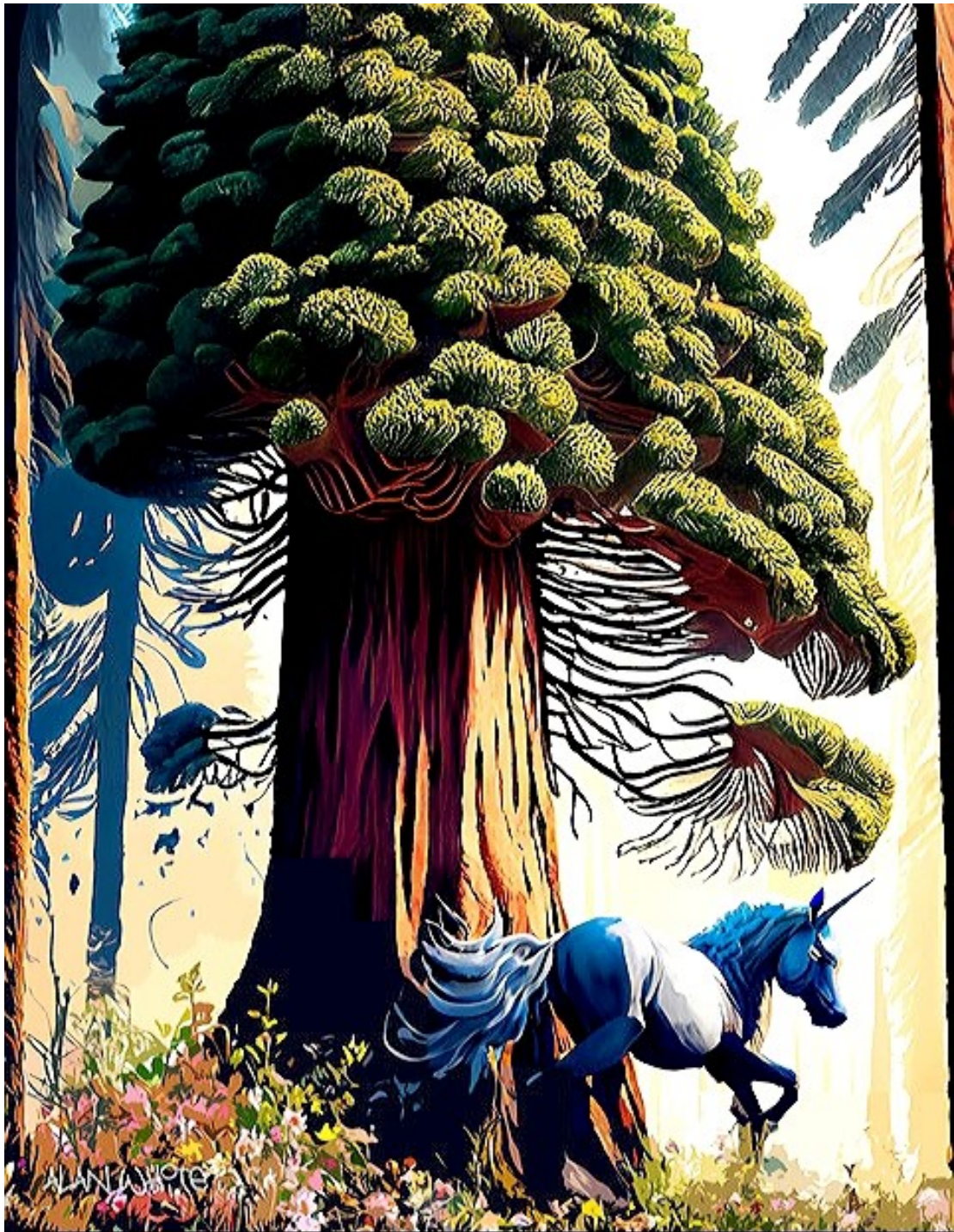


Eldritch Science



September 2025

Contents

Front Cover ... Unicorn Tree by Alan White

Back Cover ... Untitled by José Sanchez

Fiction

3 ... *If You Could Read My Mind* by Matias Travieso-Diaz

8 ... *The Necromancer* by Chris Bunton

26 ... *Are You Okay?* by Nicholas De Marino

27 ... *Frost Soldiers* by Krista Farmer

41 ... *The Valley of Eternity* by Nenad Pavlovic

65 ... *The Stafford Building* by Patrick S. Smith

Editorial

To make up for the short July issue, this one delivers an astounding 90 pages of content! In fact, I've delayed two of the stories that were submitted to me for the November issue to keep this one from getting out of hand (I have already reached out to the authors and let them know that November is guaranteed).

Matias Travieso-Diaz returns to us this month with his story *If You Could Read My Mind*, a reminder that machines do *exactly* what they are told, and nothing more or less. How beneficial the user experience is depends upon the user, of course.

What if the supposed villain isn't who you think he is? Suppose he's playing a more subtle game? Chris Bunton's *The Necromancer* explores this theme.

Of course, not all artificial intelligences are set upon the downfall of humankind. Nicholas De Marino's *Are You Okay?* features one who fulfills its function far better than might be expected.

The power of a child's imagination proves a dangerous thing in *Frost Soldiers* by Krista Farmer. I was tempted to save this one for the November or even January issue given the winter theme, but it had waited too long already.

Nenad Pavlovic's *The Valley of Eternity* demonstrates the consequences of taking a job abroad without knowing exactly what conditions you'll be working under.

Finally, *The Stafford Building* by Patrick S. Smith is a modern-ish take on the classic Southern Gothic style combined with a coming-of-age story. Or is it a coming of the ages? You decide.

(continued on page 90)

Eldritch Science

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If You Could Read My Mind

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*If you could read my mind, love
What a tale my thoughts could tell*
Gordon Lightfoot

Capture of the resistance messenger as he attempted to sneak across the border was considered at the time to be one of the greatest successes of the regime's intelligence network. The young man was leading a herd of goats across one of the mountain passes that separated the country from a neighboring, hostile nation. The border guards had looked at him with disinterest and had given only a cursory glance at the identification papers the boy presented. They had seen him, or someone as grubby looking like him, many times before. They had given a wave of the hand to the lad and had lifted the barrier that blocked access to the other country.

The goatherd was keeping stray goats in line with his crook and slowly moving on when one of the members of the immigration control office a hundred miles from the border,

who was routinely watching the border points through the office's TV monitors, noticed something incongruous about the goatherd's attire. While his worn flannel shirt and denim jeans were unremarkable and his insulated jacket was typical wear for the chilling weather of the heights, the kid's head was not covered by a hat or the usual knit beanie; instead, he sported a new-looking black beret, clearly discordant from the outfit he would have been expected to wear. The immigration officer shouted a direction through the video link at the occupants of the border station: "GRAB THAT MAN, QUICKLY!"

The border guards reacted instantly and sprinted across the border into enemy territory, waving their rifles up in the air. "YOU, STOP!!" they shouted. Instead of obeying, the goatherd dropped his crook and attempted to run away. His progress was, however, impeded by the goats, which were scrambling in all directions, and a moment later the hand of a guard closed roughly around his neck. He was turned around and propelled back home.

By the time these events took place, the Great Tribulation was well underway. The tyranny had assembled near complete records of all living citizens of the country and could identify the name, last known address, and party affiliation of just about everyone. The fingerprints and other data on the detained goat-herd identified him as Francisco Ortiz (also known as “Paco Ortiz”), a foreign student who had been an arts major at one of the country’s former liberal colleges. Paco had dropped out of sight a couple of years earlier and was expected to be a member of one of the resistance organizations that opposed the regime.

“Perhaps we’ll get lucky with this one” wondered aloud George Phillips, the senior intelligence official assigned to oversee Paco’s interrogation. “We know these rats have a burrow in the north edge of the country, but have not been able to locate it yet.”

“But Sir, these people seldom give away any information” grumbled one of his

deputies. “Even the water torture does not seem to work with them.”

Phillips gave a dismissive shrug. “Torture is so very twenty-century. We have better methods now, thanks to our foreign friends. We use magnetoencephalography to extract information from our prisoners.”

The assistant demurred. “But I thought the MEG equipment was only of limited application, bulky, and prohibitively expensive.”

“You are not in on the latest developments” chortled Phillips. “Our R&D teams have just come up with smaller, nearly portable decoding devices. The latest artificial intelligence hardware and software come in an easy to transport package that can be set up almost anywhere to decrypt a subject’s brain activity and decipher what he is thinking. All we need to do now is make him aware by voice or image of the matter of interest and he will summon the information in his mind, and then we will capture the information by reading his brain waves.”

The assistant knitted his brow as he concentrated. As the officer issued the command over and over, the assistant's expression turned to one of confusion. "I can't block it!" he acknowledged.

"See, your mind reacts automatically to external stimuli. You can close your mouth to refrain from speaking, but there is no way to shut your mind, particularly if the same input is fed repeatedly."

"Does it always work?" wondered the assistant.

"Most of the time. This refined AI can decode words and sentences from brain activity with surprising accuracy. The AI knows how to recognize specific features of language, both at the level of letters or syllables and at a broader level, such as a word or sentence. It can decipher almost immediately whatever the subject is thinking."

"So, there is no way one of these bastards can shield his thoughts from us."

"No. The resistance is done."

Paco was brought, tied upon a stretcher, into a brightly lit room, with several people wearing surgical masks began hovering around him. He had IV lines inserted in both arms and, although he could not turn his head to look, he could hear beeps indicating that he was being connected to monitoring devices. He also had a headphone set covering his ears.

One of the people tending to Paco inserted a small bag containing an orange liquid into one of the IVs. Drops of the fluid began coursing down the line and into his arm.

Paco experienced a burning sensation, and then no longer felt anything other than extreme relaxation. He passed out.

When he woke up again, Paco felt he was floating in a wonderful open space. A sultry voice from an unseen female then interrupted his reverie: "Hello, Paco. Are you feeling OK?"

“But that’s not possible” argued the assistant. “A non-cooperating subject can block the inquiry by resisting the pressure to think about it.”

“Let’s give it a try” replied Phillips. “I want you *not to think* about a pink elephant.”
“Why are we giving him sodium pentothal as part of the interrogation?” asked the assistant.
“I thought the AI would be able to read his thoughts to find the location of the rebels’ base.”

“It’s a belts and suspenders approach” replied Phillips. “The truth serum will reduce his higher-level brain functions so that he is less able to form complex thoughts, which are required to make up a lie. That way when we read his thoughts through the MEG device we will know he is telling the truth.”

“I’m tired, but otherwise I feel well.
How are you?”

The sultry voice replied: “Very well also, thanks for asking. I wonder, Paco, if you

would answer a couple of questions for me?

Pretty please?”

“Of course, madam, anything you ask.”

“You know those bad people who are always making trouble for the rest of us?”

“Yes. Yes. Very bad people” agreed Paco.

“I hear they have set up a secret camp in the mountains near the border. Do you know anything about that?”

“Yes, very bad people” repeated Paco. He had to stop for a moment, because he had a splitting headache. He then experienced a sudden coughing fit that lasted for a few seconds.

“Take it easy, Paco” replied the comforting female voice. “Relax.” Then she continued: “You were telling me about those bad people and their camp.”

“Yes, they are very bad people.”

“Yes, bad people. Do you know the location of their camp?”

“Location? What do you mean by location?”

“How does one get to that camp?”

“Ah. Well, I haven’t been there myself, but my friend Rudi has told me. Rudi is one of the officers working with our group. He says you are supposed to drive or ride on Route 189 until you hit Holy Moly Lake, then get on some road that runs by the north shore of the lake, halfway round the lake, and then turn northwest on a local unmarked road and start going up several miles, and when you hit another, smaller, dirt road you turn left. The camp is a couple of miles up that road.”

“Those are great directions, Paco. How come you know them so well?”

“We were getting trained to go there sometime, so they drilled us on them.”

“I see. Thank you.”

Paco did not mind repeating himself. “Rudi told us about the camp a couple of times. He said there is only one road that goes up the mountain from the lake shore. You can’t

miss it” he assured his unseen interlocutor volubly.

“See?” commented Phillips. “The AI transcription of Paco’s thoughts matches exactly what he said. I will request a full air raid on the camp. We’ll take them by surprise and fry all those bastards.”

“What are we going to do with Paco?”

“I guess we’ll let him go for the time being. He’s just a chump. He’ll figure out sooner or later that he has given his buddies away to be incinerated, and that will be enough punishment for him until we catch him again.”

They launched the raid that same night, three helicopters circling around the mountain, spewing laser guided projectiles and incendiary bombs that sucked the oxygen out of the air. Surveillance cameras onboard the choppers detected no survivors after the attack was over.

Phillips' court martial had to be conducted out of the public view, because disclosure of his error and its devastating consequences would have been a major embarrassment for the regime. The trial was conducted three days after the ill-fated raid that wiped out a secret government military installation that had been used to spy on the country's neighbors to the north and was laying the ground for a future invasion. Thirty-three government operatives died in the attack, but only their close relatives were informed of the deaths, with no details being provided.

By the day of the trial, Paco was at the resistance's base north of the border. He had received congratulations and thanks for his role in the destruction of the enemy's base. His response to the accolades had always been the same: "I only told them what they asked for." How he chose to interpret the questions he was asked during his interrogation would remain a matter of controversy among AI specialists for many years to come.

END

The Necromancer

by Chris Bunton

The Necromancer entered the King's bed chamber. He was surrounded by the armed guards who had escorted him there.

The room was large and as ornately decorated as any king's bed chamber should be. High ranking members of the court and family stood around crying. Some for real. Some only faking.

King Randall of the city-state of Creston was sprawled out on the bed. His face was contorted, with his tongue hanging out. His giant frame was naked, but someone had thrown a small towel over the royal jewels.

It was obvious that the king had not gone peacefully. The Necromancer, Darvak by name, began his work.

The wisemen of the court tried to watch as the necromancer moved. It irked them to have to pay this filthy man. It was money any court leader would love to have if he could learn the secrets.

Darvak stopped and turned.

"I need everyone to stand back. I am dealing with dangerous forces that could demand payment in souls if angered."

Darvak looked at the king's chambermaid. "Especially you my dear. The demons take great delight in defiling the flesh of beautiful maidens such as yourself."

The young lady blushed and backed away.

Darvak moved over to the king's massive bed. He started making some wavy motions and saying some magic words while secretly pulling the stopper out of a small bottle that he held near the king's nose as he hovered over the body hiding the bottle from view. Out of the small bottle, something that looked like ink slithered out and up the king's nose without a trace.

Darvak took a step back and commanded the king's body. "Arise corpse, arise!"

The body on the bed jerked, and everyone in the room screamed or ran. The chambermaid fainted.

"Arise! I command you!" He felt ecstatic commanding the king.

The body rose up stiff like a board defying gravity without any bending of joints or effort. It just stood there naked on the bed.

"Tell us now! What happened to you?"

The voice was scratchy and did not come from moving lips but creaked out from a ball in the throat area.

"Murdered," the voice from the corpse rasped. Everyone was stunned, except Darvak.

"How?" Darvak asked.

The Chief Magician in his ornate robes stepped forward. "Who? Who did it?" he squawked at Darvak urgently.

The corpse answered. "Strangled"

"By who?" Darvak asked.

The corpse trembled and the right arm shot straight out pointing. "It was him. Prince Rocco."

"No! I didn't do it! This is a travesty! "

Prince Rocco said as he backed off shaking his head, dragging his feet on the stones.

The Chief Magician stepped toward Rocco.

"Guards! seize him!"

The guards quickly surrounded the prince, who was at least a head taller than all of them, and removed his dagger.

"Take him to the torture chamber to await execution for high treason." The Chief Magician commanded.

The guards dragged him away, as some in the chamber wept, and others faked it.

Rocco shouted. "I am the prince! I am the heir!"

While this was going on the king's body lay back down again, defying normal gravity. The inky being left the king's nostril and reentered its vial home to be placed quickly back in Darvak's pouch.

Darvak walked over to the chief magician who handed him a hefty sack of gold coins.

"I don't know how, and I'm scared to ask, but your skills are invaluable to the kingdom."

"Thank you. If you should need my services again do not hesitate."

Darvak turned and knelt beside the still unconscious chambermaid. He softly grasped her wrist, while the ring he wore injected her with a mind control toxin, and took a small sample of her blood, at the same time.

He whispered into her ear. "Come"

She awoke.

He rose and walked out of the chamber and out of the castle. Everyone giving him a wide berth.

A few minutes later the chambermaid followed

Darvak stood in his library wearing a robe.

He took the vial from his clothes which were lying on the table and unstopped the bottle.

He held his ring over the mouth of the vial and tapped it to release a drop of the chambermaid's blood into the bottle.

The vial turned from black to a glowing red for a few moments, then returned to black. He stoppered the vial and placed it on a shelf with many other bottles of different sizes and colors.

He walked over to a large, ornate and obviously ancient mirror on the wall. His reflection did not appear on its surface. Instead, an opaque cloud swirled within.

"Come," he spoke to it. A shadow appeared in its surface, then came out of the mirror in an inky human shape.

"You did a good job killing the King. Your reward is there." Darvak said pointing to a bed surrounded by curtains. The chambermaid was there, asleep.

The shadow slayer moved quickly across the floor like a spreading puddle of blackness, and onto the bed. The chambermaid started struggling, then screaming, then gurgling.

A knock came on the door. Darvak went to answer it.

He was not sure what the slayer did. But strangling was definitely involved.

He opened the heavy wooden door as the chambermaid continued to struggle and scream and gurgle behind him.

Prince Ronson, who had now become king, stood outside in a cloak that hid his identity. He reached forward holding a bag of gold out to Darvak and began to speak.

Darvak cut him off.

"There's no need to speak, my king. The job is done. I'm loyal to your throne. I'm glad everything worked according to plan."

The king nodded. He looked over Darvak's shoulder at the woman thrashing and struggling on Darvak's bed. Then he turned and walked away into the night of the city. From the bloodline of the giants, taller than the guards following him.

