

# SUMMER CAMP HORROR

FEATURING STORIES  
AND POEMS BY:

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*JUAN PEREZ*

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*SARAH MCKNIGHT*

*M.S. KEYSTONE*

*WHISPERIA WAILING*

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*AND MANY MORE...*

ALTERED  
REALITY

SUMMER '23

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## POEMS OF JUAN PEREZ

### **Tiny-Toe Tommy**

Tiny-toe Tommy just lost his zombie  
can't figure out just where to go find him  
just let it be, it will come back you see  
dragging more zombies some miles behind him

Tiny-toe Tommy just found his zombie  
just like the wind he came straddling in  
wanting to cozy, bloody and rosy  
a good wash outside, now cleaner than sin

Tiny-toe Tommy loves his lost zombie  
what he doesn't like are zombie's new friends  
Paul, Richard, and Mark; Mike, David and Tim  
moaning for brains the long day without end

as what happens to Tiny-toe Tommy  
happens to those who take in more zombies

### **Machine-Monster And The Circuit-Heart**

[i poet, monster of castle frankenstein]

from the dark, dark coal mines  
of your deep, deep black heart

an organ that could not fulfill its role  
that beat stopped beating, my dear, my soul

from the dark, dark coal mines  
of your deep, deep black heart

that heart, your heart, the hole in your chest  
the whole of your soul is missing, confess

from the dark, dark coal mines  
of your deep, deep black heart

the change whose veins stop pushing  
long after rapture, I'm musing

from the dark, dark coal mines

of your deep, deep black heart

that heart, your heart, the hole in your chest  
the whole of your soul is missing, confess

from the dark, dark coal mines  
of your deep, deep black heart

where machines like man could feel  
through sad sutures of skins you steal

from the dark, dark coal mines  
of your deep, deep black heart

that heart, your heart, the hole in your chest  
the whole of your soul is missing, confess

from the dark, dark coal mines  
of your deep, deep black heart...

from the dark, dark coal mines  
of your deep, deep black heart...

from the dark, dark coal mines  
of your deep, deep black heart...



Juan Manuel Pérez, a Mexican-American poet of Indigenous descent and the Poet Laureate for Corpus Christi, Texas (2019-2020), is the author of numerous poetry books including the newly published poetry-memoir, *THIRTY YEARS AGO: LIFE AND THE FIRST GULF WAR* (2023). Juan is also the 2021 Horror Authors Guild's Inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award winner and a recipient of a 2021 Horror Writers Association Diversity Grant. To learn more about award winning poet, check out his official website at: <https://www.juanmperez.com/>

## YOUR AVERAGE CAMPFIRE STORY BY SARAH MCKNIGHT

It was a dark and stormy night.

That's how they always start, at least. But what if I told you it was a gorgeous, sunshiny, early fall day, with the late-morning heat already shimmering the air around the rustling leaves on the trees. Not nearly as scary, right? Sounds more like a romance movie if you ask me. But what happened that day still haunts me. Sunlight doesn't mean anything in the real world.

The weekend got boring fast. It was too early in the school year to have much homework, and after spending the entire summer hanging around the neighborhood, we were tired of the same-old, same-old. That's why Carla and I decided to pay a visit to our old elementary school playground and hang out for a while. It was a short walk away, but we hadn't been there in ages. Us middle schoolers were too cool to be seen messing around on the elaborate wooden structures that had fueled our imaginations for hundreds of recesses. Games of tag, Princesses and Dragons, Escape the Sinking Ship, and hide and seek were some core memories for both of us, and we were just bored enough to consider heading over and reliving some of those childhood experiences.

Of course, Carla's boyfriend had to come along. I always got a weird feeling around him, but I never could figure out exactly why. He was always brooding for one thing, and his eyes were kind of spacey. But she saw something in Matty, and they spent that entire summer attached at the hip. He didn't go to our elementary school, so it felt almost sacrilegious to bring him along, but it's not like I could have done anything about it.

There were two ways to get to Parkview Elementary from our subdivision: Climb up the hill to the main road and take a left onto the sidewalk or cut across the overgrown field we called Aladdin's Pass for some reason. The weeds and brush always scratched at our legs and made them itchy, but at least that way was flat, so we opted for the Pass. Not the brightest move, but it's not like we could have known.

Matty sauntered behind us, hands shoved deep in the pockets of his cargo shorts, as we cut across Mrs. Winston's backyard, through a thin line of trees, and entered the field. Thanks to the tree line, the houses that made up the subdivision of Oak Ridge were almost completely hidden, although you could still catch a glimpse of light reflecting off a window here and there if you really squinted. A similar tree line blocked the elementary school from view as well, but Carla and I had taken this Pass so many times, we knew our childhood playground was waiting for us straight ahead.

Picking our way through the brambles and veering around the occasional tree, Carla and I chatted while Matty stayed silent behind us. A prickly sensation spread across my neck as I felt eyes on me, but I reminded myself that Carla loved the guy (for some reason) and did my best to focus on our conversation about the time our friend Madison had fallen off one of the wooden towers on the playground in an attempt to escape a ferocious "dragon" and broke her wrist. What a day that was!

Around the halfway point, something definitely felt off. Carla and I both sensed it. We didn't even have to say anything to each other. We just slowed in unison and looked behind our backs.

The field was weirdly silent. Usually, the area was filled with chirping birds and buzzing crickets, but it was almost like all the noise had been sucked out of the air. Even the light breeze rustling the weeds blew through soundlessly. It could have been my imagination, I guess. I was already mildly creeped out by Matty's refusal to join in our conversation. But the way Carla's mouth twisted down told me she felt like something was wrong, too.

Matty stood a few yards behind us, looking at something between a few scattered trees, his head tilted to the side. I knew what was there. I've walked through Aladdin's Pass so many times, I could probably sketch even the moss patterns on the trees from memory. But I couldn't understand why he was so fascinated.

It was just a shed, crumbling and rotting from the inside out. I think it used to be a barn or something. The remnants of a loft still remained and the whole area around the tiny building smelled like sweet, tangy hay, like the scent was engrained into the wood itself.

Carla relaxed, looked at me, shrugged, and rushed back to her boyfriend's side. She'd probably wither away and die if she wasn't within a five-foot radius of him at all times. But Carla's sense of ease made me feel a little better, so I rolled my eyes and went to join them.

"What's the hold-up?" I asked. "It's just an old shed."

But when it came into view, I saw what had really caught Matty's attention. It seemed like some local artists had found the decimated structure and saw the weather-stripped walls as a blank canvas. The graffiti was mostly just colorful Instagram handles in huge bubble letters, but someone got creative and spray-painted a few fun, stylized animals on the wall as well. The beer cans poking out through the brown grass told me that Aladdin's Pass had gotten a lot less sacred than I remembered. Everyone needs a place to hang out, I guess.

"Hey, check it out," Matty said, but he didn't wait for us to check anything out before making a beeline for a can glittering near the shed's entrance.

I thought it was just another empty beer, but when Matty grabbed it and held it up, I saw that it was actually spray-paint with a fluorescent blue cap.

Carla squealed. "Draw something!" She turned to me and squeezed my arm. "Matty's a great artist."

I had to bite back a sarcastic remark. Matty was great at everything.

With permission from his girlfriend granted, Matty shook the can, popped the lid off, and set to work outlining something in a gap between the artworks. I crossed my arms as I watched. I'd never admit it out loud, but I was actually kind of looking forward to running around our old childhood stomping grounds, and I wasn't exactly in the mood to wait for Matty to spray down what I'm sure Carla would call a masterpiece.

While Matty worked, a rustle in the trees caught my attention. I glanced toward the noise but didn't see anything. I guess my ears could suddenly hear again now that I was a little more relaxed.

When the rustle came again, I didn't look. But Carla did. I saw her head swivel out of the corner of my eye. I saw her face pale, and I was running before her command to do so even registered in my head.

Matty dropped the can and raced after us, crying out “What? What’s wrong?” as he fought to catch up. But I didn’t question Carla. I didn’t need to. If she said run, I was going to run.

Like dumbasses, we ran for the school, and when we broke through the tree line and onto the asphalt with yellow-painted Four-Square courts, Carla and I collapsed in a heap and fought to catch our breath.

Matty was stooped at Carla’s side a second later, his hand on her back. I guess I could

have just died for all he cared.

“What was up with that?” he demanded, although I caught a hint of nervousness in his tone. The crack in his voice gave it away.

Carla panted heavily, her face reddening with the exertion. “I thought...I saw...someone...” she managed to choke out.

The rustling sound came back to me. Had I seen movement in the trees too? I took a slow breath. “Someone, like who?”

“I don’t know. Someone just,” she shuddered, “watching us.”

Matty stood and glanced over the trees. “Who? A guy? A girl?”

“I think a guy.” Carla bit her lip. “I only saw him for a second. But he looked mad.”

“Are you really sure you saw someone?” Matty asked.

And here we go with the gaslighting. I fixed him with a hard look and put my hand on Carla’s shoulder. “I believe you.”

She managed a weak smile. “Thanks. But I guess it could have just been my eyes playing tricks on me, with the shadows and stuff. I thought I saw someone and sort of panicked.” She stood, brushing dirt off her shorts. “That’s probably all it was.”

“Probably,” Matty agreed.

But I wasn’t so sure. Something definitely felt off back here, and I had to admit it wasn’t because of Matty.

Despite the momentary panic, we set off for the playground to do what we went there to do. But the air still felt heavy as we challenged each other to see who could jump the farthest off the swings and bounded around the wooden platforms whooping and yelling. I don’t know about

them, but I was making the noise to try and drive some of the unease away. I’m pretty sure they felt it too, because Carla’s smile seemed tight, and Matty was acting a lot more alert than usual. But I guess we all just wanted to pretend like that dash through the woods didn’t happen.

While we played, I caught myself scanning the tree line from time to time, trying to catch a glimpse of any unusual movement. Once, I thought I saw a man’s face peeking at us from around the trunk of a particularly thick tree. I was almost the one to demand we all take off running again. But then I blinked, and the face was gone. A shadow.

We took the sidewalk home.

The next day, our history teacher told us the elementary school had gone into lockdown. A weird man was skulking around the playground. No one was allowed to leave the building until the situation was handled, whatever that meant.

I caught Carla’s eye across the room, and she scrunched up her eyebrows. I knew we were thinking the same thing.



Later, I found out that the guy had disappeared before the police could show up. Carla and I didn't talk about it, but Matty tried to bring it up once.

"Do you think he was looking for us?" he asked.

But we didn't answer. If he was, we didn't want to know. The event was too close to home. Literally.

We never took Aladdin's Pass again, and it took a long time for us to venture back to our childhood playground to let off a little steam. Even then, we only went back a few times before leaving that place to rot in our memories forever. It was too weird. I always caught myself staring at the trees, searching. Wondering.

Sometimes, I hear noises outside my window at night. Rustling. Like someone's walking around out there. And it makes me remember that day, and it makes me wonder things I really don't want to think about.

I have no doubt now that there really was a man at the Pass that day, and though I never told Carla this, I think Matty was right. I think he was looking for us. Maybe Matty messed up his mural and he was looking for a little revenge. Maybe he was just a squatter who didn't want us kids messing around the shed. Maybe he was something worse. And maybe he's still hanging around, watching me. Watching us.

But the thing is, I could be lying to you through my teeth. I could have made the whole thing up. None of you knew Carla. She moved away after seventh grade, and Matty's family moved soon after that. But whether I'm messing with you guys or not, you'll never know. Not really. A part of you is always going to wonder if there's someone out there in those trees, watching. It's enough to keep you up at night, don't you think?

END



Sarah McKnight has been writing stories since she could pick up a pencil, and it often got her in trouble during math class. After a brief stint teaching English to unruly middle schoolers in Japan, she decided she wasn't going to put off her dream of becoming a writer any longer and set to work. Her books tackle real-world issues such as anxiety, depression, and letting go of the past - with a little humor sprinkled in, too. A St. Louis native, she currently lives in Pennsylvania with her wonderful husband and three cats. You can find her on Twitter @mcknight\_writes

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## LAGRIMOSO BY M.S. KEYSTONE

Mel Conway pulled up to his work assignment for the day – tuning a piano in the highlands beyond the city. From the driver’s seat, he surveyed the resplendent mansion of yellow-washed siding, charming white shutters, tall columns, and a palladian window. It shined like a summer cottage, but grander, as if it could be a small hotel.

