

# THE BOOK OF FEMILEAN

*adventures*



# **THE BOOK OF PESADILLAS**

**black book of horror stories and dark fiction**

Edward Reyes

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Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,  
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,  
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,  
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.

EDGAR ALLAN POE, "The Raven"

edward reyes  
September, 2013

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# The Rats and the Girl

It was always gloomy in the Stonewall area. Margaret Bell and her husband, Jonathan Bell, had recently moved into the dark town. They had stumbled upon a home that was really cheap, basically a steal. Margaret thought this was too good of a deal. She is very superstitious and cautious. She knew this new home came with a mystery.

The house is two stories, painted black, and creaked, even from outside...very eerie. White curtains hung on every window of the house. Margaret didn't like it; she was scared to go in. But her husband had no belief or fear of paranormal fables or theories. He thought of himself as a realist. He was a person who used common sense and had a logical explanation for everything. And money was tight, so Margaret had to take what she can get and live with it until Jonathan's job brought home some wages.

While Jonathan was checking out the basement, Margaret stood in the kitchen with Mr. Bronstein, the realtor. She was moving her fingers in a nervous frenzy and looking around frantically, running questions over and over in her head. Is this house haunted Mr. Bronstein? What happened in this home?

"Mrs. Bell, are you okay? You seem like you are waiting for the police and have to use the bathroom! Ha ha"

"Oh, no, ha ha, sorry, I'm just a little anxious and uh...worried about a thing or two."

"Anxious? Worried? Scared of ghosts?"

"Ghosts? Mr. Bronstein, are there ghosts in this home?"

Mr. Bronstein laughed out loud, his big belly moved up and down, his face was bright red and a little sweaty. He took out a handkerchief and wiped his balding head and face and stuffed it back in his pants pocket. "No no no, nothing like that. Well...you see, the last family moved because their daughter went missing. They just couldn't stand being in the same home with the memories of their daughter lingering here. So they picked up and left. No deaths here, madam...that I know of"

Margaret felt a little easier but still worried. Something was telling her that this house was just too good of a deal. But they bought the home and everything was fine until the rats started showing up. She could hear them at night, in the day, the morning, afternoon, and evening. It was driving her insane. Jonathan worked long days at the dock so he was bothered but not as much as stay-at-home Margaret. She saw them in the shower, in the kitchen, in the living room, and was setting traps everywhere. So many dead rat bodies and more rats showing up. It was like she would kill one and another was born.

It was so cold, so dark, and so creepy in the house. She couldn't stand it anymore. She was sitting by the window in the living room reading the newspaper. Her eyes went wide when she saw an article about a teenage girl who was still missing. She knew it was the girl who lived in her home. As she was reading, a gust of wind blew the paper out her hands and she instantly let out a shrill scream. She looked to the window and it was shut. No wind could get in, anywhere. As she looked down at the newspaper, a group of rats came out a hole in the wall

and ripped up the paper and took some back into their hole. Suddenly, she heard a moan, looked to the stairs and saw a white female figure run up the stairs, thudding the steps lightly.

Margaret screamed in panic and thought to herself: I knew it!

It was late evening so she quickly jumped up and went for a candlestick holder. Yellow light from the flame casted upon the dark eerie home as she stepped quietly to the stairs. She was looking up, behind her, and anywhere a ghost could pop up. She was frightened, her teeth had started to rattle and it got colder in the home.

As she climbed up the stairs, she saw about 20 rats, the most she's ever seen, scatter in the hall. She picked up her long dress, uttered a small cry, and started stomping to scare away the rodents. As they fled, a door creaked opened slowly...a door herself and Jonathan were unable to open. She raised the candlestick holder higher and started to the door. As she crept in, she noticed it was pitch black. She lit the room a little and noticed stuff that belonged to a girl on the floor. And the room smelled like a dead cat.

There were dolls, clothes, and rat feces everywhere. The stench was sick and unbearable and it was colder in there. Suddenly, she started hearing what sounded like a thousand rats squealing at once. As she looked up from the ground and raised the candlestick holder to her left, she screamed like she never screamed before.

On a bed was a girl's decaying body, almost skeleton, and rusted iron shackles were holding her wrists and ankles. The hair on the dead skull was dry and straw like. She noticed rats had been feasting on the body, even the bones. She started crying and went to the door as fast as she could. She turned back and saw a ghost girl standing by the door smiling and then she vanished.

She and her husband alerted the authorities and the parents of the missing girl were arrested for the murder and captivity of their own daughter. One of her parents was the realtor, Mr. Bronstein, who had thought his wife got rid of their daughter's body and locked the bedroom door. It was locked, but the missing girl's spirit opened it. The Bells moved out and there were no longer rats or the ghost of the missing girl.

# stormy night

It was, as is usual on these occasions, dark and stormy outside, but Jen was nice and cosy lying on the sofa in her living room watching an old horror flick on the tube, her bare feet pressed against the warm fur of her curled-up cat. A brief hunger pang pierced her gut so she pulled on her plaid slippers and padded out to the kitchen. She opened the fridge, muttered to herself, closed it and opened the freezer. "Huh," she mumbled, crossing the room to the food cupboard. It was only as the wooden cupboard door creaked open that she saw... the sight made her turn away in shock... she was out of chocolate!

Jen collapsed, sobbing, to the floor. How could this have happened, and to her of all people? Then, in desperation, she remembered an old folk tale. She picked herself up and ran to the bathroom, grabbing a candle from the dining table and her lighter on the way. Standing in the small pool of light surrounding the flickering candle's yellow flame she stared into the bathroom mirror, hardly believing what she was about to do.

"Ben and Jerry," she whispered. The wind outside blew in the trees.

"Ben and Jerry," louder this time. Jen shivered as the window catch rattled. She took a deep breath.

"Ben and Jerry." The window blew open and a blast of cold air blew into the room, snuffing out the candle. In the mirror she thought she caught a fleeting glimpse of two men standing in the shadows behind her, laughing. She spun around but there was nobody there.

Feeling a little silly Jen reached for the light switch and the room was bathed in cold, bright light. She pulled the window shut and pressed the catch home before picking up the candle and going back to the living room, where, to her surprise, she found a tub of her favourite double chocolate crunch ice cream sitting on the coffee table.

Jen settled down on the sofa with her ice cream, but just as she was about to take a mouthful she heard someone - some thing perhaps - moving about in the kitchen. She knew it wasn't the cat as he was still fast asleep beside her, so she quietly stood up and tiptoed to the door. Just as she reached it, it opened.

Standing in the doorway, clutching a shiny, narrow metal spoon and a couple of cans of Coke was her Jen Fan. "I, knocked but there was no reply so I thought you'd popped out or something, and I used my key. Did you find the ice cream?"

Jen hugged him with relief. Neither of them noticed the shadowy figure in the trees outside the window.

"Mmm, that was good," Jen sighed contentedly, scraping the last of the ice cream out of the tub. You stay here and watch the end of the film, I'll just put this in the trash." She stood up and stretched, before heading for the kitchen. A movement outside the window caught her eye as the kitchen door swung shut behind her, but she dismissed it as just the wind blowing the leaf-clad boughs. Putting her foot on the pedal of the bin she found that the bag inside was full to the brim, so she lifted it out, dropped in the empty tub and tied the top. "I'm just taking the trash out," she called, and got a muffled "OK" in response.



The air outside was cold, whipped around her by a sharp wind. She tugged her sweater tighter around her torso and made her way down the steps to the bins at the side of the building. As she shoved the bag into her bin the hairs on the back of her neck bristled as if there was something behind her, but when she turned around there was just the wooden palisade, stretching down to the back of the house, creaking gently in the wind. On an impulse she decided to check whether there was somebody back there, so she edged her way along the wall. As she reached the end of the house Jen took a deep breath, jumped around the corner into what she hoped looked like a karate stance and shouted "Hold it right there, buster!" There was nobody there. Jen straightened up and sighed with relief. She looked up into the trees that backed onto the small rear garden, but saw nothing. "God, I'm silly," she said to herself, turning round to find an old, twisted face staring at her. She was barely able to contain the scream that welled up in her throat before she realised that it was old Mr McGillicuddy from across the street.

"I didn't mean to scare you," the old man backed off, "I was coming home from the bingo and saw somebody creeping around over here. I thought it might be that escaped lunatic that was in the paper this morning, but it's just you, thank God."

Jen hadn't read the paper that morning as she'd been late for work. "What escaped lunatic?" she asked, as they walked back to the front of the house. The old man gently took her arm and told her how one of the patients had escaped from the Ashurst Remedial Clinic the night before; a man with a history of stalking, kidnapping and murder, who had mutilated at least one of his victims, gutting her semiconscious body with the razor-honed hook that took the place of the right hand he had lost in a childhood accident involving a food processor and a jar of crunchy peanut butter.

At the front of the house, Jen waved goodbye to Mr McGillicuddy and headed back up the steps to her front door, which she found open, banging against the frame in the wind. She was sure she had closed it on the way out, but didn't give it much thought as she pressed the latch down behind her. "I just met old Mr McGillicuddy," she shouted, as she walked through the kitchen, "You won't believe what he..." but her fan wasn't in the lounge. "Hey, where are you?"

She checked the bathroom, bedroom and study, but there was no sign of him. Thinking he must have popped out to the 7-11 for something else, she went back to the kitchen and put a new bag in the waste bin.

Jen stayed up for another couple of hours, but her fan didn't return, so she assumed that he'd gone back to his house for the night and she went to bed, practicing the telling-off she'd have to give him the next day for abandoning her without an explanation. They'd been going out for a few months now, and she'd been starting to think that maybe he was the one, that this was developing into something lasting, but now she wasn't sure. As she turned the bedside light out her mind was in turmoil, cycling between wanting to kill him, hating herself for wanting to kill him, wanting to forgive him with no explanation needed, and hating herself for wanting to forgive him. Jen hugged her pillow and finally went to sleep.

Like her thoughts, her dreams were troubled. She found herself being chased by a dark shadow with a hook for a hand, through endless corridors of locked doors until she finally came to an open one, standing alone at the end of a passage. Running towards it, the shadow at her heels, she pulled up sharply as the door slammed in her face, and the shadow engulfed

her. She woke with a start to find something pressing on her legs, but it was just the cat, who had jumped up onto the bed. Then she heard a door slamming. That hadn't been a dream, it was real.

Jen climbed out of bed and pulled on her robe and slippers. She tiptoed out into the hall. Leaning against the front door was a man, his face hidden in the darkness. She couldn't see his hands as they were held up to his face, but she saw something glinting and screamed. The shadowy figure jerked upright and reached for the light switch. It was her fan, his keys in his hand. "Hey, have you been asleep? Didn't you hear all the fuss outside?"

Jen shook her head, then remembered how angry she was at him and demanded to know where he'd been. "Oh, I'm sorry, hon. While you were taking the trash out my neighbour - you know, Mr Johnson, you met him last week - phoned to say he'd seen through the window that I'd left my fire on, so I popped back to turn it off; we got talking - you know how lonely he is since the funeral - and before I know it three hours have gone by. You know, he remembered your name and where you lived, and called directory enquiries because he was worried my place might burn down. Really thoughtful of the old chap, don't you think? Anyway, I'm really sorry about not telling you but I was only planning on being ten minutes. Let me take you out to dinner tomorrow to say sorry."

Jen took in his explanation, but something was nagging at the back of her mind. "What commotion outside?"

"Some maniac's killed that old man across the street, ripped him apart according to the policeman I spoke to. He said the old guy was calling 911 to report an intruder when the line went dead. They found the killer at the scene and took him away. Don't say you slept through the sirens?" Jen's knees gave way, but her fan rushed forward and caught her in his arms, their bodies collapsing slowly to the floor. "I was just talking to Mr McGillicuddy earlier," she whimpered, her eyes filling with tears before the realisation hit her, "It could have been me."

"I know, and you were fond of him weren't you? But they've got his killer and I'm here now," They sat on the hall floor holding each other for what felt to Jen like hours, until she fell asleep in her fan's arms and he carried her back to bed

# Intro Into The Apocalypse

Friday, May 22, 2012

11:30pm ET

Two scientists, Michael Coffman and Stanley Gregory, were set on a mission to find a human specimen for a breakthrough experiment they have been conducting in a disclosed science facility. They were both strolling along the beach, looking for anybody who was alone and preferably intoxicated or under the influence of narcotics. Somebody they can just carry into their job-owned work van or bribe to make them ride along. They both were searching anxiously.

It was a chilly spring night; the wind was above average, making the tide wash onto the sand with lots of foam. The moon was bright and pale, almost eerie. Casting a cold blue color over the beach. There were only a few people on the cool sand, all in groups, except one.

“Stanley – There!” whispered Michael excitedly. “That guy has to be passed out, there are beer cans around him and he’s obviously alone.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Let’s hurry up,” Stanley replied in a bold whisper. “I really want to make this happen, Michael. We need to make sure this experiment works.”

The two slim, salt and pepper haired scientists casually walked up to a shirtless man, wearing only cargo shorts, and sandals. They could smell the alcohol fumes and marijuana all over his body and on his breath as he snored, mouth open. They both took a look around - nobody watching, and Stanley gave the man a tap, seeing if he was conscious. He wasn’t.

“Alright, he’s out, lets do this!” Michael whispered.

The scientists grabbed the man, one by his legs, the other by his arms, and carried him off to the work van

Saturday, May 23rd, 2012

Pm11:44

The scientists were in their disclosed laboratory at their hidden facility. The light in the vicinity was enough to blind anyone who walked in. Neon white everywhere, super clean, and biohazard sign stickers slapped on every door in the hall. Stanley was writing in his work journal:

Subject was detoxified from alcohol, heavily sedated with morphine, and has been injected with Virus T87Z. Immediately after injection, the subject woke up, blurted out obscenities, tried to get up but we have him strapped in tightly to the hospital bed. Soon after, the subject calmed down, stopped talking entirely, and had a fever of 109. Then, the subject had sever chills, started shaking violently, and began throwing up... Everything. Blood, food, and bits of his organs? It was unrecognizable. And of course, the subject died in 5 minutes after injection. He was reanimated a minute later. His eyes were dead grey, blackened eye sockets, and he had no trait of human nature expect for the urge to EAT and maybe, KILL. The subject is still

strapped in to the hospital bed but for how long? He's been struggling to get out, even cutting his arms and legs with the belts from the bed. And also

"Stanley! Come quick, one of the safety belts have busted and I don't know what to do! We should have put on a muzzle for the guy! This is crazy! His face- his eyes! His growl – I can't do this anymore!" Shouted Michael.