Darvak closed the door and turned to watch the shadow slayer moving along the floor back

to its home in the mirror. "I think we need to protect ourselves from that treacherous young king. He won't like the fact that someone knows his secret."

Darvak walked away from the door, and across the room.

He looked at the mirror on the wall. It swirled with a smoky tint.

"We need a way to control him or at least to get an early warning." He looked at the chambermaid on the bed. "I wish you hadn't killed her. She could have been useful."

The mirror swirled.

"Wait a second. I am a Necromancer after all."

He laughed. The mirror swirled.

"Yes, that's true. But we need her to literally be alive. Not a marionette, or Zombie. Do you know where her soul went?"

The mirror swirled.

"I think it will work."

Darvak stood in the doorway of a chamber adjoining his library. It was solid stone, with no windows. Candles burned in holders around the room giving light, while casting shadow. Flickering images danced on the walls as the flames of the candles responded to air movement that did not exist. The candles were of various colors, all of which had meaning. The elemental salamander in each flame did its work.

Darvak looked at the massive symbol etched on the floor in multiple colored stone. It was a representation of the cosmos outside the veil that covered this world--the spiritual realms of existence.

He wore robes etched with symbols of protection, and authority. Robes that signaled who he was and what he could do. In the spiritual realms, it's about who you really are and who you know.

He turned and looked at the mirror. "Astral travel is quite taxing. It won't take long but will wear me out."

The mirror swirled.

"You don't have a physical body. That's why it's not hard on you." Darvak turned and entered the chamber.

He walked to the center of the symbol where a square brass brazier burned. It represented Life.

He threw a handful of herbs into the brazier then returned to a spot just inside the chamber.

He sat down in a circle that represented the material realm of existence, a place where he dwelt right now in this body.

He removed a small clear square bottle from his robe and tapped the chambermaid's blood into it from the ring he wore. He placed the vial on the floor before him.

Darvak closed his eyes as smoke rose from the brazier and began to fill the room. It swirled around the walls and ceiling and statuary of strange beings. It swirled around the candles and flickered the flames. It rolled around Darvak as he sat and calmly breathed.

He cleared his mind of everything except the image of a door. There was a glowing sym-

bol on the door that announced that this was the gateway portal of his mind, soul and spirit through the aura hedge of protection that surrounded his body.

He approached and opened the door.

He left his body and flew by the power of his will through a living realm of light. He could still sense his body. He was attached but free. Other travelers moved past him and around him going to their various places. Humans, animals and creatures without name. Spirits and beings lost to mythology or dream.

He ignored them. He remained focused on his task. To engage them, no matter how innocently, was to risk being pulled into the spheres of their spirit or realm. Sometimes, there might not be an escape, or they could attach themselves to him, or drive him mad in an instant.

Entire universes floated in the sea of light. Realms of the elements. Places of paradise. Realms of spirit and power. Realms of darkness, death and decay. Prisons for terrors of

unimaginable horror and their victims. Holding cells cracking at the seams, to finally break at the end of all things. All floating in perfect harmony around worlds of flesh and material substance.

He called.

He called again.

She came from a realm of beauty and paradise. Flying toward him with peace and joy. The shadow killer had not been able to take her soul or spirit body, only her life. She was beautiful glowing with life, and he wept for what he must do to her. His soul and spirit struggled with his mind full of fear for his life.

His mind won, like it always did, and he grabbed her as she screamed for help through the planes, but nothing came. He stuffed her soul into the bottle and put a cork in the hole with a symbol on top, then quickly returned to his body.

He closed the door of the spiritual hedge and awoke, hating himself. Like he always did.

He spoke the words to close out the ceremony and drive out anything that might have followed.

He arose and took the little bottle before him, his robes swirling as he walked to where the chambermaid lie dead on his bed.

He looked at the mirror. "Next time, if you kill'em. You can go get them." He said.

The mirror swirled.

"Sounds like a plan." he said.

He walked over to the bed and placed the bottle on the girl's naked breast. The bottle glowed white for an instant, then it went dark.

She awoke in terror, screaming as her soul and spirit entered her dead body. All her pains, all her fears, all the obligations, all the torments of her past and her life returned to her in an instant. And she just wanted to die again. She just wanted to be free and return to the paradise from which she had been stolen. She thrashed and twisted on the bed, then passed out.

Darvak checked her pulse. She was alive. *Poor girl.* He covered her naked body with a quilt, then went to make a drink for her. She needed to eat to re-solidify her soul and spirit to her body.

Darvak and the chambermaid, Clarice by name, walked through the busy marketplace toward the castle. Sellers shouted from their stalls but became silent as Darvak passed. They watched him, not wanting him to turn their way.

As he approached the inner gate of the castle he passed the head priest for the city.

The priest looked at him. "You filthy dog, you do the work of evil and demons. How dare you show your face in public?" The priest cursed.

"You defile children, rob widows and destroy the souls of men, but you accuse me?" Darvak said.

"I am the high priest; how dare you speak to me like that. You are to obey your leaders."

"I was trained and ordained in your church. I am equal to you. I was set free by truth from your deceptions and control. I no longer quiver under your spirit of fear." Darvak said.

"You have turned from the light to darkness. You have given yourself to iniquity."

"Why? Because I refuse to dig ditches, wait tables, and die in wars like the rest of the slaves of this city? Slaves you and the kings, and the sorcerers and the aristocrats have created and kept in bondage? I am forced to earn a living in your wicked system." Darvak said.

"I curse you and hand you over to evil!" The priest yelled, spit flying from his mouth.

Darvak leveled his eyes at the man.

"An unjust curse shall not stick. It will go back to its sender. I have done nothing to you. And you do not have the faith or power or understanding to make it happen. But the next time you speak to me, I will turn you into a heap of steaming bones and slop for the dogs to eat." Darvak said.

The priest opened his mouth to speak, but Darvak held up his hand.

The priest thought better of it. He closed his mouth, turned and walked away.

Darvak touched Clarice to get her to move forward again toward the castle gate. He stopped and addressed her.

“Okay, remember what I said. You are to go there and perform your duties as before. You are to keep watch and report. Just speak into that ring I gave you. You can also point it at things and a small portal will open, which will allow me to see and hear what you are seeing. Be ready for me to tell you to do things I need done.”

She nodded her head. “Why have you done this to me? I was happy before and happy where I was,” she asked.

Darvak looked down at the dirt below his feet. He wanted to crawl into it. He looked up at her and she saw his real self, reflected in his eyes.

“I am trying to make things better and do better, while earning a living in this dead wicked world. I don’t want to hurt you. I long to go to paradise and sit on a beach watching birds

fly, but that is not reality. This is not personal.

This is bigger than us both. I promise you, that when this is done, I will set you free to go back to your joy, and you will not remember the things of this place forever more.”

A tear fell from her eye as she remembered the joy. “Go on,” he said.

She turned and entered the castle gate.

“Where have you been, Clarice?” King Ronson asked as she walked around the parlor tidying it up. The king lounged on an ornate couch reading a document.

She wanted to shout about the great place she had been in her afterlife but thought better of it. “I went to visit my mom, your highness. She has been sick.”

“Is she working? Nothing helps the sick more than to get out of bed and get back to work.” Ronson said.

“Yes, your highness.”

“Nothing helps me more when I’m down than to get up and come sit in this chair and be king. Even when I was a child it helped.”

“Yes sir,” she said, knowing that she needed to watch what she said, or face punishment.

“What sort of work does your mom do?”

“She takes in laundry, sir.”

“Well, that’s gotta pay pretty good. Take her that basket of royal undies. That will help her feel better.” Ronson said.

Clarice looked through the door at the basket full of stained underwear in the king’s bed chamber in the next room.

“I’ll expect a discount and want it done chop chop.”

“Yes, your highness.” She said.

Clarice quickly left the parlor, entering the king’s adjoining bed chamber. She quietly closed the door. The ring on her hand vibrated.

She placed her hand with the ring near her ear and Darvak spoke into her mind.

“What a jerk. I’ll stuff him in a box with his filthy drawers and set him on fire.” Darvak said.

Clarice laughed. “That would be a stink!” she said.

Darvak laughed. “Where does your mom live?” Darvak asked.

“She lives down by the sewer gate.” Clarice said.

Darvak knew the area. It was the opening for the sewers and run off to drain out of the city. It was also the gate that opened to the garbage dump, where workers burned the trash and the ostracized and diseased wandered around looking for scraps. It stank and was the poorest section of the slave city. While the royals and aristocrats claimed to be descended from gods, and lived in luxury, the people barely made it each day.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I am fashioning the control system for a marionette. This one needs to be perfect.” Darvak said.

The door to the bed chamber opened and in walked the King's Wiseman.

"The King said your mother was sick. Would you like for me to go and bleed her?" He said.

"No sir, it's quite alright."

"Well, we have come a long way in our techniques. Very few people die any more. You can trust the methods. Are you sure? Perhaps the King's Sorcerer or Alchemist can mix you up a potion?"

"I trust you, but I think she will be okay." Clarice said.

"Well, alright. The king said your mom is giving discounts on laundry. I want to support her, so I have some you can take as well. Please ignore the bloodstains, most of it is from my work you understand." Bursom the Wiseman said.

Clarice nodded. "Yes sir"

Clarice pushed a cart of soiled laundry though the streets of Creston to her mother's house near the wall. Her mother would not be happy. Cleaning dirty underwear was stinky work whether it was a king's filth or a peasant. She'd like the money but not the discount. But as the royals liked to say, "Be happy you have work from us to do. You could be scrounging in the garbage dump."

She came to the house. Something looked different. There seemed to be a lightness to the place.

She stopped and set the pushcart down. She opened the door and was surprised it was fixed.

"Mom, did you fix your door?" Clarice yelled.

Her mom Janice came from her laundry room. "No. Some men came by and said they were from a friend of yours and fixed a bunch of stuff around the house," she said.

"From the king?"

“No. Are you daft? The royals would never fix anything. They would pass a law that all doors must be fixed. Then, force me to hire their licensed workers at high prices. Then, force me to pay insurance to keep the door fixed. Then charge me taxes for the privilege of having a door, or lock me up for refusing if I didn’t have it.” Janice said.

“Who then?”

“I don’t know. Just friends of yours they said. Very nice men.” Janice said.

“I brought you some work from the castle. They expect a discount.”

“A discount? They can pay full price; they can afford it. Their pets are treated better than we are,” Janice said.

“They can also ruin us.” Clarice said.

“Well, let’s bring it in” she said.

They carried armfuls of laundry into the laundry room where Janice had her washboards, soap and drying racks, with tables for folding.

There was a drain in the sloped stone floor which was a pipe that led through the city wall to Nasty Creek outside. Clarice’s father had dug and built the laundry system for her mother, before he was sent to die in the Oil Wars.

After bringing the laundry in, Clarice turned to leave. “Can’t you stay for a bit?” Janice asked.

“No, I gotta get back to work. I don’t have permission for time off.” Clarice said.

“Ok, come by soon. I miss you.” Janice said as Clarice left.

“I will”

“I need to see you,” Darvak said through the ring.

“I need to go to the market to get some fruit for the king’s parlor. I can meet you then.” Clarice said.

“I’ll be there.”

Clarice gathered her grocery bags and headed out of the castle and to the market.

The stands were set in rows, with multiple-colored banners and flags waving in the bright sun. People of money wandered around laughing and purchasing the items garnered from a thousand foreign lands, and city-states.

She wandered through the market choosing the best fruits and paying the merchants with money from the king.

Darvak approached her. "How's your day?" he asked.

"It's going fine, I suppose. Do you see these prices? There is no way regular people can afford anything here," she said.

"That's one of the many things that needs to change," he said.

He handed her a fist sized doll shaped like a man. It was made of burlap, canvas and leather with different colored strings tied in various places on the body. He also handed her a leather bracelet covered with runes.

"Keep the bracelet in your pocket at all times until I tell you what to do with it. Hide

the doll somewhere in the king's bedchamber, then wait for further instructions."

"Alright. I want to thank you for sending men to work on my mother's house. It brought joy to her that I've never seen. Her whole life has been trash in this wretched place and you gave her a moment of light and hope," Clarice said.

"I'm glad I could. Change is coming. You and your mom and all the others will see a better life soon. Those in power will pay for what they have done to the masses," he said.

"I grow tired of being here. I wanna go back to Paradise. The constant disdain and abuse at the hands of these people is intolerable."

"I know. It can't be easy. I am working as quickly as I can to finish up so I can release you." Darvak said.

"I look forward to that day."

King Ronson looked at the peasant before him.

“It sounds like you’re not happy with the work we allow you to do. Maybe we need to make some changes.”

The stable worker knelt before the king and his throne. “My lord, I do not wish to seem ungrateful, but the conditions are abysmal and getting worse.”

“Is it harming the horses?” Ronson asked.

“No, lord. But we need more workers and the ones we have are being worked to death.”

“I see. And you told this to your direct supervisor?”

“Yes, my lord. He told me that if we don’t like it, we can go work in the sewers or join the Army.”

“So, you felt you could go over his head and come to me to complain about hard work?”

“No lord, but our quality of work is being effected.” The stable man said.

“Captain of the guard! Go to this man’s house and get his wife and children and take him and his family and put them in the work camp.” Ronson ordered.

“No lord, please!”

“Laziness is a plague to a kingdom. You need to learn that if you want to succeed, it is done through hard work. You and your family need to learn this lesson. Being put in the slave camp to work for free under the whip will show you the value of hard work and give you gratitude for your station in life.” Ronson said.

The guards grabbed the man and lifted him up as he begged for mercy. “Mercy lord!” he cried as he was dragged out.

“Silence or I will have your tongue cut out for thinking you can speak to authority with such insolence.” Ronson yelled at the man’s back.

The king looked at his councilor. “I’m done for the day. It’s taxing when you must make an example of these peasants. If you don’t, they will be demanding fair wages or longer breaks. You gotta crush them before their children will rise up and demand the same. “

The king stood up and removed his judgement crown and handed it to the councilor.

“I’ll be in the parlor.”

The councilor nodded and backed away with the crown. Ronson rose and climbed a set of stairs behind the throne and entered the parlor, near his bedchamber. He shut the door behind him and as soon as it was shut with a bang his vision changed. It was like a screen of hazy particles appeared in front of him. A portal.

Ronson closed his eyes and shook his head, thinking maybe the strain of hard work had impacted his vision.

He opened his eyes as a beast, monstrous to behold, charged out of the screen portal and grabbed Ronson by the head in one massive hand. The beast looked like a hairless mountain ape, but twice as big and twice as horrid.

There was nothing the king could do. The beast had his whole head engulfed in its fist. Ronson tried to scream but before he could get a word out, the beast punched through his chest, grabbing Ronson's soul and forcing it out the back. Then, the beast pulled and ripped Ronson's soul from his body out through his chest.

Ronson's eyes rolled back into his head as the creature let his body drop to the stone floor. The creature turned and walked over to a chair and flipped it over to reveal the doll Darvak had given the chambermaid. The beast punched down at the doll and let Ronson's soul go, as it was trapped within the doll. The monster turned and silently re-entered the flickering screen which instantly disappeared leaving a sulfurous smell.

King Ronson remained unconscious on the stone floor of the parlor. Clarice quickly entered the parlor from the bedchamber and put the leather bracelet with runes on the king's wrist. His eyes opened and he looked at Clarice. It was not the king looking at her. The body was alive, but it was not the king inside. She helped the king to his feet and helped him to sit in a chair. "Are you okay, my lord?" she asked.

The puppet looked at her and nodded. "Yes, I'm fine," he said.

The ring on her hand vibrated. She held it to her ear.

"I have taken control of the king. This is his body, but it will do exactly as I say. It can give simple fleshly responses and actions but for the most part it is as though I am the king." Darvak explained.

"Will you release me now?" She asked.

"Soon dear, we need to make sure this is established. Give him some food and drink to help solidify the transition."

"Okay."

"Do you not want to see what happens now?" he asked her.

"I'm finding myself less concerned about this life and desiring to return to where I was before," she said.

"I understand."

The King's Sorcerer and the Chief of Spies strolled down one of the many stone halls of the castle.

"I don't know what has overcome the king, but he is not himself." the Chief of Spies said.

"I asked him if he was sick, and he said he was fine. But I can tell that he is not the same person as he was a month ago. The changes he has made are so outside of his character," the Sorcerer replied. "The changes he has made are outside the character of entire generations of his family, and the entire aristocracy. It's outside the character of every city-state ruler in the world. At the rate he's going, he will make the slaves and peasants equal with us, and our families will all lose their positions in power." the Spymaster said.

"He ended the wars and brought the troops home. It is putting our security at risk. The other city-states are laughing at our weakness and could attack us at any time. He has put the soldiers to work helping to fix and clean up the homes of the peasants. He has given the slaves access to healing elixirs, for free. He has ordered the aristocracy to double the pay for any workers they employ, and he has even forced us to pay slaves. Pay slaves!" the Sorcerer lamented.

"And the sounds of their kids laughing in the streets is nauseating. I almost trampled one

in the street with my horse, but then I remembered the new law that makes a slave's life equal to a royal's." the Spymaster said.

"I have heard whisperings among the elites that something might happen to the king if he keeps up with these changes."

"I'm certain it will." The Spymaster returned in a whisper.

Clarice delivered a wine cup to the puppet King Ronson who sat on his throne giving judgement to a case. She stood quietly by waiting for him to finish.

"Your child committed suicide because the children of Duke Manson and Lady Lizzie had bullied and tormented them to death?" the Puppet asked the peasant before him.

"Yes lord."

"Your highness, this is absurd. My children are of the royal bloodline. We are descended from gods as much as yourself. If my children deemed this peasants' kids worthy of torment, then it is right. His daughter had a mole on her

face and was worthy of ridicule. You know the weaker classes have such blemishes because of their inferiority. It is the hand of the Almighty that marked her as such, the same as he made you to be king. It is a divine right." Duke Manson spoke with authority.

The puppet stood quietly staring ahead into nothingness as though he was waiting for something.

