

THE NIGHTMARE SOCIETY



VOLUME I

THE
NIGHTMARE
SOCIETY

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Edited by Jake Tri

The Nightmare Society: Volume I

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Content Advisory:

Some stories in The Nightmare Society contain strong language, adult themes, and graphic descriptions of violence and horror. Reader discretion is advised.

GENESIS

Story by Jake Tri

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

“Hey Genesis... what’s the weather like right now?”

A green light blinked three times, followed by a soothing female voice. “The current temperature outside is 31 degrees, partly cloudy, with a 60 percent chance of snow.”

Nick smiled at the small, pyramid-shaped device sitting on his desk.

“Do I have any items on my schedule tomorrow?”

“You have a client phone call scheduled for 1:30 pm.”

“Okay Genesis, turn the lights on.”

The small apartment immediately lit up.

Nick was always ahead of the curve in terms of technology, and the new Genesis Home Device was the latest upgrade to his tech-centric lifestyle. For \$120, it was a great buy, and after a bit of tinkering, he could control almost every device in his apartment via voice command. The thermostat, the TV, the lights... and that was just the beginning. The plan was to turn his regular home into a functioning smart home, and Genesis was the first step.

A couple nights later, Nick was lying on the couch messing around on his phone. He was exhausted, his energy depleted from too much work and the frigid temperatures of mid-February. He stretched his arms out to yawn, slowly giving in to his heavy eyelids. But just as he was about to drift off, a voice ripped through the silence.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know how to help with that.”

Nick looked over at Genesis sitting on the desk.

“Um... I didn’t ask you anything.”

Nick stood up and waited for Genesis to utter something else, but he was met with nothing but silence and the green glow of the power light.

After checking the settings and making sure it was still properly connected, Nick just brushed it off as a glitch, or that Genesis picked up some audio from the TV. He then trudged into his bedroom and plopped down for some much needed rest.

“Okay Genesis, set the temperature to 68 degrees, and turn the lights off.”

The sound of the furnace soon kicked on and every light in the apartment clicked off. Nick smiled at the ease of it all, and drifted off to sleep.

...

“I’m sorry, I don’t know how to help with that.”

Nick’s eyes ripped open. He looked over at the clock, 3:33 am. A white cloud of vapor left his lips every time he exhaled... it was absolutely freezing. Nick wrapped himself in a blanket and groggily walked to the thermostat. It was turned off.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know how to help with that.”

Nick yelled at the device like it was a misbehaving pet, “Genesis, stop!”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know how to help with that.”

“Genesis, shut up!”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know how to help with that.”

Nick walked over to the outlet and harshly unplugged the power cord. The green power light slowly faded out and Nick plodded back to bed.

The next day Nick exchanged his Genesis for a new one. He almost felt bad, like he was exchanging an old, faulty friend. It made him realize how easy it was to bond with something simply because it had a pleasant voice and a nice, pre-programmed personality. But one thing was for sure, he couldn't risk getting pneumonia simply because it was defective.

A few weeks passed and Nick didn't have any issues with the new Genesis device, in fact, he had found a way to sync up nearly *everything*. Even the refrigerator was now a "smart fridge."

"Genesis, turn the shower on and start my Friday night playlist."

The water started running and music immediately filled the apartment.

Nick threw his clothes to the side and stepped into the stream, the hot water rolled down his neck and back, relaxing him. It was pre-set at the perfect temperature. But just as he reached for the soap, the lights cut out and the music stopped.

"What the hell? Genesis, turn the lights back on."

The lights flickered back on and Nick returned to showering, but seconds later they cut off again.

"Damn it..." Nick turned the water off and wrapped himself in a towel. He stumbled around in the dark, searching for the bathroom wall. As he made his way into the family room, Genesis was the only thing visible in the dark, its power light emitting an eerie green glow in the corner of the room.

"Genesis, repeat the last command."

The green light blinked three times, indicating the request had been heard.

"The most recent command was... 'Turn off the lights.'"

A chill went up Nick's spine, "What? I didn't say that."

Nick just stood silently watching the green light glow in the darkness... then the light blinked three more times... but Nick hadn't said a word.

"I'm sorry, I don't know how to help with that."

Suddenly the temperature in the room dropped and Nick heard a slight hissing sound behind him. It was like a faint whisper in the air, scraping across the walls, filling the room with a palpable sense of dread. He could feel it brushing against his skin. The hair on the back of his neck stood up and goosebumps erupted over his body. Again, the green light pulsed.

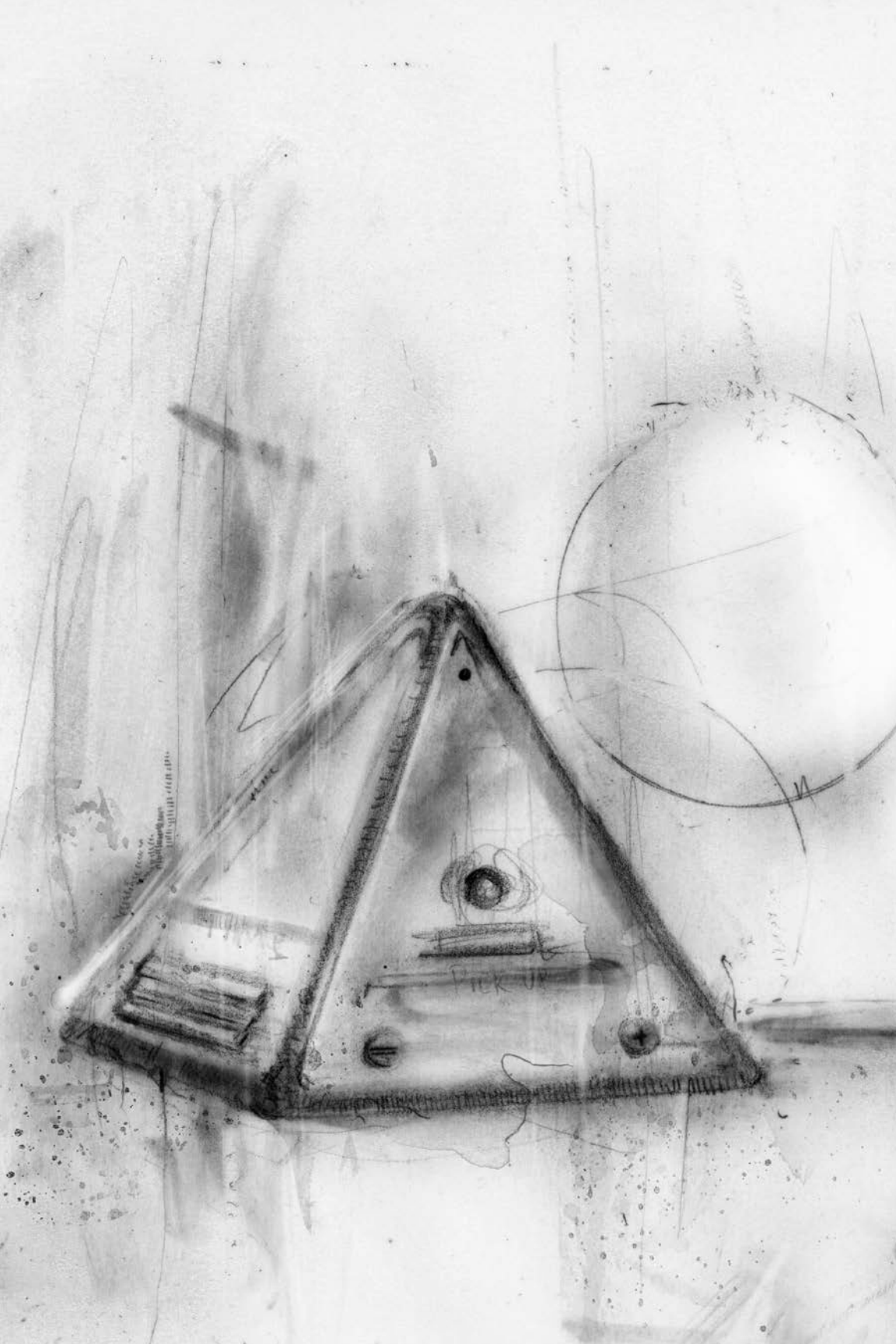
"I'm sorry, I don't know how to help with that."

His voice trembling, Nick called out to Genesis one more time.

"Genesis...repeat the last command."

The green light blinked three times, followed by a soothing female voice, always constant in its friendly tone.

"The most recent command was... 'Kill him.'"



WRONG EXIT

Story by Alex Olson
Illustrated by Gennady Muradin

“You missed the exit.”

“What exit? I didn’t see one.” Sharon paused, trying to remember a sign that read, “Exit 613, Tall Oaks.” But she couldn’t admit that she’d made a mistake. Mark would seize it like a knife stuck in her thigh, and twist it until she screamed. “I saw one that said Oakwood.”

“No...,” Mark said, “I read it. I saw it.”

“Well, that’s what I saw, so-,”

Mark bit his teeth, making his fillings ache. He knew he was *absolutely* correct, but because his wife was so damn stubborn, she wasn’t going to budge. She’d get entrenched in her position, and the more Mark tried to push her off, the angrier she’d become. And then came the pouting, the annoyed sighs, and the vague Facebook statuses like, “I wish someone would listen to me.”

Mark decided to play the long game. “Okay, you’re right,” he said. But his thoughts spoke differently. *You’re not, though. We missed the exit and we’re going to keep driving for miles, and then you’ll finally admit that we’re lost. Then I will win.*

Sharon glanced sideways, away from the road. Mark was biting his knuckle and glaring ahead. She frowned, having her own internal conversation. *There he goes again. Off in his thoughts. And when I ask what he’s thinking about, he’ll say “baseball” or*

“some work stuff” and I’ll know that he’s lying, he’s thinking that he hates me, that I’m stupid, that I’m not good enough for him.

Darkness descended as the car zipped along the highway, occasionally changing lanes to avoid semi-trucks. A brooding thunderstorm approached from Mark’s side as lightning briefly lit the barren cornfields and scraggly forests.

After a few quiet minutes, and after the storm had enveloped the car and rain was flicking against the windows, Sharon said: “I think I missed the exit.”

Mark felt his throat twitch, ready to scream out in frustration. But he restrained himself, and in a mild voice, he said: “Yeah, we might’ve missed it. Like I said.”

His voice grated on Sharon’s nerves like a wire-brush on skin, but she also kept her composure. “Well, what should we do?”

“Take the next exit, I suppose.”

She steered the car along a thick bend that hooked over a river. They drove on for a bit, and a large, dark forest appeared to their right, trees springing into view only to fade as they joined the other greens, blacks and greys of the woods.

“There. Take that exit up ahead.”

The exit led to a town that was buried deep in the woods. The rain slowed and started to clear, but the sky was still a heavy dark. The town was in a clearing, and consisted of a single four-way stop, with a drugstore, a church, a post office and a gas station on each corner.

There was no one in sight.