"Michael, what did you expect? We are studying biological weaponry and reanimating a corpse is one of the damn experiments!...this is our job! I don't want the damn US Army breathing down my neck because you can't handle your own work or because you're too scared!" Stanley replied, angry and irritated.

"It's a zombie Stanley...a zombie...I-I mean I knew that it-it was possible b-but this is just too much!" Michael started laughing nervously, "but please, help me. We need to terminate the subject. We must!"

Stanley and Michael went into the lab and saw that there was blood, coagulated blood, and yellow vomit everywhere on the bright white floor. There was also another scientist who appeared dead and had a gaping, fleshy wound on his neck. He was faced down but dark blood was pouring out of his neck like a broken dam. Streaming down the floor. The subject, now a hungry zombie, was groaning and growling at the scientists with blood and vomit smeared on it's mouth and chin.

Michael ran to his desk at the corner, reached for his handgun and cocked it.

"W-w-wait! Do. Not. Kill. The. Subject." Said Stanley. "We still need him a little longer for the experiment".

Suddenly, the scientist on the floor began moving his arms and feet slowly. Picking up his head and revealing dead grey eyes, sunken dark eye sockets, and growling at the two scientists.

"Remarkable...he didn't even get a fever, or vomit, or-"

"Stanley! Are you kidding me? This has to stop!"

Michael raised his silver handgun, squeezed the trigger, and put a bullet in the zombie scientist's head. The zombie scientist died, again, immediately.

"You fool! We could have used Tom as another subject! You didn't ha-"

"Use Tom as a subject?" Michael replied disgustedly. "I no longer want ANY part of this, Stanley. Tom was our fellow worker...a human... a-"

"A what? Who cares? What about that zombie over there? He was human too, right?" Stanley pointed at the zombie subject who was growling and moving violently on the hospital bed. "You didn't care about him last night, or this morning. Now you feel bad? Too late, Michael. Too late."

Suddenly, the belt straps that had been restraining and cutting onto the zombie's skin, creating nasty lacerations, busted. The zombie got up but fell off of the hospital bed.

"Stanley, we HAVE to kill it, I'm sorry," said Michael.

Just as Michael was raising his gun to the zombie crawling on the floor, Stanley knocked the gun out of his hand and pushed Michael onto the zombie. The zombie grabbed Michael's leg and bit a chunk of flesh with ease. Michael screamed loud in agony and cursed at Stanley.

"Should've listened to me, dear friend," said Stanley, so cold and serious. Then he shot Michael in the head without remorse or sorrow.

"I must write this down," said Stanley.

The zombie on the floor was quiet and finished eating a part of Michael's leg. The zombie managed to stand and was now going toward Stanley who was completely unaware and in shock. As Stanley was writing down what he had seen in his work journal, the zombie opened it's infected mouth, and bit a huge part of Stanley's neck.

"Aaaaahhhh!" Stanley screamed defeated and in pain.

Instead of immediately shooting the zombie, Stanley put the handgun to his mouth, shot himself dead, and unwillingly bumped onto a button which unlocks all doors in the building. All the doors in the facility opened. And the zombie made his way down the hall. Walking irregular but normal.

Sunday, May 24th, 2012

9:09am

It was a sunny, warm day. No cloud in the sky and people were on their way to the beach. There was traffic everywhere, coming in and out of the city. Everybody was busy and on the move except for a homeless man by the name of Carl, who was hunched over, drunk, under a short bridge that was a bit out of city limits. Also a little far from the beach.

Carl was in a drunken sleep, under the shade. He suddenly woke up because he heard a loud shout or a growl, maybe both at the same time.

"Whoa, where's your clothes at, buddy?" said Carl, to a naked man who was walking towards him.

Carl was drunk, dizzy and was seeing blurry. All he could feel was his numb body and white beard on his face.

"I got some-some cl-clothes in the-the – umm – cart! If you need, buddy," said Carl in a drunken slur, pointing at this shopping cart full of clothes and bottled beverages.

As the naked man got closer, Carl was frightened. What he saw completely ruined his buzz. The naked man had dead grey eyes, dried purple blood on his mouth and chest, and cuts all over his arms and legs. Then suddenly, he lunged toward Carl in a lazy jump.

"Ahh! Get away! Get away! Help! Ahhh!" Carl shouted but it was too late.

The zombie subject from the lab had walked out the facility, into this ditch, under this bridge, and treated this man's face like a pie eating contest with a no hands rule. Suddenly, tires screeched and a wail of police sirens rang in the air.

“Freeze! Step away from the man!” shouted a heavy built Sheriff from the top of the bridge.  
“Freeze or I will shoot!”

A commuter had called 911 when he noticed a naked man walking along the sidewalk. Sheriff Rudy was on duty and in the area so he took the call immediately.

The zombie looked up at Sheriff Rudy with a bloody piece of Carl’s face flesh hanging from his mouth. His eyes were so angry, so grey, and so empty. The zombie let out an animal like growl and then bowed its head and continued to chew on Carl’s face. Like a dangerous animal protecting it’s food, scaring off any threat to its meal.

“What the f-“ gasped Sheriff Rudy. He reached for his dispatcher “I’m going to n-need um, a, back up! Please! Hurry! By McKinney Bridge!”

Suddenly, Sheriff Rudy heard what sounded like a vehicle stampede. He turned around and saw a long line of military SUVs accompanied by black SUVs. As they approached him, only 3 men got out of a black SUV that was leading the way. Two in black suits and one in a lab coat.

“We got it from here sir, please wait in your vehicle for further instructions,” one of the black suit men said.

“But, uh, don’t you want me to s-“ Sheriff Rudy was cut off.

“WE. GOT. IT. FROM. HERE. SIR. GO. TO. YOUR. VEHICLE. OR. I. WILL. CARRY. YOU. TO. IT.” The black suit man snapped back.

Sheriff Rudy was so confused and in shock. Also a little pissed off about the rude reply he received from the black suit man, but he went back to his car, full of unanswered questions and horrified about what he’d seen.

The scientist in the lab coat ran down the bridge as fast as he can. Both men in the black suits took out a big silver dart gun and shot the zombie on the back with tranquilizers. The zombie let out a low groan and slumped over Carl’s body. Carl was in shock and had passed out. 3 other scientists ran down, one with a metal briefcase, handed it to the lab coat man, and started to pick up the tranquilized zombie.

As they carried the zombie away, the lab coat scientist opened the locked metal briefcase and took out a syringe full of yellow liquid. He injected Carl on the neck and then put the syringe back in the briefcase.

“He’s still alive, I have injected him with Anti-T87Z. Bring in the other body so we can hurry back into the lab and perform more tests with T87Z and the subject,” said the scientist to one of the black suit men.

One of the black suit men carried down a man very similar to the zombie who had feasted on Carl’s face. The man he carried in was naked and full of gun shot wounds on his chest. He placed the body on top of Carl and went up the bridge to talk to Officer Rudy.

“Now, we wouldn’t like to take lethal actions with uncooperative people, okay? So, here’s the story...you got a call about a naked man, you came down here, saw him scratching at and beating an old man under the bridge, you shot him, killed him, he was unresponsive and

aggressive, and he appeared to be under the influence of some new street drug. Got it? We will keep a close eye on you, Sheriff,” said the black suit man, so cold and serious.

“O-okay, sir,” said Sheriff Rudy and he called in an ambulance and stayed on scene. The black suit men and the lab coat scientist got in the black SUV and left with all the other military vehicles.

Friday, May 29th, 2012

7:00am

To further the experiments and test the possibilities of other chemical warfare attacks and what the virus might do to a population, the T87Z virus was released airborne into a busy downtown section. They believed it would be a “controlled” outbreak but what was supposed to be a quick test run, turned into something more dangerous and the infection spread faster than the scientists expected. And in a couple of days, the zombie apocalypse was in full swing across the nation.

# The Dark

The boy watched the red dust sweep around the pickup. The flatbed behind him, piled high with their possessions, creaked in tune with the rough track. A new life, his father said. They were going to live with his sister in Kinsasha. The boy would go to school.

Learn something.

A red sun settled over the bloated arteries of the Congo and the boy could smell the decaying vegetation hanging in the water, saw a hippo breach the blackness every now and again. It was the sun, low on the horizon now, which turned the dust around them red. To the boy it looked like a living thing and made him feel a little afraid.

Darkness fell, and the dust glowed in the headlights. The boy drifted. The land cooled. Bugs swept against the windscreen as the rickety old machine jumped and lurched down the track. The boy massaged his dry throat, tried to close his eyes and sleep.

His father slowed.

Stopped.

The boy looked up. His father took a sip from the canteen, rubbing his free hand against his cotton shirt. Something flickered in the distance. The engine was turned off and the lights were swallowed by the dark.

A fire.

His father sat there for an age, staring at it, then put down the canteen and climbed out.

“Wait here, Buba.” He spoke his maternal Adioukru. He always did that when something was wrong.

He stopped in front of the pickup. Hand resting on his knife belt. He looked back once.

There had been stories for a while now. The boy heard the grownups telling them. Terrible things happening. The boy watched his father walk down the dirt track, the breeze catching at his shirt. The darkness ate his father and the boy listened to the cooling engine, the screech and cry of the flatlands around them. The air grew colder and the darkness more complete. The glow in the distance faded.

The boy waited.

Silence came. Long, dreadful, complete. No sound. His own breath seemed absorbed by the darkness, his own heartbeat.

These were the most frightening moments of his life and he came to believe that he would be trapped in this silent bubble of darkness forever. There was no escape. He didn't have the courage to open the door and climb out.

He just waited.



Towards dawn, the darkness began to take shape again. The shadows turned around him until he could make out the road. A tall, lumbering figure came towards him. A man with a long, equine face and eyes that were still buried in shadow. He made no sound as he loomed large in the dirty windscreen. The tall man in the black suit doffed his top hat and smiled.

It was the most terrible thing.

And in that smile, the boy knew his father was dead. All were dead. The tall man reached into his sleeve and pulled out a bunch of flowers that looked grey in the dawn light and he placed them on the bonnet of the pickup. He walked on down the track and the boy remained in his seat and it was not until the harsh glare of the sun reached over the hills that he gathered the courage to go and get help.

# I'll not forget you

I have to remember to clean my teeth. I have a list on the cabinet door that Maisey put there. Wash face. Clean teeth. Take pills.

All this assuming I remember to go into the bathroom in the first place.

There's the question of how many times I go into the bathroom. I guess I clean my teeth more now. And my face is always pink and free of blackheads. I don't take too many pills because they're in a pack made up by the pharmacy.

I have a lot of lists. All around the house. Maisey's written some. Others I've done. Drink water, that's a favourite. Turn off the gas. Check the mail. Sometimes I need the lists. Sometimes I don't. Sometimes I can't remember how to work the washing machine. It depends which direction the wind's blowing.

I forget, therefore I am. Or am not.

Don't ask me what I did yesterday, or five minutes ago. I find it difficult. My cheeks clench and my teeth grind as I try to drag the memory, any recent memory, from the quicksand that is now my mind. Maisey tries to help, and I get frustrated. I know it's missing, but don't know what.

My thoughts, one by one, are disappearing into the quicksand. I have pills to help, but they just slow the process. They don't stop it. They won't reverse it.

I could rant and rave. It wouldn't do any good. Most of me accepts that the real, authentic me is draining away. I know, already, what will happen. Piece by piece my past will disappear. Sucked down into the quicksand.

Until only one, solid memory remains.

Him. Pressing into the dark. His hot breath. His violent words. From almost sixty years ago. I'll remember only him. And maybe I'll wonder what happened to him. But mostly I'll be left with the fear. I've known that since forever. When everything is gone, He's all there will be.

Then finally, we'll be sucked down into the quagmire together, his fierce and terrible features along with my last sense of self.

And then there will be peace. The way a pool settles after a rock has been thrown into it.

Calm, flat and nameless

# The Pizza Cutter

The front door thumps. “Who is it?” You ask. Not a sound comes out. Only the A/C and the faint volume from the television. You shrug it off and read that thump as the neighbors getting home late. “Probably wasn’t even the door. Had to be their stupid car.” But then your conscious says, “Was it?”

As you go back to reading your facebook feed on your phone, you hear another thump - a bang at your door. This time it is louder, deeper, and aggressive. You jump at the noise. You drop your phone from your hand and it smacks your face. You get angry and feel the small sting from the stupid smart phone. Your parents aren’t home. No one is. Everyone is out of town. Who can be knocking? Playing a cruel joke? Why is this going on?

As you’re about to answer your own question, your bedroom window BANGS! You scream and shiver violently for two seconds. And then the living room bangs right after. You gather up all your courage, run to the kitchen, grab a kitchen knife, and tip toe to the living room. You stop hesitating, hand going to the knob, and without even thinking about asking who’s there or looking through the peep hole, you open the door.

Your hand is raised, knife shining down, and you let out a terrified scream. The guy standing in front of you utters a low moan and says “Stop! I’m just the pizza guy!” You immediately put down your knife, take a deep breath, and smile in relief. You tell him, “I’m so sorry. Someone hit my window, the door banged-” He cuts you off and says “No worries, sorry I startled ya. Want your pizza, ma’am?” You say “Sure! How much is the total?” He has the pizza box in his hand. He looks at you, turns his eyes to the top of the box, looks back up at you and says, “No charge at all”. With a handsome, warm smile. You say, “Really? Wow. Thank you!” He smiles & says, “Lady, you aren’t gonna have a chance to even eat this pizza.” You stop smiling, heart starts to pound, and you look at him confused and scared. Before you can ask why, the pizza guy flips over the box, it falls to the porch floor, raises his hand, and he is gripping a very sharp and gigantic pizza cutter covered with what looks like marinara and blood stains. All you remember is his crazy eyes and the cutter to your face.