He squinted. Something about it looked familiar, though he was quite sure he had never been here before. He would have remembered the driveway – a mile long, but it unfurled like hundreds of miles with its ribbon of sparkling cement curling along the verdant hillside.

Glancing at his phone, he double checked the address. His boss’ note topped his stack of texts and corroborated the particulars. “This customer asked for you specifically.” The boss added his appreciation. “Building a clientele, I see. Way to go, rookie.”

Middle-aged Mel scoffed at being called a rookie, though there was some truth to it. He had only been tuning pianos for a couple months. Many years earlier, he had been a piano teacher before his incarceration brought that to a halt. He found it odd that someone would ask for him by name, especially with his history of a felony.

After grabbing his gear, he made his way past the manicured shrubs to the front entrance. The wrap-around porch cast a shiny sheen with its fresh coat of barely gray paint. He stepped lightly.

He was about to knock on the door, when the notes of a baby grand caught his ear. Following the sound, he tiptoed along the veranda and peered into the window. Beyond his reflection, he saw a young girl, no more than fourteen, her straight blonde hair grazing her shoulders. With impeccable posture, she perched herself at the bench and played a haunting melody – lagrimoso, mesto. Mel contemplated the musical terms for a piece to be played with melancholy. She captured the spirit flawlessly.

Like the house, the girl looked familiar, too, but he couldn’t place her. With her back to him, she looked like any of his students from days gone by. The music, too, filled him with a sense of *deja vu*. He stiffened.

After indulging in her rendition for a few moments, he returned to the entry. No sooner than he knocked, the lady of the house answered. Her straight blonde hair caught the breeze through the open door. She had hollow, pasty cheeks, like a model’s. A lacy, ecru dress hung on her, as if she were a clothes hanger. Mel guessed this was the girl’s mother.

“Mr. Conway...” Her voice echoed against the foyer’s high ceilings. “...I’ve been expecting you.”

“Ma’am.” Mel scanned her lusterless blue eyes. “Do we know each other?”

She avoided his gaze. “The house is ready for sale.” She tilted her head toward the drawing room. “The last thing is the piano. It needs to be in mint condition...as if it had never been touched.”

“Of course.” Mel tightened his clutch on his tool bag.

“Right this way.” She led him to the adjoining chamber.

With a puzzled expression, Mel looked around the space. “Where is the girl?”

“The girl?”

“There was a girl here, just a moment ago. Playing the piano.” He started humming the melody like a piano teacher. “Lagrimoso. Mesto.”

The woman shrugged. “There’s no one here but me.”

Mel scratched his head.

The woman touched a bony finger to her chin. “There was a girl here years ago. A quiet, sad child, as if she were holding on to a terrible secret. Committed suicide, I’m afraid...Mr. Conway.”

The way she said his name made it sound like they should know each other. Mel stiffened again. “How unfortunate.” Baffled, he exhaled and set his tools down next to the piano. “I’ll get to work.”

She disappeared, and Mel got lost in his tinkering. After a couple hours of toil, he sat at the keyboard to ascertain his handiwork. His fingers floated across the ivory to reprise the same piece he heard the girl playing. The piano seemed to play itself. The pitch perfect notes swelled in his ears. Satisfied at a job well done, he packed up his implements.

As he stood in the foyer at the front door, he called to the lady of the house. “Ma’am, I’m all done.”

She glided down the stairs. “Thank you, Mr. Conway. I’ll make sure to remit the agency.” She handed him a small parcel. “For your trouble. Perhaps it will be worth something to you.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” He tucked it into his bag and gave her a respectful nod. “You have a nice day.”

As the door shut behind him, he thought he heard the piano again. He scurried to the window, but no one was at the baby grand. In fact, the piano was already covered with a dust cloth. “Well, that was fast,” he muttered to himself. He figured the music had simply invaded his imagination. A classical ear worm.

Backing away, he noticed the peeling paint on the charming white shutters and sashes, and the porch’s cracked and bubbled floorboards. He rubbed his eyes and blinked. This was not the way he remembered it as he walked up to the home. The weather was clear. He couldn’t fathom how this happened so quickly.

He returned to his car to text his boss that he was done. When he pressed send, instead of the whooshing sound he would typically hear, he heard the notes of the piano. With disbelief, he shook his head at how much the piece affected him.

He took one last look at the house. Instead of a regal summer cottage, he saw a dilapidated manor that could have once been glorious. Weeds sprouted alongside the ragged shrubs. The shutters drooped askance. He couldn’t understand how his initial impressions were so far off.

Before starting the car, he unwrapped his bundled gratuity. Inside was an ornate, antique music box with a ceramic top and gold trim. He stroked his chin. The bibelot could bring a handsome fortune. He opened the lid and found an intricate, mechanical figure – a girl playing the piano. The same tune that lured him to the window chimed from the objet d’art. With a calculated smile, he wrapped it back up and put it back in his bag.

As he proceeded down the circuitous switchbacks, the music of the day filled his ears.

With each revolution of his tires, the melody got louder, stronger. For a while, he enjoyed the replay, but as it persisted, he grew weary of the repetitive motifs. He turned

on the radio for an alternative, but each station blared the same classical piece – the one he heard in his head. He questioned how this could be as he checked each of his presets, and then scanned for new stations.

Glad to have no other assignments for the day, he went home. The music rang through his skull, and his brain throbbed. He took some aspirin. Even though his headache subsided, the notes reverberated even more fervently.

He put in ear plugs. He dove into bed and held his thickest pillows over his ears. He drank a fifth of vodka and longed for sleep. All of it was no use. The music roared from within, and no matter what he did, he couldn't shake it.

"It must be the music box!" he shouted to no one. He grabbed the memento from his tool bag. When he lifted the lid, the song boomed with fury. "Arrrgghhh!" He snapped it shut, but this did nothing to dampen the sound.

He hesitated for a split second, realizing he was about to forsake whatever recompense the treasure might fetch. But stopping the music would be worth it. He hurled it against the wall. It shattered into fragments. Still, he could hear the piano. *Lagrimoso. Mesto.*

He seized his hammer and pulverized the remaining large chunks. He knew it was futile, but he had to try. Then, amidst the shards, he saw it. A newspaper clipping that had been tucked beneath the fabric lining.

He unfolded the faded, yellow paper and read the article about his trial and sentencing.

"I'm sorry!!!" Again, he screamed to no one. "I've done my time! I've paid my debt to society! Why are you tormenting me?!"

A female voice, with the sweetness of an angel and the scowl of a devil, laced itself into the piano notes. "Because you'll do it again, Mr. Conway."

"Aaarrggghhh!" He bellowed and yanked his keys from the table. He returned to his car and dashed back to the house on the hill in a drunken rage.

As he wove along the labyrinthine path, he pulled at his ears in desperation. Even if he wrangled the fleshy bits free from his head, he knew the music would persist. He noticed the smooth, green grass was now overgrown, as if no one had landscaped in years. Potholes riddled the meandering road leading to the top.

He parked in front as he did in the morning and bolted to the front door. Now the music sounded as loud as a jet engine.

He knocked, but there was no answer. As he jiggled the knob, the hardware fell off into his hand. He gasped. Nearly tripping on the porch's warped floorboards, he rushed to the window of the drawing room.

There, he saw the young girl at the piano...playing...*lagrimoso...mesto*. The music thundered from the soundboard. He could not imagine it getting louder, and yet it did.

"You! You, there!" He beat on the window with his fist.

"Mr. Conway..." A ghostly voice swirled around him. "...you've returned."

"Make it stop! Make the music stop!"

Ignoring his plea, the voice continued. "Why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"You know what you did."

"I went to prison for that."

“For that particular student. What about all the others? What about me?” With her pointed question, the ingenue spun her head around to face him. As she turned, he saw her face – it belonged to the woman who had greeted him earlier.

He jumped back at the specter. If the teen hadn’t killed herself, she’d be in her thirties now. She would be this woman.

“Why did you make me touch you? Why did you make me do those things with you? Why did you take my innocence?”

“I don’t know...” He sobbed. “...I’m sick and twisted. I can’t help it.”

“I know, Mr. Conway, because you were going to do it again, weren’t you? When you saw me this morning?”

“I don’t know...I...I –”

“You can’t help it, can you? All the prisons in the world can’t take away the urge.” The apparition seethed. “That’s why I sent the music.”

“Please, make it stop!” He buckled and squeezed his head between his hands.

“I can’t make it stop, Mr. Conway. Only you can make it stop. The same way I had to make it stop.”

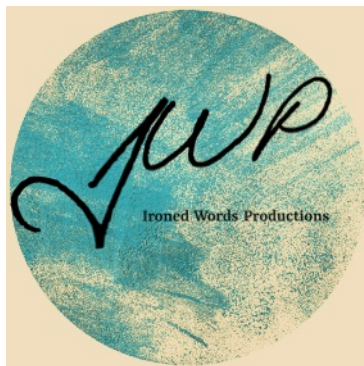
“NOOOO!” Mel pounded on the glass so hard, it broke. As soon as he breached the plane, the girl vanished, but the music played on.

He withdrew his bloodied arm and retreated to his car in haste. He floored the gas pedal and sped away from the possessed house, but he could not escape his haunted thoughts. Crazed with misery, he lost patience for the back and forth of the designated route. Wrath and vodka surged through his veins. The bumps and divots rattled his vehicle. He veered off course, and his car plunged and bounced down the hillside. It flipped and tumbled before coming to rest in a ditch at the bottom of the property and burst into flames.

When the cops came, they pulled Mel’s charred remains from the wreckage and attributed his demise to the unfamiliar, complicated driveway.

The police chief shielded his eyes from the bright summer sun and turned to the fire chief. “At least the piano got tuned.” He pressed his lips into a wistful smile at the “for sale” sign in front of the grand yellow house, brimming with enchantment and curb appeal. “Wish I could afford it. A real beaut, this one.”

From the drawing room, the last notes of the piece came to a soft close. Lagrimoso. Mesto. Then, an infinite rest.



M.S. Keystone is a writer of eclectic tales, tapper of keyboards, and builder of stories. To find the author is to find Brigadoon. Find them online at <http://ironedwordsproductions.com/>

## THE NEKRASCAPE BY A.J. DALTON

They cling to the underspace  
Invisible enemies  
Without a face.  
They wait to emerge, unobserved  
To prey and quietly dine  
Upon your mind.  
They greedily eat memories  
So you can't remember  
Yourself before.  
Your friends will frown when they meet you  
Concerned that you're not yourself  
Then shrug – people.  
The mental health crisis we have  
Is spreading as they grow strong  
Can we be saved?  
Yet no matter to whom I speak  
None believe in the unseen  
They say I'm weak  
Of argument, thought and faith  
Despite the proof all over  
There are such wraiths.



A J Dalton ([www.ajdalton.eu](http://www.ajdalton.eu)) is a UK-based SFF writer. He has published the Empire of the Saviours trilogy with Gollancz Orion, and various collections with Kristell Ink and Luna Press. He also lectures in creative writing for Middlesex University London, where he runs the online storytelling community <http://www.creativewritinghq.com> - all welcome! He lives with a monstrously oppressive cat named Cleopatra.  
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Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/ajdalton2/>

## REVENGE BY DONALD FIRESMITH

It was well after midnight on a Friday night and raining hard as Brad Johnson drove his pickup down the deserted mountain road toward home. He'd been at the Cascade Bar drinking with some of his buddies from work. And because he'd only had five beers, he didn't feel drunk, merely tired.

Ever since the night Johnson had missed a turn and totaled his previous car by running it into a tree, he'd hated driving in the rain after dark. And that he'd forgotten to replace his car's worn-out windshield wipers didn't help. Even if the sky had been clear, the thick forest crowding both sides of the narrow road would have cast deep shadows on the pavement.

Johnson yawned, closing his eyes for only an instant, and nearly failed to notice the woman standing at the side of the road. He swerved, skidding to a stop just in time to avoid running into her. Rolling down the passenger side window, he intended to give her a piece of his mind about wearing dark clothes while walking along a road at night. But he held his tongue when he saw she was young and beautiful.

Then Johnson noticed her ripped blouse and the bruises on her face and neck. "Are you all right, miss?"

She shook her head and began to cry.

"You'd better climb in out of the rain, and I'll drive you home."

She looked at him fearfully before answering. "I don't know you."

"I'm Brad Johnson, and I live at the mobile home park a few miles up the road. What's your name?"

"Candy. Candy Crawford. I live back at Forest Glen," she said, pointing in the direction from which he had come.

"Well, Candy, now that we know each other, get in so I can drive you home. You can't just stand out here in the rain. Besides, Forest Glen's a good twelve miles from here. It's too far to walk."