The car sat idle at the stop sign. Mark waited for her to tell him to go in the gas station and ask for directions.

Instead, she pointed out her window. “Oh! There’s a sign!”

Mark craned his neck and saw it, painted on the side of the drugstore. The letters were bright green, a color that Mark associated with slime and creatures at the bottom of the ocean.

Left to Tall Oaks; Go through the tunnel.

Right to Green Hills; Stay off the dirt roads.

Straight to the Apple Orchard.

Sharon turned the car, and the town slid past like a brief memory. The land shifted downhill, and they could feel themselves leaning forward. The road flattened as they came upon a tunnel that was cut into a large hill.

The tunnel scared Sharon. She slowed the car and they coasted up to it, and when they were in the gaping shadow of its entrance, she pressed firmly on the brake. She even put the emergency brake on.

Mark looked at her. "What are you doing?"

She stared back, biting her bottom lip. What should she tell him? That she was wrong and they should turn back? Was dealing with Mark's patronizing bullshit better than going into this tunnel that brought her terrible dread?

The answer was yes. "I-I was wrong, honey," she said. "We should turn around."

Mark bit his knuckle, thinking. He felt bad for her, but how many times had they missed exits, been late to movies, overdrawn the bank account, because she wouldn't listen to him?

Mark decided to throw her stubbornness back at her. "No, no, you were right. I was being a jerk. C'mon, I'll drive through the tunnel for us, okay?"

They swapped spots, and he flicked the brights on. They barely made a dent in the darkness, but it didn't bother him too

much. Sharon was curled in the passenger seat, staring ahead and shivering.

He urged the car forward. She watched the rearview mirror as the light from the entrance grew smaller and smaller. The tunnel curved to the right, and then the small hole of light she'd been counting on for comfort was snuffed out.

Mark started to get nervous. The "road" was nothing more than a dirt passage, and he had to constantly adjust course to avoid the wall. "Man, it's a lot darker than I thought," he said. He rolled down the window and stuck his head out, thinking that the windshield was obscuring his view. He steered carefully as he squinted ahead, his eyes following the curve of the tunnel for reference.

He could hear something. Chittering. At first, he thought it was water, a stream chuckling as it flowed over branches and rocks, but as it grew louder, it grew more metallic and sinister. The chittering morphed into clicking, like a million pens were being clicked on and off. Chittering, clicking, whispering, hissing.

Something thumped against the front of the car. A slim, black line scurried up the windshield and over the roof.

Another one hit the hood, next to Mark. It was a black tubular creature the length of his arm, with a million tiny legs jammed into its snakelike body. A millipede, but not, because millipedes were *flat*, this horrible insect looked like a giant drinking straw.

It raised itself like a cobra, the tube-front aimed at Mark. He became horribly aware that his head was outside of the car, but he was transfixed by the creature, the same morbid fascination that took hold of him whenever they passed a car accident. He *had* to see.

The thing began shaking, leaning over like it was gagging on a piece of meat. When it rose back up, Mark saw that a single, glaring eye was being pushed out of the tube.

Something dropped into his hair. He screamed and tried to dive back into the car, but the insect on the hood scurried forward, and in one, liquid motion, it dove into Mark's mouth. He could feel it sliding down his throat, writhing down into his guts. It was like swallowing a noodle.

He managed to get himself back in, and he rolled up the window. He was dimly aware that Sharon was screaming. He glanced at her, like he had a thousand times, out of annoyance, out of pity, and yes, sometimes out of love. "I was right," he mumbled, and then the tube-thing burst gleefully from his guts.

The tunnel seemed to collapse around Sharon as more creatures detached from the ceiling and landed on the car. As she struggled with the creature that had killed her husband, staring into its sole wicked eye, she thought the sound was like the rain, tapping against the windows of their little car.



THE HOWLING MAN

Story by Alex Olson

Illustrated by Gennady Muradin

Gary and I stood at the receiving bay doors, watching the security camera monitor with a mix of amusement and fear. It was 2:35 am, and the backroom employees were killing time until lunch.

On the security camera, a tall, gangly fellow wearing a large, furry coat paced around the loading bay. He walked in jagged circles, spinning on his heels and stomping his feet. He looked like a giant piece of lint being blown around by the wind.

“Go out there and tell him to leave,” Gary said.

“Why do I have to do it?”

“You’re the new guy. Yelling at homeless people is part of your training.” He grinned. “Be careful, one time a guy took a dump in the parking lot and Chelsea from up front stepped in it.”

I opened my mouth to tell him that I wasn’t going out there, but the man on the camera dropped to his knees, and tilted his head back so he could scream at the night sky.

His screech vibrated my teeth and made the metal door warble. Gary winced and put a hand to his head.

“That’s it,” he said, “I’m not dealing with this garbage, not tonight, we got twelve stacks of pallets to put out there, I’m not getting stabbed by a dude who thinks he’s the second coming of Christ.” Gary strode to the door and banged on it with his fist. “Get out of here! Get out of here or we’ll call the cops!”

The man froze, the scream cutting off in his throat.

“What’s he doing?” Gary said.

“Backing up. Staring at the door. I think you scared him.”

The guy suddenly bounded for the door on all fours, his knuckles scraping the hard pavement. He hit the door hard, budging the entire thing.

Gary decided that he’d had enough. He grabbed the walkie off the receiving desk and called Neal, the night manager. “Yo, we got some freak hitting the door back here.”

Neal’s voice crackled over the radio: “Tell him to buzz off. The store is closed.”

“Yeah, I don’t think he’s here to buy toilet paper. He’s on drugs, or something.”

Neal groaned. “I’ll be right there.”

He came stomping over to us, his heavy boots echoing throughout the backroom. He glanced at the monitor. Our friend was still gazing up at the sky, like he was waiting for something to arrive.

“I just want one night where nothing happens. One night! Is that too much to ask?” Neal said. He pulled the keys off his belt and started twisting one into the door’s lock.

“What are you doing?” Gary demanded.

Sighing, Neal turned around. “We’re going out there to tell this guy to leave.”

“Can’t you call the cops?”

“I *could*,” he said, “but then we’d each have to give a report, and there would be a follow-up inquiry by Super-Mart, and *then* a drug test to make sure we were in our right state of minds. I can pass one, can you guys?”

I’d been thinking about getting high in the parking lot on my lunch break, so I shook my head.

Neal lifted the door open, and we were greeted by a blast of chilly air. The post-rain, soggy smell filled my nose, and it mixed horribly with the smell coming from the howling man.

It was like old hamburger grease, left in a pan for days so that the meaty smell soured and became something new and awful. It was the smell of mold and rot, of dank basements and stale slaughterhouses.

We approached him, Gary flanking left, Neal moving to his right, and me in the center. We formed a rough triangle around him, but the man continued to stare at the sky.

“We need to ask you to leave,” Neal said.

“It’s too late,” the man said. He tilted his head down and stared at me. His eyes were large, white and wild. They looked like cartoon eyes, drawn in surprise.

“It’s not too late for you to screw off.” Gary shoved him, knocking the man off his feet. I felt a twinge of pity when I saw that he had fallen into a muddy puddle, and his coat was matted and wet. He was just a poor bum out in the rain; he didn’t deserve to be shoved around.

I stepped forward to reach a hand out when a white glow hit my skin. I looked up, and saw that the moon had busted through the clouds like a baseball crashing through a window.

The lunar spotlight hit the man and he screamed, louder than last time, so loud it made my ears pop and my eyes water. It drove me to my knees, eyes pulsing in pain. I could feel the sound in my jaws, pain radiating like an ear infection that morphs into a toothache. I managed to open my eyes, only to be blasted off my feet by a large black creature. I landed a few feet away, rolling onto my stomach, and then I scrambled to my feet.

The hulking wolf-beast grabbed hold of Neal by the neck, making him kick and squirm. I wondered why he didn't scream. "*Oh, he's being strangled,*" I thought, struck dumb by terror.

With one twisted paw-hand, the werewolf swiped Neal's head off. It made a squelching sound, like ketchup coming out of the bottle.

The beast tossed Neal aside and dove for Gary. The wolf tackled him, raking its claws against his back, making Gary yelp. The wolf dug its snout into his belly, raking its mouth from side to side, like a dog eating from its dish.

When Gary stopped moving, it turned to me.

I ran at the door, but halfway there I realized that I was way, way too slow. The strength went out of my legs, and the growling darkness engulfed me.



THE HUNTRESS

Story by Ryan Harris

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

I could hear her purring echo through the woods. She was stalking me in the infinite blackness of night. The great feline probably knew how fast my heart was racing, could hear it careening around in my chest. I clung to my crudely made punji stick.

In a way, I pitied the big cat. Kay, a Bengal tiger, was raised as a deadly huntress by Gen-Mod Genetics for entertainment. Her IQ was higher than my own, but her sole purpose in life was a bi-annual hunting game. Every six months, a lottery of lifers entered a drawing for a second shot at life on the outside. If Kay was killed, the person could walk free. I'd been trying for six years before I was chosen.

The odds were usually stacked in Kay's favor. Branches were just out of reach to climb and the underbrush was thick in the Indian forest. She was toying with me. Her canines could have been inches from me and I wouldn't have known it. Moving from tree to tree and protecting my back was my best defense. A light rain, nearly a mist, began falling and masked the sounds of her movement.

A micro camera implanted in my eye recorded sights and sounds. The world was watching but I didn't care. What mattered was Kay, the darkness, survival.

Like mad, I ran for a river I passed during the day. What little moonlight there was glimmered softly off the sluggish Banas. I plunged into the river and swam for the other side. Kay's lethality would be negated in the river and she knew it.

Staying in the river was not an option because she would just wait me out. I sat for a moment to catch my breath, though it didn't last long. Kay plunged into the moonlit water and light rippled at the surface. My impromptu plan had paid off. I had forced Kay to give away her position, but she was still coming for me and Bengal tigers are excellent swimmers.

I fell and stumbled as I got up. Beating her to the river bank was crucial. I'd never been so scared in my life.

Barely able to see her shape, I jumped at her. My punji stick was directed in front of me. My weapon landed a hit and she roared in pain. I wasn't sure where the stick had stabbed her. As my foot touched ground, it bent oddly on a rock, and I could hear the audible snap of my ankle bone.

A colossal paw caught my shoulder, tearing away flesh. But then Kay ran into a thicket five yards from the river to regroup. I limped for my weapon, wanting to cry out in pain. Using it as a makeshift crutch, I tried my best to stand upright. The slowing rain made it easier to listen for Kay.

The Earth shuffled by the thicket and Kay pounced to finish me off. It was only a second but it seemed like everything was in slow motion. Kay sank her teeth into the area between my shoulder and neck, her claws ripped through the flesh of my back. I waited for the final crunch of my vertebrae...but it never came. I looked down and saw that she'd been impaled by my weapon.

The great beast was lying on top of me, groaning in pain, but she refused to die. Blood was gushing from both our wounds, a pool of human and tiger blood mixing beneath us. One of us would

be dead soon, I just had to hold on a bit longer... either way, I would finally be free.