# Treacle Smiles

The man is about 5'11". He's nothing much to look out except he's not one of the regulars. The second non-regular this evening. That's strange. Ella thinks it is. She's been tending bar at the Pig for a couple of years now and non-regulars don't come by but once in a long while. The man comes to the bar. His arms hang loosely and his shoulders are slouched but his eyes scan the four corners of the Pig before settling on Ella behind the bar.

Those eyes are stone cold and Ella almost shivers. He hikes up on one of the stools, settles his thick hands on the bar and laces the fingers together. He orders a scotch whiskey. Ella stares at him for a little while and then pulls a shot glass down and fills it with Bells. She places it on a napkin in front of him. He looks at that, and for a moment she thinks they're playing a game and she doesn't know the rules. Ella feels uneasy. Two non-regs in one night. What were the chances of that.

"Hey, Ella, get us two more beers!" Normally she would have some sour remark ready for Lenny. She had let him fuck her once and regretted it ever since.

Lenny is over by the pool table with Ray Chuck and both of them have been hitting it pretty hard all night. Usually, with a big guy like Lenny that ends with Troy Keep, the bar manager, having to pay out for new pool cues. So far, Ray and Lenny are behaving themselves. But there are still a couple of hours to go until she closes up.

The non-reg at the bar unlaces his hands and picks up the tiny shot glass. Big hands for a medium size guy. She stares at his hands as she pulls two beers and she thinks they don't fit and that worries her some more. Like they aren't his hands. He just borrowed them for the night.

Non-reg downs the scotch in one, grimaces as it goes all the way down and sets the shot glass on the bar. He reaches inside his suede jacket and pulls out a crumpled pack of cigarettes, picks one out with his teeth and lights it with a match from the bar. He tosses the still burning match in the ashtray and watches the flame, blue, yellow, orange.

Ella slides the beers on the bar and shouts Lenny to come and get them. He lumbers over cursing about the lack of service but in truth she wanted him a bit nearer. Lenny's a good man to have in a fight. He's had the practice.

"You want another?" She lifts the bottle of scotch and shows it to the non-reg. He nods and stares at the shot glass again. Above his head the Steel Water fan revolves slowly, making a chink sound every four seconds. When it's real hot, it gets on Ella's nerves. She catches sight of herself in the mirror. She looks worn.

"You fuckin' turd!" Screams Lenny. Ray has just fluked a shot but it's not going to lead to a fight. Lenny bangs his cue on the floor and turns to look at the cubicle and adds: "You like that queer fuck."

Thick cigar smoke drifts out of the cubicle. Apart from the white shoulder and the tattoo she can't see the other non-reg of the evening. A guy shouldn't be that pale. Not in this part of the

country. She's surprised Ray and Lenny haven't taken him out back and broken his bones. He's been sat there, nursing a soda and not saying much of anything.

"Put some music on the box, Ray," she shouts.

"You mean pay for it, Ella?"

"Just kick it like you usually do." He kicks it with his cowboy boots and a Dolly Parton song comes on. Lenny stoops towards the green baize and punches a ball into the corner pocket.

The non-reg at the bar picks up his second drink and downs it in the same manner as the first. "You passing through?" Asks Ella though something tells her not to start up a conversation.

His eyes narrow a little. "Who'd want to set up home in a shit stick place like this?" His voice is all gravel and broken ice. She doesn't think that was very polite.

"It's not too bad in the fall," she says.

He pushes the shot glass at her and she fills it.

"Too damn hot anyway."

"Where you heading?"

He doesn't speak, picks up the glass and looks at the brown liquid inside. His head leans to the side and his flint eyes soften a little. He puts the glass down and draws the last smoke out his cigarette before stubbing it in the ashtray. He blows of cloud out at the bar and Ella watches it.

"I'm looking for someone."

"You and me both honey." The non-reg doesn't return her forced smile. His eyes grow hard again.

"You had anyone come in tonight."

"Only regulars here," she says. He picks up the shot glass again and drinks it down and then he calls her a liar and smiles and she knows, for certain, this guy his death on legs and he's mean and couldn't care less if her life was snuffed out right now.

He laughs and that makes Ray stop his next shot. Lenny asks if she's alright and cigar smoke bundles out of the cubicle.

"Looking for a guy called Carnegie. You can't miss him. He's pale as fucking snow." Lenny rests on his cue and looks at the non-reg hidden in the cubicle. The man at the bar raises his voice so he's sure everyone can hear and Ella backs away a little, her eyes falling on the Dewbar shotgun clipped under the sink. "Hey, Carnegie, still smoking the shitty cigars I see."

From the cubicle comes and whiny sort of laugh, the sort a bratty kid would make to annoy an adult.

Carnegie comes out of the cubicle, slow, almost bored. He's wearing a sleeveless t-shirt with a picture of a dancing chicken on the front, jeans and heavy work boots that are covered in mud.

The cigar hangs like a second dick from his thin lips. His flesh is paler than Ella's crop top blouse. Carnegie has large eyes, like a wolf.

Lenny and Ray watch this in silence. She gets the impression these two are going to be no help at all. Carnegie is a good foot taller than the guy at the bar and he looks trim so she knows who her money is on. The guy at the bar looks bad. But Carnegie looks worse.

He takes two more steps and he opens his mouth to say something and suddenly there's a roar of noise and Carnegie's pale head explodes. Lenny and Ray get a liberal splashing of brains and bone. The funny thing is, as she would tell Sheriff Hooper later that evening, Carnegie kept on walking, half his face hanging off, arterial blood squirting a long stain on the ceiling.

"Dumb fucks never know when they're dead," says the man at the bar. The second shot blows a hole through Carnegies heart and that stops him. He doesn't fly across the floor, just sways for a couple of seconds and then dead weights to the floor.

The non-reg is moving towards the body, holstering the big fuck off gun. He grabs both feet and drags Carnegie, minus his head, across the floor and out the door. Lenny and Ray are statues. Shaking, Ella unhitches the shotgun, checks it's loaded and carries the heavy weapon from behind the bar. She can see the man through the window.

There's a pickup that's seen better days and there's Carnegies body lying in the dirt. The man is getting a gallon can of petrol from the back of the pickup, now he's pouring it over the body.

Ella comes out the door, her finger round the trigger of the shotgun and she tries to say something but she's too full of fear. The man looks up at her, puts a cigarette between his teeth and lights it. He looks at the flame of the match and then at Ella. He looks kind of sad. She aims the gun at him, the barrel shaking. He drops the match and there's a rumph of sound as Carnegie goes up.

The man turns and climbs behind the wheel.

The pickup is a long way down the road before Ella puts down the gun and sinks onto the porch. She can smell barbecued Carnegie and that, above anything else, is the thing that makes her vomit.

# Chatter

I'm awake. A tweet in my head. I don't pay attention. Something about a book signing in LA. It's just a message. Nothing real. So I ignore it and get up.

Breakfast. Wash face. Comb hair. Brush teeth. Cigarette. Routine.

Another twitter-tweet. This time my iPhone.

#TEOTWIN get ready for something big.

I'm fine with it all, the great techno revolution. Satellite positioning, touch phones, iPads, Wii and Xbox, cameras on every street, e-mail, keyboards, motherboards, surround sound, high definition, DAB, Tweeting, Beeboing, Digging, Facebooking. The whole damned world of interconnectivity. It swamps me, but I'm okay.

For another couple of hours at least.

Until #TEOTWIN opens the floodgates.

I'm pretty good at social networking. As I travel to work I'm tweeting my followers, regaling them with banal thoughts. They tweet back with equally dull opinions. All that chatter, it's got to mean something, hasn't it?

Then there's the twittering in my head.

Fading in and out. Confusing things.

And the thing is this: It's getting louder.

You know those stories about schizos hearing voices? Well I'm hearing Tweets.

By the time I get to work: A million tweets inside my head.

That damned stupid sound. Twitter-tweet. Eleanor is looking down at her keyboard as if it's the strangest thing she's seen. "Can you hear it?" She asks.

I'm shaking. Stumble to the window. Outside people are moving erratically. Like they aren't in control of their own limbs. A man walking, backing up, walking, backing up, trying to get past a lamp-post.

Another million Tweets in my head. Tweet-twitter-tweet. An endless, painful, inane chatter. Then e-mails begin to ping too. Comments pop-up offering me three free goes at an online casino. YouTube videos start to play. The whole of our techno-social world is dumping into my brain. Eleanor slumps forward with a cry.

I can't see. I can't think. #TEOTWIN get ready for something big. #TEOTWIN get ready for something big. Tweet-Twitter-Tweet. My nose is bleeding. There's a scream of car tyres and a crash. I'm sitting down on the floor because I can't do anything else. Its gone mad. I've gone mad.

Harvey falls into the office, his face sweaty and scared. "They burst it," he cries. "They broke it open!"

I can't speak. My mouth opens and closes like a brain-fried asylum inmate.

#TEOTWIN get ready for something big.

Then nothing. A terrible void. No relief, just a sense of fear. Harvey weeps. He scratches harshly at his own face making it bleed. I back up to the desk, try to pull myself up. I want to run, but, really, there's nowhere to run. It's all in the head you see.

Twit-Tweet.

#TEOTWIN The end of the world is nigh :)

Twit-Tweet.

And then it descends. Every thought, every action, every electrical impulse, rushing into my already overcrowded brain, this endless, terrible, pointless chatter. Harvey's eyes bleed. And all I can think is...

Tweet-tweet-tweet...



# Treading Water

Mikhail watched, comfortable in his chair. The rhythmic movements, arms swirling in a loose figure of eight, legs kicking. The water foaming and rippling. It was all so poetic.

When the man first went in the water, he thrashed, screamed and tried to reach up the sides of the well, almost grabbing the lip, but then falling back. He continued this way for a while until he finally realised he could not escape.

Once the man had taken a deep breath and plunged into the cold depths of the well. Mikhail watched distorted legs kicking down into the darkness. The well was deep though. Too deep for anyone but an experienced free diver to find the bottom. The man came scooting up a while later, exploding on the surface and gasping for air, fighting to stay in control until his breathing calmed and his legs and arms set about their rhythmic movement again.

Later, the man decided it would be wise to conserve his energy and he settled on the gentle circular motion of his arms and hands and the slight kick of his legs to keep himself afloat.

But now he was beginning to tire.

Mikhail could see that. His motion had become a little more erratic. He shivered and moaned. He began to cry as realisation came.

“No point in trying anything,” whispered Mikhail. “There’s no escape. Your legs and arms are going to give out. You’ll just stop and then you’ll sink down and that will be it.”

The man looked up in panic. “Who are you?”

Mikhail laughed. “No one like you.” His voice echoed off the stone.

The man swam to the edge and felt the wall, looking up, kicking his legs more furiously. “Who are you?” He reached and fell again.

Mikhail unwrapped his sandwiches and took a bite of tuna on brown with thin slices of cucumber. “There’s no escape,” he repeated. “Don’t you understand?”

He finished the sandwich and had a coffee and watched the man settle back into that rhythm they all seemed to adopt eventually. Prolong the agony. Keep going. Maybe something will happen. Something miraculous.

The man cried out: “Help me! Help me!”

He sank and took in a mouthful of oily water, came back up gasping and choking. Sobbing. Then he went back to the rhythm and this continued for another hour or so until the cold sapped the energy from his limbs and everything slowed down.

He was talking to himself then – Mikhail couldn’t make out what – but it was usually something to do with contrition.

Father forgive my sins. They have been so very great.

After a while, the legs stopped moving. Then the arms slowed and the head began to dip beneath the water and then the man sank into the oily darkness.

“See,” Mikhail whispered. “I told you there was no point.”

# Halloween Ritual

"I don't want to dress up for Halloween! I'm not a baby!" said Eric Wilson. Eyes in a squinted death stare to his mother. "Nobody dresses up when they're sixteen." "Yes they do, Eric. I saw plenty of kids your age dressed up in their costumes when I drove by your school this morning," said Eric's mom.

Eric's brother Matt walked in and stuffed his mouth with a Cherry Pop Tart and said, "Psh! Yeah, tell that to those skimpy twenty year old girls that dress up as sexy angels or devils and walk around like a damn porn convention is happening!" Matt laughed and went back out the kitchen.

Their mom gave Matt an unpleasant look and gazed back to Eric. "Look, I'm working the night shift tonight, your dad isn't coming home until tomorrow morning. So please wear your costume, please be safe, and be back before eight-thirty. We just moved here last week and I don't know this town or the people that well. But yes, wear your costume."

Why is she so persistent about me wearing a costume? She never was before...

Eric thought to himself as he gave his mother a hug and walked her out the door. The sun was ready to set and the air outside was fresh, cold, and smelled like burning fall leaves. Kids in costume were already bagging candy and running wild down the streets. Eric's mom got in her car feeling uneasy and kind of strange.

Was what the store clerk told me true? Do kids really have to wear costumes or else- ah, forget it. Just small town superstition. She gave Eric a happy wave and went off to work.

Eric's friend Tommy, who also just moved to town also, showed up a few minutes later, dressed up as Batman. He looked cheerful and very unthreatening as The Dark Knight because he had a huge smile across his face.

"Ha! It's the dork knight!" Eric said laughing hysterically.

Tommy's smile faded and he sarcastically snapped back. "Oh, how original. That one is so new, Eric. I think my grandpa's grandpa made that up."

"Hey! Ouch! Just giving you a hard time...I'm not dressing up man. Just feels weird for me now."

"Eric, you're just weird, man. Even old people still dress up. And people around here are super anal about dressing up. Weird. Are you ready to go get some candy? It's so dark now." Tommy looked at the setting sun, which was now only a nudge in the distance.

"Yeah, let me just get my jacket. I will be wearing all black. Just in case the treat givers give me crap about not dressing up."

The streets, the night, everything around Eric got really creepy. There was a light fog rolling in. It reminded Eric of the horror movies he'd been watching all October. He kept hearing kids screaming, some laughing, and fire smoke in the air, and eerie wolf howls. He and Tommy had

already collected a satisfying amount of candy and chocolate. Eric wanted to go home, but he didn't know that he would never return.

