes before I realized something had changed. I had walked a good distance, seeing more police and fire vehicles wail by. I kept brushing at the hair that kept flopping in my face, blowing in my eyes. It suddenly hit me what danger I was in. Minutes ago, my hair had streamed out behind me in the strong wind that rushed into the fire. Now it was blowing frontward, as was the wind. The fire had changed direction, and was now pushing a superheated mass of air before it. I changed directions, heading diagonally off to the left, toward the edge of the woods and the highway. In mere moments a hurricane of hot air rushed by me as I drew closer and closer to the relative safety of the highway. I staggered from the woods and tangle of kudzu just in time to escape being baked like a potato. I ran across the southerly two lanes of the highway into the narrow median strip. I was watching traffic before attempting to cross the other two lanes when I saw the sheriff, looked him straight in the eye as he spotted me and slammed on his brakes. I stood there, dumbstruck, watching him fishtail this way and that, his tires smoking as they screeched to a stop. I came to my senses and began to run across the highway. I heard the car roar back to life with a screech of acceleration as he swung his patrol car around after me. I heard him approach like some roaring beast.

There was an instant where I saw the front hood of the car draw even with me, and then felt a violent impact as the sheriff hit me with his car door, held open specifically for this purpose.

I came to, seconds later, lying face down on the ground, my hands cuffed behind me as he screamed at me, "Did you light this fire sir?"

"Huh, what fire?" I stumbled, "I didn't light no fire, Sheriff!"

"Well, then what the hell is this for?" he demanded, shoving my backpack in my face. "You mind tellin' me what y'all doin' with all this wax and matches? Are y'all fixin' to start a candle factory then? Is that it? 'Cause I seen you runnin' out the woods with a backpack full of wax and matches just seconds ahead of a forest fire. I'll tell ya sir, I'm puttin' two and two together and I'm not getting five. Do you understand me sir?"

"I don't know. I'm not that good at math." I told him, which was the truth.

"Oh, is that so?" he asked, as he picked me up and threw me across the back seat of the cruiser, "Am I gonna need to EDUCATE you, then?"

"No sir!" I yelled, "It's the God's honest truth. I just ain't that smart. I didn't mean no disrespect, Sheriff, honest! As God is my witness!"

"We'll see about you sir." he said threateningly, "We'll just see about you sir."

That was the end of our idle cocktail chatter until I was brought to the sheriff's office and fingerprinted (I could've saved him the time. My prints ain't on file nowhere). I was photographed, and when he attempted to book me, that went bad from the get-go. When asked my name, I told him, "Joe Anywhere, sir! Truth be told, I don't got a name, least if I do have one I can't remember what it was," I explained, hoping to get his sympathy, like that would help me in the fix I suddenly found myself in. "I been alone for damn near 20 years. Ain't been nobody to talk to me. I ain't been called anything but "hey you." I told you I wasn't that smart, Sheriff. I really don't know why or how, but my brain done got a little hurt, sir. I just ain't the same as most folk."

He had this look in his eyes, just briefly, like he'd like to split my skull down the middle and just see what was inside, and then it was gone as he locked me in a cell and walked off mumbling how he'd just see who I was. Sure enough there he was 10 minutes later, waving my wanted poster at me, demanding, "This you? Melvin? George Melvin? Hot damn! I do believe I got me the Super Fire Bug!" He held it up, his eyes moving from the poster to me.

"I got you man. I'm callin' the FBI. Y'all got a million dollar bounty on yer head!" The mention of a million dollar bounty was not what caught my immediate attention. What caught my attention was the name – "The Super Fire Bug." It was no Unabomber or Batman, but it'd do nicely. It's nice to be recognized, and the million buck reward? Looked to me that I'd finally arrived, the outlaw equivalent of being knighted.

He returned dutifully to report that he had faxed my photos to the FBI office in Montgomery and that they were very interested in talking to me. This guy had such a shit-eatin' grin on his face. I wished I could knock it off. He could just smell that reward money. I could feel the long arm of John Law closing in on me now. For the first time in a great many years, I was scared shitless. Nevertheless, I went over to the steel bed and lay down on the filthy mattress. Hell, this was way better than lying in some field somewhere. Besides that, I reckoned I was gonna need any bit of rest I could get before the Federal Law Dogs came in the morning. I was asleep before lying there five minutes.

I was awakened in the wee hours of the morning by an odd sound. It sounded like

someone choking. I seemed to hear the muffled sounds of some sort of struggle in the outer office, followed minutes later by a dull thud on the office floor.

And then I noticed a scratching outside the barred window opposite the cell. This was not just the ordinary scratching of a stray oak limb on the side of a brick building. This was something more, something different. I lay there in the dark, startled suddenly by the unmistakable sound of a pane of glass cracking and a scraping sound as the glass was removed from the sash. I told myself not to let my imagination get the best of me. After all, I'd lived outside for years. I'd seen it all, from raccoons to bobcats to deer, bear, and even mountain lions. This was nothing but a dead branch rubbing back and forth against the building.

And then something called my name.

I wasn't sure of it at first. I chalked it up to the wild imagination of a man in extreme duress. But then there it was again, almost a whisper...."George?"

There seemed to be something else, too, some other sound not quite recognizable, some sort of background chatter. I couldn't quite put my finger on it as I was still having a bit of difficulty believing I had just heard my own name mentioned in the middle of the night in a lonely jail cell.