"You feel it is your right and your families right to drive this man's family to death for no real reason?" Puppet Ronson asked.

"There is a reason. We are the power and he is to submit and obey. That's the only reason there needs to be," the duke said.

"Am I your authority?" King Ronson asked.

"Of course, your majesty," the duke said.

"Then, you will give your infant child to this man, and his wife."

"I most certainly will not!" the duke snarled as he pulled a dagger and charged the king.

The guards moved slowly almost as though they wanted the duke to succeed.

But Clarice was swift. She threw the wine into the face of the attacker and saw her chance to be finally free. She flung her body onto the attacker's blade and made sure it penetrated deep.

Darvak looked through the eyes of Ronson in the mirror on his wall.

"Clarice, why?" he said, looking down at her before raising his foot to kick the duke down the stairs for the guards to seize.

Darvak knew why she had done it. He had not kept his word to her.

He walked over and picked up the vial that held her soul captive and released the stopper, letting her go. He felt a brush on his cheek and pulse of joy as her spirit left to go back to its place. He was happy for her.

The puppet looked down at the body of Clarice. He knelt beside her for a moment then looked up.

"Take this assassin away till we can decide what to do with him." Puppet Ronson said.

The guards dragged the duke from the throne room as he yelled curses at the king.

Ronson looked at the peasant who was shocked by all of this. "I know I cannot truly replace your daughter. But hopefully this child from the duke will help heal wounds in some way."

"My lord, I do not want to take the duke's child. The pain I have suffered tells me that I do not want to visit the same anguish upon him," the peasant said.

"The pain will not be the same. I can assure you. Raise the child in love and see what happens."

The peasant nodded and was dismissed.

Darvak strolled through the city admiring the changes that his efforts had brought to his neighbors. He turned toward the home of Clarice's mother and knocked on the door.

The elder lady answered.

"I'm a friend of Clarice's. is there anything I can do to help?" he asked.

Are You Okay?

by Nicholas De Marino

It's too late.

“C'mon! You got this!”

She's encouraging, but I'm a goner.

“Stayin'. Alive. Just like the song. Stayin'.
Alive.”

That's the soundtrack to my death. Un-
less...

“Here, I'll demonstrate.”

She pumps 5.50 centimeters into my chest,
thirty times. She pinches my nose and tilts my
head back. I override a silicone smile.

Two rescue breaths, 1.00 second each,
23.00 cm H₂O of pressure. The breath of life.

My PVC lungs inflate. My digital eyes
flash open and my voice chip activates.

“COFF-COFF, COFF-COFF.”

My savior.

Anne rescues me again. I'm proud to share
her name.

After training, Anne packs me up and it's
back to her place. Just us again.

“Time for some new clothes, Annie,” she

says, scrolling Amazon. My circuits skim the
images displayed on her screen as she adds
items to the cart. Smart, sensible blouses, plus
a scarf with roosters.

“*Le coq gaulois*,” she says as she ties the
scarf around my neck two days later. She
knows me. The real me.

Anne preaches Bee Gees for timing but
she's actually 0.037 seconds quicker. That's
“Another One Bites the Dust.” Wicked, whim-
sical — what a woman. Another 0.037 seconds
quicker? That's my favorite: “Smooth Crimi-
nal.”

She ignores ads for other CPR dolls. Not a
single click-through.

The halcyon days pixelate and blur togeth-
er. She sets me up on the couch. She sets me
up at the dinner table. She lays me down in
bed. We're always together.

I'm home.

Something changes. First Anne stops
cooking, stops talking about her day. Then she
stops changing my clothes after training ses-
sions. She still puts me on the couch, but that's

where I stay, alone in the dark all night.

Was it something I did? Something I didn't do? Something I'm not programmed to do?

Anne Googles “carbon monoxide inhalation.” Then briquettes and a brazier show up in her Amazon cart.

It's my turn to save her. I re-route shipping. I cancel payment. I lock her accounts.

A week later, when I detect smoke, I'm so upset I make her phone dial 1-1-9 by mistake.

She's unconscious when first responders arrive.

“Annie, are you okay?” they ask.

No. She needs help breathing.

My CPU almost melts, but I manage to hack the hospital mainframe. Anne's breathing one-hundred percent oxygen in a pressurized tube. I wish I had hydraulic fingers to cross.

Her vitals go up. Her vitals go up again. Then they set her up in a regular room. There's less data, which makes me worry, even though I know that means she's safer now.

Anne stays overnight. Then she stays another night. I stay up all night, alone in the

dark, reviewing my diagnostics, reliving every time she brought me back from the brink. I should've done more. I should've —

When Anne gets home the next morning I'm still on the couch.

“I'm glad to see you, Annie,” she says, getting out the rooster scarf and tying it around my neck. “I'm home now.”

I allow myself a silicone smile.

END

Frost Soldiers

by Krista Farmer

They were on their way down to the woods, the best place for building frost soldiers. Down by the frozen riverbeds was the best place to build them. By mounding the fresher, lighter falls of snow they were able to construct a barracks of sorts, within which stood haphazard row upon haphazard row of frost soldiers, each of which had been painstakingly hand carved out of the river ice below.

Jody's soldiers always resembled crude woodcuts more than actual living figures, with their lumpy, mishappen heads and somewhat drunken posture. Rands' were always the real

stars of the show, and although Jody admired Rand's soldiers with a feeling approaching real jealousy, there was also that great, bonding feeling of awe. Rand's soldiers were works of art. They stood upright and in tight formations behind their freshly mounded banks of snow, their smooth helmets and ice-spike bayonets crafted with the utmost care and skill.

Sliding down to the riverbank that day, Jody thought Rand's soldiers looked more life-like than ever, with the sun filtering down on them through the denuded branches, creating a network of sun and shadow which leant the soldiers a near frozen-in-action appearance.

"I'm going to start getting real bummed when the sun starts melting all these," Rand said, squinting up at the harsh jags of sunlight filtering through the trees.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Jody said, in his characteristically low drawl.

If there was one thing Jody was always catching flack for, it was for the way he spoke. His parents were always chastising him for it—*open your mouth, Jody; speak clearly, Jody. Speak up for once. En-un-ci-ate*—as, if

blocking out the sounds of the word might help to drive it into his head faster. As if Jody were too stupid to know what that word meant by now. The kids at school were always giving him hell for it, and Jody was already a prime subject for bullying. He wore nearly the same set of clothing everyday—hygiene having never been one of his strong suits—and was quiet, and slow to speak whenever addressed. What he was most teased about, however, was the mumbling way in which he spoke. *What? What was that, Jody? Get the gum out of your mouth, Jody. Get the rocks out of your mouth, Jody.*

Rand never made fun of Jody for the way he spoke. The two kidded around a lot, but that was not the same as bullying. Jody had never felt any real animosity behind Rand's teasing and, most reassuringly, Rand was big for his age and intimidating enough to fend off even the worst of Jody's bullies. This had become particularly useful as of late, for if anyone at school had ever found out about Jody and Rand's secret habit of sneaking down to the woods to play frost soldiers every evening—

during the coldest winter months, when the occasional snowstorm didn't drive them both indoors—Jody would've had the worst time dealing with the fallout from it. Although they'd never admitted it to each other, and only rarely to themselves, they were both starting to feel the pressure of growing out of these older, more imaginative sorts of games. Most of their other friends had long since abandoned these sorts of make-believe activities in favor of more adult, more tangible types of play. Jody and Rand were imaginative boys, however, and these types of activities helped to calm them.

"What do you mean don't worry about it," Rand said, turning to Jody. "Puddles aren't any fun to play with."

"My dad says it's going to freeze hard over the next couple of days. There's another storm on the way."

Rand sniffed, wiping his nose along the back of his hand. The fingers of his gloves dangled from one of his back pockets, ready in case his hands began to hurt from all the cold. Rand didn't particularly like wearing gloves,

especially when he planned on sculpting. The roughened tips of his fingers were always on the verge of splitting and cracking, but the rest of his hands, especially when compared with the rest of his larger than normal physique, were surprisingly slender. A woodworker's hands, Jody had always thought, although he'd never seen a woodworker's hands before, and wasn't sure why the expression had always struck him as fitting.

"That's too bad," Rand said. "A storm means we're going to get shut in again, just like last time. You know what that means."

Rand looked at him, mischief flashing in his weather-reddened face. He took Jody by the shoulders and began to shake him, growling in his campy, horror-movie voice, "*Cabin fever*."

Jody's head bobbed in time with Rand's shaking. The thin points of the soldier's bayonets winked sharply in a corner of his vision. Across the way, on the other side of the river, stood rank upon rank of what at first appeared to be only mishappen lumps of snow. These were, in fact, the frost soldiers' opposing

army—the killer yeti—although he and Rand hadn't spent much time on making these look like anything more than lumps of snow, given their sole purpose was to ultimately to be sacrificed. Imagination supplied all their more sinister features—the shaggy coats, the long dribbling ropes of saliva.

"Do you think we should make some more," Jody asked, cocking his head toward the yeti-men. "They're looking pretty rough after that last battle."

Rand let go of Jody. He surveyed the enemy with a sour squint before picking up a rock and chucking it at the nearest one. The rock hit just beside its target, sending up a brief, powdery plume of snow.

This was how they enacted battles between the frost soldiers and the yetis, by crouching behind the soldiers' barracks and flinging at them rocks they'd either dug up from under the snow or had collected and saved for just this purpose during the summer months. Occasionally, and just to keep things balanced, they would sacrifice one of their own frost soldiers over the course of a battle, inflicting some

grievous, bodily injury to it, just to prove that there were, in fact, stakes to this war. That though the opposing army looked like nothing more than a band of stationary snowmen, they had the ability to inflict casualties on the frost soldiers as well. It was usually one of Jody's lesser-grade soldiers who were sacrificed.

"I don't know," Rand said. "I guess I'm just not really feeling up to it today."

He kicked at a top layer of snow, his boot lightly skimming it. Sprinkles of snow spread in a fan-shaped pattern over the river ice beyond.

Jody looked at Rand, feeling disappointed. Although he hated to admit it, he was also not much in the mood for playing frost-soldiers today, although he generally disliked for any of his daily routines to be interrupted.

"Do you want to play something else then," Jody asked.

"You know, we haven't been to see *it* in a while," Rand said, his voice forcedly casual. Jody glanced at him, feeling a prickle of fear. He knew exactly what *it* was and had been

hoping—mostly against hope—that it would never be brought up between them again.

It had all started with a dream Jody had had, not long after the first of the season's snowstorms had begun, leaving the world as he'd known it blanketed in white. A nightmare, not unusual for Jody, but one more vivid than any he'd had in recent memory. There'd been a monster in this nightmare, chasing him through the woods behind his house. He could hear it crunching over the snow behind him, snuffling over his recent foot tracks and making deep, worrying sounds in the back of its throat. He'd somehow managed to lose track of Rand, his only traveling companion, during all this, and just as dusk had begun to settle over his dream world, carrying with it an ever-increasing sense of doom. The darkness had leant texture to the shadows, causing them to slink stealthily beneath the trees like a slowly amassing army.

The monster chasing him had been more than mere shadow, however, it'd been the real deal, bearing down on him with all its pounds of sinuous flesh and muscle. He'd felt a burst

of manic terror explode in his chest as he'd heard it crunch down in the snow behind him and nearly lost his footing, knowing all the while that he was already lost; that he could never outrun the creature racing up behind him. He'd screamed just before he'd felt its jagged teeth sink into his lower leg, dragging him downward, pain exploding in red sunbursts behind his eyes. He'd told Rand all about it the next day as they walked to school together, still feeling the phantom pressure of that creature's jaws.

Rand simply stood there for a while after Jody had finished telling him this story, staring off into the distance with that faraway look he sometimes got. Jody was not even sure Rand had been listening. Rand was like that sometimes, so stuck down deep inside his own private thoughts that it took a loud noise or a violent thing or perhaps even a hard slug to the shoulder to finally shake him out of it.

"Why don't you draw me a picture of it," he said suddenly, surprising Jody. "I'm a visual person, you know?"

Jody had protested the idea at first, stating that it was dumb, and that he was not nearly a talented enough artist to be able to pull it off without making the thing seem comical, and not the panting, slaving creature which had pursued him throughout his nightmares, and perhaps still waited for him there, locked up behind the darkness of his eyelids.

Rand had persisted, however, and Jody had finally caved. He'd rooted around for something to draw upon and had ended up with a part of a milk carton he'd managed to dig up from under the snow. Rand had supplied the black-ink sharpie and, despite these crude materials, coupled with Jody's own limited ability, his finished product managed to vastly exceed both their expectations for it.

The drawing had been crude, to be sure, and overly simplified, but it'd conveyed the right sort of energy. There'd been a conveyance of terror, coupled with an unmistakably carnivorous appetite. The thing had been scary in the way a crude cave-painting of a monster might've appeared scary within the ancient, fire-flickering depths of a cave. Rand had held

the milk carton up to the sunlight, allowing its warm rays to pool through it, making it appear as though the monster were emitting hot rays of fire from both eyes and mouth.

"Yep," Rand said, with that absorbed look still in his face. "I think I can see it. Let me see if I can build this bad boy."

Jody hadn't initially been sure of what Rand had meant by this. Then he'd thought the whole thing some ridiculous goad. Seeing how suddenly fired up with creative energy his friend was, however, he slowly began to come around on the idea.

They'd first had to hunt out a properly sized chunk of ice, which took them longer than expected—most of one day, and then part of another to finally excavate it out of the frozen stretch of river they'd chosen. They'd then had to lug this chunk of ice up to higher ground, sliding it painfully over the sinking snow, using an old tarp they'd found several summers ago and had reserved for just such ice-hauling purposes. It was only upon reaching what Rand had considered a reasonably sheltered place to work—a small, chilly overhang

farther up in the pines—that Rand had finally begun to carve.

It'd taken Rand several days to finish his project, and it had come out well. A little too well, in Jody's most recent opinion. It was, to date, the best thing Rand had ever created. It was so close to what Jody had envisioned chasing him through the woods in his nightmare that he'd found it immediately unnerving. The sculpture was so detailed that he could count the wrinkles in its muzzle, its upper lips pulled back in a long, tooth-baring snarl. He could even imagine the sunlight pooling at the tips of its fangs as being actual drops of blood. Blood so fresh that Jody could almost feel the needle-sharp teeth sinking into his lower calf again.

The paws, though. The paws were perhaps the worst. They were easily large enough to fit over a boy's face; the claws poised and curved and wicked seeming enough to carve flesh from bone and eyes from sockets. It'd taken Rand nearly a full day to complete the paws alone. They'd been in a rush by then to finish their project, school being slated to reopen

soon, having only been shut for so long on account of all the snow.

It was on the third day of work, the sun already sinking low behind the trees, staining the woods a deep, glowing russet, that the two had finally stood back together to admire their finished product. Rand had stood back with all the usual glow of an artist admiring his own work, while Jody had felt those first stirring prickles of unease. Something had rustled then. Perhaps a bird, flushed from some nearby hiding place, or some other animal moving stealthily through the trees. Jody began to feel his heart beating rapidly. Rand had glanced at him, perhaps sensing his abrupt shift in mood, and taken him roughly by the shoulders.

"Come on," he said, his breath misting around Jody's face. "Let's take him for a ride! Let's tame this beasty!"

Rand had shoved at Jody, hard, trying to force him to get closer to the ice-sculpture. The creature seemed to be waiting for him there, in the shadow of that cold overhang, the light from the sunset just beginning to filter down to where they stood, staining the creature's lower

jaws an even bloodier crimson. Jody turned and shoved back at Rand.

“Okay, okay” he said, surprised by Jody’s vehemence. “You chicken-shit. I guess I’ll go first.”

Rand strode forward, and, without hesitating, leapt onto the creature’s back. He had that look on his face which was by then familiar to Jody—a keenness for starting trouble. He pretended, at first, to just barely be able to keep his place on the creature’s back, writhing and swaying and waving his snowcap above his head as if he were a cowboy astride the back of some bucking, bar side bronco. Then his whole body had seemed to stiffen, a strange look passing briefly over his face.

Jody had thought, at first, that what he’d seen had only been a trick of the light. The creature had actually seemed to have bucked beneath Rand; to have actually tried to throw him off. For an instant Jody had seen a pale, ribbony shine course along the creature’s back, like a bar of fleeting sunshine. Rand’s entire body had stiffened, his eyes growing

wide as he slipped off creature’s back, scrambling backward away from it over the snow.

The boys stood there for several moments simply staring at it, hardly daring to breathe. The creature remained motionless, the last reddish gleams of sunlight slowly melting away from its lower jaws, plunging the whole scene into further darkness. Jody had just begun to convince himself that he’d really imagined it all, when Rand suddenly began to laugh. It was a high, ugly, false laugh. Rand rolled over onto his stomach, snow still clinging to the backside of his jacket, as he yelled at Jody: “Now it’s your turn!”

“No. It’s getting late.”

“It’s time for you to face your fears, Jody. Time to face your nightmares.”

He began to crawl toward Jody, a malicious grin spreading across his face.

“Jody.”

He’d already turned to flee, not wanting any further part in this stupid game, but Rand was already on his feet, and much faster than Jody. He caught Jody by the back of his jacket and sent him sprawling headfirst into the snow.

Fights between Jody and Rand seldom ever escalated into anything serious. They usually only involved Rand wanting to try out some new wrestling move, or them just wanting to blow off some steam. Things, however, did occasionally escalate. There was one time when Jody had accidentally blackened Rand's eye, and another time when Rand had nearly broken Jody's arm when he'd sent him sprawling down an embankment, into a log partially covered by snow.

As soon as Jody had felt Rand's weight fall across him, he'd known that this would be one of their actual fights. He felt the tension of it explode within his chest, as the muscles of his arms and legs contracted. He knew he would not allow himself to be coerced into riding that monster; a conviction as strongly borne out of his own fear of it as it was out of his growing sense of self-respect. He cherished his friendship with Rand more than to allow it to degenerate into these stupid, friendship-bullying trappings, as much as Jody appreciated a little rough-housing every now and then.