As he and Tommy were walking back to his house, Eric noticed that the sounds of the night had grown silent. He heard lots of whispering and noises he couldn't identify. It sounded as if somebody had a CD of Haunted House sounds in a loud stereo system. And the kids' costumes suddenly looked really scary. He stopped seeing happy or kiddy costumes. Now all he saw were realistic demons, ghouls, zombies, and hooded people. And they all seemed to be staring at him.

One demon, green with wet cracked skin and small devil horns, kept its bright yellow eyes on Eric and gave him an evil smile. Eric tensed up and his heart started beating faster. What's this dude's problem? Weirdo. The demon passed right by Eric and sniffed his head. Eric jumped away and bumped into Tommy. "What the hell was that kid's problem, man?"

"I don't know, bro. But I really want to go home." Tommy went close to Eric and whispered, "Is it just me or did everything just get really freakin weird around here?"

As Tommy said that, the demon that sniffed Eric said in a dry hoarse shout, "We have a human! A young boy! Sacrifice starts before midnight! Grab the boy!"

Eric looked around, confused and scared and all the kids in costume suddenly stopped walking and started cheering. He heard:

"Yes! Finally!"

"A boy! A boy! Finally a human!"

"The sacrifice will finally help us!"

A ghoul grabbed Tommy and Tommy shouted in a weak cry. The demon came up and said, "No, he's one of us! Look at the pointed horns, you fool." Tommy stopped crying and looked relieved. The ghoul let him go and Tommy took off running as fast as he can.

"Tommy! Tommy! Get back here! Where are you going?"

Tommy didn't look back or respond. He just kept running and running. His cape was waving in the air behind him. Eric was about to run too when the green demon grabbed him by the arm. Its sharp nails dug into Eric's arm, cutting his flesh.

"Oww! Let me go, man! What's your problem dude?" The demon laughed, gripped tighter, and the ghouls, zombies, and demons moved in. Eric came to a shocking realization...these weren't kids or teens...these were real monsters. Evil monsters. The ghoul hit Eric over the head and he collapsed instantly. Dropping his candy all over the floor.

When Eric woke up, he was on the floor, inside a clearing in the woods. He turned around and saw people that looked like town politicians, lawyers, and of course, the monsters and demons. Candles were lit in a huge circle, keeping in the crowd and lit evil jack-o-lanterns were placed everywhere. He noticed that he was chained and was on top of a wooden table.

"What's happening? Where am I? Who are you?" Eric shouted and cried, as he looked around at all the faces. Suddenly, the mayor spoke up.

“Town people of Darkcreek, we all know what we must do to keep our economy boosting, good luck going, crops growing, and safety to be assured. We all know we must sacrifice, man, women, or child, for the greater good of our livelihoods. And to all stay alive. We give our sacrifice to the ancient ones who come before us and walk these streets every Halloween. To keep them happy and to get what we deserve in return. We give people a fair chance every Halloween by advising everyone to wear a Halloween costume. We must not feel guilty, all warnings had been sent out. We must now give this young boy to the ancient deity and carry on with the sacrifice. Thank you all for being here. And I can’t wait to see what good fortune this brings to Darkcreek.”

The crowd cheered and Eric kept crying and wishing he wore his stupid costume. Suddenly, a huge, scary, devil-like monster came walking up with a huge sword in his hands. The monster had tiny red glowing eyes, long bullhorns, and horse legs. It started shouting something in Latin, the ghouls and demons cheered and repeated after it. Then without warning, the monster plunged the sword into Eric’s stomach. Eric instantly died and under the wooden table he was on, a bonfire started. Everyone cheered and partied around the dead flaming corpse.

The mayor thanked everyone for coming out and said, “I look forward to our times of peace. But, good things never last too long. So we will see you next year.”

# Elisa's Child

Annie Lessing was daydreaming again. Conjuring up the bad things that made her flesh crawl (like the time He came sweeping across the garden, a flurry of shape and angry autumn leaves and eyes that blazed deep and cold into her frightened heart).

For a moment, she was convinced God had reached down while her back was turned and pulled Far Reach from its perch above the town. He had a right to grab that old house and throw it straight down to Hell. She doubted there was another place on Earth that held the darkness so tightly.

Albert Vernon said you could tell the house was bad because it was perfectly aligned. Tourists would look at him, raise an eyebrow or two, but Albert would get that dog-eared old map out and tell them: if you drew a line straight from its red brick chimney, through its centre, said line would pass through the house, the garden path, the gate at the bottom that was never used these days, through the hillside, through the centre of Station Road library, the white lines of the high street and the old clock, splitting the pier and the bay into equal halves.

Albert said nothing good was ever so symmetrical.

The tourists would nod and buy him a drink and Albert would nod back and scratch his chin and say: "Yeah, Grevin's always been damned." Then he would give a humourless chuckle and blow smoke up at the ceiling of the Pendragon Pub and Grill. "You can feel that damn house, wherever you are in town."

Albert Vernon said it was like someone always tapping on your shoulder with bad news. When he was drunk – which was often – he said maybe someone should go up there and cut those Jewish girl's throats while they were sleeping.

Maybe set light to the place too.

Marion Vernon, Albert's long-suffering sister, said he was a drunken old bugger who had nothing better to do with his time than enlarge his liver and talk rubbish.

"Why d'yah think I drink woman?"

Albert said he was just saying aloud what everyone else was thinking.

The house, he would add, was just no damn good.

Annie clutched the two boxes of candles and carton of milk to her chest and moved away from the shop window into the dusty gloom of Giggs All Purpose Store. She didn't want to think of the house. She didn't want to think of anything. She looked around the store and tried to pretend everything was just fine. Even though things were far from that.

There were ordinary jars of sweets and an ordinary set of scales behind the counter, on the left a stack of second hand 45's and a Silvertone Phonograph that had belonged to Ewan's mother. There was an old freezer that hummed fitfully and was home to seven different flavours of ice lolly, next to that a rack of loose veg that was beginning to turn. There was a rickety shelf unit where Ewan kept most of the newspapers and gossip magazines and some

toys – mostly cheap Chinese imports – that he sold for an extortionate profit and which he didn't like the kids touching. There was also a work bench piled high with various sized tools and a selection of nails and screws and some pots of paint that had been mixed over twenty years ago.

In between it all, there was dust and a little grease.

Some people thought Ewan was in need of a good woman. A good few thought that he was just too plain mean for a woman, good or bad.

He leaned on the counter now, picking dirt from under his nails with a paperclip, watching Annie's pink slippers as she approached.

He was a skinny man in a brown check shirt and nylon pants that hung baggily around his crotch. Rumour had it that Rebecca Williams dated Ewan once – a meal at La Pizzeria got mentioned. Rebecca told her sister, Louise, that Ewan Giggs was so excited all through the meal that his little pecker made a tent so obvious even the waiter noticed. And to cap it all, he expected her to go Dutch when he'd invited her out in the first place. She lived in Rhyl now with a retired bookkeeper and her two children.

No one mentioned Becky Williams' name in front of Ewan. Not if they wanted him to remain civil. She had been his one and only true love – at least what passed for true love in Ewan's mind – and the loss had made him even more cantankerous than nature and upbringing had ever intended.

Annie tried to hold his gaze as she put her shopping on the counter. She tried her best to be defiant. She had a right to shop here like everyone else and if Ewan didn't like it he could take a running jump off the pier. But holding his gaze while Elisa was up in Far Reach bleeding into the sheets was well nigh impossible.

He looked at the candles and ran his tongue over crooked yellow teeth. "Specting a power cut are you?" He asked.

"That's right." She would keep her answers short. If she said too much, her voice would start pitching high and he'd know something was wrong (aka Elisa bleeding in the attic) and then she didn't know if she could keep herself together. She forced herself to breath in the dusty air of the shop and told herself there were worse things in the world than mean-spirited shopkeepers (aka, again).

Ewan grunted and began adding up her purchases on the old till.

"How's your sister these days?" He emphasised the "sister" with a hiss.

Behind him a string of unsold action figures hung between multicoloured jars of candy. It looked as if they had all committed suicide and their dead faces were staring at her. How's your sister these days? We know how she is...don't we boys.

"Fine," she said, fumbling with her purse.

Ewan sucked noisily on his lower lip as the clasp popped open suddenly and her change jumped out. Coins bounced across the tiled floor, filling the small shop with discordant music. Ewan looked at her with the sort of derision he reserved for vagrants and unruly children as

she bent and gathered the change. "God in heaven woman," he growled. "Are you going to be all day?"

Her cheeks burned. She couldn't pick up one of the coins. It seemed to be clinging to the floor for dear life. Her hands shook and she wanted to scream at him – put her nose an inch from Ewan's face and scream all that fear and hate out of her body. Trade places with me, she wanted to cry. See if you can live like me. See how you like it.

Annie slid the coin across the floor until it hit the foot of a magazine rack and flipped up into her palm. She let go a triumphant squeal at this small battle won. Her cheeks cooled. Her breathing slowed.

See, wasn't that easy?

She laid the right change in front of Ewan and watched him count it again, poking at the coins as if they were soiled with something unspeakable. She put the purse back into her bag while Ewan placed the candles and milk in a thin carrier. He looked at the money one last time, then swept it into his left palm and dropped it swiftly into the till.

She thanked him for his time, although he didn't deserve it. Ewan turned his back and feigned interest in the shelf of brightly coloured sweets, releasing a long sigh as if he had been holding his breath the whole time she was at the counter.

Outside, Annie opened the door of the grey Morris Minor, dropped her shopping bag over the back seat and climbed behind the wheel. The red leather was hot on her back and without thinking, she dabbed at the flesh beneath her eyes and checked the sweat on her fingertips to see if it was clear. She pressed her teeth together, swallowing hard. I'll not cry, she thought. Not in front of them all.

Ewan Giggs followed her out onto the street, carrying his old broom. He leaned on it, looking up the slope at Far Reach and then at Annie as if she was a liar, a thief, murderer or worse.

Ten years ago Elisa had treated Ewan for a cancerous growth. He had been grateful. He had gushed, Elisa said. Annie couldn't imagine him gushing about anything (except maybe Rebecca Williams in her pretty little panties and bra) and he certainly didn't seem that grateful. In fact, she got the impression that Ewan would cheerfully stick an axe in Elisa's skull and lose no sleep over it at all. They all thought the same, of course but, as Albert Vernon was fond of saying, better to sell your soul than suffer from piles.

You hypocrites, she thought.

Dave Boulton stood by a ladder outside Woolworth's, chamois leather hanging from his right hand. He was in his fifties now, sagging a little, but he had been quite the catch in his youth. He was the sort of man she'd have liked to settle down with. Attractive, in a rough sort of way. Rugged. He was trying not to look at her now but he was looking all the same. She could always tell. Hadn't Elisa fixed his back one time?

"He's got a nice back," she'd teased. Annie blushed. She'd been dreaming about Dave for a while (this was back in the 60's when she still entertained such thoughts). "I could make up a spell if you like." Annie had pooh-poohed any notion of a spell but she had thought about it a long while, mostly at night, until Dave married someone else and broke her heart.



There was Melinda Forrest, wearing her winter coat and wool hat even though it was mid-August, stood with a letter poised at the mouth of a post box. If there was a person who fuelled the gossip about Far Reach (as if it needed any), Melinda was the one. Spiteful. There was no other word for her. She could have done with a spell that one, a big nasty one, something to stop her big ugly tongue from wagging.

There were Kath and Hope Dickenson. Frozen by the spell. They had stopped arguing outside the new KFC (finger-licking-good) and even Paul Middleton, who was too young to appreciate the bones of the story, had stopped kicking his punctured ball down the street and was staring in Annie's direction.

What were they waiting for?

Her head to split open and the Devil to pop out like a Jack in the Box, no doubt.

They went about their ordinary lives, did their ordinary things, but always above them sat Far Reach. Haunting their dreams. Spoiling their mundane lives with its dreadful terrors.

Well, why didn't they do something about it? Why didn't they go up there, carrying flaming torches and set fire to the place? They didn't because their collective fear was too great. It was deeper, stronger and altogether more potent than any of Elisa's spells.

"Well you deserve it," she muttered and started the car.

The engine rumbled. The spell broke. Satisfied that nothing out of the ordinary was going to happen, Ewan went back to his shop. Dave slapped his chamois leather against Woolworth's window and started whistling and Paul Middleton kicked his ball down the high street sending a group of pigeons into the air. Kath and Hope went in the Everything-A-Pound shop to continue their argument while Melinda Forrest headed purposefully towards Giggs All Purpose Store to get a copy of the Times, which she never read, and to spread her daily supply of gossip.

Annie turned right at Woolworths and left past the library. As she drove up the tree-lined road towards Far Reach, she looked in the rear-view mirror at the sunlight glittering off the bay below. The water was a shining green-blue and there were a couple of boats about a mile or so out, white sails full of breeze.

Visitors came here for the golden beaches, blue seas, promenade kiosks and the summer fair out by Calan Cove with its Ferris wheel, candyfloss stalls, dodgems and shooting galleries. They didn't care what secrets the town held and they certainly didn't come to see what Far Reach held within its permanently damp walls.

The road twisted into the trees now, covering the car's bonnet in ripples of darkness. There were places beyond the trees that surrounded Far Reach, hidden valleys of lush bush and vine, where the sun did not touch but where things grew all the same. She had been once, with Elisa.

Once in sixty years. When Elisa had the accident and couldn't carry her childish gifts down into the darkness.

A figure moved on the roadside. It turned out to be Mrs Wilkins scrawny old dog but for a second she thought it was Him, come to take her soul as he had so often promised. She

pressed her foot hard on the accelerator. The engine whined. Her knuckles tightened around the steering wheel. Annie bit her lip hard and it was only when she turned in through the gate and the car lurched onto level ground that she felt the pain of it.

She parked in the driveway and stared at the crimson brickwork of the three-storey building, her hands together as if she was praying. It looked like the house was bleeding too, the way Elisa, in the heat of the attic room, was bleeding. "I should be dead, house," she said to the walls. "You've kept me alive against my will."

He had brought them here just after the war.