"George," a whispery voice called. Though it sounded like someone whispering through wads of cheesecloth, this time there was no mistaking it, . "Would you like to talk to your wife, George? She's right here."

The words sent a chill through my bones. My gaze was riveted on the small window high on the wall facing my cell. There was a full moon tonight, but for some reason it didn't shed that much light in the cellblock. It did provide enough ambient light, though, so that I could make out dim shapes in the room as my eyes became accustomed to what little light there was.

That initial sight almost stopped my heart. For there in the dim, diffused light of the full moon I could see the most delicate tentacles of kudzu vine creeping through the small hole in the glass of the jailhouse window.

"George? Your girls are here too. Would you like to see them?" The eerie voice now sounded like some old-time party line where thousands, no, millions of conversations were going on at once, yet I still could make out the unmistakable voice taunting me.

"No, I don't want to see them! They're DEAD! They're GONE! Who are you?" I screamed.

"Oh, I think you know just who we are, George," the wispy voice intoned in a sing-song fashion, "We are the visitors. The ones you seek to eradicate."

I was speechless. I felt as if someone had knocked the wind out of me. I tried to yell, but there seemed to be no air to do so. There was a crash as the window smashed. In the dim light I watched in horror as a mass of vines insinuated themselves through the window, quickly branching out, covering the wall across from me like some green leafy plague. I watched as each successive tentacle of vine crept over those that had gone before it, working their way rapidly toward me.

"SHERIFF!" I found my voice, "SHERIFF! HELP!"

"Oh, would you like to see the sheriff?" the eerie plant-born voice taunted me, "He's a little, shall we say, tied up now, but we'll get him for you."

There was a strange scraping sound from the outer office, something scraping across the floor. I had barely time to consider the source of this when the heavy metal door to

the cellblock was slammed, as if by a sledge hammer. This happened three more times in succession, each bang louder than the last, until the reinforced metal door burst in, frame and all. I was suddenly blinded as the room lights were switched on. I was horrified to see that an immense strand, or rather several strands of the despicable vine, had jammed through the front windows into the sheriff's office like some giant leafy anaconda. In one fluid motion, it moved into the cell block and stood before me. Held fast in its leafy grasp was the sheriff, apparently still alive but frozen with fear. His eyes locked on mine, beseeching me, silently pleading with me to help him, yet knowing it could not be so. I could see the horror in those eyes as the vines rapidly entwined themselves around his body, gradually squeezing his midsection. I watched, terrified, as frothy mucus began to drip from his mouth. I observed his chest laboring to breathe. Each time he exhaled the slightest bit, the vines tightened their reptile-like grasp, prohibiting him from drawing life-sustaining air. His face was bright red now, like a man in the throes of a heart attack. His body began to spasm, desperate in its need for air, while the vines tightened their deadly grasp. His face was now the deep purple of twilight as further breath became impossible. I watched his eyes glaze over as life left his body. It happened in an instant. One minute his eyes, though filled with horror and pain, shone with God-given life; the next minute they became dull, staring, lifeless orbs. His head now looked like some grossly misshapen eggplant as the vines continued their constriction, his eyes bulging out like some gross Halloween mask. As vile as this sight was, I could not turn away. With a loud indescribable POP, his unseeing eyes burst, spraying me with ocular matter. I screamed at the top of my lungs, continuing to watch as the kudzu wrapped ever-tightly around his neck, and with one swift motion tore his head off and thrust it toward me. Vines invaded his empty eye sockets, going in one and out the other before invading his ears.

"Here's the sheriff," the alien voice intoned, "It appears he is a bit under the weather at the moment. He may not be much help. He seems to be falling apart."

I screamed again, and it was then that I noticed my surroundings once more. The walls of the small cellblock were completely covered by the devilish vines, the vines that took my family from me so long ago. And now, at long last, they had come for me, helped by my imprisonment. I noticed with alarm that leafy tendrils had already begun to wrap themselves around the bars to my cell. As they had with the walls, each successive streamer of vine covered over, joined with those that had gone before it, until the cell bars were completely covered and resembled some weird topiary display. I knew that this was entirely unnecessary as they could have merely gone between the bars and squeezed me to death as they had the poor sheriff. I thought to myself that they had other plans. Perhaps they wanted me to suffer just a little bit more than the hapless law enforcement officer. I could hear the bars rending as they were gradually and forcefully bent aside. I began screaming at the top of my lungs, "HEEEEEELLLP! IS THERE ANYONE OUT THERE? PLEEEEEEASE HELP ME!"

My cries were interrupted by a loud tortured sound of iron being destroyed as the top of one of the cell bars was snapped and dropped unceremoniously to the floor with a dull metallic thud. This was repeated one by one, yet the vine still made no attempt to invade the confines of the cell. In short order, there was the excruciating sound of tortured iron as the remainder of the bars were torn from the cell in one unit and pushed to the side, up in front of the only other empty cell. I stood there facing a wall of green undulating,

seething vines with nothing to bar the advance of the invader onto my earthly form. I noticed that the body of the sheriff was now entirely engulfed with the vile green death. It seemed to be feeding on his encapsulated remains. The leaves in that area were now glowing a bright green. There was no doubt in my mind what my fate was to be.