GRIDO

Story by Logan Arney
Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

Eric and his father had the perfect weekend routine. Every Friday after school, Eric's dad would be waiting for him with fishing poles. Their trusty canine, Grido, panted and wagged his tail in the back of the truck. Then they would head down County Road 97 to an old camp site they had been going to for years.

There was only one rule when they were out there: never venture north of the first two ponds. Just last summer, three people had gone missing in that area and none of them were found. That section of the forest was like a thick labyrinth and getting lost was just a matter of straying too far.

After a long day of catching absolutely nothing, the sun retired behind the rolling foothills, the signal that it was time for the moon's shift to start. Night had come, and rather than wait on the stubbornness of the fish to end, Eric's dad decided to hit the sack early and try again at sunrise. Eric, however, wasn't ready to pack it in quite yet.

But something was bothering Grido – he kept looking over into the darkness of the woods and growling. It wasn't totally uncommon, given where they were, especially with raccoons running all over the place, but this seemed different.

Suddenly Grido sprinted towards the tree line. Eric had no choice but to get up and chase him. "Grido, stop!"

Grido went deep into the woods. The thick trees and foliage started to block out the moonlight that Eric depended on to see. It wasn't long before he was alone and bathed in complete darkness.

"Grido!" he yelled. "Grido, where are you, come here boy!" There were no paths, no markers, Eric had no idea where he was, so he simply started walking further into the forest. Little did he know that he was traveling north.

An hour passed and Eric was starting to really get scared. He thought about just stopping and hunkering down until morning, but the thought of losing Grido kept him going. So he continued walking aimlessly through the woods, constantly calling out for his dog.

About five minutes later Eric finally heard something about 30 yards away from him. It was a low whimper.

"Grido!" Eric sprinted towards the noise and found his friend lying in a small clearing. But it was so dark Eric could barely see in front of him.

Right at that moment, a sharp pain pinched at his ankles, like razors tearing at his flesh. Eric began scratching wildly. He rolled up his pants, took off his boots, and ripped off his socks. He brought his lighter to his ankles, and his stomach twisted in disgust and horror.

Dozens of quarter-sized ticks were pulsating and wiggling wildly, and burrowing so quick that he could barely pinch them out.

Grido cried in pain as the ticks gorged on his hind legs, quickly doubling in size as he rolled around on the ground. All Eric could hear was the overwhelming sound of the ticks clawing and scratching, feasting.

Frantically, Eric began burning off the ticks with the lighter, even stabbing through his skin at those that had buried

themselves. He did the same for Grido, who continued to whimper as the ticks continued their ravenous feast. Their blood-filled bodies and throbbing legs were clawing and pinching inside his floppy ears, and inside his nose. Crying, Eric continued burning and stabbing the ticks, trying to rid his four-legged friend, and himself, of the agonizing pain. He killed as many as he could, then picked up Grido and ran, trying to get as far from that area as he could.

By sheer luck, he finally came across one of the northern ponds, an area he could follow back to the campsite. But he had to stop and rest. He had been walking and running for hours. He meant to close his eyes just for a moment, but he soon slumped over in absolute exhaustion.

Eric woke up just as the first hint of morning light brushed across the sky. It was still dark out but at least he could see. He looked over to his side but Grido was nowhere to be found.

Eric immediately stood up and started calling out his name, but the only sound he heard was a blood-curdling screech from the nearby bushes. He unsheathed his knife and slowly approached the sound, hoping something hadn't gotten to Grido while he was sleeping. But when he pulled back the leaves, he saw a creature he had never seen before... and it was ravenously feeding on something below it. Eric's heart dropped, fearing it was his friend. But as he inched closer, he realized... the creature *was* Grido

His four-legged friend now had several spider-like appendages bursting out of his fur. His eyes had shrunk, now beady, soulless and fire red, and his spine arched violently as his midsection was now completely engorged. He turned to Eric, lifting his blood-filled body off the deflated raccoon he had just sucked completely dry.

Eric whimpered and cried. He called to his friend once more, hoping Grido was still in there somewhere. The creature paused for a moment and slowly turned its head to the side... then it let out an earth-shattering shriek and leapt onto Eric's chest, plunging its newly grown pinchers into his flesh.

Eric was on his back, the dirt and blood spurting all around as Grido started rabidly feeding. Eric soon went numb, but he was able to slowly raise his hand, and stroke the fur of Grido's neck one last time before everything went black.



THE CART GRAVEYARD

Story by Alex Olson

Illustrated by Jake Tri

The Cart Graveyard was a 2-acre patch of land wedged behind Walmart and stuck behind Meijer. The two stores sat back to back, like angry life partners refusing to speak to each other, and the Graveyard was the space between them in bed.

It was an overgrown jungle of hardy weeds, tough shrubs, and stout, skinny trees with limp leaves. There was a pond on the Walmart side. It was a small, muddy thing that Miles thought was more goose shit than water. The pond spawned cattails and toads. In the summer, it acted as an aircraft carrier for millions of mosquito squadrons.

The cart pushers of both stores shoved broken carts into Graveyard. They treated the carts like a dystopian society dealing with the poor and the sick. Abused, cast off, and then ultimately forgotten.

Cut through the center of the woods was a jagged path that had been formed by feet and bicycles. Miles used the path daily, chancing poison ivy and mosquito bites to get to work on time.

On occasion homeless people slept under the trees, or made makeshift tents out of the carts, but they left Miles alone as he hustled to work, carefully stepping around the soft mud.

This particular Tuesday had been spectacularly busy, so Miles found himself clocking out later than usual. It was 9pm and

the sun was setting. As he was walking out of the store, his coworker Aaron flagged him down.

Aaron leaned on a shopping cart. “Hell of a day, huh? Do me a favor and take this out back? It’s making that frickin’ squeaking noise.” He pushed the cart back and forth, making the wheels shriek. Miles winced; the noise sounded like nails on a chalkboard.

“Yeah, I gotta head back there anyway.”

“Oh, you use the path to get home?” Aaron made a face. “I hear that hobos screw each other in the bushes.”

Miles shrugged. “I don’t care, as long as they leave me alone.” He grabbed the cart and dragged it behind him.

Walmart’s yellow-orange lights made the place feel like autumn. He took the cart to the pond and gave it a hard shove. It blundered forward, got caught in the mud, and then fell over, scaring away a few geese.

There was a rustling noise behind him, and he turned around in time to see a young woman in a white gown dart into the woods, slipping behind some trees. He’d only caught a glimpse of her, but she had long blonde hair and creamy white skin. Her beauty seemed enhanced by the dreariness around her, as if the juxtaposition amplified her good looks.

Miles wondered if she’d escaped from a mental hospital and was hiding out. He thought he should warn her that sometimes creepy guys hung out in the woods, and that she should probably find a better place to hide.

He started walking forward, a daydream dancing in his head. He could give her money for a cab, but she might not have anywhere to go, and she would sleep on his couch and they would hit it off and all that loneliness he lugged with him like a rusty cart would fade away, blurred out by the brightness of that girl.

It was stupid and he was stupid, but it was nice thought, so he kept it going, figuring it would get him through the walk home.

He found the path and walked along it for a few minutes, and then a wailing screech pierced his ears. It sounded like an amplified yowling cat with the volume turned to eleven. It made his eyes water and vibrated his eardrums, so much that they popped. For a moment, all he could hear was a ringing sound.

Out of the bushes and bramble came the woman. He had been wrong; she was not beautiful. The blonde hair was stringy and patches were torn out. It looked like straw that had been trampled. The long gown was in tatters; was it a dress or a hospital outfit?

As he took in these details, his eyes widened; her face was the thing of nightmares. Her pupil-less eyes were a deep, glowing red. Like old blood caked on the wall, not the bright red you'd see on Halloween decorations. Her mouth was stretched open like the mask in *Scream*, but instead of empty blackness, a lolling, purple tongue hung out. It writhed and licked the air.

It screamed again, and this time he felt in his *guts*, like a sonic wave had hit him and turned his organs into quivering Jell-O. Panic set in as his entire body went cold. He stumbled back as the creature walked forward, pale arms stretched out to grab him, to stuff that tongue deep down his throat.

Isn't that what you wanted when you saw her?

The thought shocked him into moving faster. He turned around and started crashing through the weeds, going off path, his shoes catching in the mud. One sneaker came off and he felt his foot plunge into cold dirt and ignored it.

He ran until he could see the orange glow of the Walmart lights. He was ready to breathe out a crazed sigh of relief, but his shin clipped a downed shopping cart, sending him sprawling into

mud and goose shit. It was the cart, the stupid cart he had just brought out there.

Groaning, he started to get up, but then he heard the scream again. It was directly behind him. Something warm and wet wrapped around his neck as another scream sounded off, blasting his eardrums out like overfilled water balloons.

He couldn't hear it, but he was screaming too.



SALLY

Story by Logan Arney
Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

Ginny wasn't like most teenage girls. She was incredibly shy and had an obsession with schoolwork and reading. She also preferred to spend time alone, and as such, had trouble making friends. Given her antisocial behavior, Ginny's mother decided that she needed a little push and insisted she go to her cousin Jill's 14th birthday party, a sleepover at her parent's lake house.

Ginny and her cousin weren't close, especially since Jill's friends regularly made fun of her. But it was only for one night and Ginny knew it would make her mom happy, so she started getting an overnight bag ready. After packing some clothes, a pillow, and the standard bathroom items, Ginny looked back to her bed and saw her favorite Sally doll sitting there. She paused for a moment, nervously biting her lip, then grabbed her, held her tight, and stuffed her into the bag. She knew she was too old for dolls, but she didn't care. Sally comforted her, and that's all that mattered.

The other girls wasted no time picking on Ginny, just as she feared they would: her acne, her braces, and even her pink elephant blanket. The girls told a few scary stories by the fire, and began toying with the idea of bringing out a Ouija board, to which Ginny disagreed vocally.

"What's a matter Ginny-winnie, you scared? You got your blanket to protect you!" The girls howled with laughter, and Ginny learned her lesson not to speak out again.

The girls decided to play “Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board” and nominated Ginny to be the recipient of the ritual. Ginny fought and screamed, but the girls quickly forced her to the ground. One of them decided to riffle through Ginny’s bag, and soon found Sally, inciting more howling ridicule.

They let Ginny up and started tossing Sally back and forth just out of Ginny’s desperate reach. Then three of the girls again pushed Ginny to the ground and held her there as the others lit Sally on fire. The burning doll was laid in the center of the stone floor, and the girls proceeded to chant out a fake spell that they had learned from Girl Scout camp, laughing all the while.

A rage started to build in Ginny. She started to think about all the times she had been made fun of. The teasing, the constant jokes...and as she watched Sally burn, she finally had enough. Ginny erupted from under the three girls, flinging them off her. She quickly grabbed her blanket and dove on Sally, suffocating the fire. The other girls could barely breathe they were laughing so hard. Ginny ran out of the house crying and caressing her sweet Sally, who was blackened and charred, completely unrecognizable. The rest of the girls just continued to laugh. They were glad Ginny was gone, and about an hour later they all went to bed, still cackling about how awkward and weird Jill’s cousin was.