A young man with piercing dark eyes and a face as pale as snow, a man who seemed young but was old and dry inside, a man who smelled sometimes of the dark earth in a cemetery.

Annie grabbed her bag and walked across the drive. The azaleas she planted in spring had begun to wilt, their colours blunted. The seeds came free with a packet of cereal and for a while their bright colours lifted her spirits. Now they looked drained of their essence, the petals crumbling.

She pushed at the front door. It was heavy and the hinges creaked and reminded Annie of something from a Hammer Horror movie. She expected to see Dracula standing at the foot of the stairs, cloaked arm resting below blood-red eyes. And a rubber bat.

Don't forget that.

She forced a laugh. If a rubber bat followed the Devil, he wouldn't half as frightening.

Her gaze settled on the book trail.

Annie took the candle boxes out of her bag and rested them on one of the piles of note books that filled one side of the hallway. Blue ones, red ones, green, yellow, faded and new, placed in no reasonable order that Annie could see each line filled with Elisa's handwritten spells.

In one of the books was the spell that cured Ewan Gigg's of his cancer. In another was the one that had eased Dave Boulton's back. Perhaps she could find Ewan's spell and take it down to the All Purpose – post it through the letter box just to show him what he owed Elisa. If it wasn't for that spell, Ewan would be dust by now.

The books didn't leave much room for furniture in the hall or the large dining room off the kitchen. They trailed up the stairs, forming elaborate tenements of paper, sealed shut with damp and caked in multicoloured flows of wax. Candlelight trailed down the hall and up the staircase. How many books? How many candles? A shrine of wax and paper to the God of Darkness.

Annie took the milk to the kitchen and put it in the fridge. She poured herself a glass of water from the sink and gulped it down. Annie was a big woman, ample as Filip Malinowski had once called her, an age ago before they settled in Grevin. A buxom wench.

She smiled when she thought of Filip. He had followed her like a lap dog. Once he bought her flowers, blushing as he thrust them at her. They weren't good flowers but it was the first time a boy had bought her such a gift. It was the first time a boy had those thoughts about her. It made her feel sweet and warm inside.

Annie had been thinking of Filip a lot lately, especially the day he died. The image of him now was not the one she asked for, but it was clear as anything: lying in the mud of the street. Grey figures walking past him, not wanting to look. Poor Filip. Just part of the mud and everyone too scared to go over and see if he was still alive.

Annie pushed the memory away and filled a tin bucket with cold water. Then she pulled on a pair of white surgical gloves, struggling to stretch the latex over her thick fingers. She'd never wanted to be a nurse, had always been revolted by the thought of sickness but Elisa was all she had and there was nothing the doctors in town could do even if she had a mind to call them.

She tied a green plastic apron around her waist, lifted the bucket and went up the stairs to the attic. There were six flights in Far Reach and with each step the air seemed to thicken as if she was passing into another world. She couldn't count the number of times she had made this same, dreadful journey. Will this be the last? She asked the gloom. How many more times?

Elisa's gums had started bleeding two days ago.

Annie asked if it was going to be worse this time. Elisa smiled that red smile and went back to writing in her damn spell book and Annie stormed out saying she wasn't going to help this time. The bleeding terrified her. It was okay for Elisa. She could just lie there and drift off into the never, never. Annie was the one left to wait and wonder if Elisa was going to make it or if He was going to turn up. She was the one left terrified and alone.

Shortly after Elisa's gums started bleeding, specks appeared in the hollows under her eyes. Then she was leaving bloody thumbprints in her stupid books. Soon after that, she asked Annie to prepare the room. It was time.

The attic air was gorged on the heat of a hundred candles that surrounded Elisa's bed. The room smelled of thick, sweet decay. Annie set her bucket on the floor and stifled a sob of disgust. Elisa lay on her back, blood sweating from every pore in her body. Her hair fanned out over the single pillow in ragged tangles of pink and white, the sheet around her stained almost black, a gruesome sleeping beauty awaiting her prince.

With the sight and smell of her decay came the plink-plink sound of blood dripping from the bed. Puddles had formed on the floor beneath and some had seeped between the wooden slats.

Annie pressed a finger to the pulse on Elisa's neck and felt the dull beat of her sister's heart. Elisa's mouth dropped open. She moaned gently. Beneath red lids, her eyes darted back and forth.

Annie took clean cloths from the bedside table, dipped one in ice water and began clearing the blood from Elisa's face, working gently out from her eyes.

"There, isn't that better?" She whispered.

Elisa's skin was a thin veil for her skull, her arms and legs wasted down to a skeletal nothing. But, while all else was bone wrapped in bleeding skin, her stomach bulged obscenely. The tight flesh there glistened in the candlelight. Annie rinsed a cloth and ran it slowly over the

mound. She closed her eyes when something kicked beneath her fingers, thought of autumn leaves swirling about a dark figure and laughter cold as ice and that voice that clawed her soul.

It took her an hour to clean away the blood. For that moment, Elisa looked like a freshly laid out corpse. When she had finished, Annie bundled up the blood soaked sheets and cloths and took them down to the cellar. There she stoked the burner and incinerated the linen, the gloves and her apron. She had tried cleaning the sheets in the past but the smell of blood clung to them, filling the house with Elisa's sin, ingrained in the walls and carpet, heated up by the candles until it became unbearable.

It was better to burn everything.

She went back to the kitchen, scrubbed her hands with carbolic, washed her face in the sink and drank three more mugs of water without quenching her thirst. Beyond the window, trees rustled as the sea breeze swirled around the large garden. The lawn needed cutting. When had she last cut it? Spring? Yes, spring. She and Elisa had spent a day in the garden. She stared beyond the lawn to a thick swathe of trees. Was He out there? Waiting? Hiding in the dark places beyond the garden. Waiting for his latest gift.

Annie opened the back door. The breeze was cool across her face. Shadows danced ahead of her. She could smell rain in the air. She shivered and thought of a cold, wet day, another lifetime ago. Another world. Before she could help it, she was thinking again about the day Filip died.

There was no reason for his death. There wasn't a reason to most things at that time. The world had gone mad. She had been talking to Mrs Abraham, asking if she knew anyone with some flour (she wanted to bake a cake for Elisa's sixteenth). Filip was across the street, chasing some other kids and having a fine old game. They were all laughing. The two soldiers were walking down the street and everyone was minding their own business. But Filip was in a world of his own and he knocked into one of the soldiers. There wasn't much of a commotion. No harsh words. Filip bowed a little and apologised.

The soldier smiled and then drew his pistol and shot Filip twice in the chest.

It shocked the street into stillness. The soldiers carried on, chatting, as if they were the only animated figures in a photograph. There were about fifteen other people on the street and none of them moved. Not even the kids.

Then, as the soldiers disappeared round a corner, He came down the street. The Devil walked across the mud, she remembered, while all of them were trying hard not to look at Filip. He walked right up to the body and looked down at it. Then he kicked it hard. Filip rolled onto his black, dead eyes staring up at the grey sky.

Annie slammed the back door shut and locked it.

I'm not going to think about you. I'm not!

A scream ripped through the house. Annie closed her eyes, brought her fists to her mouth and whispered for someone to help her. She was not ashamed of the fear – god forbid that she would ever become so desensitised that she could not be afraid.

That night in a Warsaw slum, when the soldiers were searching the tenements, she remembered pressing a towel to Elisa's bloody face, almost suffocating her, to keep her quiet. The fear then nearly got the better of her. She could hear the guttural sounds of those soldiers in the rustle of the trees outside Far Reach. They wanted to take all the young, fit people away to another place. They had hidden themselves under blankets in the attic, listening to the screams of others who were not so fortunate.

Elisa was carrying His first child.

Annie turned away from the window and went back to the attic room. The veins in her legs ached as she climbed the stairs and her shoulders carried the weight of sixty years of sin and she decided if she stopped now, not even His presence on the stairs would get her moving.

Elisa had bled again. Her eyes were wide, lips trembling, fingers raised to her bloody face.

"Hush now," said Annie. She pressed against her sister's shoulder, pushing her back onto the pillow. Elisa grabbed her hand then. Candlelight shimmered in her bloody eyes, reflecting a pain that filled every cell of her body. Her stomach rippled. She screamed again and squeezed Annie's hand with a strength beyond her feeble appearance.

"It's okay," Annie whispered. "It's okay."

But she wasn't sure.

Elisa never used to bleed so much. It never used to give her so much pain. Perhaps this was her punishment at last. Annie's too. What would she do without her sister? Perhaps this was the end. Perhaps she would die and Annie would be alone and maybe then she would have the courage to set fire to this damned place.

Elisa moaned. Her back arched.

Fluid oozed between her legs, thick and dark as treacle, pooling around her buttocks. Annie had to be strong now. Elisa needed her. There were times when she should have run, kept on going until Grevin and Far Reach were on the other side of the world. But she had promised Elisa in Warsaw that she would never leave her. It was the only promise she had ever really kept.

There was a hideous squelch as a limb twisted out from between Elisa's thighs. Fingers unfurled, grabbing at the air. To Annie it looked like a gnarled piece of wood. She gagged on the sour smell which accompanied this, stepping back as the child forced its way through. A dome of grey pushed apart her sisters' thighs, dark fluid oiling its escape. Now, Annie could make out an ear; an eye, half open and glistening with life. A tiny crooked nose came next and there the child rested, lodged between the comfort of Elisa's womb and the outside world.

Then the hand curled up as if the child was making a conscious effort to free itself. Annie reached out, sobbing, then pulled her arms close to her chest. She couldn't bring herself to touch it. The hand hooked down and dug into the bed, muscles knotting on its forearm. The head slid out and now she could see two eyes. A mouth gaped at her. Air exploded over the child's wet lips and, to this awesome music, it slipped from Elisa's body and onto the bed, legs wrapped in a thick, grey umbilical cord.

Elisa's stomach contracted powerfully. A flood of black fluid gushed out around the child and then another set of fingers stretched out between her legs. A second child. Annie gasped.

Twins. My God, twins!

The first child's head jerked. The one good eye settled on her. Its fingers stretched out towards her. The body trembled and then its arm dropped as a rattle of breath came from its lungs. The child's head settled softly onto the bed and it was still as its sister emerged from the darkness into the candlelight.

Annie took a pair of scissors from the bedside table. She cut the umbilical cords and wrapped the children in towels and took them down the stairs into the living room. She cleaned them, placed them in a crib and cried for their mortal souls. Outside, the darkness settled and for once Annie said a true prayer.

# The Rain

Thought you might have had enough of rants, so here's some fiction to keep you happy. This is a chapter from the novel I'm working on at the moment. It's called Clubland.

The rain came.

It had been that way for a few years now. It would rain. Hard. And places would flood and the soil would become heavy and water would run down the streets and people would make jokes about building an ark.

It rained because people had messed up the ozone layer or they hadn't recycled their plastic trays or empty bottles or they had driven their cars too much. The ice caps melted and caused the sea levels to rise and that had done something to the sea currents and that had slowed the world down and made the clouds gather. There was nothing to be done.

Except to let it rain.

Kenton Grange's main thoroughfare sloped down towards the coast thirty miles away, so mostly the water ran straight through the high street and into the Deel River which was far enough away from the main housing that they didn't even consider re-enforcing its banks.

According to town planner Carl Benson, the only problem they were likely to have was with the hill that led up to the old Gillenhall place but no one took that too seriously.

Not until it rained five days solid. Five inches a day, every day, enough to start getting people worried. Enough to get Benson worried.

He rolled onto his side early Sunday morning and listened to the rain across the window. It soaked the air in his bedroom. It even made his skin feel damp. He reckoned a week of bright sunshine wouldn't dry out the town, or him. The grey sky hung there like a big sponge, dripping down on the town and driving everyone slowly mad. It would end up like Waterworld, that film with Kevin Costner where everyone went round in boats and scavenged for food.

Maggie was propped on her pillows, a book in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She had been sat there reading and smoking since six o'clock that morning.

"Do you have to do that?"

She looked at him over her glasses. Her nightdress was tipped off her shoulder and one veined breast was hanging out. "Do what?"

"Smoke in bed."

"You used to."

"I gave up."

"More fool you." She went back to her book and he disentangled his legs from the duvet and pressed his feet to the carpet. He breathed in the damp air, rubbed the back of his head and

farted. Maggie called him a pig. He said, if she could smoke in bed, he could at least release the gas in his bowels. It was only fair.

As he made his morning cup of tea, he said loud enough for Maggie to hear: "Think I might take a walk up to Gillenhall."

"It's Sunday."

"Yes, it's Sunday."

"And it's still raining."

He slurped his tea and went back into the bedroom. Looked out the window at the slope of the town below the window of their flat. There were a few cars and their taillights glowed and it seemed a little dreamy. The tar glimmered and looked like a grey river, snaking down between the shops and houses.

"You want to go and get stuck in the mud, don't call me for help." Maggie turned another page of her book and lit another cigarette just to piss him off. She was reading a thriller. She got through a book every couple of days. All she seemed to do was read and smoke and he wondered if she had found the perfect existence.

Benson rubbed his stomach. The acid was up in his gut. That was always a bad sign. Not anything to do with the bottle of red he threw down last night while he bitched about the town council, or the bacon and egg sandwich on white he had later in the evening. The acid was down to the weather.

"You want me to check your blood pressure?" Asked Maggie.

"Why would I want you to do that?"

"You're face is a bit flushed and you seem agitated."

"Go back to your book."

He finished his tea, set the cup on the windowsill and started to get dressed. He pulled on old underpants and a pair of jeans, tugged a t-shirt and then a sweater over his head and went in search of his boots.

When he got outside, dragging on his gortex rain coat and pulling up the hood, there was a blue Ford parked crooked across one of the spaces out front. There was someone slumped against the driver's window. Benson snorted phlegm into the back of his throat and spat it out onto the wet ground. He rapped his knuckles against the window. The body didn't move so he rapped louder.

Finally, the head twisted and a pair of rain distorted eyes stared at him. There was a whirr as the window came down.

"What the fuck you want?"

"Christ Jack, you look a mess."

"Did I ask your opinion?" There was an empty half bottle of Russian Vodka on the passenger seat next to Jack May.