There was a loud crack, as if from an earthquake, as the wall opposite me cracked open from the incessant attack of the kudzu. Thick vines the size of my wrist now streamed into the building, confronting me, massing before me. I thought of how it had torn the head off the sheriff and jiggled it about like a play toy. It seemed almost as if, now that it had finally caught me, it was not sure what to do with me. Either that or it was in fear of one who had destroyed so many of its kind. At the front of this mass of green, smaller tentacles of vine snaked out occasionally, coming near me as though sniffing me, then quickly withdrawing, like a snake's flicking tongue. Little by little, though, the mass of green grew, closing the distance between me and it, as it did so. I felt like a lone soldier facing down a battalion of tanks. The exploratory tentacles were more active now, bolder. They actually began touching me, tickling my skin before withdrawing. Each time one of them touched me, it left a tingling sensation and the vine itself glowed bright green for a brief instant before fading. Through the wall of green I could see that daylight had come. When it had, I could not be sure, as I had been otherwise occupied with my leafy visitors. My foot jerked as a vine grabbed it and yanked, apparently trying to throw me off balance, not that it really needed to knock me down. I felt as if it were just paying with me, taunting me like a bully in the school yard.

Then, for whatever reason, the tentative behavior vanished. Several strong, thick tentacles whipped out and wrapped themselves around my feet and my arms, quickly entwining themselves up my legs and arms. I was caught like a rabbit in a snare. In seconds my entire body was covered in glowing green tentacles of alien destruction. There was no squeezing as it had done with the sheriff, just restraining me, letting me know I was theirs.

"We've waited for this day for a long while, George S. Melvin," it said to me as it tightened its grip ever so slightly, letting me know who was boss. More and more vines were surrounding me now, reinforcing the initial restraining vines, sealing off any chance of escape as if there ever was one. My legs hurt now as the vines began tightening their leafy grip on them. It felt as if they might actually crush the bones. It hurt like hell. I felt the tightening move up my body, squeezing my midsection. I peed and defecated uncontrollably as they forced the waste from my body. A little more pressure and I vomited what little I had in my stomach. As the tightening moved up to my chest, stifling my breathing as a constrictor does to its victims, I began to black out, hazy darkness rapidly closing in on my field of vision. I struggled for every fragment of breath I could take, each one being less than the one before. My last sensation as I began to lose consciousness was of vines forcing my mouth open and snaking into my esophagus.

"MELVIN! GEORGE MELVIN! ARE YOU IN HERE?" a strong voice grabbed me back from the brink of death. Some lost primal survival instinct took over and I bit down hard, with all the strength that remained in my tortured body. I gagged as the nearly severed vines quickly withdrew from my throat, the grip on my chest weakening ever so slightly, allowing me to inhale and exhale several times in rapid succession.

"FIRE!" I managed to yell, "BRING FIRE!"

"Way ahead of you sir!" the voice yelled back as the vines began to tighten once

again. I inhaled as much as I could and held my breath as long as I could. I heard a loud scraping noise followed by a low sputtering noise. I noticed a bright red glow as the vines once more uttered their “EEEEEE! EEEEEENENENEEEE! EEEEE!” instantly relaxing their grip on me. The scraping sound was repeated and a sputtering tube of bright red was thrown into the room. Highway flares, oh sweet God almighty – Highway flares! ‘Twas fire that put me in jail and now fire was setting me free.

All around me the vines continued their otherworldly shriek, totally withdrawn from me now, contorting in the agony of fiery death.

“MELVIN!” I heard again, “FBI, MELVIN! I’m coming to get you!”

This was followed by more whooshing sounds close by as more highway flares were lit and set to work on the still-withering kudzu. Momentarily a man appeared in the doorway holding two brightly sputtering highway flares. He tossed one over to where I was standing. I picked it up and brandished it at the dastardly green filth, thrusting it deep into the wall of vine, relishing the shrieks of pain that it caused. I made my way to the door and escaped the now burning building with the FBI agent. We ran to his car and he unlocked the trunk. He retrieved a gasoline container and ran back to the building. He opened it up and splashed it into the open doorway, before finally capping it up tight and tossing it inside. In seconds, there was a loud explosion and a roar as the gas container burst spreading fuel for the fire throughout the building. I have never seen a more beautiful inferno in my life. It will be one of my fondest memories for the rest of my days.

In the minutes immediately after setting the fire we both got in the front of his car. The agent, Special Agent Frank Moore, initially went to handcuff me and then thought better of it. He didn’t even read me my Miranda rights.

“I have a feeling you’ve been through enough already,” he told me.

I was not about to argue with that. On the way to Montgomery, I spilled my guts to him, admitting everything about every fire I had ever set and why. He did not doubt this a bit. He had seen with his own two eyes what the kudzu had done to the sheriff and his staff and almost to me. He had heard its unearthly screams. After I was done, we rode some miles in silence, I looking out the passenger window, he looking down the highway. We hadn’t gone that far when there it was again, a vast stand of kudzu, stretching from the highway’s edge, even covering parts of the guardrail, and stretching far off into the distance, covering everything for miles around. I stared at it glumly, dejectedly, knowing my fight was over, and wondering what was to become of our fine planet once the weed took over. And then, in the midst of these thoughts, I noticed the car slowing. We came to a stop at the side of a deserted section of highway. Agent Moore jumped out and opened the trunk. He grabbed the last two highway flares and thrust something in my hand. It was my backpack.