A few hours later, the girls were woken up by a squeaking laughter downstairs. It was quiet at first, but grew gradually louder and louder. After arming themselves with pillows and flashlights, they slowly opened the door to the hallway and walked down the stairs. “Ginny is that you?” Jill nervously called out. “We were just joking with you...”

Ginny was sitting in the middle of the stone floor, laughing and giggling like a small child. Sally was sitting in front of her, as new as the day she was purchased. Ginny started laughing so hard

that she doubled over, her hands clutching onto the sides of her head like a madman. Just as Jill was about to call out to Ginny again, the girls all screamed in terror.

The Sally doll suddenly turned its head towards them, a huge jagged smile cut into the fabric of its pale white face.

The girls tried to run back to the hallway, but the door slammed shut just as they reached it. Then the rest of the doors and windows began to violently close, shaking the walls. The wooden stairs suddenly gave way, sending the girls crashing to the bottom. Ginny's laughter was almost out of control, as Sally began floating above the fireplace, its black eyes locked on the group of girls below. Flames started erupted from the fireplace, furiously spewing out into the room. The Sally doll opened its mouth even wider as a demonic, almost mechanical giggle cut through the air.

The girls all scattered, searching for an exit, but they were stopped and jerked violently into the air. The fire continued to grow as Ginny watched the girls crash into the walls and flail across the room... just like what happened to Sally a few hours earlier. Sally lowered herself onto Ginny's shoulder, and the fire engulfed the wall behind them.

The girls finally stopped screaming, as they fell to the ground. All of them arranged into a perfect circle, the same as when they burned Sally and chanted their spell. Jill tried to move, she tried to scream, but she couldn't. All she could do was watch Ginny and Sally standing over them, giggling to themselves. The front door to the cabin slowly swung open and Ginny turned and walked out, Sally still perched on her shoulder. The pair walked into the forest, their laughter echoing through the trees. They never looked back as the cabin burned furiously in the night.



THE RED WOMAN

Story by Alex Olson

Illustrated by Gennady Muradin

I could hear laughter.

It was 4 am and I was alone in my living room, illuminated by the glow of the television. The job of night owl is a lonely occupation; my wife was asleep in the bedroom, snuggled up with my son. He'd gotten scared and come downstairs.

The house was not silent; there was a multitude of noises, made louder by the night silence, all echoing about the old home. The burbling of Andrea's fish tank, the dull chatter of the television, the gentle ticking of the old clock that was forever stuck at noon. I could hear the cat scratching his litter box in the bathroom, the sound of a dog barking in the distance, and the radiator clicking on.

And I could hear laughter.

A woman's laugh, high pitched and bubbly. A giggle, a titter, hardly audible over the nighttime din of my house. I heard a hint of it first, so I cocked my head, straining to filter out the background noise. It happened again, louder this time, coming from upstairs.

"Heehee."

For a moment, I rejected what I had heard. It was the TV; it was my wife's cell phone going off with notifications. It was my son giggling his child laughter in his sleep. But they were in the bedroom, downstairs.

There was no one else in the house.

The laughter did not happen again for five, maybe ten minutes. Almost enough time for the tension to leave my neck, for the saliva to return to my mouth. I turned my head out of its cocked position and back to the television.

“Heehee.”

It made me jump, sending a jolt of icy panic into my chest. The laughter had sounded as if it was coming from the top of the stairs.

I was rooted to my spot, unable to decide whether to investigate the noise or just continue hoping it went away on its own. I’m an imaginative person; my monsters in the closet never fully went away, and I’m as susceptible to the terrors of the dark as the next person.

I’d made up my mind to get up and do *something* when another sound came from the stairs.

“Ker-thunk!”

The sound of someone taking a step on the creaky wooden stairs. Someone wearing high heels, maybe.

“Ker-THUNK!”

Another step.

“KER-THUNK!”

“KER-THUNK!”

I had my eyes locked on my TV; I refused to look away. I was watching a documentary on aliens, and I tried to force myself to be interested. Oh, the pyramids were built by aliens? Oh, there are alien codes in temples all over the world? Oh, there’s something on my stairs?

“KERTHUNK-THUNK-THUNK-THUNK!”

I widened my eyes, trying to expand my peripheral vision so I could see without fully seeing, look without having to look. Whatever it was, it was standing at the bottom of the stairs.

It drifted into my blurry side vision. I saw a glimmer of white, a flash of red. I was biting down on my own teeth, heart racing, a feathery-light feeling in my chest.

“Heehee!”

Some force dragged my head to the left, to look at it, whatever *it* was.

A woman in a white dress, like one a bridesmaid might wear. It was knee length, but I could see no legs. I saw red hair, brightly, absurdly red hair, like Ronald McDonald’s. It was curly and long, draping the woman’s shoulders.

I saw a face; a pale white face that was marble smooth. There were no eyes, just the featureless, smooth skin of a mannequin.

But the mouth, the mouth was there. Huge, wide and smiling. White teeth, too many white teeth, open in a toothy grin that stretched from ear to ear. The lips were coated, caked in red lipstick the same shade as her hair. The lipstick was so slathered on it looked as if someone had taken a knife and outlined her lips in one long, deep wound.

I opened my mouth to scream as her grin grew wider.

“Heehee!” She darted from my view in a white blur, like the road-runner.

It was a dream. My eyes fluttered open and I was in the bedroom, not the living room. I’d slept the night in here; there had been no red woman. I sighed in relief and grinned at the ceiling.

What a dream! I swung myself out of bed, but the creaking bedsprings made my son stir, and then cry out softly.

“Go get his pacifier,” my wife mumbled into her pillow.
“It’s upstairs, on his dresser.”

I climbed the stairs, still feeling slightly uneasy. I went into my son’s room and grabbed the little blue pacifier off the dresser.

I started to head back downstairs, but a bit of color in my son’s crib caught my eye. I leaned over the railing and flecks of red were on his pillowcase. With a shaky hand, I scooped some up and crushed them in my palm.

It was lipstick.



BLACKOUT

Story by Warsha Kumar

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

Black. White. Figure.

Black. White. Figure.

My vision blurred and fuzzed, like a TV screen. What was going on? What's wrong with me? What's this figure in front of me? What happened?

The figure tried to move. My hands lifted together and brought an object down on it, hard. It was difficult to penetrate with the object, whatever it was. So I kept pushing, lifting it up and swinging it back down violently. Wait, what am I trying to do?

I didn't have a single bit of control over my body. It was like I was a marionette puppet. Twisting the object, my hands shook. I came to realize that it was a knife in my hands, and that figure was the body of a middle-aged man, with fair skin and hair as dark as the night, now writhing in pain. The color flushed from his skin as the blood seeped out just as quickly. I thrust the knife back into his porous body and started twisting... and twisting... and twisting.

Slowly, my hearing came back to me. I heard the agonized screams bursting out from the torn lungs of my masterpiece. Absolutely stunning. I pushed the blade deeper, if possible, more

blood leaking out from his veins like water from a burst pipe. My vision faded again, and then came back. I was breathing heavily.

Wait... was there a smile on my face? My body was shaking, but was it fear? Anxiety? Or was more sinister, like the laughter that shook my body so viciously as it did? It felt like I was a glass figurine, I could shatter at any moment from these ferocious shudders. One hand rose up as if it were being pulled by a string. I ran my hand across my face. Are those tears? They can't be, I don't feel mournful at all, if anything, the complete opposite! Could they possibly be joyous tears?

I jerked the stencil out of my artwork and stood up. Dropping the bladed object, it clattered on the ground, spraying satellites of blood around. The sound was muffled by the man's tortured screams. Pools of blood became one as they grew and merged, in correlation to the man's fading noises.

He's dead.

Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God, what the hell have I done?!

I fell to my knees, shocked. How did I get here? I couldn't remember anything, nothing at all! Who was I? How could I... why did I commit such a horrendous act? My fingers brushed the blade and hesitated. I picked it up like it was a disease; I was horrified.

The sharpened steel was raised to my lips. My tongue slid along the side. So... sweet, so pure. I knew I chose the correct vessel! This is what I've been craving for so long. This sweet, sweet taste.

"SWAT! Freeze!" My head swiveled up. A black tactical vest that read 'SWAT' in big bold white letters glared at me from a few feet ahead.

I glance down at my hands, then at the body. I beamed with pride and satisfaction. I pushed myself up and looked at the squad

of four and identified their rifles as M4 Carbines. They were suited up in their gear, of course; all black, bulletproof vests with the glaring white letters, headgear that included helmets and eyewear, and earpieces. One in the front held a shield that covered all four, a 9mm in his right hand, just peaking from behind the see through bulletproof wall. My grin was so wide, like my mouth had been slit from the corners.

"Drop the knife!" The sound of the man's voice resonated through the room. I smirked charmingly and lifted the knife, at the same time, the squad took aim, fingers no longer resting along the trigger guards. The light from their flashlights glinted off the stained reflective blade. The red tint engulfed my vision and filled my veins with adrenaline. Realization hit me. There's no going back. I couldn't stop now. It's too late. I was done for.

Arms raised, knife in my hands, I lunged at them.



MOONBURN

Story by Alex Olson
Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

Keith Richards and I were pulling the late shift at the gas station. I came in at 11 pm; he wandered in at 11:27. He was obviously stoned.

The Keith Richards that worked with me at the 24/7 Gas ‘N’ Snacks was not a member of the Rolling Stones. My Keith Richards was a spiky-haired, reefer smoking redneck whose greatest ambition in life was to screw the girl who delivered Pepsi in the morning.

I was giving a customer change as Keith filled up a slushie, drank half of it, and then filled it up some more, then finally proceeded over behind the counter.

“Jay, good to see you, it’s been a long time,” he said in his airy, wispy voice, as if the only thing in his lungs was cigarette smoke.

“I saw you last night,” I said. “And you’re late again.”

“So what?”

So what was right. We were paid so little that the owner could afford to have two of us on at night. This was only done because our gas station was in a particularly nasty bit of town. Keith knew it well; he lived three blocks away.

The customers slowed to a weak trickle, just the occasional midnighter buying gas or coffee. As usual, Keith let me do all of the actual work; he sat behind me, reading one of the porno

magazines we kept behind the counter. He was the only person I knew of that actually read those magazines. Every now and then he'd say something like: "Did you know that Miss Sheila Keets, 24, this month's centerfold, enjoys the books of Vladimir Nabokov? Must have some extra brains in those tits of hers."

I was the responsible one; the manager had told me so. He trusted me, the 19 year-old, over the twenty-something degenerate who'd worked here for three years.

We were engaged in a heated debate about oral sex when the greatest customer we've ever had showed up.

He came barreling into the store, the little bell going *ding!* We looked up, and Keith Richards snorted. The man was wearing a black cloak that went down past his ankles, and thick, heavy boots that *clump-clumped* on the floor. He had long, white fingers that seemed to writhe in the air as he paced the aisles.