Once Candy had opened the door, sat down, and buckled herself in, Johnson turned his pickup around and headed back toward the small town she called home.

"You want to tell me why you're out here all alone in the middle of nowhere?"

"No!"

"Okay. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to." He briefly glanced over at her, and for the shortest of moments, his eyes dipped down at the cleavage exposed by her torn blouse.

"You men are all the same!" she exclaimed angrily. "You get a girl alone in your car late at night, and you think she owes you something for giving her a ride. You think you can do whatever you want with her."

Shocked at her outburst, Johnson was about to apologize when she suddenly grabbed the top of the steering wheel and yanked it toward her. The pickup swerved to the right, ran off the road, and shot between two trees before crashing into a third. Johnson, who wasn't buckled in, flew forward, smashing his head into the windshield and ramming his chest on the steering wheel.

Candy, however, was unhurt. Before the dazed driver could react, she pulled a small knife from her purse and slashed it across Johnson's throat. Then she calmly wiped the bloody blade on his pants leg, opened her door, and stepped out into the rain.

She turned and smiled as she silently stared at the doomed man, watching him slowly bleed to death.

With her night's work done, Candy slowly walked back along the road. She had exacted revenge on one more man she was sure was an animal like the one who had raped and strangled her, leaving her dead and battered body in the bushes beside the same road where she took her victims.

A vehicle's headlights appeared in the distance. The black SUV slowed to a stop next to her, and its side window rolled down.

"You look like you're in trouble," a deep voice said. "Can I give you a ride?"

Looking in, she saw a man in his mid-fifties with hair and a beard as black as coal. He smiled at her, though she noticed the smile didn't reach his steely eyes. Looking forward to her second kill of the night, Candy smiled back at the man, who didn't even try to hide that he was leering hungrily at her cleavage.

Opening the door, she sat down next to the man.

Soon, they were moving far too fast for such a curving road in the middle of a rainy night. Candy didn't mind. No car crash could harm her body, for it was formed not from fragile flesh but from her soul made solid by her hunger for revenge.

"Candy Crawford, I've been looking for you," the man said. His gravelly voice sounded as if he had smoked a million cigarettes and cigars.

"How do you know my name?" she asked, unsettled by the man's unexpected knowledge.

"Oh, I know all about you and your little late-night escapades. How was Brad Johnson? Did you know the innocent man you murdered had a wife and two children? No, of course, you didn't. You enjoyed watching him die. But killing him didn't satisfy your hunger, did it?" The man chuckled mirthlessly. "You even thought you could do the same thing to me."

Beginning to panic, Candy reached over and grabbed the steering wheel, but the man's grip was like a vise.

"Stop this car and let me out!" she demanded.

"No. I think not."

She tried to open her door to jump out, but the man had locked it.

"There is no escape, Candy. Not tonight and not from me. It's time you finally pay for your sins."

As she looked on with horror, the man revealed his true appearance. His clothes disappeared, and his body changed. His skin turned a deep red, and his fingernails transformed into claws. His teeth became triangular as a shark's, and two short horns grew from his temples.

"I am Andromalius, overseer of Hell's murderers. You're coming with me, my dear. I have a special cell waiting for you."

Andromalius snapped his fingers, and suddenly, they were no longer in the car. Instead, Candy found herself standing next to the demon in a stone hallway that seemingly extended to infinity. A torch burned above each of the thousands of doors that lined the corridor, and the combined heat from their flames made the place feel like the inside of an oven. And the resulting smoke stunk with the stench of sulfur.

Andromalius pointed at the iron bars forming one cell's door. "This small chamber is your new home, and once you enter it, you will never leave. Look now upon the man with whom you shall spend eternity."



Candy looked through the bars. “You!” she hissed.

“Poetic, isn’t it?” Andromalius observed. “Say hello to Samuel Withers. Surely, you remember him from the night he raped and murdered you. While you’ve haunted the road where you died, murdering innocent men to take revenge for what Withers did to you, he was arrested, tried, and sentenced to death by lethal injection. Far too painless a punishment, don’t you agree? Since his execution, he’s been locked in this cell, waiting for this day. So you see, Candy, he blames you for his downfall, just like you blame him for yours. And now you both will have all eternity to exact your revenge.”

The cell door swung open, and Andromalius shoved Candy inside. The door clanged shut behind her with the finality of the grave. A jagged dagger appeared in her hands, and she looked up to see her rapist holding an identical blade.

“Stab and slice each other,” the demon commanded. “Cut and carve away to your heart’s content. Make each other bleed and scream with pain. But know this, you worthless turds. No wound, no matter how deep, can kill those who are already dead.”

And with those words, Andromalius turned and walked away. He smiled, listening to the fading screams from the cell as he left to collect the souls of more murderers. His work would never end, for Hell would always have empty cells to fill.



Donald Firesmith is a multi-award-winning author of speculative fiction, including science fiction (alien invasion), fantasy (magical wands), horror, and modern urban paranormal novels and collections of short stories.

Prior to retiring to devote himself full-time to his novels, Donald Firesmith earned an international reputation as a distinguished engineer, authoring seven system/software engineering books based on his 40+ years spent developing large, complex software-intensive systems.

He lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with his wife Becky, his daughter Sera, and varying numbers of dogs and cats.

## DON'T BY ANN K. HOWLEY

“What are you most afraid of?” the bespectacled man wearing an orange sweater vest asked the gray-haired lady.

Lillian blinked and frowned, sure that her pastor wanted her to admit that she was afraid of Tom dying, because, actually, her husband was wasting away from pancreatic cancer at that moment and had only weeks to live. But she wasn't afraid of that and she wondered why her pastor felt like he had to press her on that. From the way he was squinting, Lillian knew he expected her to answer.

“Fire,” she blurted impulsively, pretending she misunderstood his question.

“Fire?” He tilted his head.

Smiling innocently, she shrugged and nodded.

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That was two months ago. Tom was dead now and Lillian did exactly what her husband wanted at his funeral. She let the pastor give him a beautiful eulogy that made him out to be a wonderful, Christian man who coached softball, led a Boy Scout troop, and was a pillar of society.

The first thing she did after her daughter and relatives left and her church friends finally started to leave her alone was go to Starbucks and buy the biggest size caramel macchiato on the menu. She knew that would have upset him. Not just the expense, but what the empty calories would do to her thicker waistline that had seemed to disappoint him for decades.

There. I just made a decision for myself, she thought as she took a sip and licked whipped cream off her lips. Maybe it was this small act of defiance that gave her the courage to make a bigger decision.

I'm going to sell the house.

She smiled, and felt proud of herself for thinking such a seditious thought. When Tom was lying in his hospital bed, connected to all those tubes, half drugged, half mad with the painful business of dying, he made her promise that she would never sell the house. Not that it was anything special. It was the only house on the block that had peeling paint and a small jungle of overgrown shrubs in the front and back yards. But they bought this house 50 years ago and as soon as Maddie went off to college and he retired twenty years ago, he barely left it. He mostly just sat in his brown recliner in the living room and barked orders at Lillian, who did her Christian duty and obeyed his commands without complaint.

“I won't,” Lillian promised, as she patted Tom's weathered hand and fluffed the pillow behind his back. She tried not to look him in the eye.

“DON'T,” he wheezed, angry that his body was failing and his wife was lying.

Lillian couldn't wait to sell the house. For her, all the joy in the house left when Maddie left. No more laughter or fun. Even when Maddie was little and she had to take her tomboy daughter to the emergency room for broken bones or stitches, she felt happy. But now she was alone. All those years that Tom sat scowling in his chair, she felt alone. Chances were she had bought the wrong brand of chipped ham, or she didn't put enough creamer in his coffee. He usually wasn't speaking to her for some reason. Maybe it was better that way.

Now he was gone and she lived by herself in this empty, quiet house. It was funny how she always felt cold, even when she turned the thermostat heat higher than Tom ever allowed.

At least Maddie wasn't surprised when she told her that she had talked to a real estate agent. She had called her daughter right after she made the decision.

"Good for you, Mom," Maddie said. "It's too much for you to take care of anyway."

Lillian never told Maddie that she promised Dad she would never sell the house. What did it matter? He was dead.

It was the only lie I ever told Tom, she thought, but she refused to feel guilty.

But after she hung up the phone and walked through the living room, she smelled something odd. Cigarette smoke.

Her pulse quickened and she instinctively looked up at the ceiling, remembering how tendrils of smoke used to waft up when Tom smoked. But that was a long time ago. He had quit decades ago. She searched the kitchen and bedrooms. Nothing seemed amiss. She opened the front door and peeked out to see if the smoke from someone's lit cigarette might have seeped into the house from outside. No one was in sight. Only in the living room did the pungent odor of cigarette smoke linger, but like many things in her life, she decided to ignore it.

Suddenly, she noticed the book on the coffee table and a surge of anger colored her cheeks. It was a big book about National Parks. She hated that book with the glossy pictures of all the beautiful places she would never see in her lifetimes. Tom knew she had always wanted to see all the National Parks, so he bought that book for her birthday. But Lillian knew that the book was Tom's way of telling her this was close as she was ever going to get to the Grand Canyon or Yellowstone. It never mattered what she liked or wanted.

Suddenly, anger overwhelmed her. In a fit of pique, she snatched up the heavy book and stormed into the dark outside, lugging it to the black plastic garbage can on the side of the house. She snorted as she hefted the book over the edge and felt a sense of satisfaction when it thudded on the bottom of the empty barrel. Wiping a bead of sweat off her brow, she stomped back into the house and retrieved Tom's last six-pack of beer from the refrigerator. He made her buy it while he was in the hospital. Obviously he expected to drink it when he came home from the hospital. She hated that he drank beer. Lillian didn't drink and was proud that alcohol had never passed her lips. She carried the beer out and threw the bottles into the trash can. The sound of shattering glass made her wince. She sighed, resenting she would have to come back out and clean up a sippy mess in the morning since she didn't want her trash to smell like beer. Tonight it was too dark and she was too angry to clean it up.

When she entered the house, she saw blood oozing from her hand. In her anger and haste, she must have nicked it on the hard edge of the trash can. The sight of red dripping down the back of her hand reminded her of the time she cut her finger when Tom shouted for her and she had asked for just a minute to finish chopping onions.

"Dammit woman! Now!" he screeched, which startled her so much she jumped. She ran to Tom, clenching her fist to hold a wet paper towel around her bleeding finger. Her face paled when she saw the veins popping on his neck. That was not the first time she thought he was angry enough to kill her.

It was usually little things, like not following the pattern of diagonal rows that he preferred when he used to cut the grass, or not buying the rocky road ice cream he wanted because he had diabetes and he wasn't supposed to eat that.

"Don't you dare defy me," he snarled, pointing an accusing finger at her.

"I'm not!" she protested. But what could he do now? He was bedridden. He couldn't hit her anymore.

Maybe she was defying him by deliberately doing things a little different or wrong.

He never really meant to hurt me. That's how she always rationalized his outbursts. It was usually just a quick slap or on one particularly unfortunate day he slammed the door in her face and gave her a black eye. But he didn't lash out often so she didn't want to make a fuss. She just told her church friends the black eye was an accident so she could continue to honor her godly marriage.

What a liar I am. She swallowed, allowing herself to taste the bitterness of self-pity.

Cigarette smoke tickled her nostrils and now she could see a light haze hanging over the recliner in the corner of the living room. She wiped her eyes as she pulled a large Bible off the bookshelf and placed it on the coffee table.

This is what she always thought should be displayed in their home, not a stupid book about places Tom didn't care about.

The lamp by the recliner started to blink, dimming and brightening, illuminating the hazy glow in the corner like a lighthouse beacon in fog.

"Weird," she thought, stuffing a rising sense of panic.

Puzzled, she unscrewed the faulty lightbulb and tested it in another fixture. The bulb shone bright, casting her shadow on the wall. No blinking or dimming.

As Lillian screwed the bulb back into the lamp, the fixture popped and sparks burst out. Her heart beat fast as she ripped the electrical cord out of the wall and ran to her bedroom.

It's just a faulty wire, she told herself. I'll call an electrician in the morning.

After putting on her pajamas, she climbed into bed and tapped the screen on her cell phone to play the soft calming music that helped her fall asleep. But the pulse in her neck was throbbing and she turned several times in the bed trying to get comfortable. Reaching out, she ran her hand across the space where Tom used to lay. It seemed like forever since he had slept in their bed together. But now she was thinking of Maddie, living on the other side of the country, far away from this house where Lillian hoped she had good memories of growing up.