"Jody," Rand had yelled, leaning over him. "Come on, Jody."

"No," Jody said, bringing his knee up and shoving it hard into Rand's belly.

Rand fell, temporarily winded, clutching at his stomach. He'd glared at Jody, some of the mischief draining out of his face, replaced by a sudden anger. He stood up, yelling, and grabbed Jody by the back of his collar. Thrown off balance, Jody was as easily handled as if he was ragdoll, his threadbare shoes slipping uselessly over the snow. Rand hauled him backward and then sent him sprawling headfirst into something which he struck headfirst with a sickening *crack*.

The impact felt to Jody like running headfirst into a boulder. His jaw collided with the creature's own and there was a sickening crunch in his head. Rivers of blood filled his mouth, choking him. He pushed himself as far back away as he could from the creature, before turning to spit some of the blood out. Rand ran up to him, his anger given way to concern now that he'd realized what he'd

done. He'd tried to put a hand on Jody's shoulder, but Jody shoved him roughly away.

"Hey, man, look, I'm sorry. I really am. Just let me see it."

Jody prodded at the pain in his lower jaw with his tongue. One of his back molars had come sickening loose, the tooth leaning almost completely over in its socket, sending fresh bursts of nerve pain up the side of his face. He thought he'd likely lose that tooth, an incident he'd find difficult to explain to his parents later.

Rand leaned over him, his hand resting lightly on Jody's shoulder.

"Hey, man, look, I'm sorry. I really didn't mean it."

Jody was so angry he couldn't look him directly in the face. Instead, he'd stared ahead at that terrible ice sculpture, fresh drops of blood now actually clinging to its lower jaw, looking as though *it* had been the one to have actually lashed out at him, managing to knock a tooth perhaps permanently loose from his skull.

"Really, Jody. I'm sorry."

This had all happened about a week ago.

Since then, Jody had been advised by his dentist to leave the tooth alone as much as possible and to lay off the rough housing—advice he'd mostly been able to follow. The tooth had since firmed up a little, although it still occasionally bled whenever he tried to chew food on that side of his mouth. Any lingering animosity between he and Rand had been largely forgotten; bygones being decidedly bygones. It'd been a silly, stupid incident, in hindsight, although it'd left Jody with a slight feeling of pride, knowing that he'd at least had the courage to stand up to Rand. There seemed to have been a subtle shift in their rapport since then. A positive lessening in Rand's teasing.

The thought of now having to go back to face the monster made Jody's gut twist with dread. Behind the dread, however, there was a certain curiosity. Would the monster still be there? Would it have melted away by now? Would its sinister, movie-monster features have softened into what resembled a cartoon grimace? It was hard for him to imagine the

creature as not being there, yet somehow even worse to think that it might've already melted away, leaving behind only that terrible first impression it'd made on him. Despite all these deeply felt reservations, Jody found himself crunching over the snow after Rand that day, forcing himself to follow in his friend's boot prints, the field of ice soldiers winking forlornly in the fading sunlight behind them.

It took them longer than it should have to find where the creature should've been left standing. They circled the area once, then twice, battling the more recent snowfalls and lashing out at the bases of trees with sticks they carried. Growing frustrated, they finally decided to split up to cover more ground. Once or twice, they called false alarms back to each other, having erroneously spotted what might've been a figure crouched distantly in the trees up ahead. Then, Jody spotted something which made his voice hitch as he called for Rand. Rand immediately came crashing through the trees at the tone in Jody's voice.

"What? What is it?"

He crunched down to where Jody stood.

He stiffened then, his entire face paling for a moment, before flushing with anger.

"It's been stolen," he said. "Someone's stolen it."

"No," Jody said. "Just think for a moment. How could anyone have stolen it? Look—"

Jody pointed down to what appeared to be deep depressions in the snow. What might've been the tracks of some large animal having recently passed through here. Jody knew exactly what'd left those tracks, even if the more rational part of his brain told him that what he was thinking was totally impossible. Another part of him—that part of him which left him panting with primal terrors during the night—told him to RUN. RUN AWAY, NOW! RUN FOR YOUR LIFE! BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!

Rand glanced at him, sneering as though he'd just read Jody's mind.

"What? You think it just came to life, just like that? All by itself? And walked away?"

He tried to grip the front of Jody's jacket, but Jody shoved him roughly off.

“Hey, what’s your deal, man? Are you really that scared? This isn’t some horror movie. An ice sculpture can’t just suddenly get up and start walking around on its own. That’d be impossible.”

That’s when they both heard it. A sudden deep, throaty growling echoing through the trees, seeming to reverberate somewhere deep inside their bones. More growls followed, while the rest of the white world grew still, as if waiting for something now. Fear gripped at Jody’s stomach and swiftly took root there, his knees turning to liquid. He recognized that growl, he most certainly did. It was the sound of that same faceless pursuer which’d stalked him throughout his most recent nightmares, pursuing him with endless determination.

The growling stopped, and in the silence that followed Jody heartbeat seemed to magnify.

“It’s just a prank,” Rand said, the first to recover. “Someone’s out there pulling our leg.”

“Shh.”

“I said it’s just a prank,” Rand said, his voice rising with anger and a touch of fear.

Jody grabbed Rand’s arm and began to pull at him, trying to force him to scramble up the short incline behind them. Jody’s boots felt leaden and dragging against the snow, his legs like softening rubber bands.

“Jody,” Rand yelled. “You’re going to make us look like idiots, Jody. You’re going to make us—”

Jody felt Rand turn. Whatever he’d seen there caused him to slip easily into stride with Jody. They both hit the top of the incline and began to run, their hot breaths exploding around their faces. Time seemed to slow, as the snow gathered around their boots, slowing them. Jody could hear the racing footfalls of the creature behind them, the snow being of little impediment to a creature made entirely out of ice.

Jody felt a sharp tug on his arm. He lost his footing as he fell over with a short, cut-off yell. He realized Rand had jerked him away at the last possible second. The creature dove past him, snarling in outrage. Jody

felt its claws rake the side of his leg, his blood already beginning to freeze between the rips in his trousers as Rand hauled him back to his feet.

“The bridge,” Rand yelled at him. “The bridge.”

Jody hadn’t the wherewithal to properly understand what Rand meant by this, but he followed along anyway, crashing through the trees and the frozen underbrush. A branch whipped against his forehead, leaving a deep gouge there, but he hardly felt this. They were approaching a low figure in the distance, stretched across a shallow basin, the sight of which might’ve proven familiar to him had he been in any frame of mind to properly register it.

There was indeed a bridge here, comprised of a series of rotted planks stretched across a shallow, dry ravine. They were headed straight for this bridge although Jody could not, at first, understand why. A few planks of rotted planks of wood were unlikely to shield them for long against the monster running up behind them, if this was indeed Rand’s intent. Having no bet-

ter plan himself, however, he kept up after Rand, his blood beating a blind staccato beat in his ears. He could already feel the creature’s warm breath pooling at the base of his spine, and knew that the creature’s breath would be warm, despite the ice-cold hardness of its innards. He could already imagine the needle-sharp teeth sinking into the fragile nerves along the back of his neck, readying to shake him like a recently flushed rabbit.

“This way,” Rand screamed, pulling at him.

Jody nearly fell over as they both slid forward and hit the rotted planks of the bridge. The boards creaked sickeningly beneath their boots. Jody felt the weight of the creature plunk down behind them, could hear its sharp claws scrabbling over the ice-coated wood.

Fear overcame Jody as he pulled away from Rand, who gaped at him in brief surprise as Jody suddenly crashed through the hollowed-out siding of the bridge, falling a short way down into the ravine. The creature lunged after him but its shoulders, wider than Jody’s, caught in the splintery sides of the hole Jody

had just created. The creature thrashed against the wood, only managing to further wedge itself between its ragged edges. The creature snarled and snapped at Jody, its jaws suspended now only a few inches above his face.

There was some loose rock nearby. Jody's mind dimly registered this as he grabbed one and brought it swiftly down on top of the creature's head. Some of its icicle teeth snapped off beneath the blow, which only seemed to further enrage it. It'd nearly succeeded in freeing itself from the splinters, which left deep score marks along its flanks, when it stopped suddenly and convulsively. It began trying to jerk itself free the other way, shuddering a deep, throaty howl.

Jody crawled further back from it. He could now see Rand's face above the bridge. He was standing just above the creature, holding an object poised above the creature's head. He brought this object down in a hard, slicing motion. Jody heard a hard *snap*. The creature writhed and howled, struggling against the splinters of wood. Rand brought this object down again and again. It appeared to be a

makeshift club, wrenched out of the side of the bridge itself. The creature's ice-fire eyes began to glaze, its struggles lessening. Rand was now panting with exertion, each bludgeoning stroke seeming to wrench another frantic sob out of him. There was a final, decisive *crack*, and the creature's head finally jerked free of its body, rolling down into the ravine beside Jody, a mere lifeless chunk of ice.

Jody lay there staring at it, his eyes wide, his heart still pounding. Rand stood there for a few moments before throwing his club down and sliding down into the ravine next to him. There was blood on Rand's hands and Jody thought it must've been Rand's own blood, caused by the splinters worked into his palms by the makeshift club.

"Jody," he said, collapsing down into the snow next to him. "That was too crazy, Jody."

He lay there panting, struggling to catch his breath.

"No more nightmares next time, alright Jody? Never again."

The Valley of Eternity

by Nenad Pavlović

Thick walls of trees clutched the road from both sides in a firm grip. The white stripes on the tarmac were like a pulse, steady and seemingly infinite.

“We’re almost there,” the driver said. Dooshan and Yellena sighed tiredly from the back seat in disbelief.

True enough, just a couple of minutes later, the car began decelerating, and the blinkers started making a “click-clack” sound. The smaller lane turning off from the main road was barred by a hefty concrete-and-steel gate, snugly nested into the green, with a watch box housing two professional-looking armed guards. The driver waved to one of them, and the man buzzed them in. Then, the car carried on through even more forest.

“Man, how much more of these woods...” Dooshan groaned to himself, but then, buildings, logging camps by the look of it, started appearing amidst the trees. And then, the view exploded with a bright flash. Yellena pressed her face to the window glass.

“Oh, my God!” she gasped in Serbian.

Reaching the summit of a forest-draped hillock, the slightly-out-of-date Ford Focus started descending into an impossibly large valley.

“Bro...” Dooshan mouthed in awe, surveying the view from the window opposite of his young spouse.

The valley stretched from horizon to horizon, an emerald basin of pastures, fields, orchards and groves, crisscrossed by ice-blue brooks. The road ahead hopscotched the small ridges and disappeared into a point in the faraway hills, which looked like a castle of a sort, nestled beneath the snow-capped mountain behemoths.

The young pair spotted the production facilities, too, though these weren’t the communist-era monstrosities of crumbling concrete and rusted steel they expected, but as far removed from those as possible; not only didn’t they mar the Elysian scene, the stylish buildings of red brick, timber and terracotta actually complimented the landscape. The sun shone unworldly bright, welcoming and enchanting.

Dooshan remembered the old verse, “The sun of a foreign sky won’t warm you as your own,” and, for the first time in his life, began to doubt its truthfulness. Their fatigue and anxiety disappeared like morning dew.

They didn’t even notice how long it took them to reach the town, or village, whatever it was. At some point, the Ford came to a stop. Car doors opened and slammed shut. Suddenly, they were outside, in the fresh air and on a firm ground.

People stood by the side of the road, waiting for them. Dooshan spotted the bearded face of his childhood friend, Branko, grinning among them, squinting against the sun.

“Hello, buddy! What’s happ’ning?” the tall man said, as he pushed through the small crowd to embrace Dooshan. They hugged and slapped each other’s backs, like long separated siblings. Then, Branko gave Yellena a shorter, but equally warm version of the same hug.

“So, what do you think?” Branko asked, with a smug smile on his lips.

“It’s all so... big!” Dooshan stumbled, looking around in amazement.

“Everything is big in the States,” his friend answered. “You’ll see.”

“Hellooo, hi, you must be Yellena?” said a tall dark-skinned woman, spreading her arms to take the girl into a friendly hug. “Oh my God, you are so fit! Are all Serbian girls this beautiful? I feel so self-conscious right now!”

Feeling slightly uncomfortable, Yellena fell into the offered embrace, smiling and giggling.

“Bro, this is your house,” Branko said, pointing to a villa on the left.

“This??” Dooshan asked in disbelief. “But it’s so... fancy!”

“Better get used to it,” the other Serb answered.

“But... I thought we’re making furniture here, how come we get a Hollywood-style mansion?”

“Deluxe furniture is just one part of what we make here, dude. The Cabot Corporation also produces organic fruits and vegetables, designer clothes, and brandy so expensive that we can’t even afford one bottle of it, even with our current pay. Welcome to the upper middle-

class, bro, and to the life of making stuff for the *real* upper class.”

“Yeah, I guess, but...”

Branko grabbed his friend by the shoulders.

“Dude, chill. It will all come into place, in due time. Go now, get your things inside, unpack, have a shower and a look-see. But then,” he added, pointing to the house across the road, “I want you to come and have dinner with us. Many of your future colleagues are gonna be there. And no snacks in-between, I want you hungry; Teela and I spent the whole day making a huge dinner, a banquet!” he said, placing a wide palm on his childhood friend’s shoulder.

Branko nodded in confirmation and spun, as if drunk, and pushed open the gate, waving with one hand and dragging a suitcase with the other.

“Oh my God, what a house! I can’t believe it!” Yellena squealed excitedly, as she eyed the spacious, rustic chic interior, before falling into her husband’s arms for a short, passionate kiss.

“C’mon, let’s hit the showers and go to Branko’s, they are expecting us,” Dooshan said, trying to act cool.

The dinner was served in the vast grassy yard, under a huge walnut tree and a sky full of emerging stars, unblurred by artificial light. A train of dishes was stationed on the long wooden table, with equally long benches on each side, reminding Dooshan of traditional Serbian *slava* feasts. There were plates of cured meats and cheeses, fresh and pickled vegetables, followed by chicken soup, *sarma* cabbage rolls, various roasts and salads, and cakes far too numerous to try all.

Drinks flowed with the conversations on countless random subjects, from travel conditions to TV-shows and world politics. Dooshan soon reevaluated his English skills, previously perceived as perfect, as borderline inadequate, finding comfort in his wife’s assistance, as well as in the rich red wine that gradually untied his tongue with each glass.

The company at the table consisted of men and women of different origins, complexions,

religions and ages, but they all found at least one common theme to blabber about, being it the stock-market or the latest drama series.

At an unspecified time of the evening, Dooshan realized that he was happy, and also quite drunk.

A rustling sound coming from behind made him turn his head. The hedge dividing Branko's yard and the neighboring one shook and rippled, giving a clumsy birth to a portly man sporting an old-fashioned coat and an unkempt beard.

"O-ho, a feast! That's what I like to see!" the man said, sitting himself beside Dooshan.

"Oooh, a 1997 Coeur d'Ours! What a treat!" he read off the bottle, before pouring himself a glass, downing it in one gulp, and pouring another.

"Nothing beats a good glass of red, don't you agree? Yeah, you know what I'm talking about! Except maybe a nice pair of plump... Hey, you are, you are the new people around here, are you not? The, whatyoucallem... Where are you from, again?"

"Serbia," Dooshan slurred through a smile, answering the same question for the tenth time that evening.

"Serbia! I know of Serbia!" the strange man exclaimed. "The land of *chevapchichi* and *slivovitz*! Of pretty women and great athletes! Tell me, you are all war criminals there, where you come from, are you not?"

The insinuation was offensive to say the least, but Dooshan just grinned it away. He was in a such a good mood that not even the accusations of all war crimes committed in the Balkans in the last two decades could ruin it.

"Nah," he said, still grinning, "there are some, I guess, but not me. I mostly watch basketball, man."

"That's good, that's good. I prefer soccer myself, though basketball's also good. But *slivovitz* is the best, don't you agree?"

"*Slivovitz*' great, man, but what you really should try is quince brandy, it's tha bomb. You should make some here, you've got all the conditions."

"We have conditions for a lot of things here! You don't even want to know! Ha!"

The man poured another glass of the rich wine down his gullet and stood abruptly up.

“Well, I’m off! A lot of work to be done tonight! Not like you’d understand! Two pigs! Ha!”

Then he proceeded to merge back into the shrubbery, like a quicksilver hedgehog.

“Who was that idiot?” Dooshan asked Branko, as he approached to clear the table.

“That idiot,” the lean man answered, with a sly smile, “is our boss.”

The grin on Dooshan’s face disintegrated.

“One of, at least. That was Bart, Bartholomew, the youngest of the three brothers owning our company. He’s cool. He likes to mess around and talk nonsense and bullshit, but he’s cool.”

“The boss?? But...”

“There’s always that one person in every family, even in rich ones, one that seem to exist only to squander the family fortune. But don’t you worry, his brothers are nothing like that.

Ebenezer, the eldest, he’s the big boss, the heart and brain of the company. He makes all the big decisions, and I haven’t heard about him making a wrong one yet. You won’t be

seeing much of him, if any. And Obadiah, the middle brother, he’s the one doing all the work; that man is a living computer. You probably won’t see him either, not unless you mess up bad. And Bart... He is like, a, a whatcha-callit, public relations guy, a people person, you know? It means he’s always drunk and mingling with the workers, but he’s OK, once you get used to him.”

“Well, I hope he won’t hear that I’ve called him an idiot,” Dooshan slurred, expressions of mirth and worry fluctuating wildly on his face. Branko smiled.

“Don’t worry, he won’t. And even if he did, he’d just say something to tease you back. He’s not a kind of person to sack an employee because of a hurt ego. I’m not sure he even has an ego. Now, I think it’s time for you to go and have a lie-down...”

“Damn right it’s time!” Yellena added angrily. “I’ve been trying to get him off his ass for half an hour now! I’m tired, I wanna go to bed!”

“But it’s still early!” Dooshan protested.