Benson smiled. "Guess you had a tough night. Not working I hope."

"You got anything to say or can I close this window?"

"Just heading up to Gillenhall, myself."

"Why would that interest me?" The window of May's blue Ford whirred and shut him off from the world.

Rain clattered on Benson's hood. "No helping some people," he said and started walking towards the road that led to Gillenhall. Before he'd got a hundred yards, he heard May's car start up and move at speed down the main road into town.

A mile up, Benson turned onto the dirt track that led to Gillenhall, making his way through muddy ridges as the rain grew heavier. Drops clattered on his hood and hypnotised him. He passed old Lisa Preston, walking her dog. The Labrador was thick with mud but happy as hell. Lisa's arthritic limbs worked in strange unison. She looked like a robot learning how to walk for the first time.

"They say it's going to stop soon," she shouted.

"You shouldn't be coming up here Lisa."

"Rain or shine," she chuckled as she moved past him. "What else would I do?"

The trees on the path rattled and Benson tried to remember Septembers when there were still leaves on the branches and the sun was shining. He leaned into the muddy slope and dug his hands into his pockets and thought of cigarettes.

The remains of Gillenhall House lay like broken teeth on top of the hill. The place had been a halfway house for orphans before one of its less stable inmates decided to set a fire about ten years ago. Benson watched the flames from the safety of his two bedroom flat and thought: Thank god for that. Three people died and that made him feel guilty. But, along with most other residents in the town, he didn't miss it. Gillenhall had been nothing but trouble.

He reached the ruins and stood looking down at the town, hands on hips. The grass was bubbling and there was a lot of surface water and a few cracks where the top soil looked to be giving way.

They needed to do some remedial work here. The ground was saturated. Probably wouldn't be a big slide but enough to reach the first bunch of houses down below. Maybe even worse. He didn't want that on his conscience.

He checked the other side of the ruins, gazing down at the river which was roaring angrily towards the sea some five miles away. He thought about cigarettes some more. He'd been using a hypnosis tape and for a couple of days it seemed to work fine but now he was really beginning to get withdrawal pangs.

When he got back to the flat, he shirked off the coat and pulled off his trousers. He stood by the kitchen window as he dialled Vern Kent and told him he thought there was a problem with Gillenhall.

"Shit, Carl, it's Sunday."

“Does that make a difference?”

“I’ll see if I can get someone up there to have a look.”

“You do that.”

Maggie was still in bed, getting to the end of her book and smoking another cigarette. She looked at his white, bandy legs and frowned. “Make me a cup of tea Carl.”

He grunted and asked if she had a spare cigarette. She smiled and tossed the packet to him. Four weeks of denying himself. He stood at the kitchen window drawing the smoke into his lungs. It felt good.

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A mile down the road, someone else was thinking about Gillenhall.

Father James Eustace came down to the church early to practice his Sunday sermon, ducking in out of the rain and leaving a trail of watery footprints down the aisle. His sermon was going to ask the question whether a just God would have caused the Flood. It seemed apt to bring it up, and that would be his opening joke, with a spell of rain as torrential as this.

He knelt at one of the pews to begin with and bowed his head to say a prayer and the lights flickered around him and for some reason he started thinking about Gillenhall. It passed over him like a shadow and he couldn’t get rid of it. When his housekeeper, Janice, brought his morning tea, she found him with tears flowing down his wrinkled face. He took out a handkerchief and wiped his eyes and blew his nose.

Janice had been with him most of his priestly life, for so long in fact that they were like a married couple. She knew all about Gillenhall.

“Oh that terrible fire.” She shook her head and clasped her hands to her chest.

“No, not that. I was thinking about Emily Mulholland.”

“My word, whatever made you think of her?”

“I’m not sure.” He stared up at the stained glass window of the church, eyes rheumy as a corpses. “I often think of her. What became of her.”

Janice started walking towards the door and then stopped. “Some people don’t deserve your prayers, Father,” she said.

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Two hours later, the slope below Gillenhall gave way.

Benson got to it by midday and was glad that it wasn’t the major slide he’d feared. Huge lumps of red clay were mixed in with the dark top soil and he guessed it was the clay that had stopped a major catastrophe because it was denser and had absorbed less of the water.

By two, there were trucks and men all over the place, most of them angry because it was Sunday and they weren’t supposed to be working. No one seemed to have much of an idea how to shore up the slope. They pushed mounds of dirt back with a digger and brought in

heavy metal girders and that took a few hours but there were plenty of people standing around shaking their heads and saying it wouldn't hold.

An inspector came to have a look and see if they would have to evacuate any of the houses. He ambled round with a clipboard and then decided no one was in imminent danger.

Then, near dark, someone spotted the body and everyone stopped thinking about the rain.

# The Rules of Gruesome

Fella says to me.

Why don't you find a job.

I ask: What makes you think this ain't hard work?

Well, he just about pisses himself laughing. He says: All you do is sit around with your hand out.

That takes a lot of work, I can tell you.

He's one of those suit types. Works in the local offices and thinks he knows everything about everything and then some. The kind of guy you might be tricked into going for a drink with once but not twice on the bounce. He probably has a wife who hates him and a kid he hates. A boss he dreams of stabbing to death. I can see the dread in his eyes. The inkling that what he knows might be totally wrong.

I always figured that's what having a job does to a guy. I seen plenty over the years. Can't say I feel sorry for any of them. Like the guy says: You make your own choices in life.

I could tell him I'm the only true free individual here but he won't listen to me. It's not true anyway. I learnt a long way back there's no such thing as free. I can make-believe if I want. I try to – it saves a lot of hassle and helps pass the day without slitting my wrists.

I stake out St Anne's Square. It's a good spot though I have to fight for it. And I mean fight. There's plenty of competition in the homeless quarter. Always some nut who doesn't like his spot and wants yours. Always some nut who wants something more out of life. But I like this spot. And it's mine.

There's a couple of burger places over in the corner and the bars are close by, up on Deansgate most of them, and when the revellers have had enough and they're drunk enough to part with their loose change, a fair few come here.

See the girls over there? The one's giggling and stumbling about in their short skirts. They ain't much use for a handout. Most don't have that much money when they get here and they're not disposed to giving it to someone like me. Women, generally, have less sympathy than men.

Don't know why that is.

You'd think it was the other way round. I guess girls like the pack leader. They don't have much truck with the fallen.

Besides, I stink. Even I know that.

Guys will toss a few coins if they're with a girl. It's a way of impressing.

I usually park myself outside MacDondalds and look sorry for myself. You have to look hungry in this trade – like you've been sucking on plaster for the last few days. Doesn't pay to be drunk either, no matter how much you want to take the old hooch. If you're drunk they think

you're having a good time and they won't give you anything. They think you're just going to take the money they give you and buy some booze.

You got to sit there and look sorry and sober. See, hard work. All the time.

I used to have a dog but someone ran off with it. Dogs is good. They get you at least twenty percent more. When it's cold, it's a bitch but you get more money too. The best combination is a dog and an icy day. When it's hot, it seems like the rest of the world is out enjoying itself more than you. You don't get nothing when the sun's out except a glimpse of some girls panties as she passes by.

I'll watch the kids making out. There's the odd fight. Sometimes you get a guy weeping his heart out for some reason or other. Sometimes they pick on me to unload their woes, maybe because I'm not a real person. What I think doesn't matter. Had one guy tell me how he'd gone bust and was thinking about doing a Reggie Perrin. Don't know what he expected me to do about it.

It's a real soap opera out here and I'm not sure what would make some of these people happy. They come to Clubland, drink themselves into a stupor and wake up in a daze wondering what happened to the last twenty-four hours.

Me, a cigarette and a coffee and I'm made for the day. Simple pleasures you see. That's what I like about this life. I don't have a bank account or a mortgage to worry on. Don't have friends to bother me. Just need a few pennies to last a day or two. With the cold and hard ground, it'll kill me quicker than a comfortable life but, hell, it don't matter when you pass from this world. That's what I say.

You like Clubland? You do?

You can hear its beat all over the city. Different music. People stomping like maniacs. I'll stay up till three or four in the morning sometimes but even when you sleep you can feel it vibrating through your bones. The party in clubland goes on 24/7 and I don't have much of a clue where these people all come from. All shapes and sizes too. All ages. Like it's some religious thing and they have to come to worship.

They come and take it to excess. Blows their minds. Police and ambulances are kept busy.

Somebody must be making money out of it I suppose. This guy I knew liked to tell me that over a million come through these streets in a week. Sometimes two. That's a lot of people looking for something. You have to think, if you were of a philosophical mind, that this was all we were about as a race.

About two in the morning, a few days ago, I was sitting here, beginning to nod off because the tips were slow and the action was nothing great. It weren't too hot or too cold and I was feeling a little weary.

There was a group across the square pushing at each other and laughing and joking and there was a couple eating each other out over by the church and music was busting down the street and people were pretty high. Enjoying themselves in the only way Clubland allows.

Then this guy comes staggering in from the Market Street end. Clothes in tatters, his face all beat up. He walks kind of hunched with palms pulling the air in front of him. Like he's trying to

paddle down the street. Eyes drug wide. There's something dark on the remains of his shirt and I know it's blood. You don't sit round here all this time and not know blood.

The hair on his head is all in tufts and his skull is pocked with cuts. As he passes by, he turns to look at me, doesn't really see, and there's this big hole in his cheek and blood pouring down his neck. He has one shoe on, other foot just covered by a sock, hanging half off and more blood's dripping off his fingers.

This guy's a mess.

Well he zigzags his way over to the fountain and sits down. Eyes all blazing and blood beginning to pool around his feet. The boy has been stabbed a few times. In another life I'd have got up and seen he was alright. But I don't do that now. I don't get involved. Think I already said that. But it's worth repeating.

No point getting involved.

He sits there a while and the usual party people mill past and ignor him. The blood pool gets bigger and he becomes kind of still. Not unusual for an injured man to lie in the street and for people to step over him in Clubland. It's like they just don't see him. A fellow vagrant of mine, Petie Walsh, he lay in the street two days till someone kicked him to see if he was alive.

Anyway, these couple of uniforms come strolling by and stop and look at him and they talk for a while. It's like they're trying to decide whether this guy's worth helping or not. Do they arrest him or send for an ambulance? I hear the injured man laugh and then I hear one of the uniforms ask what his name is.

Jonny Heston.

He shouts it so the whole square can hear and the uniforms take a step back and one of them gets on the radio because this guy looks like he's ready to get up suddenly and bust a hole in the world.

Half his teeth are missing, guess someone must have knocked them out while they were stabbing him. He gets a bit more animated and one of the uniforms tries the soothing approach but that doesn't work much. Nothing with this guy is going to work much. He's cracked.

He starts asking:

You know the rules of gruesome?

And he keeps on asking it until the van turns up and they cart him away. And he's still saying it and laughing when they slam the door and drive off. The pool of blood is all that's left and the foot prints leading to where the van took off. The rain'll wash that away eventually.

It's as he's walking away I start thinking that I seen him somewhere else. Standing more erect and a little crazy even when he wasn't covered in blood. Not crazy in the sense that he said anything strange. Crazy in the way he stood and the way he acted. Jonny Heston. He was hanging around a few nights ago. Picking on the girls and generally pissing them off.

I'll keep the name in my head for a while. Till something else comes along and pushes him out the way. That's the least I can do.

People like that get swallowed into the Clubland night sooner or later.

Clubland parties hard and doesn't care much about the millions who pass through these streets. It's just the way things are. I like to think Clubland will swallow me one day. There'll just be the grey stain on the white wall that I've leant against forever and no one will know or care how it got there.

These are the rules of gruesome.

Ain't that the truth

# FIVE DAYS

## DAY ONE

Mike awoke to the sound of Evie making breakfast downstairs. He rolled over with a tired groan and squinted at the clock on the bedside table. The digital red numbers told him that it was 05.37. She was getting earlier.

He fumbled for the lamp switch by his bedside table and blinked at the light that engulfed the previously pitch black room. He sat up slowly and rubbed his eyes. There was a loud clatter of pans from below. The kitchen was directly beneath their bedroom and a weird smell was wafting up. He sniffed and wrinkled his nose at the scent that was both spicy and sweet. He wondered what strange concoction she was making this morning. Her side of the bed was cold so she had been down there a while.

He wearily got out of bed and padded across to the door to retrieve his dressing gown. The new oatmeal-coloured carpet was still springy under his toes. They had decorated the house a month ago in preparation. There were only a few finishing touches left now.

Mike shrugged on the black gown and tied the belt around his waist. He walked barefoot into the hallway and down the narrow stairs. He still couldn't get used to having an upstairs. They had only recently upgraded from a one bedroom flat to a modest two bedroom terraced house with a little garden out the back.

He followed the strange smell to the kitchen and leant against the doorframe. Evie had her back to him and she was fussing with something on the counter.

'Morning.' His voice was rusty with sleep.

She turned to greet him with a sheepish smile on her face. 'Sorry, did I wake you?'

His eyes drifted down to her protruding stomach, which was straining against her own white dressing gown. He still couldn't believe that in less than two months he was going to be a father. Evie's bump had grown immensely in the last couple of weeks.

He looked back up at his fiancée's face. Her eyes were shining and she had a smear of batter on her cheek. Her short blond hair hadn't been brushed yet and was sticking out in clumps. They had planned to get married next year, just before they both turned thirty, but that had been put on hold for now with the imminent arrival.

'So what's on the menu today?' He asked, trying to suppress a teasing smile.

Evie bit her lip and mumbled something towards the floor.

'Sorry, what was that?' He raised his eyebrows slightly.

'Waffles with peri peri sauce.' She repeated louder.

Mike burst out laughing and she threw a tea towel at him.

'I can't help it!' She protested 'I can't control the cravings.'



He walked over and kissed the top of her head. 'If it's ok with you, I'll make my own breakfast today.'

She took her bizarre meal to the living room to watch the morning news while he made some toast and a cup of coffee. He usually found the first few sips bitter but today he couldn't seem to taste anything. He chewed his toast slowly but there was no flavour. Maybe he was coming down with a cold.