“I think you know what to do with this,” he told me as he sparked one of the flares and tossed it far into the woods. And me, well I showed Agent Moore exactly what I could do with that backpack. It was a wonderful fire – a team effort, and that’s just what we became then, a team lighting fires and fighting the invaders of our planet.

After seeing that the fire had a healthy start, Agent Moore turned the car around and we sped off in the other direction. We read later that there had been a horrific fire in the sheriff’s office in York, Alabama, which claimed the lives of the sheriff and his staff, an FBI agent, Special Agent Frank C. Moore, and one George S. Melvin, aka the Super Fire

Bug. The truth is, I think the Feds had a good idea what had really happened after finding the beheaded sheriff. That little bit of misinformation gained us valuable time, so we could exit these parts and get safely to another part of the country. We abandoned the car, pushing it into a flooded limestone quarry in Tennessee, and then rented a series of cars using a phony driver's license that Moore had as part of his job with the FBI. And so it was that I gained an accomplice. We altered my modus operandi using highway flares in place of paraffin wax. In time this earned us a slick new nickname – The Highway Flare Gang. It has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?

In time, I began to think of young Frank as my son. I will treat him thusly until such time that I leave this life and meet up with my wife and girls in the next, provided that I will regain my memory sufficiently to recognize them. I told him all about the alien kudzu invading our planet, killing animals and people whenever it managed to catch them. It is my sincere hope that he will continue this work after I am gone. My life's goal has now changed. What is now important to me is that he learns to burn.

THE END



FORLORN

By Ty Johnston



[Vote For This Story Now!](#)

Walking through the dead lights of night, I spy lovers in a car. Beneath a tree. Behind the library.

He is young and strong, probably a student.

She too is young, also likely a student. Her pale

hair hangs longer than his, though just barely. An inch or two below her shoulders. I can

smell her perfume from twenty feet away. It is sweet, like the tang of marigolds on a dewy morn. It disgusts me.

It reminds me.

Blackness.

When I come around, I am bent over leaning against the car, breathing heavy. I blink several times to make sure I am awake, not dreaming.

The first thing I notice is red ink on my hands. Red ink? Where would I get red ink? I smear it so it runs beneath my nails, into the lines of my skin and through the down of the soft hairs on the back of my hands. It is sticky. Grossly so. I hold my hands up to see them better in the fluorescence of the parking lot's lights.

It is not ink.

I look to the car. The passenger door is open. Smearred across the door window is something wet and gray. I do not ask myself what it is.

Inside the car. Two bodies. Him. Her. No longer lovers. Now just meat. They have not been dead long, possibly no more than five minutes.

I shiver.

Blood is pooled in the bottom of the driver's floor. Sunk into the mess is a knife. A hunting knife. Covered with red mess and pieces of flesh.

I recognize it.

Later. Home. Bathroom. Shower.

The telephone rings as I am drying myself with a Mickey Mouse towel my son won at a game in Disney World several years ago. I let the phone ring. The machine will get it.

"Roger, are you there? If you are, please answer the phone."

A voice from long ago. No. Only days since I have seen her.

"You haven't called me in two weeks. If I hadn't bumped into you on campus the other day I wouldn't even have been able to tell you."

Her voice is from long ago. It is the voice of someone who cares. Once she cared.

Now ...

“Damn it, Roger! When are you going to talk to me? Jeff is dying and you haven’t even been to the hospital to see him. Your own son, Roger. What is with you?”

Click.

Yes, what is with me?

Morning. Back on campus. Back to work. Happy little professor smiling as he strolls the halls toward his first class of the day. History 513. History of the Roman Republic. Room 223 of the Carter Building of History and Anthropology. Stepping through the door into the classroom, I am surprised to see twelve students. All of the class is here. And it’s a nine o’clock class. Still, only twelve of twenty thousand students signed up for my course. Does no one care?

“Hannibal was scum,” I say to start the class.

After lunch.

Professor Waltz strolls over to me. He specializes in American history from 1860 to 1920. American history bores me. *He* bores me.

“I’m really sorry,” he says almost in a whisper from the other side of my desk. “I just found out yesterday Jeff has ... cancer. I didn’t know. No one in the department knew.”

I look up at his balding head and thin mustache and thick glasses and the coffee stain on his white shirt.

“How did you find out?” I ask.

“Rebecca was in here looking for you. She was crying.”

I look down at the calendar on my desk. It is a month old. I must have forgotten to flip it over.

“I’m really sorry, Rog. If there is anything I can do, just ...”

His voice trails off.

“No, nothing anyone can do,” I say.

“My God, did you see the paper today?”

“It was horrible. Both of them cut up like that. And right behind the library.”

“Just like a couple of weeks ago.”

Campus gossip.

Late again. I have just finished grading last week’s exams. Of my twelve students, only seven passed. No one cares.

Near midnight. Behind the library again. Scanning my surroundings. But there is nothing to see but empty, parked cars. Bored. Decide to take a walk around campus.

Twenty minutes later, I spot them. Walking a path between the student center and the ROTC building.

Him I ignore.