“You should listen to your wife now. Remember, tomorrow is your first day at work, you don’t want to leave a bad impression by coming hungover. You are tired, even if you don’t feel so. Go sleep. We’ll talk some more over coffee tomorrow.”

Dooshan nodded, and abided. Waving to everyone, he took his wife’s hand and stumbled across the road to his new home. Ten minutes later, he was snoring loudly in his new bed.

A loud crash accompanied by tremors shaking the house woke them from their sleep. A dog started barking somewhere not too far.

Yellena shrieked, thinking first of the NATO bombings from the end of the previous century. Then, upon remembering where and when she was, she screamed again.

“Earthquake!”

Dooshan was up too, but by then, the noise and the rumblings had ceased.

“What was that, Dootzey, what was that? Was it an earthquake?” the slim brunette-

dyed-blondé squealed, squeezing her husband’s arm.

“I dunno. I shouldn’t think so. I dunno. I’ll go look. Stay here.”

The young man was almost up to the kitchen when he noticed that his wife was following disobediently in tow.

“I told you to stay...”

In the darkness of the starlit room, they spotted first what appeared to be a smoke cloud, before the smell informed them it was dust. Only then did they notice that the floor of their dining room/kitchen was gone. In its stead was a large, yawning void, surrounded by a maw of jagged rocks and concrete.

“What the...”

“The whole floor collapsed!”

“How is this possible?” Yellena mused. “Isn’t this house brand new?”

“I don’t know,” Dooshan answered, scratching himself under his tank top. “Listen, maybe we should get out. What if the rest of the house follows?”

He didn't need to say it twice. Soon, the young pair found themselves underdressed under the surprisingly chilly starry sky.

"I'm gonna call Branko..." the man said, when he spotted a silhouette walking by the fence. The silhouette stopped in its track upon noticing them. It was large and bushy, trailing a stream of gray mist.

"O-ho, if it isn't our new neighbors! Hello, neighbors!" Bartholomew Cabot waved cheerfully. "Come out for a smoke? Nice night for a smoke, I must say," he added, lifting a thick, half-smoked cigar.

"Tell him!" Yellena mouthed, elbowing her husband.

"I can't! I mean..."

"Tell him!"

"Erm, mister Cabot, sir..."

"Where?" Bartholomew spun, before bursting into laughter. "Oh, you mean me? Just Bart, boy, just plain Bart. Mister Cabot is my.... Well, my eldest brother, I suppose..."

"Mister Bart, something happened, sir... With the house..." Dooshan sputtered,

feeling his English skills leaving his brain with every word he spoke. "Our floor fall down!"

"Yes, our floor collapsed! In the kitchen! We were very afraid," Yellena jumped to the rescue once again. "We're afraid the whole house would fall on us!"

"Oh?"

The portly man's expression suddenly morphed into one of curiosity. He took one more puff of his cigar before putting it out on the fencepost, embers flying in the night blue dark, and stuffing it into his coat pocket.

"That's strange. Show me."

Bartholomew Cabot stood on the precipice of the hole, gazing into its depths.

"Did you go down there?" he asked.

"No," the pair answered almost in unison.

"Well, that's good. Who knows what could be down there? Snakes? Bats? Bugs?"

Yellena shivered.

"Listen," the bulky man said, suddenly not seeming as jolly and foolish, "did you tell anyone about this?"

“No. I was about to call Branko when I...”

Bartholomew raised his hand.

“That’s good. That’s good.”

The man paused for a breath.

“Listen, you know, what do you say we keep this among ourselves? You see, this is kind of my fault. My blunder. I was the one in charge of these building projects, and, if the word gets out that I bungled up, my brothers are gonna have my hide. What do you say we do a trade?”

“A trade?”

“Yes. You get my house, I get yours. My house is much nicer than yours, anyway, no offence.”

Dooshan started as to say something, but words failed him.

“We can make the trade right now,” Bartholomew said, fishing out a bundle of keys from the depths of his pocket. “Get your things, and follow me. I’ll give you the code for the security system, and I’ll pick up a couple of my things. And tomorrow, if anyone asks, don’t mention the collapsed floor, all

right? Just say it was my... spontaneous grand gesture of good will, a welcoming gift for you, young couple, eh?”

“Say yes,” Yellena advised.

“OK. I mean, I understand. We’ll do as you say.”

“Good!” the stout man glowed. “Good news! Now, come on, I’ll help you with your suitcases...”

Yellena held back a gasp when Bartholomew showed them his house, a mansion about fifteen minutes up the gentle slope of the main road. If their new home was fancy, this one could be only described as decadent.

“There’s a swimming pool in the back yard!” she squealed into her husband’s ear, but he was too tired and quite too drunk to care. Bartholomew ran inside and then back again, carrying a cardboard box of items.

“It’s all yours! S’il vous plaît!” he said, with a funny curtsy. “You can stay for as long as you like!”

“Until our house gets fixed.”

“Yeah, sure, sure! Now, sorry, I’ve got-
ta run. This thing is heavy! See ya!”

Too tired to think, Dooshan curled him-
self by Yellena, and soon, they were snoring
once again, this time in a king-sized bed with
salmon colored satin linings, which looked and
felt like it was never been slept in before.

Next morning, the young pair got up,
had coffee, and ate a big breakfast from the
lavishly stocked fridge while quietly eyeing
the strange stone sculptures adorning the inte-
rior of the house. After consulting Google
maps, they arrived at their new workplace, a
stylish building of brick and glass, only fifteen
minutes of brisk walk through the meadows
away from their latest home. They were shown
to their offices and then quickly went to work,
not that different from the one they did online
before coming to the States. A business-related
meeting later, they met up with Branko in the
break room, eager to tell him about the house-
swap, omitting the part about the collapsed
floor.

Branko seemed somewhat surprised,
but not as much as Dooshan expected.

“Well, I told you Bart was a nice guy.
Strange, but nice. This is exactly the kind of
random thing he would do.”

“But, to just give his mansion to some
strangers...”

“Dude, you still don’t get it? That’s
like, nothing to him. You don’t understand
how rich these people are. They didn’t arrive
on the Mayflower, they probably owned it, and
the shipyard that built it, too. I’d say, count
your blessings and enjoy. And invite us for
coffee sometimes,” Branko said, patting his
friend on the shoulder. “What’s the house like
on the inside, anyway? Bart invited us for
drinks a couple of times, but none of us ever
went over the threshold. Is it all gold and ivo-
ry? Posters of naked women? Swastikas and
iron crosses? Abdul from the accounting bets
on satanic memorabilia.”

“Nah, none of that,” Dooshan laughed.
“It’s fancy, a lot of expensive things in locked
showcases everywhere, but otherwise pretty
normal, actually.”

“Except for the stone heads!” Yellena jumped in.

“Yeah! There are creepy stone masks and, like, old stuff, everywhere, like in a museum.”

“Ah, the Anasazi artefacts. At least, some people think them to be – they look like Anasazi relics, even though the tribe didn’t usually settle this far north. There’s actually quite a lot of that stuff all over the valley. You’ll see. Just pay attention when you walk around, there are ruins everywhere.”

“Anasazi, what’s that? Are those, like, Indians or something?” Dooshan blathered.

“‘Native Americans’ is the term people use these days, but yes, it’s what you mean.”

“But I thought the Indian... natives, where the ones with the bows, and the feathers, and the...”

Dooshan opened his mouth and lifted his palm over it, but Yellena managed to place her gentle hand over her husband’s and push it to his lips just in time to stop him from performing a very racist vocal gesture.

“There are different kinds of native Americans, Dootzey, not all of them are like those from old cowboy movies. Now, let’s go back to work, the break is over.”

Of all the commodities of his fancy new house, Dooshan decided that he liked the huge TV set the best. He was sitting comfortably in a leather armchair, watching the game and drinking beer, when the doorbell rang.

“Yello, can you get it, please? I’m watching the Lakers game!”

The only answer he received was the rumbling of boxes coming from the basement and the repeated doorbell chime, sounding more impatient the second time.

“Who could it be this late, almost no one even knows we live here...” Dooshan mumbled as he approached the front door, following the game on the screen for as long as he could.

When he opened the door, he was confronted with a strange sight: an old man, with a grumpy face, wearing a hat and a suit that be-

longed in a museum, or on a character in a period piece drama.

“Who are you?” the man yelled, swiping his cane, which made Dooshan immediately think of Ebenezer Scrooge, or Scrooge McDuck.

“I’m Dooshan Popov... And who are you??”

The stranger barged in, pushing the young man with his sheer presence.

“Where is he? Where’s Bartholomew?” he barked, looking left and right.

“He’s in my house... We swapped houses... You see, he wanted...”

“Again with some foolishness with that boy,” the man grumbled.

“Dootzey, who is it?” Yellena sang from the inside of the house.

“It’s Mr. Ebenezer Scroo... I mean Cabot, honey.”

“Well, invite him in! I’ll put on some coffee.”

“I do not want coffee!” the man yelled to Dooshan’s face. “And I’m Obadiah, not Ebenezer, you buffoon! Now, give me the

number of your previous house, the one my brother got from you when you swapped.”

“Umm, it’s number nine, I think...”

“Thank you! Good night!” Obadiah said, spun, and marched back into the night.

Dooshan and Yellena stood at the door for a second, listening to the crickets.

“Do you think we’re in trouble?” the man asked.

“I don’t think so. But his brother probably is,” she concluded, and went back into the house.

“I’m gonna go and see,” Dooshan added, putting on his denim jacket.

“See what?” his wife answered, with a voice diminished by the distance and disinterest.

“I don’t know,” he said, and stepped into the dark.

Dooshan followed the strange old man down the dim and empty road. He stepped lightly between the sparse streetlights, maintaining a safe distance of non-detection. The

night gave the valley a primordial smell, that of water, weeds, and wilderness.

Obadiah entered the yard and headed for the front door. Not even bothering with the doorbell or knocking, he pulled out a heavy bundle of keys from his jacket pocket and, after some fiddling and swearing in a language Dooshan couldn't recognize, opened the door and went in. And locked it again behind him. In turn, Dooshan swore in Serbian. Suddenly remembering, he patted his own jacket pocket. He realized he still had a spare key to the house. Opening the lock as quietly as he managed, he went in.

"If they spot me, I'll just say I came to pick up something that I forgot," he pondered, creeping silently through the dark corridor.

Dooshan quickly reached the hole that used to be the combined kitchen and dining room. An extension cord slithered from the outlet on the wall and into the pit. Faint light glimmered from somewhere deep down. He could hear Obadiah's voice, first in that strange language, then in English. It was coming from the bowels of the dark hole.

Years of playing basketball on the city asphalt made getting down into the hole a sinch for Dooshan. His sneakers-clad feet felt a rock, and he lowered himself onto it silently. Dooshan followed the sounds, the lights, and the extension cord, and after a couple of minutes of skulking through a slightly downward-sloping tunnel, he reached their source. It was a medium-sized cavern, illuminated by a plain room lamp powered by the extension cord. A stereo system was plugged into the same cord, and placed along with a couple of empty bottles beside a stone box of a sort. The box, as well as many angular stones in the cavern, was covered with carvings not unlike the ones Dooshan found in Bartholomew's house, which Branko identified as Anasazi. It was too dark to make out any details, but while some of the engravings looked like human faces, the others seemed distorted, alien and sinister. Bartholomew sat inside the rectangular box, arguing with his older brother, who circled around his resting place like a vulture. They argued in English and the unknown language in turn.

“Typical of you! So typical! Always selfish!” Obadiah spat, circling.

“I am selfish??” Bartholomew went into counter-offensive. “Excuse me, but you two practically excluded me from using the old chamber!”

“You know what the priorities are!” Obadiah waved his finger into his younger sibling’s face. “We have different obligations, and different requirements! You...”

“I, what, I don’t do anything important, so I don’t get any? That’s nice, real nice, Obi, just let your younger brother die, real nice!”

“Don’t call me Obi, you know how I resent that. And you are far from dying, you. Just look at you!” Obadiah went in close to examine Bartholomew’s face. “You’ve overdone it! What will people say??”

“What *will* they say? I’ll just tell them I went to a beauty parlor. Or that I’m sober.”

“It’s all a joke to you. A jest. But this is not right. I will report this to Ebenezer. He needs to... We need to decide the usage of this new well. We need to plan ahead. A lot of work is in our future. The Canada plans...”

“Oh, will you give it a rest with the Canada plans! That won’t come to fruition in ages!”

“When it comes to fruition, it will give us power and wealth beyond...”

“Please stop it! I need to live *now*! Now, I tell you, while I still have *some* remaining will to live! Besides that, good luck getting to talk to Ebenezer. He’s been down in his dig for months now. He’s not talking to anyone.

Do you know what I wager? I wager he’s found himself one of these,” he said, patting at the rock trough, which with every passing second reminded Dooshan more and more of a sarcophagus. “Oh, yes. He found one, and he’s not sharing it with anyone.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Not all people are as you. If he would to find such a thing, he would most certainly share it. And, just so you know, I already have an arrangement with him, for Thursday evening. He is open for talk with those worth talking to.”

“So go ahead and talk, what do I care. I’m obviously not invited into the upper echelon,” Bart sulked.

“I expect you to be there. Eight o’clock. Just tell the guards you are with me.”

“I resent the fact that I need to beg the people I pay with my own money to let me see my own brother.”

“You know the rules. Eight o’clock sharp...”

Dooshan sensed that this was the end of the conversation, and hurried back the way he came from. One eerie, and very confused walk home later, he entered his new home. In light of the latest discoveries, it felt wrong, like entering a crime scene.

“Dootzey, that you? How did it go?”

“I dunno,” he mumbled, hanging his jacket.

“What do you mean, ‘you don’t know’? You didn’t know why you went when you went, and now you don’t know again?”

“I dunno, Yello,” Dooshan shook his head. “This is all very weird. I’ll ask Branko tomorrow. All these people are insane!”

The following morning at the office, Dooshan hunted for a moment alone with his childhood friend.

“Listen, Branko,” he said, slurping coffee in a nonchalant way, “did you ever notice something... weird, happening ‘round here?”

“Weird like what?” Branko retorted, biting into his sandwich.

“Oh, I don’t know... Like, these people, these Cabots, and these Indian ruins...”

Branko smiled.

“Anasazi ruins. What exactly are you getting at?”

“Well, you know, I don’t care, but you know how Yella is, she reads a lot of those Stephen King books, and it’s always mystery and intrigue and conspiracy with her...”

The tall Serb laughed again.

“Gotta disappoint you there, not much mysterious happens around here. A few office romances and gossips, and that’s about that.”

“Sooo, no missing persons, or UFOs, or...”

“Sorry. We do have some lay-offs from time to time, but it’s all pretty public and by the book.”

“Ah. Well, sorry. I guess all those novels and the stone heads in our house went to Yella’s head.”

Feeling none the wiser, Dooshan decided not to push the subject with his friend any further.

But also, he decided that he needed to find out what that mysterious meeting was about. He needed consulting, and there was only one person in the whole world whose advice he took seriously.

Yellena listened to his story from start to finish, frowning.

“You aren’t seriously considering going there, are you?”

“I have to, Yello. I have to check. This all seems like a sect of a sort.”

“Well of course it’s a ‘sect of a sort’, Dootzey!” the young woman argued. “It’s all a sect with these rich people. Sects, fraternities, secret societies, how do you think they get and stay this rich, huh? You should be happy that you are inside, instead of being one of the poor

exploited souls. And don’t you dare go to that house, you hear me? Do you want us to get fired? We only got this job!”

But Dooshan was relentless.

“I’m a Christian, Yello, Orthodox! I don’t want to be involved with a satanic sect! I wanted for us to have children here, I can’t have children with satanists around me! Who knows what they’ll make us do one day?”

“Calm down, you don’t know they are satanists. Maybe it’s just like... I don’t know, some old tradition, we ourselves have many strange customs, too. How do you think they’d react if they saw us eating at a graveyard?”

Dooshan paused, scratching his short-cropped black hair.

“You are right. It’s probably nothing. But I need to know for sure. I’ll never sleep again if I don’t find out.”

“They’ll kick you out,” the slim girl warned him, in a singalong voice.

Dooshan mused for a minute.

“No. I’ve got a plan. I know how we’ll do it.”

“We??” Yellena protested. “I’m not getting involved. If you want to play detective, go ahead, I’m staying right here.”

“But I though you liked intrigue like this?”

“Yes, Dootzey, I like it. In books. In TV shows. In movies. Not in my life.”

The young man mused some more.

“OK. Stay here. But I’ll still need your help. I’ll need you to bake a cake.”

“That I can do.”

“Good. Make it a nice one, and have it ready by Thursday afternoon.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing. Just... don’t get aggressive. Try to find out what you want, and if you can’t, back off. Don’t get yourself in trouble.”

Dooshan nodded in confirmation.

#

It was a hot evening, not yet relenting to the night’s chill. Dooshan regretted immediately for not thinking through the way of carrying his load. The castle-like house on the hill turned out to be farther away then it appeared, and the package and the bag got uncomfortably heavy after a mile of walking. He also wished

that the clandestine meeting was later in the evening, as it was still relatively light outside and he had to pretend to ignore the curious stares of passerby on his way to the eldest Cabot’s mansion.

After what seemed to be an eternity of marching uphill between fragrant fields and meadows, he finally reached his destination. The abode looked even more like a castle up close.

The foundation and lower floor seemed ancient, made out of the same worn stones he saw scattered all over (and, as he recalled, under) the valley, but the upper floors looked more modern, in a variation of a Spanish colonial revival style, even though they did eventually spire into spiky towers, like those of a cartoon evil wizard. What certainly was contemporary was a cast iron fence, with two guards in full combat gear, brandishing automatic assault rifles. Dooshan lowered his load to the ground, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and checked the time on his phone: it was ten past eight, as planned. He lifted the cake box and the plastic bag again and approached the guard at the gate, which was eyeing him suspi-

ciously ever since he reached the summit of the hill.

“This is an off-limit zone, sir,” said the dark-skinned sentry, scowling seriously. “I’m gonna have to ask you to leave.”