He was bald, a head like a polished bowling ball, with eyes pushed into their sockets like he was the wife of some asshole who talked with his fists. Keith muttered in my ear that it was Bruce Willis without any makeup, yippee-ki-yay motherfucker!

The man went down our tiny medical aisle, knocking things off the shelves as he searched for something. I watched as he picked up suntan oil, turned his lip up in disgust, then flung it behind him.

I came out from behind the counter and went over to him. "Help you find something, man?" Up close I saw that his skin was red, fire engine red, and it had a greasy, unhealthy sheen. I saw crusts of white, dead skin peeling off.

"Yess-uh," said the man, "I need aloe vera. The leafy stuff-uh."

I leaned down and grabbed the little green bottle; it was outrageously overpriced. I handed it to him and he murmured his

thanks, and then uncapped it. I watched as he slathered it on his face, his head, rubbing it in and moaning.

I looked back at Keith, my eyebrows raised, but he was no help; he was shaking with silent laughter.

“Do you have-uh, sunscreen? Lotion?” asked the man.

“Uh, not up here,” I replied. “We had a stand of it, but after August we took it down.”

The bald man looked at his feet, fists clenched. I didn’t think it was possible, but his skin turned a darker shade of red.

“Hey, why don’t I go check in the back?” I said, thinking of spree shooters and crazy men. Better to be safe than sorry.

“You would do that-uh? Thankss-uh.”

I went in the back, moving boxes around. Keith had been the one to take down the stand, and he only offered to do it because there was a woman in a bikini on it. It had been stashed by the back door, waiting to be thrown out. I figured Keith hadn’t actually tossed it. Sure enough, the cardboard stand was still there, but the lotion was gone.

I checked the pricing bin and found some, marked down for clearance. I grabbed three tubes of sunscreen and walked back to the sales floor.

He was standing at the counter, making a noise at Keith, who was laughing his head off.

“What’s going on?” I said, sliding behind the counter. The bald man was hissing, his mouth open wide and I saw why he talked weird; his teeth were jagged and crooked; they filled his mouth like a bunch pens thrown haphazardly into a cup.

“Oh, Jay, this guy, this fuckin’ guy, you know who he looks like? You know? That vampire from that old movie, Nosferatu!” Keith clapped his hands and howled with laughter.

“I’m sorry,” I said to the man, and I slid all of the sunscreen over to him. “No charge, just please don’t complain to management.”

The man nodded his head to me, and his eyes had a sadness in them that I couldn’t place. He gathered up his sunscreen and slid out the door.

“Nosferatu!” Keith called after him. It was quiet for a bit, and then Keith said: “He didn’t pay for the aloe stuff.” On my lunch break, I went outside for a smoke. I sat on the picnic table and looked up at the full moon.

There was movement out of the corner of my eye, and I turned and saw the bald man staring at me.

“Hey, Nosf-, I mean, hey man! Get those sunburns cleaned up?” I offered him a cigarette, and he scuttled forward to take it. I lit it for him and said: “Sorry about Keith Richards, he’s an asshole.”

“No matter,” he replied. “When do you get off-uh?”

“Normally around six”

He nodded. “Sun won’t be out then-uh.” He pulled out one of his sunscreen tubes and began rubbing it on his head.

“The sun’s not out,” I reminded him.

“I know. This is for the moon. Moonburns are the worst.”

“Oh.” My cigarette was only half gone, but I snuffed it anyway and went back inside.

I didn’t see Nosferatu when I left work, but Keith Richards called in the next night. And the night after that. I went and visited him in the hospital, and he told me he had a disease, the doctors thought it might be AIDS.

“It ain’t though,” Keith Richards said, “that fucking guy bit me. He bit me on the neck. Nosferatu bit me.”

I looked down at Keith, pale and emaciated in his hospital bed, clear tubes stuffed in his nostrils. He had a white bandage on his neck, wrapped in gauze. “Maybe you’ll turn into a vampire,” I said.

He laughed a little. “Yeah, maybe. Better save me some sunscreen then.”



BEACH

Story by Alex Olson

Illustrated by Gennady Muradin

I was walking along the beach, feeling like an advertisement for a travel agency. The sun was setting; I was in flip-flops with bronzed skin. I was shirtless, muscular. A beautiful ocean stretched before me, a rolling, frolicking abyss of blue. I walked, feeling the warm sand as my feet sunk a bit with each step.

I was gazing at the water, so I didn't notice him right away. In fact, I nearly tripped over him. He was sitting cross-legged, and sand clotted his stringy, yellow hair. He was shirtless, and very badly sunburned. His cargo shorts were ripped and tattered, the same color as the sand. An odor was rising from him, a sickly mixture of stale urine and sun screen.

He looked up at me, his eyes almost squinted shut by the sun. Wrinkled skin, lined with grooves, eyes faintly yellow and watery. "Likin' the beach, mister?" the man said, his voice scratchy and cracked, as if the very sand of the beach itself was making its home there.

Mortified, I took a step back. "Yes, um, well, I like it."

The man on the beach cackled, throwing his head back like a wolf baying at the moon. Sand flew from his hair. "Aw, yiss! The beach is good, ain't it? No worries on a beach."

He said beach in a stitched, cramped sort of way. In fact, it sounded more like *bitch*.

I found myself transfixed, rooted to the spot and talking to this Gollum-like creature on the beach. He was a filthy Medusa, his jaundiced eyes turning me to stone.

“Beach is good, huh, rich man? Oh yiss. Got no money to count on the beach. No pocket watch, no cello-phant.”

I frowned. “Cello phane?”

He turned his head up to me, and I could hear bones cracking. “You know what I says. Talk on it.” He made a phone with his thumb and pinky, and held it to his ear. Then he took his hand down, stared at it. After a moment, he twiddled his hand back and forth and said: “Gnarly. Heh.”

“You mean a cell phone.”

The creature shrugged, and resumed staring at the beach. I noticed his fingernails were very long and jagged.

I cleared my throat, and tried to move my legs. There was no response from them. I cleared my throat again. “You shouldn’t bite your nails, it’s not healthy.”

“Heh!” He rocked back and forth, hands on his knees. “Heh! I eat them when they gets long enough! Taste a bit like hot dogs.”

I was becoming more and more flustered, my desire to be away from this foul-smelling thing increasing. “Yes, well, I really should be going.”

“No! No, don’t be doing that. You stay for a while.”

“I can’t. I really must be-,”

The man ripped open one of the Velcro pockets of his shorts, and pulled out a rusty knife. He reached over and cut something in my leg, and I fell down next to him. I still could not move.

“Yiss. You stay. Heh. Sit.”

Mouth very dry, I pulled into a cross legged position next to him. There was no pain in my leg, but I could see something red and stringy hanging out from the wound. A tendon had been cut. Even if I could walk, I wouldn't get far.

I could still turn my head, so I looked at the wino, the bum, the homeless man, the creature on the beach. He was scooping handfuls of sand into his mouth, crunching on it. It sounded like someone eating corn flakes. His mouth stretched open into a painful grin, and sand leaked between his teeth. "Eat," he said. "Yiss."

My hand moved of its own accord, and grabbed a palmful of the grainy soil. I willed my mouth shut but it was no use, as the hand brought me my meal. My mouth opened, and the sand was dumped in. My teeth worked up and down, crunching, crunching, crunching. It scratched the back of my throat, and I longed to cough and spit, but I was not in control. I swallowed and shuddered as the sand slid down into my belly. Something groaned inside me. My eyes were watering, and my hand was reaching for more sand.

"Please," I croaked, "let me go."

"Heh," replied the man. "We go when all the sand is gone. Relax. Beach is fun."

Another mouthful of sand.

Hand reaching for more.

The sun is setting.

It will be dark soon.

I'm still on this beach.

This bitch.

Heh.



BRIDLEWOOD

Story by Logan Arney
Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

The Bridlewood crew flourished in the summer, and more particularly, in the legendary game of flashlight tag. The entire neighborhood, and even the cornfields, were all fair game. The only place forbidden by their parents was the junkyard between the fields, as it was rumored a few kids had disappeared there years before.

Each kid had their own individual folk-tale about the junkyard, but they were always dismissed as fish stories because nobody was brave enough to actually go there. One kid claimed it was the site of an ancient Indian burial ground. Another claimed it was a spot where witches gathered to practice black magic. Each story was always bigger and more dramatic than the one before it, and as the years passed, the neighborhood legend continued to grow.

John wasn't the oldest, but he was definitely the best at the various summer games. Capture the flag, bike racing, baseball, it didn't matter. John was the one to beat and all his friends knew it. Even the teenage kids knew John was not to be taken lightly, and he bragged about that point often. So much so, that he challenged the entire neighborhood to a game of flashlight tag. It would be everyone versus just him. The others agreed, and made a wager that if he was found he would be excluded from playing for the rest

of the summer. John snidely accepted the terms as he had already devised a plan earlier that day... he would hide in the junkyard.

That night, while everyone searched the neighborhood, John was already investigating the dozens upon dozens of rusted old cars and machine equipment, laughing all the while, “THIS is what everyone was afraid of?”

He was so confident he started shouting out into the darkness, “Come on guys, you aren’t even close!” He soon saw a few lights in the distance, so he decided to take cover behind an old tractor wheel and look on with delight. The flashlights entered the junkyard circle, but he quickly realized they didn’t belong to his friends, it was a group of three men. John immediately began to panic but managed to keep himself quiet.

One of the men had a cloth sack covering his head, his hands bound tightly behind his back.

The two others pushed this man into a small opening illuminated with moonlight.

“This is fine right here,” one of the men spoke in a low gruff voice. He was tall with a shaved head, the light glinting off his sweating scalp. He seemed to be the one in charge.

The two men grabbed a steel chain and quickly tied their hostage to a large pipe protruding from the ground. Muffled yelling could be heard from underneath the sack. The tall one then harshly ripped the cloth sack off, revealing a disheveled old man, gagged and whimpering. It was one of the homeless people John had seen mulling around town.

The tall man looked around apprehensively, “Okay, let’s get this over with.”

He then walked over to a large set of steel doors, they were almost horizontal to the ground, like the opening to a storm shelter or underground storage unit. He took out a large key, and unlocked

a huge padlock to release another set of chains wrapped around the handle. He then grabbed a large steel pipe and slammed it against the doors. The sound made a thundering clap as it echoed through the mountains of rusted metal.

The tall man quickly jogged over to his partner, their eyes fixated on the now unlocked steel doors. They slowly backed away from the old man bound to the pipe and stopped about 20 yards away.

The shorter man finally spoke up, “Why do we have to stay. I hate this part.”

“This is the only way he will eat... and somebody has to put him back in the box.”

Suddenly the steel doors exploded open, a low growl rumbled from the black hole that was revealed. The scraping sound of chains dragging across dirt jangled through the night air.

A hulking figure emerged from the darkness. It stood over seven feet tall, its shoulders wider than a truck. It looked up to the glowing moon and let out a gut wrenching shriek.