Tears burned the corner of her eyes. She knew the truth. She knew that there was something wrong with the way Tom used to explode at Maddie, and drag her down the stairs into the basement. Lillian couldn't bear Maddie's shrieking cries, muffled by the basement walls and door. Lillian once pounded on the basement door, calling for Maddie, pleading for Tom to stop. She couldn't stand Maddie's screams. But the door was locked. She felt helpless. Crying, she slid to the floor and curled into a ball on the vinyl floor. When Maddie, red-faced and whimpering, finally came up the stairs the agonizing betrayal in her daughter's eyes pierced Lillian's heart like a dagger.

"Maddie," she begged in a hoarse voice. In an instant Tom was kneeling in front of her, his face an inch from hers. His eyes looked black and wild.

“Don’t you EVER do that again,” he spat, squeezing her wrist so tight she thought it would snap. “Stay out of the basement.”

She glanced away from his terrible glare, wiped her nose and nodded. When he let go of her wrist, she took a deep breath so she wouldn’t vomit.

Two hours later, after she had washed her face and cheerily called Maddie down for

dinner, she pretended nothing had happened.

She shuddered, silently despising her cowardice.

She never went into the basement again.

Suddenly, the music stopped. Her cell phone buzzed and vibrated so sharply it nearly fell off the end table. At first Lillian thought there might be an emergency alert, but then a crackly voice spoke through the phone.

“DON’T. DON’T,” the crackly voice said. The phone buzzed once more and the calming music flipped on again as if turned on by a switch.

Lillian gasped. A cold tingle shot down her spine. Was she imagining this? She had heard of things like this - the deceased using electronic devices to try to communicate with the living. The thought of dead Tom trying to talk to her made her chest feel tight.

DON’T, the voice had said. Did Tom know she was going to sell the house?

Her faith required her to keep her eyes on God and not fall for the whims of the devil. She believed strongly in heaven and her church friends tried to comfort her, saying “Tom is in a better place.” They didn’t know that their words were of little comfort. Lillian did not want to meet Tom in a better place.

DON’T. The word pounded in her head. DON’T. She sat up and turned the light back on.

“He’s dead,” she thought angrily. “I can sell the house. I can do whatever I want.”

DON’T.

Her head started to throb. She rubbed her temples and reached into her bedside table to find her migraine medicine.

DON’T.

She smelled smoke again, but this time it wasn’t from cigarettes. It smelled like a campfire. Her bedside lamp started flickering. The air felt thick. It hurt to breathe.

“No!” she screamed into the void. “You can’t tell me what to do anymore!”

DON’T. The word pulsed through her body. She covered her mouth and coughed pink frothy blood onto her hand.

“Why do you care?” she sobbed. “You never cared. Not about me. Not about Maddie.”

She bent over, shaking. Tendrils of smoke started wafting into the room. She jumped up, opened her bedroom door and ran into the hallway, filled with acrid smoke that stung her eyes. Blinded, she ran into the living room, coughing, sputtering, bleeding. She saw the flames lick around Tom’s recliner and soot had already blackened the floral couch. Running into the kitchen and grabbed a kitchen towel, holding it over her nose and mouth. She ran to the basement door.

DON’T.

She tried the door, but it was locked. She pounded and screamed. Maddie. Maddie. Maddie. Her voice grew hoarse. The flames crept closer.

DON’T.

As she slumped down and curled into a ball, a wisp of flame caught the edge of her dress.

“I don’t feel cold,” Lillian thought in amazement.

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A week later, Lillian’s children did exactly what their mother would want. The pastor gave a beautiful eulogy, making Lillian out to be a wonderful Christian woman, who loved her family and was grieving the loss of her husband when this terrible and tragic fire took her life.

“She’s in a better place now,” the pastor said, looking up over his glasses, gazing at

Maddie. “She’s with your father,” he said in a husky voice. “They are together in heaven.”

Smiling innocently, Maddie shrugged and nodded.



Ann K. Howley's debut young adult novel, *The Memory of Cotton*, was a 2023 Next Generation Indie Book Award winner. She is also the author of the TAZ Award-winning memoir, *Confessions of a Do-Goooder Gone Bad*. She writes for *Pittsburgh Parent Magazine*, teaches writing classes for Community College of Allegheny County’s community education program, and conducts workshops in cities across the country. She is currently writing a book about traveling all over the United States with her husband and two dogs in their converted campervan named *The Paddy Wagon*.

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## HUMAN NATURE BY GERALD DE VERE

Gloomy goes the sky above.  
Back and forth, the shadows shove,  
Haunting my peripheral,  
Freezing still my troubled skull.  
Pound, my heart, inside my chest,  
Save me from the wicked rest!

On foot, through dreams, Death chases me,  
Feeding on psychology,  
He taunts, he beckons, through the night,  
Savoring my mental blight.  
When he's done, I do not know  
Which way I came or where to go...

Brash and bold are clownish apes,  
For ignoring nature's fate.  
We toil all our time away,  
Making fun and making play.  
No one lives on past their day,  
Without giving Death his say...

Never getting very far,  
Never mind how small we are.  
Never looking up ahead,  
Always egos seeing red.

A heap of shit we've handed down.  
Upon inspection, no way 'round.  
So, wallow through those boggy mounds,  
Where human nature's soaked the ground.

The vile muck of egos past,  
Enlightened here, it cannot last.  
Onward plow into that shit,  
The sins of man have all been writ!  
Up they grapple, unto Death,  
Where even still, they cannot rest.

Why rest?  
Why wait?  
Why consternate?  
Why must we blindly masticate?

'Because, dear boy,' some will reply,

'You've too much idol in thine eye.'  
There's no denying human fate  
Would rather sit and masturbate.

Ashes to ashes,  
Dust to dust,  
Human nature  
Should be cussed.

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Born & raised in the haunted hills of Pittsburgh. Educated in the arts at the Black Swamp. Disillusioned in Old New Amsterdam. Now on hermitage in Appalachia. When he's not scribbling, Gerald enjoys history, horticulture, and roaming the North American wilderness. His first novel ['Creatures'] is available now and his second book ['Ghost Light'] is tentatively scheduled for release in winter '23/'24.

<http://linktr.ee/deverewrites>



## JUST DON'T SCREAM PART ONE BY THOMAS VAN BOENING

Inspecting the girl's cabin, the bunkbeds and walls were bare, and all the craft projects were gone. I searched every possible hiding spot for snacks to prevent attracting bugs and rodents during the off season. I found a few wrappers.

The cabin had the perfect summer scent of lingering kids' sweat and wet linens from the girl's drying towels and bathing suits after the previous day's final excursion tubing on the Niobrara River.

One kid left behind a souvenir t-shirt. It hung in the rafters, most likely due to the older campers' cruelty.

Running in the Nebraska heat, I made it to the buses, the girl without a t-shirt cried because she had such a good time and was so thankful about getting it back.

The smell of the old diesel stung my nose when the buses left the grounds with kids waving from the open windows. I knew I'd see a bunch next summer, and some I'd be pleased to never see again.

"Good hustle," Spencer said. "Several boys almost left backpacks behind. I swear all they wanted were their phones back. I admit, they're getting better at hiding them. Which is a pretty good joke, since there's hardly any service anyway."

When the kids were out of sight, Spencer and the other guys pulled off and twirled their shirts gave an emphatic 'woooo' when we had the camp to ourselves for the next few days before shutting down the grounds.

Spencer was always cute, and this summer was exceptional. We were friends on Facebook, and I knew he got a home gym last Christmas. He'd been handsome during his skinnier days, but since last summer, he had a swole glow-up and looked like the hunks in my mom's bodice rippers or the sweaty beefcakes on WWE.

Nikki Pohl and the other women counselors hooted at the shirtless men, but all I wanted was to see a lot more of Spencer's body when I began cheering too. I finally turned eighteen in July, and my long crush on Spencer worsened with Nikki in the way.

Spencer's parents arrived in their rusted pickup with groceries from Valentine. Mrs. Lloyd held up two bottles of Jack Daniels in one hand and a plastic bag of corn cobs while Mr. Lloyd had two stuffed paper bags of chips, and condiments for the hotdogs and burger patties.

"Hi-Ho... Hi-Ho... It's off to cook we go. Our work is done, let's have some fun!"

Mrs. Lloyd always sang Disney tunes for every situation.

I saw Nikki grab Spencer's hand, and I volunteered to help cook just to not focus on my potential summer fling.

I shucked the corn and helped get the grill going for Mr. Lloyd. With nothing left, I excused myself to cool off with the boys.

In the women's cabin, I slipped on my swimsuit, tied my hair back, and looked down to see if enough cleavage was happening to get Spencer's attention. Of course, there's never enough cleavage on my one piece, and I wished my mom didn't buy one with boylegs to keep me 'ladylike.'

"Focus," I scolded myself.

In the mirror, I looked athletic, and I hoped Spencer liked hourglass figures. Nikki was skinny to the point she looked like she starved herself. How she flirted her way into his arms, I'll never understand.

The shallow pond was ideal for younger kids, but still good enough for teenagers and twentysomethings to enjoy.

I dipped below the surface and swam until I was behind Spencer.

He heard me exhale. "Another year gone, eh Cassie?"

"Another summer, and another year older."

Mrs. Lloyd rang the iron triangle to signal the burgers and hotdogs were done.

Damn.

The other men waded out of the pond as I held Spencer's forearm to wait.

"Are you and Nikki you know... serious together?" I asked, cringing at my own words.

His smile didn't wane. "I'm never really serious. Are you asking what I think you're asking?"

I told him the truth. "I've had a crush since I was thirteen. Of course, I am."

He was twenty, my first year as a camper. Then I became a Junior Councilor to get paid to still enjoy my summers and stay close friends with Spencer. Then I became a full Councilor last year and returned to finally get him to myself.

"What does Nikki have that I don't?"

I swam closer until he was in kissing range.

"You know my rule with jailbait," he said.

I held my smile. "I'm eighteen now."

"And I'm dating her," he said. "Aw, hey. I didn't plan anything to hurt you. I wish I could make every horny girl happy. Believe me."

"Nikki only showed up this summer," I said. "I... I just—"

"Hey!"

I gulped when Spencer turned around to Nikki.

"You done borrowing him?"

"I'll be along in a sec," Spencer said.

Nikki flipped me the bird. "Strike one. Just fuck around and find out what comes after strike two."

Spencer played it cool. "Nothing happened, Nikki. She's fine. Two old friends cooling off."

Nikki gave me dagger eyes, and I averted my gaze to the water.

"Don't do this. It's been a long, long summer. Let's please make the rest of it enjoyable?"

Spencer swam to the shallow part as Nikki stormed off toward the main hall.

It was just a second, but Spencer looked back toward me to silently mouth 'So sorry.'

Then I saw the water sluicing off his chest and abdomen before I saw a thick erection underneath his swimming trunks.

That cock is all the vindication I need.

...

In an angry fit, I consumed three hotdogs, an ear of corn, and a burger to not scream. I watched Nikki and Spencer sitting next to each other across the main hall. She gave me 'fuck off' eyes before I saw them holding hands under their table. It was

worse when she guided his hand between her thighs. She knew I could see, and I hated her more.

After supper, the boys put a bonfire together and we all reminisced about the few incidents with the campers this year. It was the usual stuff. Kids puking, kids sneaking in cell phones, and the rebellious boys sneaking out to make out with the impressionable girls. Never caught them doing anything past kissing, thank God.

Then the conversation changed to past camping nightmare stories from everyone. Stories of psycho kids taking competitions way too seriously, kids not making it to the outhouses in time, parents leaving without their children's allergy medicine or EpiPens, each story trying to outdo the last.

Then came Spencer's story.

"Anybody work at Camp Alkali Lake?" he asked. "Dad, you want me to tell this story?"

"It's all you, kid," Mr. Lloyd said.

"In the late 1960s, my grandparents worked summers at the old Camp Alkali Lake, not too far from here. Grandpa got the honor of wearing the rubber suit of the Alkali Lake Monster, a folk legend similar to the Loch Ness Monster, Chupacabra, Bigfoot, or the Jersey Devil."

I never knew Nebraska had its own monster fable.

Spencer continued. "Just imagine in 90-degree July heat and humidity wearing that thing for a good half hour. Gramps said he easily lost twenty pounds in nine weeks because it was easily thirty degrees hotter inside the suit. That's a camp nightmare story, but the cute part is that's how my gram met him because she got to wear the costume too. They swapped back and forth so neither of them would faint. You'd only wear underwear and a smile underneath, so you can imagine how those two got to know each other well."