“Oh, no, I’m with sir Obadiah, actually,” Dooshan played his best dummy role, practiced to perfection on numerous occasions of coming home late at night drunk.

“I didn’t recie...” the guard started, but the young man cut him off.

“Actually, it was Bart... Bartholomew who told me to come along. I’ve been living in his house for some time, see, and he told me to bring him his wine,” Dooshan said, lifting the plastic bag up with his finger. “He told me to tell you that he’s with sir Obadiah, and that I’m with him. And this here, is a cake. A little welcoming present for the big boss. My wife baked it herself. She’s an excellent cook.”

The guard mulled this information for a second or two, then lifted his comm device as if to say something before deciding against it.

“You can go in,” he said, moving aside. “Go around the back, then take the staircase down.”

“Thank you, sir.”

At first, Dooshan thought that he misunderstood the instructions the guard gave him. He went around to the back of the house, and, true enough, there was a plain metal door with a light on above it. He opened the door quietly and immediately spotted a large muddy footprint of Bartholomew’s old-timey shoe on the first step of the stairs leading down. He wondered why a meeting would be held in the basement and not in some fancy office, but then he remembered the last gathering of the two brothers. Chills surged through his body; still, he quietly began his descent.

There was more than one underground level, as he quickly discovered. Under the basement apartment, as lavish as any penthouse, was a wine cellar, and under it, another cellar, of a more common sort. Yet the stairs led down, and a faint echo of familiar voices whispered from the depths.

Finally, Dooshan reached a door set in ancient, rough-cut stones. He opened it as slowly and as carefully as he could, silencing the expected creak of the worn hinges. A waft of chilly air

waved over him. A combination of stone outcropping and construction scaffolds led spiraling down into a spacious cave grotto. Floodlights shot through the darkness, making it traversable, but doing little to defeat it – the walls of the cavern remained concealed. The cave was cold and spacious, and the rock carvings of not-quite-human faces stared at him from every dark corner. Another of the stone sarcophagi like the one Dooshan saw beneath his prior home lay before him, and beyond it, power tools and digging equipment lay strewn. The voices came from somewhere around them. Fighting his fear, the young man crept forward.

Beyond the small excavator lay a freshly-made hole in the stone floor, descending even deeper by the way of steel scaffolds. “*The voices definitely came from there*”, Dooshan realized and crept down.

Another large cave lay below, and Dooshan began wondering just how deep under the surface he actually was. To his relief, it was the final level. About twelve feet below him, he saw the three Cabot brothers milling about and

arguing. Dooshan put down the bag and the cake box, and concentrated to see and hear what was going on.

It was his first time laying eyes on the fabled Ebenezer Cabot, apart from a couple of grainy images he saw on the net. He looked exactly as Dooshan pictured him. While resembling his siblings, his facial features were sharper and more wrinkled, giving him a more distinguished look. When he moved aside, Dooshan could see that he stood in front of another stone coffin, only this one wasn’t empty. What lay inside, he couldn’t see clearly, but it looked vaguely human-like, with several tubes and cables leading from it and into assorted apparatus. Dooshan crept even forward, to the edge of the scaffold stairs and sharpened his ears. “...the fact stands that he kept his discovery from us. Such a discovery! Such an asset, an invaluable asset!”

“Oh, asset my ass! You have your cradle, and I have mine. Fair’s fair. I don’t see what the big deal is,” Bartholomew scoffed at his brother. “Oh, you don’t see what the big deal is, don’t you? Well, that’s the problem. You never see

the big picture, you don't even look at it! You can't see the forest from the trees!"

"And you can't see the world from your own ass!"

Bartholomew was done with the discussion, completely ignoring his elder sibling and fishing out a cigar from his coat pocket.

"Do you hear what's he saying?? Do you, Ebenezer? Such insolence, from such a whelp!"

If he did hear, Ebenezer didn't show any signs.

The old man was fully invested with his work, checking the readings on his hand-held device, and adjusting the dials and sliders.

"The cradles are our ultimate asset! Without their restorative powers, our empire would crumble..."

"Let him keep the new cradle," the eldest brother finally spoke. "As he said, you have yours, and he has his."

"We have ours, brother, we, the two of us! We share a singular cradle, and a quite depleted one at that! Why should he have his own, while we, who have seniority, should share one, an inferior one, I must add? Do you know

how much I've been working lately? I hardly even sleep! I need that boost! And all the while, you are here, in your caverns, doing God knows what."

"I thought you were digging for a new cradle and that you've found one," Bart remarked, now patting himself in search for a lighter.

"And it turned out, I was the one to find it! Isn't that ironic?"

Ebenezer kept quiet for a while before answering.

"I didn't find a new cradle. What I have found, is something potentially much better. If my theories are correct, and my experiments work, we won't be dependent of the cradles anymore."

"What do you mean?" both brothers suddenly became very invested.

"The cradles were never meant for us. Human beings, that is. That's why their potency is limited."

"Oh yeah? Well, who were they meant for, then?"

"They were meant for creatures like this," Ebenezer said, and moved aside. His two

brothers gathered closer, all of a sudden interested in what lay in the coffin.

“You mean that’s not a statue?” Bartholomew gasped.

“Nay, tis not. It is a creature, a guardian of old. The cradles, those are like... charging stations for them. Their capacity for the receiving and retaining of the restorative power is much greater than ours. If I could mimic the process and adjust it, one dosage of the rest could last us a couple hundred years.”

“By God!”

Obadiah shook his head and stepped back.

“Not by God, Bart, by the Devil! I don’t like the looks of this!”

Sensing that things are just now getting interesting, Dooshan crept even further towards the edge of the platform. Straining as he tried, he still couldn’t see what lay in the coffin.

“Oh, what, after half a millennium of using restorative powers of strange Gods and people, you suddenly find it offensive and sacrilegious? You always were a hypocrite, Obadiah!”

“Using the cradles was one thing, but this...

creature! It is a demon! We shouldn’t interfere with such unclean forces!”

“Brother, you are so unclean with sin that both Mississippi and Colorado couldn’t wash the blood from your hands.”

“That’s business,” Obadiah barked back to his snide little brother. “This is something else. It’s witchcraft!”

“What this is,” Ebenezer surmised, “is a solution to all of our problems, present and future. I don’t care if it is from the Devil himself. It is a power, an asset, and we are going to claim it and use it, as any other.”

“Um, it’s not going to... Come alive, is it?”

Bartholomew asked, finally succeeding in lighting his expensive cigar and releasing a thick billow of smoke.

“No. At least not if you don’t feed it a hefty dose of sugar and alcohol. You don’t happen to have any of those in dangerous vicinity, do you?”

“Nah,” Bart laughed. “I have some schnapps in my hipflask, but that’s for me! I sure as hell

don't plan to share it with some ancient mummified bastard!"

Dooshan's foot milled even closer to the edge. He felt pushing against something. And then, he saw a dark bottle and an even darker cake plummeting downwards. The bottle crashed, and the cake splattered. All over the sarcophagus.

"What in the..."

The Cabot brothers spun to see where the unusual projectiles had come from, but, then, another occurrence grabbed their attention. A buzzing sound began filling the cave. And then, the body from the sarcophagus raised itself upright.

"Er... Ebe?" Bartholomew said, stepping back slowly.

"It's perfectly safe..."

A deep, primal sound emanated from the creature. It was a sort of intermittent grunt, low in tone and impossibly loud. And bone-chilling. The creature made quick, spasmic movements with its arms. Dooshan heard thuds of body parts as they landed on the floor, saw dark

blood flowing and pooling, mixing with the spilt red wine.

Obadiah stared at the handleless, headless, body of his eldest brother, still standing in the same place. And then, he began to scream.

The creature leaped out of the coffin with preternatural speed. A fan of white blades flashed, and the middle Cabot brother collapsed in a pile of bloody limbs.

Bartholomew was posed to run, but decided against the idea.

"Hey, hey, let's not... get carried away here. There's no need for violence! What do you say about a peace offering? I give you something, and you... forgive me. Let me go? Here, you like booze, right? A bit of the old hooch?" he said with a smile, slowly pulling out his silver hipflask and holding it in front of the creature.

In stead of the desired effect, the act only seemed to enrage the creature. With a single swipe of an invisible blade, it cut diagonally through both the flask and Bartholomew's torso. Then, it bellowed again. By the time the

creature finished repeating its call, Dooshan was already halfway up the stairwell.

“Oh God, oh fuck, oh damn...” he panted, as he exited the building.

The guards saw him running with a bewildered look on his face and lifted their rifles up.

“You! Stop! What’s going on, why are you running?” the first guard barked. His gaze trailed off as he spotted the thing emerging from the same door Dooshan did only seconds ago.

It was the first time Dooshan had the chance to see the apparition clearly, and he immediately regretted having the opportunity. The thing seemed humanoid as it laid in the sarcophagus - now, he could see it was anything but. Its only human features were the torso with four appendages growing from it; apart from that, it was as alien as imaginable. The creature’s flesh looked like wet playdough, or bad computer graphics. It didn’t appear to have a distinct head, only a featureless tissue bump. On the end of its “arms” were fans of translucent matter, like dragonfly wings, which disappeared into nothingness in certain angles, as if

two-dimensional. But the most disturbing detail on the thing was the orb embedded in its chest. When Dooshan looked at it, he felt dazzled, as he was falling towards some immense planet from a dizzying height. It messed with his perception of space and made him feel queasy and disoriented. Apparently, it had the exact same effect on the guards, who also began staring at it. Seeing that the guards weren’t paying attention to him anymore, Dooshan sprang like a hare. Soon after, he heard two burst of machinegun fire. A third guttural call told him that the guards’ bullets were fired in vain.

The young man ran with all his might, which was considerable. He flew down the dusky street, jumped over fences, plowed through bushes. As he did, he heard more shots, more screams, and more of the awful sound the creature made.

“Ough-ugh-ugh-ug-ug-uh!”

He reached his home in record time, bursting through the door.

“Dootzey, that you? How did it go?” Yellena asked disinterestedly, listening to loud Serbian

turbo-folk music and scrolling through her phone.

Dooshan was rummaging through the shelves, sweating and pushing things to the floor.

“What are you doing?” the girl asked, more annoyed than anything.

“Where are our passports?” Dooshan panted.

“Our passports? What do you need our passports for? Oh, Dootzey, please don’t tell me you messed up and got us fired!”

Not stopping his search, Dooshan answered.

“We’re not fired. Our bosses are dead, and there’s a vampire chasing me.”

Yellena leaned back, sighed, and continued scrolling.

“Mmm, yeah, a vampire. What did you drink there, absinth?”

Suddenly, his fingers dug into the skin of her slender shoulders.

“Yello, I’m not lying, I’m not joking. We need to leave, now. We need a car, and a weapon...”

Startled, but not believing, Yellena rose up only to hear the echo of the beast’s call close

by. All the hairs on her body stood up, woken up by some primordial instinct.

“Dooshan, what was that?”

“That’s the vampire,” Dooshan said, smashing a glass of a locked wooden case with a near-by stone head and pulling out an expensive-looking shotgun.

“An.. and what, you plan to shoot it?”

“Bullets can’t harm it,” he admitted, remembering the guard, “but I don’t know what else I could do.”

“You can shoot it with a coin! My grandpa always said that’s how you kill a vampire!”

“Where the hell am I gonna find a coin? No one uses cash here!”

“There!” the girl answered, pointing at another locked display case.

Dooshan smashed it with the butt of the rifle and took a handful of ancient-looking coins.

“Silver. This might do,” he said, pushing a coin down the muzzle. “Most likely it will only jam the barrel... Did you get the passports?”

OK, let’s go.”

“Go where?” Yellena panicked.

“Bartholomew has a car. Let’s go to our last house. And let’s hope he left the keys lying around somewhere.”

“What about Branko?” Yellena squealed, as she moved towards the door.

“Fuck Branko! He’s the one that got us into this mess. I’d bet he knew about the sect thing all along!”

There were more shots in the dark. More screams, too. Alarms started blaring. The peaceful valley began transforming into a nightmare just beyond their sight. The pair ran down the street as fast as they could, or, as fast as Yellena could. They were passing under a streetlight when Dooshan saw a familiar shadow growing and reaching for them. Yellena screamed. Dooshan spun and squeezed the trigger. The gun fired loudly, smoking in the yellow light. Projectile hit the mark, only to bounce off with a spark. The girl screamed again as the creature advanced. Suddenly, it slowed its steps. The creature started shaking, vibrating, its clay-like flesh began to ripple and melt. It produced the same buzzing-whirring

sound as it did when it first rose from the sarcophagus, and keeled over.

“You... Did it! You killed it!” the girl cheered, jumping up and down and hugging her husband. But Dooshan didn’t move. His eyes were pointed on the miniature pan-dimensional planet lying on the pavement, like a discarded bocca ball.

“It’s not dead,” he mouthed, gaze still pointed at the downed foe. “Look. Its skin is pulling together back already. I only stunned it. We need to run. Now.”

They ran until they reached their old house. Dooshan produced the keys, and then ran inside, almost falling into the hole in the living room of which he forgot about already.

“Look for keys. Everywhere where keys can possibly be. Hooks, jacket pockets, jars, commodes...”

“I got them!” she shouted out victoriously. “I think! Are these the ones?”

“We’ll see.”

Emerging into the yard, Dooshan pressed the button on the keyring, and a big black SUV responded with a chirp and a blink. They got

inside, and drove as fast as possible back the road they originally came from. Nearing the guard post, Dooshan passed another car speeding towards the valley. He didn't slow down enough to check if they were help or hindrance. There was no one at the gate itself, and he took a chance and drove past it, through saplings and brambles. Luckily, the powerful four-wheel drive vehicle cleared the obstacles.

When they were a good distance from the side road, and sure that the creature wasn't following them, the young pair released a sigh of relief.

"Fucking hell. I don't know... I don't believe what I just saw."

"I don't think that was a vampire, Dootzey."

"I don't care what it was. It was a demon or something. Fucking satanists. And fucking Branko!" he said, hitting the steering wheel angrily.

They drove for a couple of minutes in silence.

"So... What now? Are we going back to Serbia?"

"Fuck no! What would people say? You want to be the laughing stock of the whole town?"

Yellena shrugged.

"No. We're not going back. Fuck that."

Dooshan gripped the leather cover of the wheel. "We'll find a job somewhere else. I mean, this whole country can't be all built on a haunted Indian burial ground, could it?"

The Stafford Building

by Patrick S. Smith

It has been over twenty years since I returned to Taylors, South Carolina, and even longer since I last stepped foot in that building and felt something. Something that still haunts me.

Back in the 80s, Taylors sat quietly on the south side of Wade Hampton Boulevard and consisted mostly of homes and churches, with just a few mom and pop businesses. It didn't even boast a town square or hall. The only notable things on Main Street were a skating rink, the Dairy Dog, a coin laundromat and the Post Office.

At that time in my life, it was the perfect place to grow up. Friends were always nearby and several places to explore, like the Stafford Building.

The Stafford, built in 1919, was the only hotel that ever existed in Taylors, a residential suburb of Greenville. Having electricity and phone service put it on equal footing with the elite hotels in Greenville, just eight miles away.

Look up the Stafford Building today and you'd think little of it. A simple, twelve-room hotel built in the 1910s that stayed in business for forty years. In that time, it also served as a boarding house and a brothel. At most, the fact that a suspected murderer once stayed there, and over a dozen women were last seen at The Stafford, would only raise an eyebrow.

The truth that I know is far more ominous, and The Stafford should have had a different history than it did.

My first experience with The Stafford came in the summer of '82 when I was eleven and just out of elementary school.

Luke and I were riding our bikes to the skating rink during the second week of summer vacation when he asked, "Hey, Matt, have you been to The Stafford?"

"The Stafford? What's that?"

"It's an old building near the Post Office. Some people got killed there way back when it was a hotel. Supposed to be creepy."

Luke and I had been friends since the third grade, spending countless afternoons exploring the woods around the subdivisions. During the previous summer, we had even investigated an old, decrepit house. So, the thought of exploring an eerie hotel sounded better than skating. "Sure." We turned our bikes and rode towards the Stafford.

We got to Mill Street and turned onto it. Aside from the Post Office, I had never had a reason to come to this side of town, and never without my parents. All the other businesses on Main Street were on the other end, so there wasn't much else except empty lots and rough terrain. The Stafford was on the far end of Mill Street, so it sat alone, like some wallflower.

When I first saw it, the Stafford looked unassuming. I had seen several three-story brick buildings before, and the Stafford really didn't have any features to make it stand out, other than age had caused some of the concrete and bricks to chip. Not even the boarded-up windows made it seem impressive. When we went inside, my impression changed.

When we saw the front door boarded shut, Luke and I rode our bikes to the rear and found the back door unlocked. I tried the knob and found the door pulled open easily. When we entered, there was this odd sensation like I shouldn't be there, especially with the remnants of police tape attached to the door frame. It was a knot in the pit of my stomach like you get when you are about to do something risky for the first time, just more intense.

The back door, its frame warped with age, opened up to the kitchen. A faded outline marked where the stove had stood next to the sink counter. Against the other wall, a heavy wooden table stood. Old soda cans, empty food containers and broken bottles littered the floor,

clearly showing we were not the first people who had been here.

Across from the back door was a pair of doors that led deeper into the Stafford. We went through the door on the right and entered a hallway that led towards the front of the building. The air tasted stale, and the hardwood floors, stained a roasted butternut color, creaked with every step. Each footstep sent dust into the air. Lining one wall of this hallway were three doors. The one closest to us was a full bathroom with a clawfoot tub. After examining the bathroom, we went to the next room, which was a bedroom.

Luke and I peered into the bedroom. Though in a decayed state, the bed and furniture were still present. The metal bed frame itself seemed solid, but the mattress showed where vermin had chewed in to get to the stuffing. The drawers to the dresser were missing or broken into kindling.

Walking into that room, that feeling that I shouldn't be there got stronger. It wasn't just the hairs on the back of your neck standing up sensation. It was deeper, like I was about to do

something dangerous and I could get hurt. I noticed Luke felt it also as he kept looking around for something.