Mike showered and put on a crisp blue shirt, grey trousers and a navy tie. He glanced at himself in the mirror on the wardrobe door. His brown hair was still a bit damp and he was in need of a trim but he was clean-shaven and dressed smartly. He looked closer at his hazel eyes; pretty soon they would be blood shot every morning from a lack of sleep.

He manoeuvred into a grey jacket that matched his trousers and picked up his black briefcase from the floor. He would be early for work but it couldn't hurt. They were going to give him a few weeks of paternity leave when the baby arrived.

He left Evie curled up on the sofa with her now empty plate and stepped out in the cool morning. It was early April and there was a thin layer of fog in the air. He opened the door to his blue Ford estate car and turned on the heater. The drive to work only took thirty minutes and his mind drifted as he navigated the quiet roads.

It was Thursday and they had a lot planned for the weekend. He had to finish the nursery, there were drinks for a friend's birthday and a family roast. Maybe he could enjoy a few beers with the football on Sunday afternoon. There weren't many weekends of peace left.

Mike parked in his usual spot and walked towards the building he'd worked in for the last four years. He felt his mobile vibrating in his pocket as he neared the entrance.

'Michael Faraday.' He answered on the third ring.

'Mike... it's Pete.' Came the quiet voice among a background of traffic.

Peter Wooten was one of his work colleagues, who'd been with the company for a few years longer. They were both architects and were consulting on a couple of projects together.

'Hi Pete, how's it going?'

'Crap. I've blown a tyre on the motorway and I've got to wait for the AA.' Pete's voice faded fast as a large truck steamed past. 'Can you cover my 9 o'clock meeting about the new development? I'll be stuck here a while.'

'No problem. Stay somewhere safe and I'll see you when you're in.' Mike hung up the phone and sighed.

He already had a busy morning and could do without extra meetings. He swiped his pass at the double doors and took the stairs to the third floor. The office was fairly quiet this early and he sat down to tackle his mountain of work.

The day passed in a blur. Pete hadn't arrived until 11am and by then Mike had lots of his own work to catch up on. There was a delivery issue with one of their suppliers, a problem client wanted to alter some plans and he had several meetings.

It wasn't until Mike arrived home famished at 7pm that he realised he'd barely eaten all day. He opened the front door and heard women's laughter. Evie was a hairdresser and he'd forgotten she had one of her regular clients round this evening.

He wandered through the kitchen and poked his head into the small dining room.

'Evening.' He greeted them.

Evie gave him a smile and paused halfway through folding a piece of foil. The woman in the chair in front of her was called Claire and she was wearing a black robe and had hair sticking up all over the place with dozens of foil strips. She looked like a metallic medusa and he pondered for the umpteenth time why women put themselves through this every few months to have slightly different coloured hair.

'Hi Mike!' Claire grinned. 'Evie's getting so big, bet you can't wait to be a dad!'

He chatted politely for a couple of minutes before the growling in his stomach was too much and he excused himself to get some dinner.

'There's lasagne in the fridge, just reheat it.' Evie called after him.

His favourite. He eagerly took the plate from the fridge and dished himself a large portion. His mouth watered at the smell wafting out of the microwave as it heated. When the food was hot enough he added some salad to the plate and took his dinner through to the front room.

He sank into the comfy, beige leather sofa and lifted a steaming forkful to his mouth. After several chews he swallowed and frowned. He couldn't seem to taste anything. He waited until the lasagne has cooled a little and had another large bite. Nothing. Evie always made it with a bit of a chilli kick and extra cheese but he wasn't getting any flavour at all. He could have been eating soggy cardboard.

He tried to think back to what he'd eaten over the course of the day. He remembered not being able to taste the toast at breakfast. There had been a hasty ham sandwich for lunch at his desk but he'd been too distracted with paperwork to recall any flavour. Then just cups of tea but he usually drank those scalding and couldn't detect much with a burnt tongue.

He ate the rest of the lasagne because he was still hungry but the enjoyment was gone. He flicked the TV over to a film channel and settled back, assuring himself that his taste buds would be back to normal tomorrow.

## **DAY TWO**

Mike sat up and glanced at the clock on Evie's bedside table. 06:02. Her side of the bed was empty again and he heard the faint sound of running water downstairs. It was breakfast craving time again.

He swung his legs out of bed and sniffed. He couldn't smell anything cooking. Maybe she was having a weird, cold breakfast today. He stood up and collected his dressing gown from the back of the door.

It was Friday, thank god for that. This week had felt like an eternity and he had another manic day ahead. He stretched as he walked downstairs and decided he deserved a long lay in tomorrow before he carried on with the nursery.

Evie came out of the kitchen as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

'I'm sorry.' She held her hands out. 'I know it smells really bad! I burnt the bacon and had to open all the windows before the smoke alarm kicked in.'

He stopped, puzzled. 'I can't smell anything.'

'What? It stinks!' She replied confused.

He sniffed hard. There was nothing. He passed Evie and went to the kitchen. The charcoaled bacon was sitting on a baking tray on top of the oven. He bent down until his nose was millimetres from a particularly singed rasher and breathed in deeply.

'Well?' Evie asked from behind him.

He turned around bewildered. 'Nope, can't smell a thing.'

She came over and put a hand to his forehead. 'Maybe you're coming down with something.'

'I guess. I couldn't seem to taste anything yesterday. My nose doesn't feel bunged up yet but I could have the start of a cold.'

'Maybe you should stay home today?'

He gave a short laugh and shook his head. 'No chance, we're so busy I'd have to be dying to phone in sick. Besides I feel perfectly fine.'

'You've been under a lot of stress the last couple of weeks.' She looked up at him concerned. 'You should take it easier today and over the weekend.'

'Ok.' He agreed half-heartedly.

He had a cup of tasteless tea and went back upstairs to get ready.

Perhaps Evie was right and he was stressed. That could bring on an illness and he had been pretty tired over the last week. His body was run down and telling him so.

He went to work vowing that he would have that lay in tomorrow and get some decent rest.

The office was already a hive of activity when he arrived. There was a crisis with the planning permission on one of their new developments and he had to dive right into his work. He'd almost forgotten about the morning's incident until he went on a site visit with two of the contractors just before lunch.

They took one of the company vans and Mike sat in the front passenger seat while David drove and Ash got in the back.

'Urgh, mate. I can taste that aftershave.' David coughed, looking in the rear-view mirror.

Ash laughed. 'Sorry, got a bit carried away! Thought that girl from accounts might be there.'

Mike smiled weakly. He couldn't smell a thing in the confined space.

David glanced across at him. 'Crack open your window and let some air in. It smells like something my teenage son wears.'

'I like it.' Ash said defensively. 'What do you think Mike?'

'Urm... ' He started. 'I've got a bit of a cold and can't really smell it.'

'Lucky you!' David snorted 'I swear it's burning my nostrils.'

They carried on with the banter but Mike zoned out. There was a small niggle of worry in the pit of his stomach. He really didn't feel like he had a cold so why had his sense of smell and his taste gone? He hoped it wasn't the start of something serious. He couldn't afford to get ill right now.

When he got home that evening, he played it down. He told Evie he could faintly smell and taste now so she didn't worry. It was the last thing she needed. They sat down to a dinner of chicken curry with rice and he made some appreciative noises. In reality he could have been chewing on a warm sponge.

If he was still having problems after the weekend he would make a doctors appointment on Monday.

### **DAY THREE**

Mike rolled over and felt Evie's body next to him. He sleepily opened one eye and saw that it was nearly 8am. They were both having a lay in this morning. Evie stirred and snuggled closer to him. He put a hand on her prominent belly and tried to feel any movement. The baby had been kicking like crazy when they got in bed last night and she had blamed the spicy curry. He or she was quiet now.

He laid dozing and making plans for the nursery. It was decorated in neutral colours as they had both agreed that they wanted the sex of the baby to be a surprise until the birth. He had to finish putting the cot together and add some last little touches. He wanted it ready in good time.

Mike felt Evie nudge his arm suddenly and his eyes flickered open. She was gazing at him expectantly. He raised his eyebrows in a questioning look. Her mouth moved but no sound came out.

'What?' He asked.

Or thought he did. He didn't hear the word out loud. Was he still asleep?

Evie's lips moved soundlessly again and he recognised the words they formed.

'Are you ok?' She was saying.

He sat up quickly, feeling a wave of panic. He was definitely awake and he couldn't hear a thing. He listened hard. Usually there were background noises, cars on the road, water in the pipes, but everything was silent. He turned back to Evie with bulging eyes.

'I can't hear!' He cried out.

He felt the words leave his throat, his lips and tongue curling round them, but he had no idea if he actually said them out loud. Evie gripped his arm tightly, her face a mask of worry. He could see her mouth working again but she was speaking too fast for him to lip read anything.

He looked around wildly then snatched his mobile from the bedside table. He went to his inbox then typed out a brief message on the screen. He thrust the phone into Evie's hand.

'Something's wrong with my ears. You have to type me a message.'

Her eyes scanned the words then she tapped in a quick reply.

'Is there any sound at all?'

'Nothing. They must be completely blocked.' He spoke out loud.

'We need to get you to a doctor!'

Mike shook his head and saw the realisation dawn on her that it was Saturday.

'Hospital then.'

He nodded reluctantly in agreement. First his taste and smell, now his hearing, the illness he'd been hoping he didn't have was coming out. Maybe it was something viral that affected his sinuses or an inner ear infection.

Evie sprang out of bed and began to quickly get ready. There was a hospital twenty minutes away with an A and E department. Hopefully the wait wouldn't be too long and they could help him. Mike slowly got out of bed and threw on some blue jeans and a dark jumper. He felt numb inside. It was strange not to be able to hear anything at all. There wasn't even a light ringing sound or the rush of blood in his head. He gingerly touched his ears but there was no pain.

Evie was dressed in record time and gestured that she should drive them there. He shrugged meekly, he didn't have much choice, and he felt too confused to control a car. Just before they left the house, she ran back past him and got a pad and paper from the kitchen then she hurried him out the door.

The drive to the hospital seemed to take ages. Evie kept shooting worried glances at him and squeezing his arm. He stared out the window and wondered if maybe his eardrums had burst in the night for some unknown reason.

Evie explained to the receptionist in A & E why they were there while he stood bewildered next to her. He saw both their lips moving but was completely in the dark about what they were saying. The receptionist's eyes darted to him twice but her face remained expressionless. Evie tapped his arm and pointed to some empty seats at the back of the waiting area.

She went and got them cups of tea from the machine while he sat in his own soundless world. Looking at the people in the hospital was like watching an old silent film. People were hurrying in and out and gesturing to each other. Some had faces contorted with pain and various visible injuries but he couldn't hear their moans. He stared at the action and willed himself to hear again. The smell and taste were less of an issue but being temporarily deaf was alien to him.

Evie came back and handed him a steaming plastic cup. He drank his tea quickly, barely feeling the liquid scald his tongue. They waited for nearly an hour before Evie stood up

suddenly. She forgot that he couldn't hear his name being announced by a nurse at the desk. She beckoned for him to get up and he followed her and the nurse along a bland corridor.

They were shown into a small examination room and sat down by a bed. The nurse's jaw moved as she asked questions. Evie took out the pad and paper she had bought with her and scribbled furiously. She turned the page towards Mike.

'Nurse wants to know if you're dizzy or nauseous?' It read.

He shook his head and jotted a reply then turned the pad to face the nurse. He could speak the words but part of him couldn't comprehend not hearing what came out of his mouth. Like if he couldn't hear it then neither could they.

'No I feel ok. Just can't hear or smell.'

The nurse waggled a stethoscope and pointed at him. He understood that she wanted to examine him and he nodded. She was older than him and looked about forty. She had dark brown hair that was tied in a neat bun and large brown eyes. She was carrying a little extra weight, which gave her a cuddly appearance. She had warm hands through the surgical gloves.

She listened to his breathing and checked his mouth and throat. She looked at his eyes, pulling his bottom eyelids down and shining a light in them. Then she inspected his ears with a weird pointy instrument that reminded him of playing doctors with a plastic kit when he was a child.

She took his hands and pulled him up off the chair. She scrawled another message; she wanted him to close his eyes to test his balance. He did as he was told. He seemed to be quite steady on his feet so she motioned for him to sit back down. The nurse frowned and directed some more questions at Evie. Mike waited patiently, he had no doubt that they would find a reasonable explanation for this and cure him. Maybe in time for the football tomorrow afternoon.

Surprisingly the nurse got up and left the room suddenly. He glanced at Evie and raised his eyebrows. She gave him a tight-lipped smile in return; one that was no doubt meant to reassure him in some way but instead it sent a shiver of dread along his spine.

The nurse came back a couple of minutes later with a male doctor in tow. He performed the same check up routine as the nurse and Mike found his legs a lot shakier when he stood up for the balance test this time. He could feel a sense of panic starting to rise inside. Something was wrong. Something more serious than he anticipated.

The doctor and nurse conferred for a moment and then spoke to Evie at length. Finally she shrugged and began to write a long message on the pad for him. He snatched at it as soon as she lifted the pen from the page. His eyes skimmed rapidly over the words. The panic bubbled up a little more.

They wanted to keep him in for observation and run some tests. They wanted to check his blood and send him for an MRI scan. They wanted him to wait to see an ENT specialist on Monday morning. His body went cold as he read. An ear, nose and throat specialist? A brain

scan? That was extremely serious. He could feel everyone's eyes on him and he tried not to react too much. This much stress would not be good for the baby.

'No.' He said, with what he hoped was a strong voice but he couldn't hear otherwise. 'I want to go home tonight.'

Evie grabbed his arm tightly then wrote another note.

'But Mike they need to do tests! You have to stay here for a couple of days!'

He looked at the doctor and nurse. 'Will anything happen tomorrow?'

The nurse took the pad to reply. 'Probably not but we really would like to monitor you.'

He thought for a moment. He hated hospitals, always had. As a three year old he had fallen and cut his head open on a concrete block and been taken to hospital. They had given him seven stitches and made him stay overnight in case he had concussion. One of his earliest memories was lying in a bed on the children's ward in the dead of night, terrified. His mum was asleep on a camp bed next to him but he had lain awake thinking he could see shapes of monsters in the curtains around his bed. He could still imagine the awful, medical smell of the ward and the feeling of fear. He would rather sleep at home with Evie tonight if nothing else was going to happen until Monday.