"You're dragging on," Mr. Lloyd said.

"Sorry, I'm bad at this. I'm not getting to the good part. Apparently... the monster wasn't just a made-up mascot."

Some around the fire chuckled, but Spencer shrugged off the skepticism.

"I know. Locals say it's probably just a big catfish or an overgrown mudpuppy. Hell, in the homestead days some believed it was some ox or longhorn bull that got lost and wallowed in a lake and got lots of algae stuck to it, spooking whoever witnessed it first. But my grandparents saw the real deal."

"Do you have any idea how many Alkali Lakes there are all over the country?" Nikki said. "They even had an Alkali Lake in the X-Men movies because it's so generic."

Spencer shrugged again. "I was skeptical... until I saw it."

This time nobody laughed.

"Come on, Spencer," Nikki said. "Half of mythological creatures were originally told by people before the inventions of prescription glasses and meds."

This time Spencer was clearly irked and went back to the men's councilor cabin. A minute later, I feigned to call it a night but followed Spencer as Nikki began sharing another story.

Spencer and I were alone when I opened the cabin door.

"What's up?" He asked.

“I believe you,” she said. “I bet the world still has plenty of species that haven’t been discovered. Just because they haven’t found Nessie, doesn’t mean Nessie doesn’t exist.”

He sighed. “I appreciate it, Cassie.”

Still in my bathing suit, the delight of only a thin layer of polyester between him and my birthday suit gave me the courage to touch him again.

“Strike two, bitch,” Nikki said before opening the cabin door. “Hands off.”

“Nothing happened,” Spencer said.

“You wouldn’t mind if something did happen,” Nikki said.

“Seriously,” he said as he looked at my breasts and slowly returned to eye contact.

“Nothing happened. Right, Cassie?”

He gave me a wink, and I smiled as I turn to Nikki.

You’ve known him for one summer. I’ve known him for several.

“You don’t want to earn strike three,” Nikki said.

“I can take care of myself,” I said, stomping out of the cabin past her.

I maintained my cool and watched Spencer return to the bonfire, but I went back to the women’s councilors cabin, hoping angst wouldn’t overwhelm me.

I expected Nikki to chase, but she didn’t.

Ending my night, I showered, letting my tears mix with the freezing water. When I couldn’t stand it anymore, I finished and dried myself.

On my way back, I turned a corner and was quickly shushed as someone covered my mouth.

“It’s me,” Spencer said as his arms wrapped around me. “This... really needs to stop. When Nikki’s not happy, I’m not happy.”

His inadvertent embrace was so warm, and his firm voice and muscles didn’t quell my lust.

“It’s not fair,” I whispered back. “You knew I was crazy about you. Here I am... barely legal, and you’re breaking my heart? For what? For following the rules?”

“No,” Spencer said. “It’s just... You’re the kind of girl you take home to meet the parents. Nikki is the wild girl you have a good time with move on. Just like every other wild girl from the wrong side of the tracks.”

“You want wild?” I yelled. “I’ll... I’ll show you!”

I put my mouth on his. Before he could resist, I acted how a wild girl ought to act, and bit enough to hurt.

“Mmph,” Spencer said as I let my towel drop. “Don’t. I’m in deep... fuck me.”

Spencer looked behind me.

“Strike three, bitch,” Nikki said.

Before she could punch, I pivoted, dodged, and let my hand fly and I slapped Nikki hard enough to knock her down, instantly regretting what I did by the time she got back up.

“Well, look at her,” Nikki said, rubbing her jaw. “She’s not a mousy shy girl after all.”

Spencer handed me my towel.

He got between Nikki and Me. “That’s enough! Okay. Here’s the truth for both of you. If you two hate each other, fine. Leave me the fuck out of it. Girls do drama. Women do not.”

Nikki licked her lips. "You know... I'll be honest. I'm more shook than angry. You can slay with that hand."

I wrapped myself after Nikki admired my body.

"Spencer, you talked about a ménage à trois before," Nikki said. "And... I never said 'no.' This bitch wild enough?"

Nikki backed me against Spencer. I expected fists, but she only caressed my shoulders, and I wanted to recoil, but Spencer's mouth met my neck as she began kissing my collarbone.

"You get us," he whispered as his hard-on pushed my towel between my buttocks. "Or you get nothing."

I sighed as I leaned back to feel the firmness of his pecs.

Nikki kissed above my chest as Spencer lowered his swimming trunks and lifted the improvised skirt of my towel. His hard cock grew between my thighs, and finally, his tip stopped against my cunt.

"You want this?" He asked as he put his hands on my hips.

"I-I always have," I shuddered.

He moved one hand down to my pubic hair, and the other to my breasts. I dropped the towel again when he gave my nipple a slight pinch as soft nibbles on my neck drove me crazy.

"Me too," Spencer whispered as he nudged forward, taking my virginity in earnest. Then he pulled my hips toward him with both hands.

I gasped, and Nikki began kissing my mouth. I bit her too before she softly laughed and reciprocated.

Just don't scream.

A minute later, he pulled out, and I couldn't stand being without him. Before I complained he picked me up over his shoulder, my ass in the air.

"Quickie," he said to Nikki. "Then let's get back to the bonfire."

Nikki gave me a good swat across my ass.

"Payback for earlier," Nikki said. "Nobody slaps me."

It stung so much I thought I bled as she swatted me a few more times.

In the boys bunk, he laid me on the first available bunk bed and I put a hand on my butt, and realized I wasn't bleeding. I came, and the first person to give me an orgasm, I loathed.

Spencer slid his hands under my tender buttocks as Nikki sat next to me. Spencer got inside me as his other hand slid between Nikki's legs.

It was so hot, my jealousy evaporated. The sheer pleasure of him finally fucking me released years of built-up anticipation, gratified with each thrust.

He leaned me upward and kissed me hard, and I moaned into his mouth, never raising above a mutter as my cunt contracted.

I put my arms around him as I tasted barbeque and cigarettes.

"Get ready," Spencer said.

Nikki got on her hands and knees as Spencer pulled out of me.

My face, chest, and abdomen heated as he poured his seed.

He's into bukkake.

Nikki shocked me, licking Spencer's cum off my skin. She put a finger inside me as she kissed my mouth, and lower and lower.

She adjusted me to lay back as Spencer hardened again as he grabbed Nikki's hips from behind.

Nikki shocked me with her mouth as Spencer's thrusts pushed her against my sensitive clit.

Just as Spencer was my first cock, Nikki was my first woman bisexual woman.

Spencer finished inside Nikki, and we caught our breath.

"Well," Spencer said. "Everything's all right, now. Feel free to join us for the rest of the night."

"I misjudged you," Nikki said as she dressed. "You're alright."

...

The rest of the staff partied until midnight. Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd were none the wiser of their son having his way with Nikki and me. After his parents left, the booze was distributed by Russell, our groundskeeper.

I didn't expect Spencer to hand me his red Solo cup. I was too young to fuck a few weeks ago, but underage drinking was totally fine.

"I won't tell if you won't," Spencer said. "It wouldn't be the first thing we shared tonight."

Our hands touched again.

"That said," he continued. "Don't get attached. Every other girlfriend hasn't come back for a reason. Just enjoy what we had. Hmm?"

My eyes got hot again, but this time he kissed my forehead and held my hand harder as he led me to sit back at the fire, sitting between us.

"Women," Spencer said as he put a hand on each of our thighs.

I drank while Nikki smiled my way. An hour ago, I could have torn her black hair out by the blonde roots. Now I felt like I owed her everything.

"Is what you said about the monster true?" I asked.

His grin widened. "You wanna see?"

"Of course. You've never lied to me before."

Spencer smiled. "Stay until we get the camp closed. I'll show both of my summer sweethearts. What's one more day in the sandhills, right? The kids go back to school soon, but we don't."

Nikki leaned on Spencer. "Speak for yourself. Chadron's classes start soon for me. I'm gonna hate the long-distance thing."

"Me too," Spencer said.

I leaned my head on his other shoulder. "Me too."

I lived in Grand Island. It's not the longest drive, but I knew we'd never work.

Despite myself, I relished the thickness of his shoulder and the lingering scent of our lovemaking. I wanted him again, knowing we might never repeat our fun after this summer.

2:00 AM came and went as the overconfident girls puked, and the party foul encouraged the others to turn in.

I stood up, but Spencer held my wrist. "Wait for everyone else to leave."

Spencer announced he'd put out the fire before the three of us left, and we were alone again.

Twice in one night. Best summer ever.

"You've been patient for years," Spencer said. "And haven't you always wanted to make love by the fire?"

“Don’t forget who your real girlfriend is,” Nikki said with a grin.  
“Never,” Spencer said. “I should have asked last time, but are you on birth control Cassie?”

I told the truth. I wasn’t.

Spencer reached into his denim vest pocket and pulled out his wallet. “Nikki is, but I always have these.”

From his wallet, he showed me a blue wrapper. “I don’t do kids. This condom has spermicide... just in case you want the fullest experience possible.”

I saw him growing in his swimming trunks again.

“And I’m sure someone has a Plan B if you’re paranoid. Russell gets around a lot more and hands them out like candy. Again... just in case.”

I made sure nobody else watched us, then I tugged his trunks down and let his cock elevate in the open air.

“Hey,” Nikki said. “First dibs.”

Spencer closed his eyes as she lowered her head until an inch remained outside her mouth. She gave a slight gag but moved her head back to inhale before dedicating, taking everything.

“That’s my Nikki,” Spencer said. “Fuck, I’m already close. BJ’s give me a damned hair trigger sometimes.”

I stood and kissed his chiseled chest and moved up to his mouth as he gasped as he finished.

Nikki gave a humming giggle as he jolted again and again.

“Best summer ever,” he said. “You sure you won’t move up here?”

Nikki wiped her mouth and stood. “Shut up, Spencer... and lay on your back.”

She stripped, and just when they couldn’t surprise me further, she sat on his face.

She winked at me. “Mmmm, best way to shut him up.”

I saw him stiffen as I tore open the package and rolled the Trojan down his length and straddled him myself.

This position, along with gravity, fulfilled me much better than earlier.

Nikki grinned my way, and we kept eye contact while riding our respective sides of Spencer’s body.

My endurance gave out, but then I panted when he bucked upward, I watched his abs flex in the fire’s dim light while his hips bounced me off the ground. My insides quivered and I bit my lip to not moan as cum flooded the barrier inside me.

I climaxed before his final twitch. Nikki got off Spencer’s face and he did an effortless sit-up to hold me close as he panted soft air in my ear.

“Hey, sleep with me under the stars,” Spencer said.

“Always the romantic,” Nikki said. “I’m sure I’m gonna have chigger bites on my knees, and mosquito bites on my ass in the morning. Or vice versa.”

We dressed and put out the flames as we recovered under the stars.

“Fine,” he said, holding our hands. “We can sleep in the nurse’s cabin.

Tomorrow... I get to feed a monster.”

To Be Continued...

## BREAKING THE AMETHYST MELISSA R. MENDELSON

“Thank you so much for letting me stay here.”

“It’s no problem, John. Please, come in.”

Riley held the apartment door open for John. He splashed some water and mud on a small carpet nearby and kicked off his shoes, and they landed with a soft squish on the carpet too. He grinned at Riley, and she smiled, her eyes darting over to the mess that he had made.

“Some rain.” John wiped the water off his suitcase and on the wooden floor beneath him.

“Some rain.” Riley looked down at the floor and tried not to sigh. “So, no one answered at home?”

“No.” John dropped his suitcase to the floor. “Mind if I sit on the couch? My legs are killing me.”

“Let me get a towel first.” Riley hurried away, snatching a clean towel from the closet nearby. “Here.” She watched John wipe his face and then sit down on the couch, picking up his sneakers, cleaning each one, and knocking more water and mud all over the floor.

“I really appreciate this, Riley. I had no money for a hotel or even a cab ride. I didn’t know what to do, and they knew that I was coming today too.” He placed the muddy towel on the couch next to him. “I don’t get it.”

“Me neither.” Riley tried to move past him, grabbing for the towel.

John grabbed her arm softly. “I promise I’ll stay just the night, Riley. If I don’t hear from my family tomorrow, I’ll go back. It’s just...”

“Just?” Riley looked at his hand on her arm.

John let go of her. “I might be short a few dollars. That’s all, but I swear that I will pay you back.” He glanced over at the towel. “Here.” He pushed the towel into her hand, not noticing the frown she made as the mud smeared against her skin.