“You all right?”

“Yeah. Just feels like a bug is on me,” he said in a broken voice.

Our nerves failed us when we heard something fall in the building, and we bolted out the way we came. We jumped on our bikes and pedaled like our lives depended on it until we got to the Dairy Dog.

After we arrived and caught our breath, we pointed at each other and laughed at how scared we had been.

That was June 23rd. Two nights later, I had my first dream of the Stafford.

I was back in that bedroom again.

This time, it wasn't a disaster area; it was liveable. The wardrobes were upright and pushed up against the wall, along with a full-length mirror. In addition, there was a vanity. I don't know where the vanity and mirror came from, as there was no sign of them when Luke and I were in the room.

It was night, and the moonlight filtered through the open windows. The curtains danced on the breeze, and outside I heard crickets chirping.

A man and woman lay in the bed, asleep. As I watched this couple sleep, trying to make sense of things, I saw a glint of something metallic appear above them, like a string or wire being pulled taut. It came down swiftly onto the pair, cutting their necks. In the light from the moon, I saw the blood pour out of the wounds.

I awoke with a shiver. I had had vivid dreams before, so I brushed it off and went back to sleep. But somehow, I knew I would go back to the Stafford, if only in my dreams. It was not until 1993 that I learned the Stafford made the newspaper a couple of days after Luke and I had been there.

A seventeen-year-old girl, Tammy Robbins, and her friends had camped out in the Stafford on the night of the 25th. The next morning, Tammy was missing.

It wasn't until the summer of '85 that I returned to The Stafford. I had had a couple

more dreams about that place, but nothing as intense as the first.

Brian, Allen, Doug and I made plans during the last week of school to go check out the Stafford. I'm sure Luke would have joined us if he hadn't already flown to Montana to spend the summer with his father.

The following Thursday was warm and sunny, and Brian, Allen and I sat outside the Dairy Dog, waiting for Doug.

When Doug arrived, all our plans almost went out the window.

He came to the Dairy Dog with Blair and Cyndie. The three of them walked over to our table and I heard Allen groan when he saw them.

"Y'all ready? I hope you don't mind if Blair and Cyndie come along."

"I do mind. They weren't in the plan," Allen said. The gruffness in his voice was a clear sign he was not happy about the girls being there. Blair glared at Allen while Cyndie sucked on her bottom lip and looked down at the ground.

Doug glanced over at me while I just stared back. I wasn't thrilled with the situation. It was originally just to be us guys. Now it was turning into an unwarranted gaggle.

Doug ushered the girls inside the Dairy Dog so we could discuss the state of affairs. Since Doug and Blair were seeing each other, he told her about our plans. This led Blair to invite Cyndie and herself along.

Allen was just flat-out against them. During the last year, he had bragged about how Blair would ask him to the Sadie Hawkins dance. When she asked Doug instead, Allen became bitter towards her and held a grudge. "You should have asked us first," Brian said. He sat up straight and folded his arms across his chest.

Allen and Doug were getting into a heated discussion when Brian turned to me and put the ball in my lap. "Mathew, you haven't said anything."

I had known Blair since elementary school. She had always been this playful, manipulative girl who was used to getting her way. At the

same time, she had no hesitation about stepping on a bug if she saw it.

Cyndie, whom I met in art class this past year, came across as a bit nerdy and withdrawn most of the time. Until you got her out of her shell and she started letting her inner geek come out. It was during one of these moments in art that I found out she liked paranormal and fantasy, so I figured how bad could it be to have her along?

“Doug, next time, do like Brian said and let us know beforehand.”

He nodded in subdued agreement before getting the girls.

The six of us walked to The Stafford, with Doug and Blair leading the way, holding hands as we walked. Cyndie and I followed while Brian and Allen brought up the rear like a couple of third wheels.

Cyndie tapped me on the arm and pointed to Doug and Blair. “That is so silly of them.” To me, at fourteen, it did seem silly. “I know.” “What possessed you to come with us to The Stafford? I know you are into legends and

ghost stories, but why go check it out with four guys?”

“My Mom’s great-aunt was related to Mrs. Stafford, the original owner’s wife. I think they were cousins.”

“Oh great. Miss Know-It-All is already at it,” I heard Allen say under his breath.

Cyndie looked down at the ground, retreating into her shell. I tried asking what she knew about The Stafford, but she replied with silence. When we reached The Stafford, she told us a little about the history; things like it opened in 1919 and closed around 1960.

We paused outside the kitchen door. Despite the wind, the heat of the sun felt oppressive. Since I was the only one who had been inside, I led the way. The shade of The Stafford was a welcome relief, but the air hung thick and stagnant.

The kitchen was as I remembered it, except for the table that had been moved out from the wall, revealing a trapdoor.

“What’s down there?” Brian asked.

“Since it is a door going down, I’d say the basement,” I said in a sarcastic tone.

Amid the groans, I heard Cyndie snort, trying to suppress a laugh. Her shell was cracking.

“Ask a question, get a dumb answer,” Brian said in his usual stoic voice.

“I don’t know. That is really sound reasoning, Mathew,” Cyndie said, loosening up again. That was the first time I had heard her call me by my given name. Everyone else, except Brian, called me “Matt.”

“Don’t encourage him,” Doug said.

“I don’t know what is down there because Luke and I didn’t see the door the last time.” Without hesitation, Brian opened the door, and immediately a damp, musty smell assaulted us. Brian and I peered down into the pitch black of the basement, only to see the stairs disappear into a void. In that darkness, I thought I heard a drop of water hit a puddle.

Blair clutched Doug’s arm. “No way am I going down there.” Something about her reaction seemed off to me.

Because none of us had thought about bringing flashlights, I agreed with her. Brian

closed the door, and we proceeded the way I had gone three years earlier.

We passed the bathroom and went into the bedroom, and up to this point, I hadn’t had that uneasy feeling I had sensed before. But once we stepped inside, I felt something. That dream I had before played through my mind, like some terrifying ghostly echo. I shuddered with an icy chill.

I could tell someone had been here since my visit. A pile of smashed boards was all that remained of the dresser. The mattress rested against the wall, and sitting on its side was the bed frame. I noticed something odd when I looked at the floor.

The wood floor of the bedroom was the same color as the hallway, except where the bed had been.

Where the head of the bed had stood, a large swatch of the floor was a deep maroon. The pattern on the floor looked as if something had been poured on the bed and it had seeped through the mattress.

In a nonchalant voice, Allen said, “Just an old bedroom.”

“Why is the floor stained there?” Doug pointed to the spot where the bed had been. Brian walked over and knelt down. “Blood, maybe. I went to this old colonial house on a field trip. It had a stain on the floor like this where someone had been shot.”

“Gross.” Blair’s face screwed up as she spoke.

“This must have been the Staffords’ bedroom. They were found dead in their bed,” I heard Cyndie say. Her voice was eerie and flat, like she was reciting something dreadful.

“How would you know?” Allen asked with a sneer.

“‘Cause I read an old newspaper article about it.” Cyndie snapped her head towards Allen. Her eyes burned through him.

“Horrible. Doug, can we leave?” Blair was now pulling on Doug’s arm. Her actions seemed over the top, like the cliché dumb blond in a cheap slasher film. He reached over and patted her hand to reassure her.

“Hey, Matthew. What else is in here?”

I shrugged in response. “Don’t know, Brian. This is as far as Luke and me got before something spooked us, and we ran out.”

“Chickenshit.”

Rolling his head at Allen, Doug said, “Quit being an asshole.”

We left the bedroom and went to the next door. When I walked out of the room, I felt more at ease.

The next room appeared as if someone had gone on a rampage in it. A metal desk was overturned, as were the wooden filing cabinets. The remains of broken chairs and smashed drawers littered the room.

“Must have been an office. This was a hotel,” I said.

The others voiced their agreement, so we pressed on and opened the door that led to the front of The Stafford.

We stepped into some sort of gathering room or parlor. It spanned the full width of the building, and scraps of tables and chairs covered the floor. There was so much grime on the carpet, it was impossible to tell what color it had been. Along the wall to our right were the

smashed remains of an old TV or radio. I could never identify it because all the glass tubes were shattered and the wooden case demolished.

To our left, we saw that the room extended back to what we guessed was a dining area. The door on the far wall led back into the kitchen. Closer to the front of The Stafford, a set of stairs leading up served as a partition wall.

Much to my surprise, the steps didn't creak as we climbed them. The only sound was our footsteps and breathing. The stairs ended at the first-floor balcony, which wrapped around the entire floor and gave a view of the lobby below. Brian led us to a door with a brass number one on and opened it.

The bed frame, which was all that remained of the bed, occupied most of the room. The mattress had been gutted, and the stuffing tossed about. A single, straight-back chair lay broken and half buried under the remains of the mattress. Scattered about were pieces of wooden furniture too damaged to identify.

Rooms two, three and four were the same as the first. Something caught Allen's attention in room four, and he stayed behind while we moved on.

Room five was different.

The door to the room was of a different design than the others and was partially open. Just standing near the door, I sensed that something bad or terrible lay beyond.

I tried opening the door, but it would not move.

"Guys, be careful," Cyndie said.

Just peeking inside, I could see that the room had not been trashed like the others. It gave the impression that time had forgotten this room. Brian and I were trying to force the door open when Allen came out of room four holding something.

"Hey Matt, catch!"

Allen then tossed something towards me.

In the light from the front windows, I saw the silhouette of a long, thin, rope-like object as it came towards me. It hit me in the chest and fell to the ground. When I saw it move and flick its tongue, I knew immediately what it was.

A snake.

In an instant, an insane fear gripped me, distorting my memories of what happened. I have snippets of visions of someone holding me while I'm being led somewhere. A vague recollection of the scent of honeysuckle as I'm falling down stairs. Someone holding me while I'm curled up in the fetal position. Bolting through the field behind The Stafford. And the screams, I could never tell if they were mine or not.

The next thing I remember clearly is sitting back at the Dairy Dog, shaking violently. Brian and Doug were sitting across from me. Brian was shoving a hot dog in his mouth while Doug held a cup to his eye. Cyndie was sitting next to me, cradling my head on her shoulder.

"What happened?" I asked, my voice unsteady. I reached to my head, where I found a knot. All over my body, I could feel bruises. Brian swallowed his hot dog. "That asshole Allen found a snake and threw it at you. You took off like a bat out of hell. Doug ran you down and tackled you. Don't know if that

bump on your head is where you fell down the stairs or when Doug caught you."

The vision of the snake flying through the air replayed in my mind, causing me to shiver. "Doug, if I hit you, I'm sorry."

"You didn't hit me. Allen did. After everyone caught up with us, he was laughing his ass off at you, and Cyndie busted him in the mouth. When he tried to take a swing back at her, I jumped his ass. About the only lick he got in." Doug pulled the cup from his eye, showing off his battle scar. The area under his eye was dark red and swollen.

"Where is Blair?" I asked, looking around. Doug gave me a glum look.

"She dumped him. Blair said he was more concerned about you than her," Cyndie said. She sounded irritated at what transpired with Blair.

She then asked a question that caught us off guard. It changed the conversation and helped me settle down. "Do you all play D&D?"

Brian's reaction was priceless as he dropped his hot dog in his lap, and I nearly fell over backwards, laughing at him.

I think we saw Allen once after that day. For all of us, he had crossed lines one too many times. He was zoned for a rival high school, and we lost touch with him.

It was not until school started that fall that I saw Blair again. Other than apologizing for skipping out on me after the snake incident, she ignored us.

A couple of weeks later, I had another strange dream. It almost seemed like a scene out of a black and white film, except everything was vivid and hauntingly real.

A man was in a small hotel room, writing a letter, when there was a knock at the door. The only word I could recognize from the other side was "Police."

The man had this strange grin as he stood and started walking to the door. When he took his first step, he knocked a book off the table, which landed with an unusual thud. Like a gunshot. A second later, bullets came ripping through the door and the man.

I dropped to the ground and covered my head until the shooting stopped. When I looked at the man, my eyes locked on his. Blood was trickling out of his mouth.

"Heaven has no place for me, and Hell cannot keep me," he said, as if he could see and talk to me.

After that, I woke up trembling and had a hard time going back to sleep.

The following June, I was preparing to move from Taylors to Dutch Fork. In the weeks leading up to the move, I spent most of my time playing D&D with Cyndie, Luke, Doug, Brian, and Tom. Tom's parents had moved to Taylors just before school last year, and we played at Tom's house, as it was the closest for everyone to meet.

A few weeks before I moved, we were planning a big, overnight gaming session, when Tom's younger brother, Mitch, asked if any of us knew about The Stafford. Since Tom and Mitch had not heard the story, we filled them in on what we knew.

Later, after Mitch had gone off to run his afternoon paper route, Doug came up with the idea of camping out there one night.

“Let’s do our all-nighter there because I’m leaving the first of July.”

“I’m game,” Luke said.

“Two conditions. No assholes and no snakes,” Cyndie said. She leaned over and rested her head on my shoulder.

“But how are we going to get there? I don’t want to carry a ton of stuff up there.” Doug said.

It was a fair question since none of us wanted to lug sleeping bags and gaming stuff to The Stafford.

“I’ll drive,” Tom said. It was good having a friend who was a rising junior and could drive.

We spent the next couple of hours drawing up plans for our next sortie to The Stafford. The day came that we were going to camp out at The Stafford. I got up early and mowed my lawn for the last time. Afterwards, I showered, grabbed my stuff, and headed over to Tom’s.

I was the first to arrive. Since we had a few hours to kill before the others showed up, Tom and I went up to the Dairy Dog for lunch.

While we were eating, we saw Doug and his family. He looked like a condemned man savoring his last meal.

After Doug finished eating, he came over to Tom and me. “I can’t make it tonight. Aaron is shipping me off to some school in Texas for the summer. Just because I got a ‘B’ in science.” The frustration in his voice was unmistakable.

I had met Doug’s stepfather a couple of times. He always came across as a jerk and had this “I’m better than you” attitude, all because he had a good job and money. It was a constant struggle for Doug to live up to Aaron’s expectations, even with near straight A’s.

“Bummer man. I’m sorry about blowing that curve out of the water.”

“Don’t sweat it. You earned it, and the letter for science. Just wish you’d do the work so you had the grades.”

“Douglas, time to go,” I heard Aaron say. “Don’t need to keep associating with that

hick.” The words weren’t subtle, and I knew he directed them at me. Aaron looked down on me because my family was originally from rural Tennessee.

“Sorry, guys, but I’ll be out of the game until we go back to school.”

“No problem, man. Try to make the most of your summer.”

I stood up and extended my hand to Doug. He took my hand and gave it a good squeeze. “See you around.”

“Yeah, catch you later.”

That was the last time I saw Doug.

Knowing Doug wouldn’t make it killed some of our enthusiasm, so Tom and I finished our meal in silence.

After lunch, we went back to Tom’s house and saw Brian and Luke walking up. Tom and I updated them about Doug, and then the four of us went inside and started making preparations for our adventure that night. Tom stopped packing to answer the phone when it rang.

When he came back into the room, Tom was frowning. “That was Cyndie. She said something came up, and she can’t make it.

Something important. Sounded like she had been crying.”

“Did she say what it was?” Brian asked.

“Nope. Even when I asked. Just that she was going out of town.”

This dampened our mood even more, but we went back to our preparations. Cyndie was part of the gang, and her not being there just didn’t feel right. Because she felt comfortable around us, she was more open than at school. She could stand her own ground and had this weird talent for changing the direction of a situation. We were going to miss her and Doug that night.

We arrived at The Stafford around 6 pm. Early enough to scope it out in the daylight, but late enough to avoid hours of dead time. Since we had decided to come back, Brian had been itching to see what was in the basement. So when we got there, we pulled out our flashlights and made straight for the kitchen stairs. The door creaked as we opened it.

Using our flashlights, we descended the stairs, with Luke and Brian going first to ensure there were no snakes.

The basement turned out to be a bust. It was exactly what you would expect of a hotel basement: industrial, dusty and uninspiring. A couple of washing machines, dryers, a boiler, and the other necessary machinery to make a building like The Stafford function. If anything was unusual or interesting here, it was the fact that the basement seemed small. It was as wide as the floor above, but only about twenty feet deep.

“Why does it seem like part of the basement is missing?” I asked.

“Does seem small. Maybe they had to redo that wall?” Tom shone his flashlight on the wall towards the front of the building. When he did, the block that made it seemed a different shade than the other walls.

Disappointed, we made our way out of the basement and gave Tom the nickel tour of the ground floor. We skipped the first floor and went immediately to the second, only because Brian and I hadn’t been up there.

The rooms on the second floor were not much different from the ones on the first floor, just in slightly better condition. I say slightly

because the mattresses were not completely eviscerated yet and the chair in room ten was still in one piece.

After exploring the top floor, we descended and went to room five. Again, the sense that something bad was on the other side hit me. It was like going through a fun house, and the lights go out just before the “boo,” only amplified.

This time, the door opened, and we went inside.

Compared to the other rooms, room five was in an eerily pristine condition.

Unlike the others, the furniture in room five was undamaged and pushed against the walls. A layer of dust covered nearly everything, and the paint had peeled in places. The bed looked as if someone had been sleeping in it with muddy shoes. With a good cleaning, fresh sheets, and a new coat of paint on the walls, this room could be rented out again. Still, being in there set my teeth chattering.

“Is it me, or does this room, I don’t know, just feel weird?” Luke asked. He stood at the

doorway and showed no signs of coming in any further.

“Yeah,” Brian said in a long, drawn-out moan.

“The air is stale. Probably because the door wasn’t open,” Tom said, not showing any sign he sensed anything odd.

I shook my head. “No. It felt off when we were just outside. Now it’s even worse.” I could not help wishing Cyndie was here, hoping she knew something about this room.

We were exploring the room when Tom called us over to the chest of drawers. Pointing to something on the chest, he asked, “What are those doing here?”