She is older than usual. Late thirties? A non-traditional student? Or a young professor? No matter. She has blonde hair which comes down an inch or two below her shoulders. It is a style that reminds me of Rebecca, my wife who moved out a couple of weeks ago and took my son from me and filed for divorce.

Blackness.

Pain! Pain! Pain?

I awake spread on the ground. A pulsing, driving, torturing anguish has gripped my chest.

I look down.

A knife. A hunting knife. It was a present from my father. He bought it for me when I was twelve. Now it is sticking into my chest, the cold bronze hilt resting against my flesh. My father died last year.

Blood everywhere. On my clothes. In my hair. Pouring across the sidewalk.

I can’t move. I can’t get up. I can see, however.

The young man stands over me, his fists clenched. He is big, muscular. He is angry and screaming something which I can’t quite hear because of a thumping, pumping which fills my ears.

The blonde is kneeling on the ground with her head almost between her knees. Vomiting. Crying. A weak little woman. Not like my Rebecca at all.

Blackness.

WITHIN THE LIGHT

By Philip Roberts

[Vote For This Story Now!](#)

Howard's eyes
reluctantly open
dark, bedroom
him the
beeping picked
There were few
more than
in the morning
certainly far

After the
care of Howard pulled himself out of bed, dressed only in
boxers, and proceeded to the kitchen to start the coffee
maker before taking his shower. He paused before making it
out of the dark room.

He stared at the small light emanating out from a
night light along the baseboard, at the flickering quality
to it. Something moved around inside, was the impression
Howard got, and he couldn't fathom how a bug had managed to
trap itself in the sealed plastic light.

He knelt down to get a better view of the movement,
which didn't actually move in front of the light, he didn't

Publication Credits

Broken Record: March
2008 issue of Tabard
Inn
The Apartment's Best
Feature: 2008
"Beneath the Surface"
Anthology by
Shroud Publishing
What's Always Been
Done: Dec. 2008 Issue
of The Nautilus
Engine

cracked
to stare at the
ceiling. Beside
incessant
up in volume.
things he hated
getting up early
and six was most
too early.
alarm was taken

think, but more as if the light itself was being moved around inside the case.

But he had other things to do with his morning, including the coffee his groggy mind couldn't do without. He reached down and pulled the night-light from its socket and dumped the thing on the floor beside the door, fully aware he'd certainly forget to put it back in and wake up one night with his bladder screaming, dismayed at the lack of light.

Once the coffee maker was running Howard proceeded to the bathroom. As always he had to squint against the bright glare of the bathroom light. For a second, through narrow slits, Howard almost thought he saw movement again, just like the flickering from within the night-light, but much more pronounced given the larger bulbs he was dealing with. By the time his vision had adjusted there was no movement, assuming there ever had been. He intently watched the four, round bulbs built over his bathroom mirror, at the glowing filaments visible through the clear glass.

Howard took his shower without noticing anything else.

A meeting forced him to get up early and to wear his suit, which he hated wearing. Howard wasn't an overly large man, or wasn't in his opinion, but the suit always made him appear so.

The hour hand on Howard's watch had inched a little closer to eight o'clock by the time he pulled his car into a parking spot and got out. The day was fortunately comfortable, though given the glare of the rising sun Howard couldn't say how long it would remain so.

Kent waited for him outside of the building, his face aimed upward at the rising sun. Unlike Howard, Kent looked

perfectly fine and comfortable in a suit, which was almost all he ever wore. Howard had always hated that about Kent, not that he looked dignified in a suit, but that he knew it, and played it up as much as possible, while Howard could at most look like a man trying to look dignified.

"Pleasant morning, huh?" Howard called out as he walked up. Kent didn't answer, too preoccupied with the business of staring at the sun. "Ready for this?" Howard persisted.

Howard was about to say something else as if Kent wasn't completely ignoring him, when Kent's arm shot up. "See that?" he said, though he still didn't actually look over at Howard, who had turned his own head upwards.

"It's the sun. What of it?"

"Damn, can't see it anymore. Swear I saw some movement."

"Movement? On the sun?"

Finally Kent broke his attention away to look directly at Howard. "I guess. Looked more like the light was moving, or something. Hard to explain if you didn't see it, but I had it happen this morning with my lamp."

"Now that you mention it I thought I saw something too. Figured it was the electricity."

Kent didn't appear to like the idea, dismissing the notion with his hand while turning towards the entrance to the building. "Whatever I saw in the sunlight sure isn't from electricity."

Rather than argue the point Howard decided to let it go. Still, he couldn't help but pause right before going in to glance back at the sun, which sat in the sky, normal as ever.

Howard shooed away the thought. He had more pressing

concerns than moving lights.

"There," Kent said, finger jabbed at a light hanging from the ceiling of the diner.

"Okay, I think I see it," Valerie said with narrowed eyes. Howard didn't bother to look over, not out of lack of interest but fear of dripping sauce onto his pants should he shift his head in mid-bite.

"It's gone," Kent said.

"Must be something screwy with the power today," Valerie offered with a half shrug.

"That's what I said," Howard garbled out through a mouth half filled with bread, chicken, and barbecue sauce.

Kent shook his head, an expert; it appeared, on the field of moving lights. "I keep seeing something in the sun," he said. "It'll...flicker, or something like that, for a few seconds just like the bulbs. The movement doesn't seem random. More, I don't know, deliberate, like the light is shifting its head around to look at things."