“Thank you.” Riley moved away from him. “I can lend you a few dollars.” She hoped he understood the word, lend.

“Thank you.” John slumped back against the couch. “What’s for dinner? I’m starving.”

Riley paused outside her kitchen. She looked toward the fridge. She sighed, spotting her cat hiding under the table, and her cat gave her that stare like you really had to invite him over.

“I’m sorry. I don’t have much food, John. I guess we can order out.”

“How about Chinese or Mexican? I can go for a taco. Just when you call, make sure that they put the hot sauce on the side. I don’t want my stomach upset tonight.”

“Me neither,” Riley muttered as she headed for the bedroom to grab her phone. “I really know how to pick them,” she said to herself.

Riley’s bedroom had a bed and a dresser with a tv. She realized it was the only tv in the apartment, and there was no way that she would let John into her room. Near the closet was a small, wooden table with a large amethyst stone. She touched the stone and smiled.



A few minutes later, Riley left her room and walked over to where John was sprawled out over the couch. She glanced at his shoes and then the ruined carpet. Maybe, she could save it. If not, she would throw it out.

“Did you call them?” John asked.

“I did.” Riley sat on the loveseat nearby, noting John’s disappointment. “Food should be here soon, and I’ll pay. Don’t worry about it.”

“So, no tv in here?” John looked around the room. “Just paintings.”

“That’s what I do.” Riley glanced at one painting. It was black with a shape edged against the background. She cringed and focused on John. “I like painting in here. Can’t really paint anywhere else.”

“So, where’s the tv?”

Riley bit her lip. “My room,” she finally said.

“Can we...” John noticed the look on her face. “Do you mind if we watch in there?”

“Actually, I don’t feel like watching tv tonight. If that’s okay with you.”

“Sure. Yeah. That’s fine.” John looked disappointed.

Riley did not care. “Look, while we wait for the food, how about I check out the guest room to make sure it’s set for you, and there’s a radio in there, if you want to listen to the baseball game.”

“Who’s playing?”

“Does it matter?” Riley asked. “There’s always a baseball game on especially during the summer. Be right back.”

Riley caught that stare from her cat again, and she agreed. She shouldn’t leave him alone, but what could John possibly do except maybe ruin her couch?

Riley changed the sheets in the guest room and placed the covers on the bed. She was about to check the pillow when she heard a crash. She froze, her mind racing. What did he break? There was nothing in the living room that would make that sound. She paled a moment later.

“No. No. No!”

Riley hurried into her bedroom. The small, wooden table was knocked over. The large amethyst stone was on the floor, broken in half.

“No!” Riley dropped to her knees, trying to push the stone back together again.

“Glue would work.” John flinched at the look on Riley’s face.

“Get out of my room,” Riley said.

“I just wanted to check out the baseball game. You said that there was one on right now.”

“Get out!”

John hurried out of the room.

“And you know what, John?” Riley walked over to the dresser and pulled out a twenty. “This should cover dinner.” She threw the money at him. “I’m calling it a night. Do not knock on my door, and first thing tomorrow morning, I want you gone.”

“You’re not eating?”

“Listen to me, you stupid idiot. I want you out of here first thing tomorrow morning. Got it?”

John flinched at the tone of Riley’s voice. “You don’t have to yell at me.”

“Got it?”

“Okay. Okay, but what about you?”

Riley slammed the bedroom door shut in his face. “Stupid son of a bitch!” She glanced at the broken amethyst and burst into tears. “It’s okay, Riley. It’s split in half, but there’s still enough stone. Please, let it be enough.”

Riley sat on the floor, holding the stone together. She could sense John still on the other side of the door. She should never have let him come here, and what about her cat? She would open the door for her cat, but John would think that she had forgiven him. And he would come back in and then would even ask to watch the game. He had no idea what he just did.

“It won’t come back, Riley. It won’t,” she said to herself but glanced over at the closed window nearby.

A little while later, she heard a knock on her apartment door. It must be the food, but John never came back and said the food was here. Shortly after, he went into the guest room and blasted the radio, and it stayed like that for hours. Finally, he shut it off, which meant that he went to sleep, and she could sense that it was late. She had no choice but to go to bed.

Somewhere in the middle of the night, or was it very early morning, she woke up ice cold. She tried to move but couldn’t. Something rested on top of her, digging its claws into her skin.

“John,” she squeaked, glancing over at the open window. “John.”

The creature pressed down against her, and she felt something wet slide across her skin. Blood. She blinked, trying to convince herself that it was a nightmare, but she knew it wasn’t. This happened once before, and her cat saved her. And she knew that it would come back, but then she got the amethyst stone. And it protected her, and that idiot had to break the damn stone.

She opened her eyes and remembered, and she focused all her strength to move. In her grip was a piece of the amethyst stone. She slammed it into the creature, and it let out a sound that made her body and teeth clench.

Now, John was at the door, trying to open it, but he couldn’t. The creature was somehow blocking him from opening it, and it leaned down toward her face. All she could see was black with an outline shaped around it, and it was looking right at her.

“John!”

The creature sliced its claws across her face. She lost all sensation except for blinking, and something like a cold breath slipped out from her lips. The creature caught it and moved away, diving out the window. It was not coming back. It had what it came for, but she wounded it. And it still wasn’t enough.

Riley felt herself slipping away. She struggled to hold on, but her body was unresponsive. She heard the door slam against the wall, John finally got into the room, but it no longer mattered. She tried to listen to his voice, but all she saw was darkness. And only one thought echoed inside her mind.

No good deed goes unpunished.



Melissa R. Mendelson is a Poet and Horror, Science-Fiction and Dystopian Author. Her short stories have been published by Sirens Call Publications, Dark Helix Press, Altered Reality Magazine, Transmundane Press, Owl Canyon Press, Wild Ink Publishing, and The Yard: Crime Blog.

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## SHE VOLUNTEERED BY WHISPERIA WAILING

This street performer knew many things.  
He knew the easy impressions on the young,  
the secrets washing each show  
and freshening its roots.  
Time would disappear,  
and at the end of the magician's set,  
reality would creep back into place.  
The audience would walk away,  
defeated at their ability to etch into the mystery  
of how the questions  
within the contortions of his tricks  
let him abandon volunteers so quickly—  
the thoughts of many audience members  
immersed in eyes of the reality twists.

A disfigured shadow arises  
in the darkness of a nearby alley,  
reflecting an incomprehensible, sewn-up  
project of a being, bottom row of teeth  
dripping with craving.  
The mountainous creature is a collage  
of dead human limbs  
stitched together in black needlework,  
made up of hands, arms, torsos, and faces,  
wrists stretching as if trying to grab something...  
or pull others into it as a sacrifice.  
The ever-growing monster  
suffers pain at every notch of thread  
that ties the many volunteers from years past.  
It tries to move unnoticed,  
shoulders and knuckles disjointed,  
elbows and sliced forearms pointed outward.

People clap for a volunteer who smiles, not knowing  
what suffering haunts the shadows of the street.  
The woman will feel her body lose its structure,  
separate into pieces, get lost  
in the miracle existence of the beast.

of a



Whisperia Wailing has six previously published poems. The first, “Jazz Bar,” was printed in a Scottish literary journal entitled Northern Light. The second, “Winter,” was a part winter-themed anthology. The third was her first horror-themed poem, entitled “A Sightless Grave Ghost.” She also wrote poems for J.V. Hilliard’s fantasy series, including for Vorodin’s Lair, the second book in the trilogy, and The Trillias Gambit, the third. Before her second published work, “Winter,” she graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in English Writing from the University of Pittsburgh.

[https://www.instagram.com/whisperia\\_wailing/](https://www.instagram.com/whisperia_wailing/)

## JUST DON'T SCREAM PART TWO BY THOMAS VAN BOENING

Everyone spent the last day closing the camp. I Power-washed every life jacket and put the paddleboats into storage. Spencer and Nikki spent their time together on vacuum duty in all the bunks. Spencer easily hoisted each bunk bed frame and mattress, and Nikki cleaned all the crumbs and dust under each bed.

The others got the power shut down for the season, bug barrier sprayed down, and windows locked and shuttered until next summer.

We had one last powwow in the parking lot before Spencer's parents gave us their thanks and our paystubs. We all said our goodbyes and promised to stay in touch over social media.

I got my bags loaded into my car and Spencer surprised me with another kiss on my neck before whispering in my ear.

"Still wanna see The Alkali Lake Monster?"

I had an odd vibe and hesitated. "I'm... just about packed up."

Spencer grinned wider. "Come on. College doesn't start for another two weeks. What's one more day, right?"

Nikki arrived and put an arm around Spencer. "I'm going. I told him if he wanted another good time, he didn't have to drive us way out into the middle of nowhere."

"The middle of nowhere is a perfect place for a monster to dwell," Spencer said. "I really should stop calling it a monster. It's just a large amphibian, in all honesty."

I stopped smiling. "You're serious."

"Serious as a drowning camper," he said. "If you don't believe me by this afternoon, you can tell the world Spencer Lloyd needs a huge enema. Come on. Come on. I feed it on occasion just so it sticks around."

The last fellow counselors were leaving just the three of us in the parking lot as Spencer pulled my hips to his, and I felt his hard-on again.

"I call shotgun," Nikki said.

Spencer grinned back my way. "See? She's all for it. You were wild and adventurous with us before. This is no different."

Smiling, I slammed the Dodge's trunk. "Screw it, let's do it."

...

He drove for about an hour, winding around dirt roads here and there. He slowed down at every possible pond, creek, and small lake he could.

"You do know where you're going right?" Nikki said. "My phone is getting shitty service."

"I know these parts," Spencer said. "Alkali Lake is where it was first spotted. Others have seen it by Walgren Lake a handful of times. The idea that it stays in one place is ridiculous. Just like an alligator or Komodo dragon, sometimes it'll move to another body of water for better food opportunities. Lots of small ponds lure thirsty antelope and deer."

Another twenty minutes, and I thought Spencer got himself lost after running into dead ends and doubling back.

Then he abruptly stopped.

"There it is," he said.

He pointed past the dash at another murky Nebraska pond.

"I don't see anything," Nikki said.

"That's because I know what I'm looking for," he said while getting cheek-to-cheek with her to point. "See the lump on the far side?"

I looked too and saw what looked like a big floating branch or log.

Then I noticed there were no trees around on the big sandhills surrounding both sides of the water, and no place a log could have come from.

Spencer opened his door, and the Ford's digital tune chimed.

"Ohhh," Spencer said. "Let's leave the cellphones behind. The last thing Nebraska needs is a media circus. Or worse, scientists to take this beautiful specimen away to get all dissected."

It wasn't an unreasonable request, but I didn't like something about being this far from anywhere without my iPhone. Regardless, I left my cell in the cup holder.

"Again, it's not like we have reception," Nikki said.

"Speak for yourself," Spencer said. "I got StarLink. Lack of cell service should have never happened in the twentieth century, let alone the twenty-first century."

"Does it work?" I asked.

"I know Cherry County, but even I get disoriented. Every sandhill looks the same out here. I'd like to be self-reliant, but I'm not. Besides, it's also how I keep track of where the monster might be approximately."

Before we got out of the pick-up, Spencer opened the glove box, and he grabbed a handgun that looked like it belonged in an old Clint Eastwood thriller.

He pulled out the gun and a box of bullets before loading six chambers.

"Fuck a duck, Spencer," Nikki said. "What's that for?"

"Here's the truth," Spencer said. "While I've seen it many times, it's still a wild animal. My 44 Magnum is a little insurance policy just in case something goes south. I'm an old boy scout. Always be prepared, right?"

"You could have prepared me," Nikki said. "I hate guns, and I can't stand assholes that brandish them."

"I'm not 'brandishing' anything," Spencer said. "I'm just carrying one of the best pistols I can. It's only as dangerous as the man using it, right?"

I wasn't a fan of guns either, but I remained silent as Nikki scoffed.

"Just... don't point it at me, okay," she said. "My favorite cousin got killed in a hunting accident, and no amount of NRA catchphrases are going to bring him back."

"Since I've loaded it, it hasn't been pointed at anything living, and my fingers have been nowhere near the trigger. I've done my due diligence. Try not to act like I'm some Yosemite Sam yokel."

"Let's just do this," I interrupted.

Spencer looked back at me and nodded.

I wish I wore longer jeans when Spencer led us through longer grass. I worried about chigger bites or ticks, or hidden snakes.