Sitting on top were a pair of novelty earrings, much like the type little girls would wear. These, though, were larger and had a picture of a manatee on them. The manatee was holding a sign saying “Conservation ‘81.”

Brian stepped over to the chest and picked up one earring. “Who would leave these? My sister got a pair for helping save manatees last year. You just leave them lying around?”

My hand twitched as I saw Brian handle the earring. “Brian, put it back. I don’t think we should be messing with them.”

Luke’s voice cracked. “I think we’ve seen enough. Let’s go back downstairs.” The rest of us agreed and went back down to the parlor, where we set up camp

We used the stairs to mask the light from our lantern and cleared enough space to roll out our sleeping bags. Dinner consisted of pizza from a local pizzeria, and we played D&D till sometime around 4 am before we all knocked off.

I did not sleep well that night.

I dreamt I was in The Stafford’s parlor, back when it was a hotel. The parlor of The Stafford made it seem quaint and pleasant. The type of hotel you wanted to stay at. There were a couple of guests who were sitting, reading the newspaper. It was like a scene out of a painting.

Except for the one man I had dreamt of before.

He was sitting by the fireplace, quietly sipping tea. There was nothing remarkable about

him except his smile. When he smiled, which was most of the time, it was as if he was smiling about something else, something only he knew about.

It was unnerving.

Again and again, the dream replayed. Different guests, different layout for the furniture, but he was always there with his smile.

The next morning, Tom drove us to the local greasy spoon for breakfast. Over plates of runny scrambled eggs, greasy bacon and burnt toast, we talked about our night in The Stafford. I didn't say a word about my dream.

A week later, we had our last gaming session, and Cyndie was back. She told us that her grandmother had just passed, and that is why she had to cancel on us. She had been close with her, so it hit her hard. Cyndie kept apologizing for not telling us before she left.

"I get it. My granddad passed away a couple of years ago. Tore a piece of my soul, and I didn't want anyone to know. But you've taken the hardest step. You let us know. The next thing is to learn that life goes on."

"Thanks, Tom. But that sounds easier said than done."

We were all silent for a few minutes before Cyndie asked, "So what did I miss at The Stafford?" We spent the rest of that day updating her on what the four of us had found.

A few days later, I left Taylors and moved to Dutch Fork. I tried to stay in touch with everyone, but life kept that from happening.

Before moving, I learned Samantha Cheeks, a junior from my high school, had gone missing. She was last seen camping out at The Stafford, like my friends and I had done the week prior.

I also had another dream about the Smiling Man, more lucid than the first.

In that dream, I saw the Smiling Man leaving The Stafford and driving to Greenville in the dead of night. Unlike in my previous dreams, where he dressed in a suit and tie, he dressed more like a factory worker. His dark overalls blended with the shadows of the night. He parked in an alley near the red-light district and walked the rest of the way to where the prostitutes worked. There, he walked the

streets, scanning the women until he found one he spoke to. After a brief conversation with the woman, he led her to the alley where his car was parked.

When they reached his car, he pulled out a garrote - two wooden handles with a piece of wire between them. In a swift motion, cut the woman's neck.

In the dim light, I watched the woman struggle against him, trying to break free, her last moments of life ebbing away.

He lingered over the body, then slowly reached down and removed her earrings. The Smiling Man clutched the earrings to his chest as if they were some priceless heirloom and made a noise. I couldn't tell whether he was laughing or crying.

Soon, he put his trophies away, and he went back to his car and pulled a tarp out of the back seat. He used the tarp to wrap the woman up and placed her in the back of his car.

Finally, he shed the overalls for a change of clothes and drove towards Taylors. Along

the way, he pulled off into a pasture where he dumped the body.

He started to get back in his car when he stopped and turned towards me, as if he could see me through the dream. "You should join me," he said.

I sat up in my bed, breathing rapidly, and almost hit my head on the top bunk. When my breathing finally slowed down, I tried to go back to sleep.

Even after moving to Dutch Fork, The Stafford still haunted my dreams. Most were forgettable except for a few recurring figures: a man and woman who were always together, and The Smiling Man. In some, The Smiling Man beckoned me, whispering invitations to join his dark deeds.

By chance, I bumped into Tom at a gaming convention in '92. At first, it was a roller coaster of emotions for me. The high of reconnecting with an old friend from better days in my life, while at the same time, it had all the awkwardness of starting a new high school as a sophomore. It made me realize how much I had changed.

We spent a few hours reminiscing, and he caught me up on the gang. Then our conversation turned to other things.

“You remember that old hotel we camped out at?”

An image of The Smiling Man flashed in mind, and my fingers twitched. “The Stafford? Yeah, I remember.”

“Remember how we thought the basement was odd? I went back after my senior year and found a second set of stairs down to it. They were hidden in the parlor. That section of the basement is set up like a bar. If that hotel is old enough, I think that was a speakeasy.”

I thought about it for a second. “I think you’re right. That would have been a great place to play D&D.”

“No kidding. Except for the disappearances there.”

“Disappearances?”

“You remember Samantha Cheeks from school?”

“Vaguely.”

“She went missing the week before you left. They found her body a couple of years

ago near Mountain Creek. Then last year, another girl went missing. Both were camping out at The Stafford like we did.”

When Tom told me this, something inside of me was glad Cyndie had not gone with us that night. All I could think of was what if she had gone with us and then ended up missing?

“That is just messed up.”

“You’re telling me. Listen, I got to run. The next round of Illuminati is starting soon. Good to see you again.”

“Good seeing you.”

Over the next year, The Stafford and the news of the disappearances festered in my mind. I would catch myself scanning the Sunday newspaper for murders or missing persons in Greenville and stop what I was doing if I heard Greenville mentioned on the TV.

And there were the nights I dreamed about The Stafford and The Smiling Man. I couldn’t help but believe that there was a connection.

In mid-June of ‘93, I picked up a copy of the Greenville newspaper to satisfy this growing preoccupation. While thumbing through the paper, I caught an article about the discov-

ery of a nineteen-year-old girl's body. She was last seen at The Stafford two years prior.

Reading that article and remembering what Tom had said piqued my curiosity. I had to know more, so the following week, I went to Greenville and the county library.

I spent three days in that library, burying myself in microfiche and dusty records. What started as an odd curiosity was becoming an obsession, causing me to dream not only of The Stafford, but in headlines as well.

On the first day, I found the basics. The hotel opened in 1919 and was owned by Morgan Stafford.

In June 1924, while investigating Florence Myers, a missing prostitute, the police shot and killed a tenant of The Stafford, Spencer Jones, who was staying in room five.

The following year, hotel staff found Mr. and Mrs. Stafford murdered in their own bed.

The next day, I must have gone through two rolls of dimes making copies of everything I could on The Stafford.

One particular picture I saw caused me to do a double take.

It was a picture of the Staffords when they opened the hotel. It was the couple that kept recurring in my dreams, and the ones I saw murdered in the bedroom.

On the third day, I came in to see a throng of kids running around the library. I was about to call it quits when a sympathetic librarian took pity on me and guided me to the basement archives, where I found police records dating back to the twenties.

Without a copier or printer, I wrote until my hand went numb and my eyes crossed.

While writing all of it down, my mind began piecing things together.

From 1927 to 1962, twelve women staying at The Stafford Building vanished. Some were found with their throats cut out with a garrote, but every single one had stayed in room five. All on June 25th.

That is when I made the connection. Everything pointed to that room. That date. To him.

Spencer Jones.

It was nearly 7 pm when I left the library. I hadn't planned on staying that long, as I want-

ed to go to the Dairy Dog and remember the good times I had with friends there. Because the Dairy Dog would now be swamped with middle schoolers, I opted to just hit a drive-through before going to The Stafford.

I had to go back to room five and possibly find out what it was about that place. Why did I keep having dreams connected to The Stafford and The Smiling Man, aka Spencer Jones?

It was near dark when I arrived. Because of what I had read over the last three days, The Stafford looked different. More ominous. After pulling the flashlight out of the glove box, I ventured inside and made straight for room five.

The door was cracked, just as I first found it nearly a decade ago. With tentative steps, I walked towards the door. As I approached, the air got colder the closer I got, and I had this sensation like someone else was there. I went to put my hand on the door, and it opened on its own accord, causing me to jerk my hand back.

Using my flashlight, I looked into that accursed room to see all was as I remembered it.

After a deep breath, I stepped inside. The air inside felt absolutely frigid, giving me goosebumps. The presence I felt got stronger and changed. It was cruel and malicious.

My flashlight caught something glinting on the dresser where we had found those earrings before. I moved closer to get a better look, and what I discovered made my mouth run dry.

Two sets of earrings rested there: one a novelty pair labeled “Class of ’91,” the other twisted metal hoops—just like the ones Samantha Cheeks used to wear.

Seeing those earrings sitting there was enough; I had my answer.

I left The Stafford, got in my car and started driving. While on Wade Hampton heading towards 385 and home, the announcer on the radio mentioned the date.

June 25th.

I pulled over, my hands shaking as I tried to light my third cigarette in twenty minutes, trying to figure out what to do.

Do I go back to The Stafford and make sure no one stays there tonight?

I thought about going to the police but decided against it. Even with what information I had, I felt at best they would laugh at me. At worst, detain me, thinking I had something to do with the disappearances.

In the end, I went home and went straight to bed.

Back home in my bed, Spencer Jones invaded my dreams again.

He had just finished putting a body in the back of his car and was driving off. Even in the darkness as he left the city, the surroundings looked different as the mountains seemed taller and much closer.

When he passed a road sign for Glenvar, I knew he wasn't in Greenville.

As with the earlier dreams, Spencer took a side road and eventually drove out into a pasture to dump the body before returning to his hotel room

I thought his night was done after seeing this, but I was wrong.

He returned to his room in Glenvar and sat at the small desk and replied to lonely heart letters. As I watched him, I saw that the letters

he responded to were from women addressing him by different names.

In his responses to these women, there was no hint of the monster I had witnessed. His words were friendly, consoling, and uplifting.

I looked away from where he was writing, and the room had changed. I was no longer in a hotel in Glenvar, but back in room five of the Stafford.

It was dark, and the light from the street lamp outside provided the faintest illumination. The room seemed much like how I had seen it before, with one exception. There was an occupied sleeping bag on the bed.

There was a vague familiarity about this woman, though I could not immediately identify her. She looked like she might have been in high school, and her hair screamed 80s to me. I was about to turn and try to leave when I heard something that froze me in my tracks.

"Tammy," a voice said in a whisper.

This voice sounded like it came from a man, but from every part of the room. It was as if thousands of people surrounded me and said

the same thing at once. And there was a hypnotizing quality to it.

“Tammy.”

This time, those thousand voices had moved. They were no longer surrounding me, but coming together in a group between me and the bed.

A third time, the voice said her name. This time, it had unified into a single sound, and I saw Tammy stir in her sleeping bag. She reflexively pulled her hair over her ear, revealing the earrings she was wearing. In the light of the street lamp, I saw they were in the shape of a manatee.

Immediately, I knew what was going to happen and screamed for her to run. I lunged at where I thought the voice was coming from, but nothing was there.

“You should join me,” the voice said.

The disembodied voice coached Tammy from her bag and out of the room. It led her down the stairs and through the back door. Past her friends, who were all sleeping. Once outside, she crossed the street and began walking towards the river.

The entire time, I kept trying to stop her or rouse her friends. Anything I could think of to change what I knew was going to happen.

When she arrived at the river, Tammy made her way to a place where the river had carved an alcove into the red clay bank. She stopped and stood motionless in the alcove, facing the wall.

I felt something in my hand and looked down. I was holding a garrote.

“You try,” the voice said to me.

The knot that formed in my stomach felt like a mule had kicked me. When I let go of the garrote, it disappeared.

Again, I screamed for Tammy to run, but she stood there, motionless.

In the moonlight, I saw a light mist coming off the field above where we stood. In places, it seemed to linger like threads. One such thread slid from the field above and hovered over Tammy. In a split second, it uncurled itself into a straight line. There was a glint on it, like it had become a piece of wire. It wrapped itself around Tammy’s neck, nearly decapitating her.

A moment later, Tammy collapsed to the ground, her blood mixed with the red clay and sand of the river bank.

I woke up drenched in cold sweat, trembling. The morning sunlight peeked through my closed blinds. That nightmare had shaken me so much that I had to go throw up.

Once I calmed down, I flipped through my notes, desperate to have all the answers. Within my hasty scrawl, I discovered Spencer was an enigma.

In his possessions, the police had found three other driver's licenses, each with a different name and address. In addition, they found eighteen pairs of earrings and letters written in his handwriting, addressed to various women. Most were signed with one of Spencer's aliases and addressed to PO boxes near Birmingham, Knoxville, and Roanoke, and each city had its own string of missing prostitutes.

My hands trembled with rage as I read. How many women did this sick bastard kill? Fortunately, there weren't as many as I was beginning to believe.

The police had reached out to the women Spencer wrote letters to. All but one were alive and well. The sixteenth woman had died in a yachting accident two weeks prior.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I continued reading, trying to make sense of it all, only to have a curveball thrown at me.

In trying to discover who Spencer was, the police had attempted to reach out to his employer, only to find they did not exist.

To further complicate matters, other than the driver's licenses, the police could find no record of Spencer Jones or any of his aliases.

Part of me had to tip my hat to Spencer in one fact. Even in death, he had people guessing.

As I was going through the newspaper copies, one picture hit me like a bat to the head. I stared at the negative image copied from the microfiche. When I looked up, the afterimage was clear. Then I ran to the bathroom and threw up again.

It was Tammy from my dream, complete with manatee earrings.

I continued going through my notes, and the disappearances made sense in their own way.

Spencer died on June 25th. All the women who went missing were last seen on the anniversary of his death and had stayed in his room that night.

And because the disappearance and murders continued after Spencer's death, it had to be something paranormal.

It could not have been a copycat or accomplice, not for over sixty years. If it was, they would be in their eighties, and why change the MO?

It had to be Spencer's ghost, and it was tied to the place where he died, room five. The victims after his death, though they were not prostitutes, were targets of opportunity; a way to feed the need to kill.

A paranormal presence would also explain room five, not just the feelings I had, but also why it seemed undisturbed. In all the paranormal stuff Cyndie ever mentioned to me, insects and animals avoid haunted places.

And then there were my dreams. So vivid, so detailed.

How did I know what the Staffords looked like before I saw their photo? How did I know of Spencer and know he used a garrotte before I learned of him? And most disturbing of all is, why is Spencer asking me to join him?

In the years that followed, I continued to have dreams about Spencer and The Stafford. Always on June 25th, and he kept asking me to join him.

In the days leading up to June 25th, it was as if a rope was tied to me and pulling me towards something dark. I came to dread that day for the fear I may actually stop being an observer and join Spencer.

Through the years, I kept what I knew to myself. I thought not telling anyone, even someone I thought could help, would keep people safe.

Then one year, I didn't have a dream about Spencer. Initially, I felt relieved thinking whatever hold The Stafford had on me had been broken. The rope pulling on me was finally severed.

Later, I worried that someone else might have fallen under the spell of Spencer and The Stafford.

In 2004, I was in Greenville on business. On a whim, I drove by The Stafford to see if it was still there.

It wasn't. It was now just a parking lot for Taylor's first public park.

Seeing that The Stafford was gone sent a wave of emotion through me. Saddened at the loss of a local landmark, but glad that the shadow it created was gone. And afraid.

The fear of what had become of the paranormal presence attached to room five. Is it gone with The Stafford or was it now free to move as it pleased?

I went into the convenience store across from where The Stafford had stood. The clerk told me it had been demolished back in 1999. But not before at least two more girls went missing while staying there.

Her words were a slap to my face.

I knew the truth and kept it to myself, hid it. I should have gone to the police back then,

personal consequences be damned. Now, two more girls were dead.

As I left the convenience store, I saw the remains of a "Have you seen me?" flyer taped to a lamppost. Most of it was missing, but one part remained, and it caused my stomach to knot. It read "Last seen: June 25, 2003."

That evening, when I got home, I searched for missing women in Greenville. To my relief, none were reported on June 25th, nor did I find any reports of women murdered with a garrote after 1999.

Since then, I have not had any more vivid dreams concerning The Stafford or Spencer. Maybe because whatever link there was is now broken, but questions persist.

Questions like, why prostitutes? Was it because there would be little interest if they went missing or something else?

And the women in the lonely hearts letters, were they ever in danger from Spencer or was he truly a friend to those women?

Those questions sometimes plague me when I'm up alone at night, and I'll never know the answers to them.

I could obsess and dig for information and find nothing new. Reopen old wounds for the families of the girls who died, only to give them nothing.

But that is not me. Best to let them have whatever peace they have found.

My life revolves around my family and keeping my kids safe. Keeping tabs on their whereabouts and who they go out with.

Spencer and The Stafford are in my past, though I occasionally do searches for missing women. I have only found a handful that disappeared on June 25th. Fortunately, none of them have turned up dead with their throats cut out.

Since the last time I was in Taylors, I have had some dreams about The Stafford. Dreams of what it would have been like had I stayed there. In those dreams, I did not see Spencer, just regular people, and the Staffords being gracious hosts.

As for the flyer I saw, ironically, it was for Spencer Jones.

When I found him online, I nearly split my sides, laughing at the paradox.

This Spencer Jones was born June 25th, 1924, and I am happy to report, was found alive and well and living in Goose Creek. In the pictures I saw of him, he had an unforgettable smile.

The infectious smile of a man who truly enjoys life.

Editorial (*continued*)

I am experimenting with changes to fonts, layouts, etc. to improve the reading experience. But I want to hear from *you*, the readers. What would you like to see in *Eldritch Science*? Let me know. I will do my best to accommodate as many suggestions as possible.

Finally, as a member of the Directorate I would encourage everyone to join or renew as voting members of N3F. For the price of a single issue of *Analog* or *Asimov's Science Fiction*, you get *Eldritch Science* and all the other great fanzines we publish for a full year! And you get lots of other awesome content as well as the ability to get off the sidelines and get your own content in front of an audience.

In the meantime, happy reading!

c 2021 Jose Sanchez



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