“Hello, brother,” the tall man whispered.

John was paralyzed with fear as he looked on from behind the tractor wheel. He squinted his eyes to get a better look at the monstrous humanoid in front of him. Its face was gnarled and disfigured, it had long black hair, and walked more like a primate than man. A heavy chain was wrapped around its neck, a steel leash of sorts.

The beast slowly lumbered toward the old homeless man, sniffing the air like an animal. The old man was trying all he could to break the chains, his eyes wide with fear.

“I can’t watch this.” The shorter man said as he turned his back to the scene unfolding in front of him.

The beast stopped about a foot away from the old homeless

man. It sniffed him as large strings of saliva dripped from its mouth. The old man closed his eyes, knowing something horrible was about to happen.

John watched in horror as the beast threw its head back revealing its mangled, jagged teeth. It then opened its mouth as wide as its jaw would allow, and violently bit down into the man's shoulder, ripping away a large chunk of flesh.

The old man screamed for a few moments as he was rabidly torn apart. But the screaming abruptly stopped as the beast chomped down onto his neck, creating a sickening crunch.

John stumbled back, his stomach twisted, he then loudly vomited on the ground.

The beast stopped feeding and briefly looked up, the two men both turned their flashlights towards John's area.

"You hear that?" the short man said.

The tall man revealed a gun that was tucked into the back of his pants. "Yeah... I heard it."

The beast resumed feeding on the body of the old homeless man, as the other two walked towards John's location. John was now in the most serious hiding game possible... if he was found, it would cost him his life.

"Shoot anything that moves." The tall man said, "If there's someone else here, we can't let them leave alive."

John sprinted in the direction of which he entered the junkyard. If he could make it out, there's no way they could catch him.

John raced down a small corridor created by stacks of old cars, but it led to a dead end. He turned around and raced back, panic was setting in. He ran down another corridor, not knowing which direction he was going in. His heart was beating out of his chest, he couldn't tell if he was moving away from the men

chasing him or moving towards them. He saw what looked like a large industrial shipping container and decided to hide inside. It was pitch black, but he was able to peer through a small crack in the metal.

Not even a minute later, the two men came into view. John covered his mouth, hoping to silence his heavy breathing.

“I think it’s a kid,” the tall man said, looking around with his flashlight.

“Hey kid... we’re not gonna hurt you, we just wanna talk.” The tall man turned his flashlight to where John was hiding. “It’s no use hiding, our family owns this junkyard, we know it like the back of our hand... we will find you.”

But as the tall man took a step toward the container, the sound of old metal chains rustled directly behind him. The two men were so preoccupied with finding John, they wondered right back into the area of the beast without realizing it.

A harsh squelching sound cut through the air, like that of a watermelon hitting concrete. The tall man slowly turned around to see the body of his partner drop lifeless to the ground, his head completely smashed in.

The beast lumbered forward as the tall man stumbled back.

“Please... Please, I’m your brother. I didn’t want to put you here. They made me. The others just wanted to get rid of you. I’m the one who kept coming back to take care of you. The one who kept feeding you what you wanted.”

The beast sniffed the tall man and paused, almost as if it understood what he just said. But at this point, it was more animal than human, and reasoning with it was useless.

The beast grabbed the chain attached to its neck... it then peered into the tall man’s eyes and spoke in a hissing gurgle.

“You... did... this.... You... made me... prisoner.”

It then grabbed the excess slack from the chain and wrapped it around the tall man's torso, then with one violent jerk, the beast ripped the tall man in half, his intestines slopping to the dirt like wet noodles.

John watched in horror from the small crack, doing everything possible to quiet his breathing.

The beast, rummaged through the remains of the tall man and found the keys, it clumsily jammed the key into the lock around its neck and released the chain. It was free.

It moved its head from side to side, cracking its neck that had been bound for so long. It then sniffed the air, paused for a moment, and turned its wild, rabid gaze towards John.

It slowly walked towards the container, it could smell him.

John's heart was pounding so hard he felt like he was going to pass out. He was trapped. John grabbed his flashlight and turned it on. He couldn't get out the way he came in, the beast was right there, his only option was to jump up into a large hole in the top corner of the container, but it was about 9 feet in the air.

The beast lifted the heavy door of the container with ease and stepped inside.

John flashed the light directly into the beast's eyes, briefly blinding it, and causing it to slam its fists into the wall in rage. The entire container shook back and forth.

John's legs were heavy with fear, he would only have one shot at this. He turned in the darkness and sprinted toward the back corner, his legs used every ounce of power they could generate as he jumped to grab the edge of the hole. The flashlight dropped outside the container as John dangled from the wall. He could hear the beast quickly coming up behind him. He used all his remaining strength to pull himself up, the beast was just a few feet behind him. He rolled through the hole just as the beast reached for him,

and dropped hard on the ground outside.

John's immediate reaction was to get up and run... run as fast as he possibly could. But just as he reached for his flashlight, he saw that it was illuminating words on the outside of the container he had just escaped from. It wasn't just a container, it was an industrial trash compactor.

He quickly got up and jammed the lever up. The generator roared to life. A large red button next to the lever read "Compact." John hesitated for a few seconds, then pressed it.

The sides of the container quickly started to move in. John looked up to see the beast's arm was coming through the hole he had just used to escape. It was trying to climb through, but it was far too large. The walls of the container continued to move in. The beast started to shriek and roar, it pulled its arm back through the hole and tried to make its way to the other end where the door was... but it was too late.

The sound was absolutely horrific. John covered his ears, but still he heard the screaming... the awful screaming. But that was nothing compared to the sound of bones snapping and the sight of blood seeping through the cracks in the metal.

The beast was dead.

John found the entrance to the junkyard and ran... he ran as fast as he could until he got home.

None of John's friends saw or heard from him for several days. All they saw were police cars at his house, and more police cars over by the junkyard.

After about a week, John finally emerged. All of the neighborhood kids gathered around to hear his tale of the junkyard. But just as all the stories and legends before, none of the other kids believed him.



THE MEAT THIEF

Story by Alex Olson
Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

The hunters sat and watched the fruit rot. The scuffed, round table was buzzing with flies as the bananas wilted, the apples shrank, and the grapes darkened.

Flies buzzed around the table, and the hunters glared at their rotten fruit, which – just hours ago – had been fresh and full of color. The bananas sitting on the plate had grown brown and black. The apples were mushy, and the grapes were shriveled and well on their way to becoming raisins.

The rest of the cabin was in shambles, too. The old sofa had been ripped apart, with bits of white fluff scattered all around the floor. Several of the mounted animal heads had been knocked off the walls; the bison head lay near the fireplace, and a buck's head rested against the wooden rocking chair. The freezer had been knocked over as well, and the fresh meat from the boar they'd gutted had been taken. There were smears and red splotches on the floor, like the thief had been too hungry to wait.

It was a creature, the hunters agreed on that, but that was where the agreement ended.

"Wendigo," said Richards. He'd been on hunts with some Algonquin men, and they always told sensational tales of cannibalistic spirits around the campfire.

Paulson just rolled his eyes. He thought his friend was going soft in the head. Besides, what about the marks on the trees?

Deep gouges, like cat scratches, but only a tiger could leave those kinds of marks. And there were no tigers in the Upper Peninsula.

The gas generator they used to power the cabin had broken down. It was brand new, yet it coughed weakly and died. Richards tried to fix it, but there was nothing to be done.

Later that day, they found that Paulson's truck had been sabotaged. The deep slashes found on the trees had appeared on all four tires.

They'd managed to keep their cool. They were seasoned hunters, and could both recall shivering nights without modern comforts, and they had survived those. Paulson had once pitched a tent in a snowstorm, and had to dig himself out in the morning and trek thirty miles to town.

When they found that their cell phones suddenly received no reception, however, a grimness settled over them. Richards lapsed into a brooding silence and took to staring out the windows. He seemed to be waiting for the meat-thief to return.

In fact, the only word Paulson could recall Richards saying recently was "Wendigo." And that had been last night when Paulson paced the cabin, talking to the walls about what could be stalking them. It wasn't a bear, or a wolf, or a wildcat; they knew the tracks and signs of such creatures.

Paulson decided to wait for rescue. They'd told their wives they'd be back Monday, and it was already Tuesday morning. Park rangers and state troopers were probably picking their way through the trees right now.

Richards settled into his chair and studied the slope of the rotting banana. He thought about the shrieking creature he saw in the woods two days earlier. The one he had followed when Paulson was asleep...

...

It had long, gangly limbs, and it sprang from tree to tree like a squirrel. It looked like a person... a person who had not eaten in a severely long time.

He followed the creature until he came across a large log lying in his path. There were bloody chunks of meat sitting on it, like chicken strips on a plate.

It smelled so damn good, and when Richards saw the chunks an insatiable hunger immediately came over him. The sweet, hickory smell was intoxicating. He gobbled the morsels up, licking his fingers, grinning up at the sky as he chewed. It was like eating salty jerky, sweet ham, and thick steak all at the same time.

When Richards finally returned to the cabin, his friend pointed to the fresh blood splattered on his chin.

"Looks like you nicked yourself there," Paulson said.

Richards simply wiped the blood away without a comment. Paulson would never believe him.

...

"Are you alright?" Paulson said, ripping Richards out of his thoughts.

"Yes, fine," he replied. He looked down at his hands, and was shocked to see that he'd been gripping them into fists, his fingernails cutting into his palms. Drawing blood.

Richards stared at the deep red liquid, watching it dribble down onto the table. It flowed into the scratches and cracks. It made him think of meat, of chewing, of hunger. His stomach gurgled, and he jumped up from the table. "Excuse me," he

mumbled to Paulson. He ran into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Paulson gazed at the closed door with faint amazement. No wonder Richards had been acting odd; he was sick! Probably some stomach bug from the canned beans they'd been eating. No matter, rescue had to be on the way soon.

From the bathroom. Richards cried out in pain.

Paulson walked over and knocked on the door. "You alright in there?"

"Oh, my bones..." Richards groaned.

"What do you mean?"

"They're... they're growing!"

A gut pounding, animalistic shriek thundered from the bathroom.

Paulson slowly backed up towards the front of the cabin when another shriek turned his heart cold. "Richards?"

A low, gurgling voice came drifting out from under the door. "Hungry... I'm so... hungry!"

There was a long silence as Paulson stood transfixed, one hand clutching the front doorknob, ready to flee. The bathroom door swung open, but Paulson couldn't see into the shadows.

"*Wendigo*," Richards shrieked. He scurried out of the bathroom on all fours, and lunged at Paulson.

As Richards sank his teeth into Paulson's flesh, he couldn't help but think it tasted like salty jerky, sweet ham, and thick steak all at the same time.