'I'll have the tests today then come back on Monday morning for the specialist.' He finally said.

The nurse didn't look pleased but there wasn't much she could do if he wanted to leave after the tests. He hadn't even been admitted yet and could always discharge himself after. The doctor left the room and the nurse got most of his details from Evie. They used the pad when they needed to know anything from him. The nurse took two blood samples from him and bagged them to send to the lab.

He was then sent down for his scan. He'd never had an MRI scan before and an explanation on paper from the doctor didn't do it justice. Not being able to hear made it worse somehow. It felt like he was lying in a silent tomb for an eternity.

Eventually he felt himself being moved slowly out of the machine and he saw Evie waiting for him. Her face was pale and the strain of trying to hold her emotions together was showing. She kept rubbing subconsciously at her bump.

They went to the canteen for a while to wait for the results but neither of them could manage any food. They sat drinking weak tea and holding tightly onto each other's hands.

The blood tests came back normal and there was nothing of concern from the MRI. The nurse still wanted to keep him in for observation but he insisted on going home. He would feel more comfortable spending the night in his own bed and getting some decent sleep. They arranged for him to return to the hospital at 9am on Monday morning to see the ENT specialist as a priority case.

Evie drove them home, her fingers gripping the steering wheel so hard that her knuckles turned white. It was late afternoon when they got home and she made him go straight up to bed. Mike lay there reading and trying to do some research on his symptoms on the internet but there weren't any answers. Evie bought him some pasta for dinner, which he ate

unenthusiastically with his lack of taste. She got into bed with him and lay snuggled against his body until they both fell asleep. As he drifted off, he decided he had made the right decision by coming home.

## **DAY FOUR**

Mike opened his eyes in the dark room. He wondered if it was still the middle of the night. He turned over and looked for the familiar red glow of the clock numbers but they weren't there. He sleepily considered the idea that Evie had accidentally turned it off. He reached out his right arm but didn't encounter her body; she must already be up.

He groped down the side of the bed in the blackness for the switch to his lamp. He clicked the button but the lamp didn't come on. Maybe there had been a power cut? He sat up feeling more alert and looked around the room. He couldn't see the lighter area of the curtains or the usual faint glow under the crack of the door. There was only darkness, was he still dreaming?

Mike lifted his hands to his face and waved them around but there was no shadow. He checked to see if his eyes were actually open and succeeded in poking himself painfully in the pupil. He shot out of bed feeling that all too familiar panic.

He stumbled blindly across the room in the direction of the door but his right leg clipped the bed and he veered off course. Suddenly he felt completely confused. Which way was the door? He took half a step forward and struck his head on the wardrobe. He fell backwards in shock and landed awkwardly against the bed.

'Evie.' He choked out but he couldn't hear if the sound left his throat. His tongue felt numb and the moisture had been sucked out of his mouth. Dear god, he was blind.

'Evie!' He screamed as hard as he could.

He felt a tearing pain in his throat and knew it had been loud. He lay sprawled on the floor, too afraid to get up again. He prayed that this was just a nightmare. That he would wake up safely in bed in a minute with his eyesight returned to him.

A warm hand touched his shoulder and he jumped with a cry of surprise. The hand shook him roughly in panic. He reached out and felt Evie's arms then moved his hands up towards her face. His fingers found hot tears on her cheeks.

'Evie.' He whispered, hoping that she could hear him. 'We'll be ok.' He tried to reassure her.

Inside he was screaming. He'd never felt so scared and lost in his life. He couldn't see or hear. How was he going to communicate with people? How could he live?

'We need to go back to the hospital now.' He told her in a quivering voice. 'I seem to be having trouble seeing.'

It was an understatement; he could see nothing at all. The world was completely black.

They stayed on the floor for a little while. Evie lay sobbing against him trying to pull herself together. Eventually she tugged at his hands and he understood she wanted to help him get up. She led him a few steps then let go. He stood uncertain, looking around but seeing



nothing. Without feeling around he didn't have a clue where he was standing. If he was even still in the bedroom or if they were now in the hall.

Evie took hold of his arms again and she put something in his hand. It was soft and warm. A jumper. Of course, he would need to put on some clothes before they left the house. Together they awkwardly dressed him. He had to lean on her when he put on his jeans and she tied his trainers for him.

She sat him on the bed for a little while when she went to get herself dressed. Mike stared straight ahead. He could feel each blink of his eyelids but there was no contrast between them being open or closed. Finally they were both ready. Evie led him downstairs and guided him to the car. He waited with his arm on the roof while she presumably went back and locked up the house. He could feel the strong, cool wind on his face but couldn't hear the rush of it past his ears. Evie came back and opened his car door and he slid into the seat and fumbled for the seatbelt.

The vibrations of the car engine travelled up his legs as it purred to life. He felt Evie's soft lips kiss him gently on the cheek before she reversed down the drive. A lump formed in his throat and he swallowed it back. Now was not the time to get upset. They might get to the hospital and they'd give him some drugs that would make him better straightaway.

A little voice in his head whispered that it was wishful thinking but he firmly shut it out. Everything would be all right. It had to be. He couldn't comprehend the idea that it wouldn't, he didn't have the strength to cope with it.

What if you stay like this forever? The little voice crept through again.

It was suddenly difficult to catch his breath. His heart was pounding painfully in his chest and there was too much blood rushing to his head.

The movement of the car slowed and he knew Evie would be staring at him with her concerned expression. He forced himself to take slow, shallow breaths until the moment passed.

No more putting even more stress on her, he scolded himself.

He needed to get better by the time the baby arrived and having a panic attack wouldn't help anyone. He couldn't be selfish anymore now he had a family to think about. He calmed himself down and by the time they reached the hospital, he was ready for the numerous tests he anticipated would follow.

There was confusion from the moment they entered A & E. He knew when they went into the building because of the change in air temperature but that's all he was certain of. Evie had a firm grip on his arm when they walked in but then she let go. He felt other, stronger hands on his shoulders and he was manoeuvred into a sitting position. A waiting room chair he thought, until it started to move. No, a wheelchair. There was light air on his face for a while then the chair stopped. He didn't know who was pushing him or where he was now.

'Evie?' He whispered.

Her warm hands were immediately on his arm and he felt some comfort that she was near. The fact that he couldn't see what was going on made him more nervous. There was no way

to communicate with anyone, no chance of using the pad today. He could speak still and even write a note or type a text message on a phone's keypad without looking but no one could relay information back to him. All he had was touch. He prayed again that they would be able to cure him quickly.

His nerves were on edge and every poke and prod made him jump. His body was twisted and moved around; he felt fingers on his eyes, ears, nose and throat. Metallic tasting instruments were pushed in his mouth and there were some sharp jabs of needles in his arms. It felt like there were dozens of people examining him but it could only have been a couple. There was an enormous sense of claustrophobia. Like he was being smothered in a dark, silent room.

Eventually there was one final pat on his arm and he was left in peace for a while. He felt a small hand creep into his own and squeeze. Evie. She stroked his hair with her other hand and buried her face in his neck. He lifted his arms and held onto her tightly.

He didn't realise that he was crying until she brushed the tears away from his cheeks. He'd give anything to be able to see her right now or hear her voice. This was like torture. He reached out and found the bump of her belly. He caressed it gently, wondering if his son or daughter felt the same in there.

Something sharp touched his lips and he jolted slightly. It pushed into his mouth and his tongue went to investigate the alien object. It was long, round and plastic. A straw. He sucked thirstily, realising that he hadn't had anything to drink all day. The liquid that invaded his mouth was cool but tasted of nothing. It could have been water, juice or medicine for all he knew.

A little while later he was changed in to a hospital gown that felt papery to touch and put into bed. The pillows were hard and the bed covers scratchy, but he lay there silently. He closed his eyes, not that it made any difference.

Someone fussed with his left arm for a bit and he felt a slight sting. With his right hand he found that they had hooked him up to something. A machine or a drip? He couldn't feel that far along without risking a tumble from the bed.

Evie was beside him again with her warm, little hands. He curled his fingers around hers and whispered that he loved her. He drifted off into a silent, dreamless sleep.

## **DAY FIVE**

Mike lay in the blackness, not sure if he was awake or asleep. He opened his eyes but saw nothing. He heard nothing. He neither smelt nor tasted anything. He could feel... nothing.

He moved his hands along what must be the bed beneath him but there was no sensation under his fingertips. He could no longer feel the mattress along his back or the pillow behind his head. It was like he was floating.

Is this a dream? He thought.

There was no sign to show him that it wasn't. It was as if all his nerve endings had died and left him in an empty, black void. He tried to say Evie's name but he couldn't feel in his throat if

he actually said it. He twitched his arms but he no longer knew if she was there or not. He couldn't feel the warmth of her hand.

He tried to sit up but he was too disorientated and his body was too heavy. He only succeeded in jerking his shoulders. He turned his head but that confused him more. With no sensation he really could have been floating. Which way was up or down? Forward or back? Maybe he hadn't been trying to sit up at all, he'd been pushing his body down.

Was this a coma? Did they have him on some strong medication like morphine that was making him hallucinate? He couldn't even tell if he was still breathing.

This was a living nightmare. He was locked inside his own body. Was this permanent? His senses had all gone for now but maybe they would come back. If so, when?

He gasped for air in the void. It was like a vacuum and he was suffocating. Yet he carried on floating and his body carried on breathing. He was still alive.

This is worse than death, he thought. This is hell and I'm stuck here forever. Trapped.

Somewhere out there his beautiful fiancée was carrying his baby and he couldn't get back to them. Suddenly he was like lead and he was sinking rather than floating. A medicated sleep took hold of his body.

Mike awoke. He didn't know how much time had passed. If it was minutes later, or hours, or days, even weeks. How do you measure time in an eternity of nothing?

He was still deep in the black void, miles from his family. He kept waiting for something from his life to creep in. A faint sound. A fleck of light. A prickle in one fingertip. Anything.

He raged inside with anger stronger than anything he'd ever felt before. Why had this happened to him? What had he done to deserve this? Why could no one help him?

He wanted to scream and shout and hit things. Perhaps he did do all those things. It was hard to tell. Perception was altered in the void. He shut down again.

This time he woke up to a great sadness. His life was over and there was nothing left for him now. He would never see the face of his baby. Never know if it was a boy or girl. Evie would be a single mother and he'd be nothing to his child but a character in stories she told him or her. Maybe he'd still be here, like this, and the child would come to visit him. Maybe it was months later now and the child had already been born and was here to see him.

He didn't want that. For his family and friends to spend years hoping that he'd get better. Sitting by his bed. Praying that he could one day get back to how he was. No. It would be better for everyone if he were dead. If they could all move on with their lives.

He didn't know where his body was. A hospital ward? A private room? Or if anyone was there at that exact moment but he had to try. He had to tell them what he wanted. What he needed.

'My name is Michael Faraday.' He said soundlessly to ears he wasn't sure would even be there. 'Please... kill me.'

# Help With A Story

I was wide awake. Thoughts about writing the perfect horror story were running in my head like a thousand wolves at once. A stampede of thoughts, plots, characters, dashing in and out, choosing potential ideas as they ran past the wilderness of a mind of mine. The TV was on and it was on low volume. Watching reruns of the George Lopez show as I went back into the hoard of thoughts to write the perfect story.

THUMP!

I heard this noise and immediately sat up in my bed.

“What can it be?” I asked myself under my breath.

I tried to listen close but all I can hear is the steady hum from the fan blowing and George Lopez cracking jokes from the TV. I got up, crept to the door, and as I turned the knob, the door made a loud noise. I jumped back and let out a quick gasp. Goosebumps ran through my whole body. My facial hair seemed to sprout as if I were one of those damned chia pets. It was as if somebody on the other side of the door ran into it like a lineman.

I grabbed every bit of courage I could, picked up a golf club, and slowly opened the door. The hall was pitch black, I looked around and saw nothing but the surfaces of furniture that the moonlight painted a pale blue in the living room.

“What the hell was that?” I said to myself.

As I went to the bathroom, I heard my bedroom door slowly creak and then the door picked up crazy speed and slammed. BAM! So out of reaction, I got scared, ran into the bathroom and slammed the door. I switched on the light, looked around the bathroom, golf club clutched tightly, saw nothing, and turned my attention to the door. I put my ear on it, trying to hear any noise or movement but I didn't hear anything. I felt that there was an intruder or a maniac lurking in my home. I couldn't believe this was happening. Is it a person? Is it paranormal? Either way, I couldn't let this person win, so I came out the bathroom, slowly and towards the kitchen.

As I walked toward the kitchen, the only light I had was from the opened bathroom door. Well, at least I thought I did. The light went out...by its self. When that happened, I stood still and once again, felt like I was turning into a cha cha chia! Goose flesh decorated my skin, my heart rate went into overdrive, and I began to sweat immediately. I gathered up courage once again and speed walked my way into the kitchen, searching for the light. As I was doing this, I heard a very hoarse and quiet whisper call my name...this made me get so scared that I almost fell because I tripped over my feet just to get to the light switch. And as I reached for the light, something grabbed my hand.

Something cold, icy, big, and animal like. It grabbed my hand and turned the light on for me. It was a 6 foot something, demonic creature with white eyes, and an animal like body. Kind of reminded me of Frank The Bunny from Donnie Darko but more sinister and Jackal like. I dropped to the floor and the golf club went with me and loosened from my grip. Anxiety rushed in, a sever panic attack, but a mute one it seemed. I couldn't scream, I couldn't move, I

couldn't talk. I just stayed there, staring back at this evil entity and its dark, dull white eyes stared right back at me.

Suddenly, after staring me down, in a very hoarse, low, deep voice it said, "I heard you...heard you loud and clear...I know how desperate God's weak vessels can get in this shit hole of a world. Hell, I'm only here to help. I've helped lots of your favorite musicians, actors, actresses .. turned small town whores into world wide celebrities. All you have to give me is your light, your presence, your soul. I was also listening to your thoughts...ready to write the most horrific story anyone has ever wrote ?..."

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