Spencer stopped us once we got to the edge of the pond. It was no bigger than my old high school basketball court.

"How deep is it?" I asked.

“Not sure. I wouldn’t go swimming with it. Oh... by the way. Big safety tip I should have said a while back.”

Nikki raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t scream,” he said.

“Okay?” Nikki said. “Why?”

“Something about the way it hunts. Whenever something screams, it perceives something weakened. I’ve watched it catch turkey buzzards, and other squawking birds many times.

The log shape never moved and Spencer pulled a wooden flute from his backpack. Something sold out of a kitschy roadside gift shop. It was comical until he blew out deep hollow notes.

“I didn’t know you played,” I said.

He pointed and stopped.

My jaw dropped when I saw the shape in the water splash.

Two white points emerged, which led to long horns just as Spencer continued playing.

Coming toward us, two orbs of orange reached the surface before another short horn in front of a long snout. It dipped below the surface, and I heard a great amount of water slosh in a rippling pattern coming toward shore.

A clawed frog-like webbed hand broke the water. The leathery membranous skin had a yellowish-brown sheen on the underside, and phthalo green on top.

The eyes met mine and I stepped back as it crawled on the shallow side of the pond.

“Told ya,” Spencer said. “The Alkali Lake Monster in all its glory.”

Nikki and I said nothing as we gawked. It looked like a cross between a salamander I could have seen at the Henry Doorly Zoo and a dragon from a Final Fantasy game.

Resting on the bank, it was twice the length of Spencer’s truck.

“So now what?” I asked.

Spencer set his backpack down, turning back to me. “Glad you asked. Now... we feed it.”

Everything in my body froze as Spencer drew the magnum out, pointing it to Nikki.

I expected Nikki to scream but instead she broke down and cried. “All summer you said it wouldn’t last. Is this what happened to the other girls?”

Spencer’s grin didn’t waver. “It’s the best way to ditch a bitch I know.”

Nikki stood.

“I gave you... everything,” she said. “You said you loved me.”

“I do,” Spencer said. “And I don’t stay attached. Come on, understand my perspective. I’m a pussy addict, and I will never marry because of it. I use girls the same way I used to use gym socks. This is a whole lot nicer... for me. Don’t get me wrong, everything was- aww, for Christ’s sake. Quit blubbing.”

I got closer to Spencer, but he read my mind when he pointed the gun my way.

“Heroics are for the movies, Cassie,” Spencer said. “I’ll give you this much, I never had a threeway before. I’d love to say ‘I owe you a solid,’ but that’s not happening.”



Nikki gave an ugly sobbing grunt before she dashed, but Spencer anticipated her and pulled the trigger, giving a rapture-sounding boom that rang my eardrums.

I could only sense my heartbeat faintly whooshing as the high pitch dazed me.

Panicked, I realized I knelt in a fetal position. I tilt my head up to see Nikki with a bloodied stringy mess where a hand and wrist should be. I could faintly comprehend her shrieking, and I saw the head of the monster open an impossibly large maw and bite down on the exposed flesh until only a spurring appendage remained just below her shoulder.

Tearing her flesh free, Nikki ran as I began to understand Spencer again.

“Go ahead. Scream. Scream. Scream until your lungs are raw.”

“Help!” She said repeatedly.

“We’re miles from where anyone can hear you. The way you’re running, it’s a good two hundred miles of prairie. And every other direction you choose is another hundred miles of prairie.”

Then I saw the large animal waddle out of the water and give chase, wiggling a large iguana-like tail behind it.

“This thing doesn’t like to be fed as much as it loves to hunt. No hard feelings, Nikki.”

A ropelike, veiny tongue lashed from its unhinged mouth, and caught her around the neck fast enough it gave Nikki whiplash.

The tongue retracted as I recoiled and heard the monster chew flesh and bones.

I closed my eyes as I heard Spencer’s boots crunch the dirt and dry long grass near me.

“The monster has to eat too,” Spencer said with no emotion.

“Her parents will look for her,” I said.

“She’s a runaway from a broken home,” Spencer said. “My kind of girl. The worst products of divorce tend to rebel and run away. Not always, but the ones that do, I tend to attract. It’s easier than wandering across a homeless person or hitchhiker. Sixty Thousand people go missing every single year in the United States. Appalling numbers, but Nebraska only eeks out roughly fifty to sixty a year. I can’t take all the credit, but I manage to let my pet hunt drifters whenever possible. Someone might look for you, but my family will deny everything.”

On my knees, I didn’t know how I could get out of this without getting his gun.

“Why?” I asked.

Spencer bent down and forced a kiss, and when I jerked my head away, he pointed the barrel of his gun to my chin to coax me. The warmth from the last shot made me flinch, and I fought back tears of rage as his tongue entered my mouth.

“Why not?” He said. “The world is full of good people that have bad things happen to them. It doesn’t mean bad things will happen to me though.”

“Fuck you,” I said, surprised at how much gumption I had behind it.

“Oooh, I’d love to go another round, but it’ll devour Nikki soon, and will want another snack.”

Distract him.

“Wait,” I said. Wait. If this is it... perhaps a goodbye blowjob?”

Spencer’s eyebrow raised. “Hmm. A final request, Cassie?”

I didn’t fake my tears. “I just wanted you to love me.”

He stood, and with one hand, he undid his belt and unzipped his jeans.

“This is loving enough Cassie.”

With his cock in front of my chin, I opened my mouth.

He put the barrel of the gun to my forehead.

Just don't scream.

“Try to run, and you'll get the Cronenberg treatment. I'll turn your skull into hairy lasagna.”

Yanking my hair, he drove himself down my throat hard enough I couldn't struggle.

I did everything he expected, but my idea to distract him long enough to get the magnum seemed fruitless when the same gun was against my temple.

My body kept tensing, waiting for him to shoot, and it worked in my favor when he began to moan.

“Ohhhh, let me have it,” he said.

As I still heard the monster chewing, I met his eyes. I hated how beautiful he still looked, and how he betrayed me like this.

Fuck it. No matter what happens to me, he can never hurt another girl again.

I licked the underside of his tip and let the temptation to puke all over his jeans pass as I noticed him swaying and his knees buckle.

I've only got one chance at this. It's him or me.

“Cassie,” he moaned. “Fuck, don't stop. I'm... Mmmm.”

My tender scalp burned as his hair-triggered cock shot down my throat.

“For what it's worth, you just gave the best blowjob ever.”

Now.

I clenched my jaw. Hard. Hard enough until my teeth met and the flavor of his sweaty skin and seed were replaced by an intense burst of coppery blood.

He'd either pull the trigger or be in so much pain he couldn't concentrate on anything else but what's no longer between his legs.

A madman's scream erupted, and I waited for the end.

Then neither hand was on me as blood dripped and spurt on my face and stomach. I opened my mouth and gasped for air after all seven inches of Spencer slid past my teeth and onto the ground next to the dropped magnum.

“You fucking cunt!” Spencer said.

He screamed uncontrollably as I grabbed the blood-coated gun.

Before I could pull back the wet hammer, his strong hand clenched my wrist hard enough to break my grip.

Spencer punched me in the ribs, and my diaphragm refused to help my lungs inhale for a good ten seconds.

Spencer frantically tried to put his chewed manhood back where it ought to be, but his bleeding became worse as his jeans became saturated dark red.

Then I looked down the magnums barrel.

“You're dead, you stupid-”

Hundreds of teeth from the maw emerged behind him and the monster chomped off his head and shoulders.

The arm holding the gun dropped, and another shot tortured my ears.

The Alkali Lake Monster recoiled from the blast as it chewed more from Spencer's body.

I dived for the headless torso, not caring how close I got to the beast's mouth, and I pulled back the hammer before giving the Alkali Lake Monster a single shot between its horns at close range.

It was enough damage to make The Alkali Lake Monster roar before retreating into the pond.

If it dies, it dies.

In Spencer's pockets, I found the pickup keys and his iPhone.

As I started the Ford, I realized while nobody would look for Spencer's victims, someone would at least look for Spencer.

What am I going to tell the cops? What am I going to tell anyone? Spencer lured me here to see something that should only exist in the local equivalent of a drunk fishing story. Then I escaped a fabled monster where they didn't?

Hopeless, and without signal, I saw my phone's 'low battery' warning, stating I had ten percent of my battery left because it kept trying to find a local cell tower.

I couldn't open Spencer's iPhone and I returned to the pond for his arm. I frantically unclenched the still-cooling fist to unlock it with his thumbprint.

I made sure his last few pings on the phone were not on any record, so I opened a private safari page, hoping it would be private enough.

True enough, Starlink worked out in the prairie, and I found out where the hell I was on Google Maps.

Forty miles from the camp, I knew if I was going to get back, I'd have to take step-by-step directions with my phone in painstaking detail and only turn on my phone to get the next set of directions.

If Starlink gave any pings in this spot, it would be Spencer's last known whereabouts.

When I was sure I had all the directions I needed, I chucked his phone into the pond, hoping I wouldn't regret it. I contemplated keeping the gun but immediately reconsidered the murder weapon with my fingerprints and his blood all over it, so it went into the lake too. I threw in the bullets and anything else that would rouse suspicion.

Okay. Don't panic. With some luck, it'll be a while before an investigation begins.

As the Ford door chime jingled on, I saw turkey buzzards land next to Spencer's cockless crotch and they began pecking and tearing at his remains.

Nature takes care of itself.

Then I saw the orange eyes and tip of the front horn surface on calm water, and when the birds were too focused on gorging themselves, the large jaw unhinged, and the pink rope-like tongue attached to one of the buzzards and disappeared into the water before a blotch of red plopped up.

I sped halfway back, following my phone's directions on getting out of most of the dirt roads. It reminded me of my mom's ancient step-by-step MapQuest instructions.

Stopping, I knew I had a lot of work to do to untangle myself from Spencer's death.

While I let Spencer's charger help my phone, I found a dime to unscrew the license plates and removed his Herbie Husker and 'Don't Tread on Me' stickers from the chrome bumper.

I found some food in the pickup. Protein bars melted in the heat, and a hot and spicy beef jerky package looked tempting.

I looked high and low for anything linking the truck to Spencer, and I only found an orange prescription bottle of Minocycline acne medication.

I also found a few of Nikki's things. A pair of lace panties in the glove box, and a Polaroid photo taken before camp started when Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd brought their ancient camera as a pre-camp bonding exercise.

I remembered my Polaroid souvenir back in my Dodge Neon and couldn't wait to tear it up. It was a photo of Spencer giving me rabbit-ears.

I then remembered something about VIN numbers and knew it didn't matter how hard I tried, something could pinpoint Spencer's disappearance with the truck.

I thought of the few other drivers out in the sandhills. It's so desolate, that any stranger would likely just give a passing notice before focusing on the road again.

With Spencer's phone gone, I couldn't find the VINs easily.

Burn it. Find the only VIN number I'm sure I can get to, and incinerate the rest of them somehow.

I got the obvious metal plate on the driver's door easily but found no others.

Content with my phone at sixty percent charged, I found Spencer's lighter in the middle console, and I came up with something to light in the gas tank. I tore up the owner's manual and jammed the pages inside with Nikki's panties for a crude fuse.

After a lot of running, the explosion hit me with a louder jolt than the Magnum.

Nobody would see the smoke for a while, and if another car came, I'd hide in a ditch for a few minutes.

The Nebraska heat got milder in the late afternoon, and I'd gone over five large sandhills with the faint smoke behind me. I pitched the license plates in a creek and found odd places to empty the prescription bottle and threw it into more prairie grass.

No other cars came, and I checked my phone again when I got to a fork in the road. I was getting worried that I'd encounter a bobcat or coyote before people.

So far, so good. I'll be back at the campground by sundown.

The roads began looking familiar when I finally saw signs toward Valentine.

The smoke appeared as just a faint whisp of gray against the blue sky, and anyone noticing would think a controlled fire burned and go on with their day.

I only ducked down for two cars on my entire journey, and I'd eaten both protein bars, and the spicy jerky parched me by the time I finished my last bite, but it was a better flavor than Spencer's chewed cock.

After six hours, and twenty miles of walking, and the campground never looked better as I got my keyfob out to unlock the Dodge.

Reaching the empty parking lot, I used what I had left to sprint and I turned on the A/C, giving me hellish hot air that gradually cooled.

I stripped off my bloody shirt and noticed my beige bra was spared from Spencer's remains, mostly.

I'll have to ditch this and clean the fuck out of the car later.