TUNE OF THE DAMNED

Story by Logan Arney

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

Jacob never enjoyed going to church, in fact, he despised it. His family went three times a week, sometimes more. It absolutely dominated his life. But it wasn't really the church services or the idea of church that Jacob despised. It was the people. Not all of them of course, but the hypocrites, the "holier than thou" people who preached a message of love and acceptance, but in reality, were the first ones to judge, the first ones to spread rumors, the first ones to cast the proverbial stone. Jacob's church had turned into a social scene full of cliques. It wasn't a place of worship anymore, it was more like a country club.

Jacob remembered last fall when a woman came to the church for help. She was a prostitute and a drug addict. On the surface everyone acted like they wanted to help her, but it wasn't long before the backtalk, the sneering, the social disgust that was behind all the false smiles got back to the woman. She stopped coming to the church, and Jacob heard she committed suicide not long after. That was just one memory among many others that caused his disillusionment.

The one thing Jacob did like about the church, however, was their music program. He had been a talented musician since childhood, and the church provided an outlet to show off that talent. Guitar, piano, it didn't matter. Jacob could pick up almost any instrument and play.

Because of this, Jacob was always the “go to” with anything music related, and with the church holiday party coming up, he was selected to lead the band. This was the biggest social event the church put on, and unsurprisingly, all the people Jacob didn’t like were the main ones putting it together. But it made his parents happy when he got involved, so he begrudgingly accepted.

The night before the party, Jacob went to the church to set everything up. It was late, so nobody else was there. After getting the stage all situated, Jacob looked over to the old organ in the corner. The church had moved to more contemporary music in the last couple of years so it basically sat unused. But Jacob always thought it sounded cool, so he walked over to it and sat down. He played a few notes and the sound thundered through the worship hall. Goosebumps erupted from his skin as he smiled. Jacob looked around, he then started playing the tune of a death metal song he liked, laughing to himself at the irony of it being played in the middle of church, on an old organ of all things.

He stopped after about a minute of playing. When he stood up and turned around his stomach dropped and he nearly fell to the floor.

The pews were completely filled with black, faceless shadows. None of them moved, they simply sat in silence.

The organ then erupted with a piercing, harsh note. Startled, Jacob looked back to it, but when he turned his head back to the pews the shadows were gone.

The temperature in the air suddenly dropped to an icy chill. Jacob grabbed his things and sprinted out of the building.

The next day, Jacob had convinced himself he had imagined the whole thing. Maybe the stress of work, school and all this church stuff was finally getting to him. As evening rolled around, Jacob made his way back to the church.

He re-positioned the speakers, and made sure the sound system was properly connected.

“We’re gonna need you to move those back where they were... we need that part of the stage for the charity auction.”

Jacob looked up to see Mrs. Finnley. The absolute embodiment of everything Jacob despised about the church. She smiled at him with one of those plastic grins, trying to hide the fact that she was making a command rather than a request.

Mrs. Finnley was the clique leader, the “mean girl” of the church social circle. On several occasions Jacob found himself within an earshot of her spreading rumors and gossiping about other members. She wore her “faith” like a badge of honor to display, but in reality, she was a toxic individual. She treated the church like an upscale organization of socialites, and anyone who didn’t fit her standards was outcast... just like the woman who committed suicide.

The problem was that she wasn’t the only one. The church had been taken over by these types, the only reason Jacob’s parents stuck around was because of convenience and that they had been with the church ever since he could remember. Even the pastor saw what was happening, you could tell in his defeated expression every Sunday morning.

“Oh and move that ugly organ out of here, nobody uses it anyway. Okay? Thanks.” Mrs. Finnley then turned and quickly walked away to bark orders at someone else. Jacob just shook his head and headed over to the old organ.

It was heavy, but Jacob managed to push it back into the storage area behind the worship center. As he turned to walk back, the same harsh note from the night before shrieked from behind him. A chill went up his spine. Jacob just looked at the old organ as it sat there... he wanted to get as far away from it as possible.

Jacob walked back into the worship center, as soon as he stepped into the room, he stopped cold in his tracks. The faceless shadows were back, just standing together in a couple rows.

Nobody else seemed to notice them. Jacob slowly took a few steps forward. “Hello?”

The shadows didn’t react.

The organ in the back roared to life, a haunting, dark song echoed through the worship hall. Again, nobody seemed to hear it except Jacob.

The shadows then separated, each of them walking up to one of the organizers who also happened to be part of Mrs. Finnley’s clique.

Jacob couldn’t believe his eyes, he started to shout out, started to try and warn them. But he stopped. Deep down, he wanted to see what was going to happen.

As the organizers walked around, Jacob looked over to Mrs. Finnley, she was holding a glass of wine and talking to two other women. The shadow was right behind her.

The shadow then stepped into Mrs. Finnley, almost as if it was absorbed by her body. Her fake smile immediately disappeared and her glass of wine shattered on the floor. The other shadows then entered the bodies of the other organizers. Everyone stopped talking and just stood there with blank, lifeless expressions. The organ continued blaring in the background.

Jacob slowly backed up, sensing something horrible was about to happen. The volume of the organ doubled. Mrs. Finnley, now zombie-like in nature, walked over to the catering table and grabbed a large steak knife. She stepped over to the nearest person, a man just standing there with the same blank look, and without hesitating Mrs. Finnley thrust the knife into his throat, causing blood to spray all over her expensive clothing.

The possessed organizers then all started moving, each one going for a knife, chair, anything they could use as a weapon. Mrs. Finnley started stabbing anything that moved, another organizer was smashing a woman's head in with a hammer. Everyone was attacking one another, but there was no screaming, no crying in pain, just silent carnage. Horrified, Jacob ran into a nearby closet and shut the door. All he could hear was the organ, and the sound of the chaos erupting outside. After about 5 minutes, the organ stopped playing and the commotion stopped.

Jacob cracked the door open to see what had happened. Blood and chunks of human flesh were splattered everywhere. Everyone was dead except for Mrs. Finnley. She simply stood in the middle of everything, absolutely soaked in deep red. She now had a battery powered carving knife in her hand. Her head slowly turned to Jacob. The same plastic smile slowly formed on her blood-soaked face as the carving knife sputtered to life. Mrs. Finnley slowly raised the blade to her head, and then harshly jabbed it into the side of her cheek, the small motor of the knife struggling as it ripped away her flesh.

She cut down towards her chin, her smile wider than ever. Jacob couldn't look away. She continued cutting until the flesh of her entire face slopped to the floor like a wet rag. There was nothing left except a mangled mess of bloody, twitching muscle. Then she dropped to the floor dead.

The shadows then emerged from each body and turned their heads toward Jacob. The familiar piercing sound of the organ cut through the room. Then the faceless shadows disappeared.

Jacob sprinted out of the church and into the night, he didn't know what to do. Should he go to the police? Should he go get his parents? The only thing he was sure of was that he needed to get as far away from the church as possible, and as he ran

through the streets, the haunting tune of the old organ played constantly in his mind.



CLEAVER

Story by Jake Tri

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

I felt a warm liquid drip over my left eye. It was the first thing I noticed as I came to. Everything was hazy, dark, and blurred. I was extremely confused, my thoughts were broken and scattered like my mind had been put into a blender... then the pain hit me.

It was burning, sharp and unyielding. I could barely breathe. I was hanging in the air somehow. The feeling in my left arm was completely gone, but my right arm slowly started to come back to me. I reached over to my left shoulder and felt around. A thunderclap of pain quickly radiated across my body. I soon realized the warm liquid I felt over my eye was all over me, dripping down underneath into a large pool. As my thoughts started to come back, I realized it was blood.

The origin of the piercing pain was a hook... a fucking hook. I couldn't comprehend the situation I was in. How did I get here? And most importantly, why was a steel hook pierced through my shoulder, suspending me about four feet in the air.

I was too confused at the moment to experience fear, but that didn't last long. As my vision returned, my thoughts and memories flooded back like a raging river. The last thing I remembered was jogging through my neighborhood at night and hearing something rush up from behind me, then everything went black.

As the fear and adrenaline started to course through my

veins, my mind finally started to clear. I had a pounding headache, and pain erupted from the left side of my head, I assumed I had been hit with something that knocked me out.

As I looked around, I realized I was in some kind of barn or shed... maybe even a basement. The floors were nothing but dirt, and a single light was hanging in the corner illuminating the room. Old farming equipment and tools lined the walls, it was a jumble of rusted metal and old rotted wood.

So much adrenaline was running through my system that the pain started to fade. I just wanted to know where the hell I was.

In my peripherals I caught some slight movement from the right side of the room, I turned my head as best I could for a better look. It was a woman... she was also suspended from a hook, a large pool of blood had collected underneath her as well.

Her crying and whimpering was muffled, as she had been gagged and blindfolded. For some reason I was allowed to see and speak, maybe whoever did this thought I would be unconscious longer.

I tried to lift myself from the hook, but it was no use, I could barely feel my left arm, and I was positioned in a way to make it impossible.

“Hey...” I whispered to the woman. “Can you hear me?” The blindfolded woman stopped crying and went silent. She started shivering in fear.

“I’m not going to hurt you... I can’t move, I was unconscious.”

The woman perked up a bit, realizing I wasn’t an additional source of danger.

“Do you know where we are?” The woman shook her head no. Then the sound of a slamming door thundered through the room, and the woman started hysterically sobbing.

I looked over to see a hulking man emerge from the shadows, he had to be about 6'5 or 6'6, and well over 300 lbs. He wore a mask of some sort, it looked like old rotting flesh, but I couldn't tell. He was bald with a misshapen head, and wore a huge blood-soaked apron. Even in the utter terror I was in, it reminded me of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre.

My first reaction was to scream "Who are you? Why am I here?" But the beast of a man didn't even acknowledge my presence, he simply started clearing off a large metal table in the center of the room. It was either extremely rusted or covered in blood stains, I couldn't tell.

"What are you going to do to us...?" Again I questioned the man and was answered with cold silence, but I already knew the answer. He was going to kill us.

I went silent after that. It was deadly obvious from the start this man couldn't be reasoned with. We were his captured prey.

I had two options going forward, I could give up and let this psycho do what he was going to do, or I could try and fight somehow. Rage was slowly building up inside me as I hung there, unable to do much of anything. Why was this happening? How was this happening? I had heard of things like this in the movies or on TV, but it was never going to happen to me... yet here I was, hanging from a fucking hook, covered in my own blood.

The only chance I had was to somehow get down, but I was so weak from the blood loss I could barely lift my right arm anymore. I figured I could manage one burst of energy to either run or fight, but I had to get off this damn hook.

This sick bastard probably got pleasure from watching other people feel pain, that's why we were in his little torture dungeon. So with that in mind, I decided to play dead... pretend that I had passed out. There wouldn't be any satisfaction for him if

I couldn't scream.

I stopped struggling and let my hands and feet dangle, I then let my head drop and closed my eyes, hoping that I was right.

After a couple minutes I heard the man walk over to me. I could feel his warm, stinking breath on my skin. He then poked my stomach with his finger. I didn't react. He smacked my face, I still didn't react.