"I didn't realize light had a body, let alone a head," Howard said, smiling between bites at the expression Kent shot him. He so rarely had an opportunity to poke fun at Kent, and found himself far too often on the receiving end.

"It's strange. That's all I'm saying."

Valerie still only shrugged, unwilling to offer any suggestion either way as to her beliefs on the subject. Kent wouldn't let her remain so neutral. "You said you saw something too, right? This morning?"

"All I said was I saw some weird movements in my living room coming from my plant light, but by the time I got in there it was over. I chalked it up to something with the electricity then and I haven't decided to change my

mind about it now. I mean, come on, Kent, you stare at any light for long enough it starts swirling to you. That isn't new."

"There," Howard said. "Sounds like a reasonable explanation to me."

Kent once again shook his head. "Keep an eye on the sun is all I'm saying, and you'll see what I mean."

And Howard did find his gaze shifting slowly to the sun outside the side window of the diner, now high up in the sky and barely visible from his vantage point. The thing of it was he did see what Kent was talking about. Of course, he wouldn't tell Kent that; because even if he could see the odd phenomenon, he figured it was a solar flare or whatever else the sun did he'd heard about through one science program or another. And besides, he liked seeing Kent lose his temper. Didn't look so dignified anymore, suit or no suit.

By no means did Howard forget about the lights. Thankfully there wasn't much left to do in the day; their morning meeting had been the only business of pressing concern. Of course, just as Howard's preoccupied thoughts had no work they were disrupting, they also had no work to distract him away from them, until by the time five rolled around, several others joined Kent, Howard included, by the large window that comprised the north side of the building.

"I don't like this," Kent said to the gathering. He had taken up the role of unofficial leader of any inquiry into the event at hand, and any possible explanation seemed to go through him first, only to be immediately shot down.

"Well, whatever it is," Bill said in the same dismissive tone he'd held onto all day, "what's it going to

do to worry about it? I've seen strange things, and they have a habit of going away when you least expect it and never coming around again. Let it go, Kent."

Judging from the expressions most wore, Howard had a feeling his colleagues were quick to mentally accept Bill's words even if emotionally the tension remained.

Kent turned to them, annoyed, but unable to figure out how to properly express his concerns, so instead chose not to. Howard's own anxiety was such that he didn't even feel his previous sense of self-satisfaction at seeing Kent fall from his plateau of social superiority.

Rather than go to Kent as the man angrily pulled on his coat in preparation to leave, Howard just let him go, because even if Kent were willing to sit down with him so the two could discuss it, what was there to discuss? The better solution, Howard decided, was getting something to eat, and then, more importantly, something to drink.

The sun fell ever closer to the horizon by the time Howard took his beer from the bartender without bothering to tip the man. The bar wasn't particularly full, granting Howard any booth he wished to sit at. He picked one that gave him a good view of the sun. Halfway through his beer he looked to the bartender and called out, "You see anything strange with the lights today?"

The man glanced over, and then glanced at the row of lights hanging above the bar. "Been acting kind of screwy, yeah. Haven't gone out yet and I figure they would've if they were going to. Know anything about it?" He seemed genuinely interested in an answer, and Howard got the impression other people had been making similar comments about the lights all day.

"I'm afraid not," Howard said, turned back to his booth and his view of the sun. That he wasn't going to mention. The lights were a reasonable question, but once a person mentions seeing movement in the sun, other people have a tendency to look at them funny.

"Yeah, there it is," the bartender said, and Howard wasn't the only one in the bar to glance up at the lights.

"I've been seeing something like that at the store all day," someone else said to the bartender. Howard half listened in case the person knew anything, but after a few minutes it became clear they were just as dumbstruck as everyone else.

Around nine o'clock Howard put in a call to the power company. Judging from first the wait time, and then the prerecorded message informing him they were aware of the problem, Howard figured he was one among many.

Sitting in his living room he had been attempting to pass away the night in front of the television, but each minute seemed to make the lights grow worse.

He came very close to calling up Kent, but what would he say? The only reason he would was to get the reassurance of another person's voice, which began to feel important. He had partially called the power company for a limited form of human interaction, but the automated service robbed him of that.

So rather than make a phone call Howard retreated to the bathroom and closed the door. For the first time in his life Howard was tempted to bring something in with him to read, or wished he had once he was alone in the room with only the four, large bulbs above the mirror for company.

He did his best to avert his gaze for as long as

possible, but eventually, as he knew they would, his eyes shifted back to the lights, just in time to see what appeared to be two tiny arms pull free from the filament. These tiny arms were joined by tiny feet, and then a small, faceless head, until what appeared to be a person made of light had pulled itself free from the filament and dropped down to stand in the bulb itself.

All four lights contained tiny people, all of which seemed to rub their glowing hands across the surface of the glass, testing it; it seemed to him, looking for a way to escape the prison they had emerged into.

Howard merely watched the scene with a white face, body so tense any urge he'd previously had for the bathroom forgotten.

A yellow fist pulled back in the farthest bulb away from him. The bulb exploded and Howard screamed. The glowing form fell from the shattered bulb to land on the bathroom sink, black scorch marks marking its progress as it looked around, and then up to the other bulbs right as all three exploded.

The one thing Howard noticed, before the first glowing creature's head turned towards him, was the thin line of light connecting it to the filament up above.