Gravel under the car hit the undercarriage as I sped out to the highway. After a few minutes, I repeated to myself not to speed to attract cops. I cried and began laughing, and didn't stop until I reached Grand Island.



Thomas Van Boening was born and raised in Lincoln Nebraska. He grew up loving everything books and movies of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. While not working the day job as a graphic designer, he is typing away on his forthcoming debut fantasy novel. As long as his lovely wife Sarah keeps the coffee coming, he'll never runs out of ideas.

His forthcoming novel, "Mead, Magic, and Madness," has a tentative release date in Spring of 2024. Facebook, Tumblr, Amazon Vella, and TikTok under @PaladinSlapper

## OLD FAMILY RECIPE BY ABIGAIL LINHARDT

Bobby was going to visit his mother for the first time in 10 years and his sister, Sue, would be there too. Sue had been living with their mother ever since she was released from the asylum eight years ago.

Life was miserable with the old lady. She was always yelling, breaking something, or crying. Ginny, the black cat Sue had as a child, was her only source of joy until one day their mother held it to the stove until it died.

Poor Sue could never get a good date either because her mother always scared off the men. Being almost 30 years old and never having gone anywhere with a special guy was taking its toll on Sue.

It was a dark, rainy day and it was Bobby's 32nd birthday. Sue had made a hot soup with large chunks of juicy meat. "It's good," Bobby said as they ate quietly on the old furniture. The bird in the living room cawed loudly in protest of something. "Where's mom?"

"Soup's good?" Sue asked, eyes glassy. "I couldn't stand her anymore. I wanted no one to see her ever again."

Their mother was nowhere to be seen, but the red broth and the light chunks of sweet meat were somehow comforting.

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Abi works part-time as a freelance ghostwriter, editor, audiobook narrator, and is one half of the partnership that owns *Altered Reality Magazine*. She hopes to one day make these passions her full-time job while she hunts for the next bohemian adventure.

You can find her freelance services on Fiverr at [www.fiverr.com/abigaillinhardt](http://www.fiverr.com/abigaillinhardt) and can be found online at [www.abigaillinhardt.com](http://www.abigaillinhardt.com)

## COLD WATER SHOCK BY ALLISON IVY

Imagine you're afraid of the unknown. So afraid, in fact, that you spend months in therapy just hoping you don't find yourself with full-blown agoraphobia. Imagine you visit Big Bear Lake with your father to catch one of the last days of summer. The two of you rent a canoe on an overcast late August afternoon, and you actually start to relax.

Until a fog rolls in so thick you can barely see your own hand in front of your face. With it comes a chill that threatens to reach your bones. You call out for your father and are greeted by a slight tipping of the boat as if someone has just boarded or debarked. Tentatively, you make your way to the other side of the boat, extending your arms and expecting to feel the soft fabric of his T-shirt. That feeling never comes. Your hand hovers in the air.

Your father is gone. No splash of water. No scream for help. He's just gone. Panic threatens.

As quickly as it arrived, the fog abates slightly, allowing a few visible yards beyond the boat. The air is no less frigid.

After calling for your father once again and hearing no response, you move to slide into the water. Your life vest scratches at your arms as your foot hits the water. You gasp at the temperature. It's lower than it should be. As if it were the dead of winter and not summer.

A shadow darts under your boat and away. Twice. No, three times.

You pull your leg back into the boat.

And you sit, paralyzed, on one of the benches in the canoe. You call for your father in vain, and, eventually, your calls turn to whispers. How long has it been?

A flash of red surfaces from the depths below a few yards in front of you. A life vest.

A sudden bump rocks the canoe, and you yelp and fall silent. The water ripples around you as you white-knuckle the wood underneath you, and the shadow makes a slow circle around your tiny safe haven. A glimpse of its humped, black spine, slick with slime is enough to spur you into action.

You thrust your oars into the water, ready to get the hell out of this lake, only to have them jerked out of your grip and straight down into the depths below.

Panic taps at your shoulder.

Big Bear Lake is roughly four hundred and forty-six meters deep, one mile wide, and close to eight miles long. The water frequently drops well below 70°F, especially in the off-season. A human in water below 59°F can experience "cold water shock," which can cause hyperventilation, vertigo, and even heart attack in the otherwise young and healthy.

Your therapist told you the repetition of facts is a useful technique to keep calm in times of crisis. When dealing with the unknown, it's good to keep yourself grounded in what you do know. As a comfort.

Here's what else you know:

You have no oars and a phone with no cell phone service.

You can't see the shoreline, because the fog still lingers, and you haven't seen anyone else on the lake.

There's no one who will be looking for you anytime soon because Dad is the only family you have, and your canoe rental is on the honor system. Dad knows the man who lent it to you. Sure, you told your therapist where you'd be, but your next appointment isn't for another two days.

Someone is moaning in your ear. It's a terrible, low keening that makes your heart pound in your ribcage. That same someone's hot breath wafts onto your cheek. Your entire body seizes up and then shakes uncontrollably. Your knees knock together, and you bite your lip.

The moans recede and sink below the surface of the water, becoming burbles as it sinks.

But it doesn't leave.

A prolonged scratching from underneath your feet wakes you from your frozen state, and you look down to see three long, jagged scrapes in the bottom of your canoe.

You're taking on water, and in no time at all, you'll be without your one lifeline. You wince as the numbingly cold water hits your toes, and you pull your legs onto the bench.

Kneeling there in the middle of the lake in a sinking canoe, you have only one option.

You're going to have to swim.

The thing in the water is waiting patiently for you to make a move.

You look left. Right. Behind you. There is only water and fog and the creature below you.

The freezing water is now where your knees once were, and the creature has begun to tilt your canoe. Rocking it gently as if it were a baby's cradle. The moans are deeper, now, more guttural. A predator growling at its prey.

You rise from the partially submerged bench, catching sight of the thing's hand—for lack of a better term—on your right. A horrible, slimy stone gray with spindly fingers attached to ragged black claws and almost translucent webbing stretched in between.

You look around, willing yourself not to cry. You use your phone's flashlight to puncture the fog but have no luck. Still no shoreline. Which way will you swim?

Eeny, meeny, miny ...

You settle on a direction. Left. Away from the thing now tapping its claws on the side of the canoe and rocking it harder with each passing second.

You take a deep breath, gasping in the thick fog, almost exhaling it all when you shine your light back at the hand. It's wearing your dad's waterproof watch.

*Moe.*





Allison Ivy is the author of *The Dragon and the Double-Edged Sword* and Acquisitions Editor of *Altered Reality Magazine*.

She offers editing services on her website: [www.allisonivybooks.com](http://www.allisonivybooks.com) and consults with Twin Tales Publishing. She grew up reading a book a day (mostly *Goosebumps*, *Fear Street*, or the works of Christopher Pike).

Allison graduated from Penn State with a B.A. in English and a Creative Writing certificate and currently lives in Connecticut with her partner. Look for her new adult horror novel coming soon. Find her at: [https://linktr.ee/allison\\_ivy](https://linktr.ee/allison_ivy)

## CAMPFIRE GOODIES BY J.V. HILLIARD

Casey jostled her Jiffy Pop Popcorn atop the campfire grate and brushed her blond hair behind one ear. The evening chill, chased away in the moment by the crackling fire, popped and hissed.

“What was that?” She stiffened at a distant sound. “A Scream?”

The darkened woods encroached around their camp, the flames hiding the faraway voices from her. Her eyes scanned the chattering branches that swayed in the late summer wind.

“It was nothing,” David assured, as he took a seat next to her on the log. “Just a few Boys, Lost in the woods. Have some rice. How can a billion Chinese people be wrong?”

He offered her a box of half-opened Chinese takeout. His eyes were playful but somehow ominous, adding to her jumbled nerves.

Casey wrapped her arms around her torso and glanced down at the carton of rice, but her stomach turned.

“Eh, rice looks like maggots.” Her face squirmed and contorted. “How can you eat that?”

“I don’t each much,” her friend admitted, “but I do like to... drink.” He took a long swig from a dirty bottle of wine, his lips reddening with its contents.

“Freddie, can you pass me a slice of that pizza?” Chef Slowik’s voice interrupted their conversation, his voice calling from behind her. “I like mine with extra cheese. Where’d you get the recipe for this again? It’s taste is so unique.”

From across the fire, Freddie Krueger opened the pizza box and with a quick wisk of his blades, sliced it like a professional. He handed the box to Chef. “It’s my own recipe. I like to cook with love. With soul. So, I call it Soul Pizza.”

“Hmmp,” came a disagreeable scoff from Doctor Lecter, who’d just emerged from his glamping tent.

The man’s mere presence caused Casey to shudder. What kind of person insists on wearing all white in the woods?

“Pizza?” Lecter questioned. “For a summer campfire? Nothing is better than one of Junior Sawyer’s homemade pot pies on a brisk summer night. I prefer mine with some fava beans and a nice chianti.”

“Junior?” Slowik scoffed. “You mean the guy with the leathery face?”

Junior adjusted his apron, seeming not to catch the insult and instead wiped his soiled hands before handing Lecter a helping of his Texas specialty.

“Indeed, I do chef.” Lecter nodded. “If you like, I’ll prepare some of my sweet breads for you the next time you are in town. I’d love to have you for dinner.”

Slowik shook his head, and moved back into the shadows, politely refusing the doctor’s invitation.

“Want a taste?” The good doctor leaned into Casey, but the sight of the meat pie made her gag.

“No, thank you.” She gently pushed Lecter’s hand away. “My stomach.”

“A pain?” Lecter’s curiosity seemed to be piqued with her condition. “Where does it hurt?”

“I’ve got something for that.” Jack Torrance broke his silence and finally entered the conversation. He poured Casey a shot of Jack Daniels. “Here’s to the hair of the dog that bit ya.”

Her face snarled at the pungent odor of the alcohol, and she stood up, taking a stroll around the camp.

“Don’t go too far,” David reminded her. “Or your popcorn will burn.”

“I won’t,” she replied, wrapping a woolen blanket around her shoulders.

“Are you in the mood for something sweet?” Chef Slowik stepped toward her with a smile. His gesture was meant to reassure, but she wasn’t in the mood for any food. A sharp pain tore through her stomach and she winced, almost as if she was being stabbed.

“Come now.” Slowik put his arm on her shoulder, insisting on trying to help her. “I’m about to make some S’mores. They are the most offensive assault on the human palate ever contrived. Chocolate, graham crackers and marshmallows. That’ll cure your aching belly.”

“Liver alone,” Stu Macher’s voice called from the other side of the fire. “Get it? Liver... leave her... alone?”

“Ugh,” Casey moaned. His poor attempt at humor made her stomachache worse. “Why did I ever date you?”

“Anyone seen little Chucky?” David asked. “His Swedish meatball are ready.”

“Grumph.” Junior’s inaudible answer was enough for David to drop the subject.

“He doesn’t like that kid.” Stu shook his head at David. “All that child wants to do is play and he asks our friend here all the time.”

“I think he went down to the lake with that Voorhees chap,” Lecter confirmed. “Said he’d be back before nightfall. I hope they’re both okay.”

“I don’t think Jason’s much of a swimmer,” Casey remarked, as she recalled seeing him flailing in the water earlier in the day. “If they went for a dip...”

“S’mores are done,” Slowik announced to no one—but everyone. “Eat up. It’s a house delight I make for my special guests at Hawthorne.”

The campers huddled around Slowik as the chef handed out his goodies. “It’s such a nice summer night. What could go wrong with a group of friends in the woods, enjoying each other’s company?”



Born of steel, fire and black wind, J.V. Hilliard was raised as a highlander in the foothills of a once-great mountain chain on the confluence of the three mighty rivers that forged his realm’s wealth and power for generations.

His father, a peasant twerg, toiled away in industries of honest labor and instilled in him a work ethic that would shape his destiny. His mother, a local healer, cared for his elders and his warrior uncle, who helped to raise him during his formative years. His genius brother, whose wizardly prowess allowed him to master the art of the abacus and his own quill, trained with him for battles on fields of green and sheets of ice.

Hilliard’s earliest education took place in his warrior uncle’s tower, where he learned his first words. His uncle helped him to learn the basics of life—and, most importantly, creative writing.

Hilliard’s training and education readied him to lift a quill that would scribe the tale of the realm of Warminster, filled with brave knights, harrowing adventure and legendary struggles. He lives in the city of silver cups, hypocycloids and golden triangles with his wife, a ranger of the diamond. They built their castle not far into the countryside, guarded by his own two horsehounds, Thor and MacLeod, and resides there to this day.