Pants still around his ankles Howard partially tripped during his dive for the light switch right before the things could leap at him, and felt one of them touch his arm.

Darkness claimed the room just as pain seared across Howard's arm, followed quickly by a sharp pain in his jaw when his chin collided with the floor. At first he didn't move from his position on the floor, panting, staring through the crack at the bottom of the door and the light

from his living room. Somewhere a studio audience was laughing, but even farther away, from somewhere down on the street, Howard heard a man screaming in pain.

The first and easiest order of business was pulling his pants back up. Belt buckled, Howard sat on the floor with his back against the tub and watched the flickering lights from beneath his door while listening to the ever growing rise of voices just outside. He needed to go out there. The mental image of those scorch marks along with that of the wood flooring in the living room was enough to get him moving.

He slammed open the bathroom door and hurried into the living room. A little figure, bigger than the ones from the bathroom but still only two feet tall at most, sat atop his metal lamp. As soon as it saw Howard it pulled itself upward, but not before Howard reached to his left and turned off the power switch. It died mid leap, pulling back to wherever it had come, but there was still the TV to take care of, and the multicolored figure crawling out from it.

This one was even bigger than the one from the lamp, but hadn't managed to pull itself completely free, its legs still merged with the TV while its hands made the floor smoke with growing flames.

Howard ran over to the set, just out of reach of the fiery hand reaching out to grab for him. Thankfully the wall plug was easily exposed for him to grab at. The figure turned off with the TV set, leaving Howard largely in darkness save for the flickering lights coming from his front windows, and the small flames on the floor until he stamped them out.

He slowly approached the window. Just outside on the city streets below him a handful of charged bodies were

visible, if largely obscured by the faint lighting as most of the streetlights were knocked down. Still, a few glowing figures danced across the street, like little imps enjoying their destructive fun, leaping from one body to another even though the people were already dead.

Something creaked from behind him, something from the bedroom. Howard inched along until he stood in the doorway and saw the little red figure exploring his nightstand. This one had emerged from the glowing numbers of his alarm clock, a thin thread still connected to it. By the time the thing noticed him Howard's hand was already wrapped around the cord, and it vanished before being able to move any closer.

A list of every possible light in the apartment ran through his mind. His computer. While the machine was shut down, a small flashing blue light was visible, and out from it, too, a blue figure, even smaller than the red one from his clock, had managed to emerge. Rather than simply pull the plug Howard walked up to this one, its head obviously turned upwards, and slammed down his foot. Immediately the heat began to make its way through the sole of his shoe. He yanked the cord out before it could really hurt him. A narrow hole had been melted in his sole.

Next came his cell phone, the outside blank, but once the screen was raised and the light shone, Howard could see the movement beginning, the arms reaching out. He hit the off button before a head could appear.

All strength flowed out of him and left Howard in a chair with his eyes on the lights outside his window. Was it just this city, he wondered, or had the whole world been taken over by these things?

On the wall next to him was his landline. No light on

that, at least, and even without power it should still work, but who was he going to call? He picked it up and dialed Kent's number. It rang seven times before Howard set the phone down. Another voice cried out from somewhere close, only to be quickly silenced. Howard didn't live too far from the downtown district. At this time of night, with all those stores, there were a lot of lights, a whole lot of lights.

He glanced at his watch, barely able to see it, not that he was about to use the light on it. Almost ten. There was a lot of night left ahead of him, a night of darkness. He glanced up at the sky through the window, but a cloud cover had settled in, and the moon, along with the stars, wasn't visible. Outside the flames were beginning to die away, either because someone was putting them out, or the flames had decided to move on to better things.

Howard pushed himself up and moved into the living room, rummaging through the dark until he found his lighter. It sparked twice before catching, granting him a tiny flame to see by, one that began to sprout arms, legs, a head, not from the flame, but the flame itself, nothing left but the little figure, and then nothing left at all when Howard blew it out. The fire, it appeared to him, wasn't connected to anything, unlike the electricity, and free to roam where ever it pleased.

He couldn't see much of anything anymore. The lights outside his window were nearly gone. Silence dropped over the apartment along with the growing darkness, until a half hour had passed.

A corner was his resting place, arms wrapped around his knees as he thought about what the future held, and whether or not Kent and the others were even alive. No one

had answered when he dialed 911, just as no one had when he called every other number he knew. He could go out and search for people, he supposed, but then what?

Only then did the thought occur to him, more an image, really, of the sun Kent had been so fascinated with, along with that hint of movement, as if the light was surveying the scene. But of course, the sun wasn't actually on the planet, now was it? But Howard really didn't know the extent of what was happening, or what could happen, and what about the sunlight glinting off an object? What if the rays themselves could begin to take shape, to come alive? Was the other side of the planet at that very moment being torn apart by the very light of the sun?

There was nothing he could think to do, nothing but sit and wait for the sun to come up and find out for himself.

THE LAST WALK

BY MICHAEL W. GARZA

[Vote For This Story Now!](#)

In a state of disconnection I open my eyes. There is no memory of what was a moment before and I cannot discern where I am now. There is a sensation of dream about me. I cannot resolve whether I am awake or asleep.

There is no form to me and yet I can see myself in a distant thought. Swirling lights work their way through an absolute darkness. Shapes spring from the recess of pitch black, holding only for a moment as they fight to stay whole. Dim lines pull free of the vortex and outline a doorway.

My thoughts are overwhelmed by decay as I struggle to maintain self awareness. The vision continues to grow as it expands to my left and right. The complete apparition draws a murky hall stretched out beneath my feet.

The original doorway is joined by several more along side walls. A final door stands closed at the opposite end, calling to me in a sinister and threatening way. I want to turn away but I know the door is meant for my end.

A sudden intensity consumes my thoughts in a nightmare haze. I cannot control the images in my mind. There is no reality for me to cling to, only the fading idea of what I was and the pain I caused.

The hall has no color to it, existing as a series of chalk lines on an empty black surface. The walls are shaded in long uneven lines as if the designer had no real interest in the result. There is no light to this place, no shadows in any direction.

By sheer force of will, I move. There's no sensation of muscle contraction just the idea of moving further down the hall. My mind works slowly but the number 4 comes to me. Two doors sit along the right side of the hall, only one centered on the left and the ever beckoning door at the hall's end.

The doors are staggered making it impossible to see through more than one at a time. I continue pushing forward. The effort of my mind to move is immense, unlike anything I can comprehend. There is no sense of sweat or

Michael W. Garza lives in southern California. He has had work published or accepted by Deadman's Tomb, Absent Willow Review, Morpheus Tales, Sounds of the Night, and Residential Alien. More information can be found at www.sithining.com.

heat nor can I hear the increasing beat of my heart. The deathly silence of this place is deafening.

Reaching the first door I can feel an intensity burning inside. There is a fiery rage centered within that I have no desire to see. With little control over my direction I turn to face the doorway, exposing myself fully to what lies beyond. A crude number 1 is gauged above the door.

I embrace the contents of the room with full force. A blinding light pierces my mind. The scene before me unfolds like a play. A woman screams; her body sprawled on the floor. Her breasts are exposed, shirt torn, blood flows freely from her mouth.

I can see myself in her face and feel the debilitating pain and fear she feels. My mother yells, cupping her arms around her swollen belly. A man steps over her grabbing her hair. A wash of anger floods me at the sight of the man. The rage of all my life encased in a single moment.

In vain I try to lash out but cannot move. I try to turn away but the architect of this place will not allow it. In a single moment the scene washes away, replaced by a small boy. I recognize myself at a young age, alone and crying. Long, dark hair clings to the boys face and he wipes at his runny nose.

The boy looks at me, his eyes pleading for help. I try to call out but it's no use, I know the scene all too well. My father's figure steps in front of the boy. Viciously slapping him, my father tears the boy's pajama bottoms off and forces him over on his stomach.

Begging to turn away I'm forced to watch until the hellish deed is complete. Only then is my bond released. Nothing I can do will take away the horror in the boy's eyes. The memory clings to me like a vicious disease.

Overwhelmed I am forced to continue down the hallway. The all encompassing pain hints at the purpose of this place. The center door on the left is open to me, a simple

number 2 glow in a pale light above. The scene within the doorway is in full view from the moment I set my sight on it.

I can see myself again in the throes of young adulthood. In my hands I hold my wife to be. Her long, golden hair waves in an unseen wind. She's smiling in the way that always brought warmth to my heart. She's the only person in the world that made me feel safe.

The scene shifts in a violent flash of red. There's a swift heat in the hall that scorches my mind. Streaks of yellow and orange highlight the dark corners of the room like an abstract impression.

My love is there, her perfect face dotted with blotches of violet bruises. I can see myself beside her, my face stained with tears. She's leaving me, I know and the rage of that moment haunts me for all time.

I can feel a force driving me from the view of the room. I continue down the hallway to the last door on the right. The number 3 is carved above the door like it was slashed in some moment of violent rage. The interior of the room is consumed in flames and the heat burns through me with unimaginable pain. The designer of this place will not let me scream. In endless agony I wait until the sight of my love appears.

She's afraid; her eyes give away the pure terror in her heart. I can see myself on top of her swinging my fists wildly. The scene repeats over and again all the while the flames burning the flesh from my bones. Time is endless here with no relief from the flames. Only after I plead for death, admitting to all the atrocities of my life am I released from the doorway.

I stand before the door at the end of the hallway. I know I have to open the door of my own will. The strength is beyond me and there I stand for a lifetime until I can gather what is needed.

The place beyond the door is familiar to me. The steel

slab bed has held my body once before. The leather straps lay open and the machine that took my life stands ready.

I seek to escape; reaching out for any grip on reality only to find one final door. Darkness creeps across the room like a slithering snake. The light of the world and all things wash away in its wake. I struggle to stay ahead of the coming darkness, seeking the final door. My last effort to escape propels my strength to open the way and step through.

The original doorway is joined by several more along side walls. A final door stands closed at the opposite end, calling to me in a sinister and threatening way. I want to turn away but I know the door is meant for my end.

What to look forward to next month:

The Results of the contest!

Credits:

First and foremost, Demonic Tome is owned by Jesse Dedman. All images are the property of their respected copyright holders. Poems, stories, and columns are property of the author(s) unless otherwise noted, which may not always be presented in the magazine.

Jesse C. Dedman: Owner and Manager

Greg: Submission coordinator

Sponsors: E-Booktime, Dark Graves, Anime City, The Pen.