He grabbed my legs and lifted me up... the hardest thing I have ever done is not scream when the hook came out of my flesh. He carried me over to the large metal table and dropped me in the middle of it. I still didn't move. I heard him walk to the corner of the room so I slightly opened my eyes to see what was next to me. And there it was. A gigantic steel meat cleaver. It was laid out next to several other knives and pieces of surgical equipment. That's what I was going to go for.

My heart started beating out of my chest as I tried to mentally prepare myself for what was about to happen. I had one chance at this... I'd never even punched a person, and now I had to kill... I had to bludgeon someone to death, and if I failed, I would die. "Surreal" doesn't begin to describe what I felt.

Once he got close enough to me. I was going to go for it.

The man walked to my side and turned on another light directly above me, I then heard him pick up one of the knives...

It was time.

My eyes ripped open, I lunged for the cleaver, and as soon as it was in my hands I turned to the man. I could see the surprise on his face, even under his mask. Before he even had time to react, I raised the cleaver above my head and with all the force I had left I brought it down into the area between his shoulder and neck. It felt like I had just chopped down into a large, fat steak.

Deep red blood spurted from the open wound, as the man

stumbled back, yelling in pain. I myself was screaming... rage and adrenaline had completely taken over me as I again plunged the cleaver into the man's neck.

It was almost as if I blacked out in that moment. My body went into this autopilot type mode. I just kept hacking and cutting. Blood and chunks of flesh flying everywhere. It was almost as if I was watching someone else do it. I couldn't even tell how much force I was using.

I then slammed the blade into the side of his face ripping off his mask.

He was an ugly, pathetic looking man. I saw the fear in his eyes as he watched his own blood cover the walls.

He dropped to his knees as I took another chunk from his head, the blade made a distinct squelching sound as it cut deep into his scalp.

I was screaming at the top of my lungs, and to be honest, I can't even remember what I was yelling.

At this point the man's head looked like ground up hamburger meat. I moved to his body as he slumped over. I started hacking at his fat, fleshy stomach until blood started seeping through the apron he was wearing. I cut and cut until his intestines spilled out onto the floor like a wet bag being ripped open.

He was dead. And I made sure of it.

I stood over his body, just watching it to make sure it didn't move anymore. I was shaking almost uncontrollably, still gripping the cleaver as tight as I possibly could. I then dropped to my knees, a mix of adrenaline, exhaustion, fear and relief hit me all at the same time. I harshly vomited in the dirt.

I then turned my head to the woman hanging on the other side of the room. I hadn't noticed, but she was screaming uncontrollably. She was still blindfolded, so she could only hear

what was happening.

“It’s okay... it’s okay... he can’t hurt us now.”

I stumbled over and removed the woman’s blindfold, she immediately looked over to the mutilated corpse of our capturer and started sobbing. I removed the gag from her mouth.

“I’m going to lift you off this hook okay?”

It took all the strength I had to grab her legs and lift up, she screamed in pain as the hook came out of her upper shoulder, and we both fell to the floor.

She was trembling violently. “Thank you... thank you...” she sputtered.

“Come on, let’s get the hell out of here.”

We leaned on one another for support and limped over to the door, I grabbed the cleaver just in case there was someone else on the other side.

The door opened to a concrete staircase, and as we made our way up, we realized we were in the basement of an old, dilapidated farm house. We didn’t stick around to investigate. As we exited, we found ourselves in the middle of the woods. It was night out and the moon was brighter than I’ve ever seen it before, illuminating the dead trees in an eerie blue hue.

We followed an old dirt road for what seemed like forever, the funny thing is we barely spoke a word to one another.

After about an hour, we came across a road, and small truck stop. After we stumbled in, the police were immediately called, and the old waitress working the late shift bandaged us up as we waited for them to arrive.

She poured me a cup of hot coffee... it was horrible tasting, but I was alive to drink it, and knowing that made it the best cup of coffee I’d ever had.



NEW CARPET

Story by Alex Olson

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

The phone went off an hour before Travis was due to wake up. It was his mom. She was crying and sniffing, giving him the impression that he was talking to a trickling water hose.

“Travis, please, you have to help us, your father-,”

“Step-father.”

“He had an... episode, and roughed me up a little bit. I’m fine, but he’s in jail now and I don’t know how we’re going to pay the bills. We can’t afford the rent, Francene is in school and she’s scared. What are we going to do? We could rent a house together, we could-,”

Smooth, mom, Emerson thought. In just a few sentences, she’d shifted from asking for help to assuming he would help, and then briskly moved to the planning stage. Was she hoping that he’d be so caught up in the logistics of debating costs and options that he wouldn’t consider saying no?

Emerson lay on his back, holding the phone to his ear, not really listening. He glanced sideways at the empty Bacardi bottle that was stuffed with ones, fives and the occasional ten-dollar bill. There was a bedrock layer of change at the bottom.

Emerson estimated there to be about \$2500 in the jar. He had another grand or so in a shoebox under his bed. He’d been saving diligently without a goal, hoarding like a squirrel getting ready for hibernation. Putting money in the jar soothed him; it

eased the panic-rat that liked to get out of its cage late at night, when he couldn't sleep. Sometimes, he thought about splurging on a motorcycle and roaring down the highway to something better. California, maybe.

But there was always something to suck him back in. How many times had he come to her rescue, and how many times had she forgiven that abusive asshole? Here, come on back so you can blacken my eyes again, that's what I love most about you.

If it wasn't for his sister, he would've turned a blind eye to his mother's problems. But Frankie was seven, and none of this was her fault.

His mom was still talking in his ear.

"Will you help us?" she said.

"Yeah. Fine. I'll figure something out." He hung up without another word, and rolled over. He turned on his computer. There had to be a cheap three-bedroom somewhere, right?

The owner kept calling it a "manufactured home," but it was a trailer. It was long, skinny and sagging, with chipped blue siding and metal skirting that was missing a few panels, like a hockey player missing teeth.

It turned Emerson's stomach, and from the way his mom groaned as she got out of his car, it turned hers too.

But it was only \$700 a month. He expected to be living with his mom for at least a year, and this was the best economic move, provided the place was livable. Emerson eyed the rotting porch, and felt a surge of doubt.

The owner strode over to them, a middle-aged, sunburned man who was smiling too much. He had a used car salesman vibe.

“Hey there!” the man said. He gave Emerson’s hand a quick pump and nodded at his mom. “Let’s take a look, huh?”

He led them into the house, talking while unlocking the door. “Solid little place. Three bedrooms, two bathrooms, new carpet, needs some care, no doubt, no doubt. Community is real quiet, school down the road, dontcha know-,”

Emerson tuned him out and began inspecting the house. The kitchen was nice; the cabinets had been painted and the countertops were smooth granite. The fridge was ancient; it looked like a medieval torture device. But it worked, and the stove was from the current century, at least.

The carpet was worn flat; it resembled grey cement, so Emerson doubted the “new” claim. The walls were made of cheap drywall and plasterboard. He could see dents and holes from the previous occupants.

The owner led them to a large bedroom at the back of the house, where a black and white checkered floor made Emerson a little dizzy.

“We tried to make this into a ‘50s themed bedroom, like one of those old-timey diners,” the owner said. “Go on, step in.”

His mom took three steps in, staring up at the light fixtures, a criticism forming on her lips, and then her left leg plunged through the floor. Her arms wind milled around, her mouth stretched into an “o”. She looked like a cartoon character about to fall off a cliff. “Woah-oh!” she cried as she pivoted onto her other leg for balance.

That one was sucked in as well. The floor stretched to absorb her flesh. There was a puckering sound, like someone was slurping noodles. Emerson’s mother was knee-deep in tile.

Emerson struggled to place logic with the scene in front of him. He turned to the man. “Was the floor not dry or-,”

The owner shoved him, sending Emerson toward the tile, but he managed to grip the door frame with his fingertips and hold on desperately.

“It has to feed,” the owner said. His country-bumpkin way of talking had disappeared, and now he sounded like a religious zealot, ready to kill those who did not convert. “It has to feed or it grows.”

Behind Emerson, his mom cried out: “IT HURTS!”

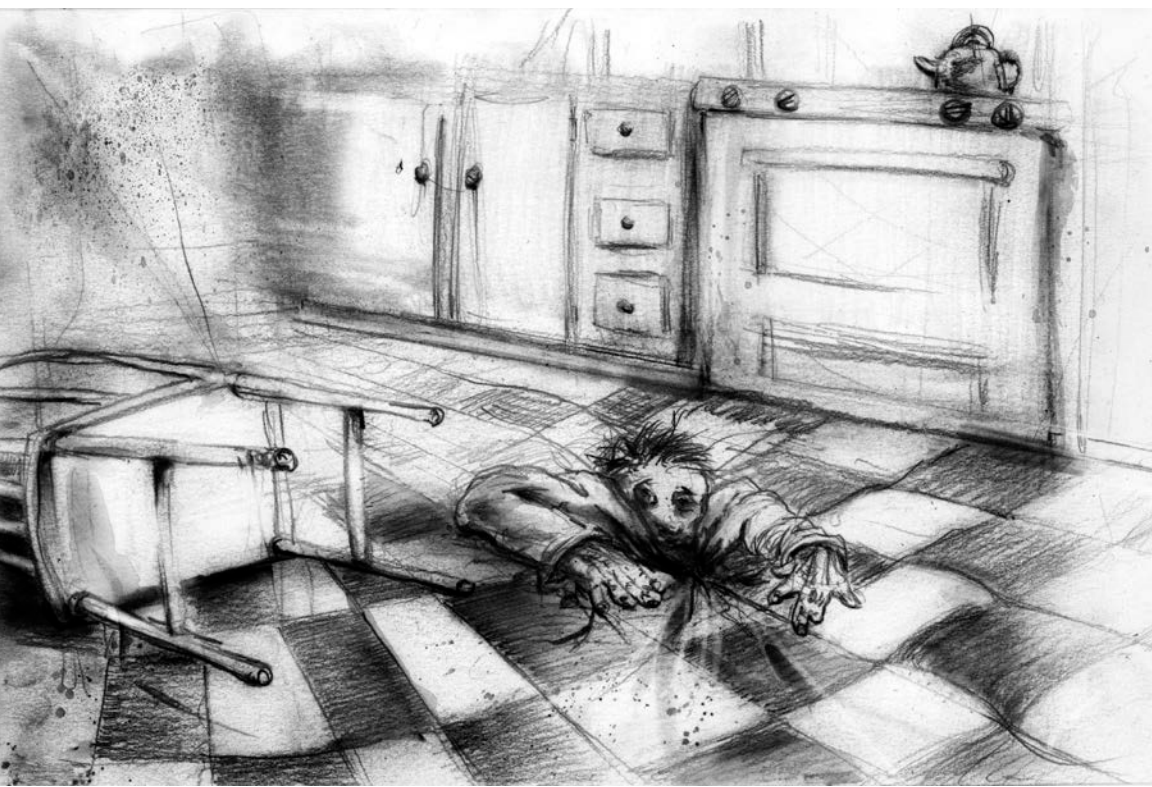
He craned his head around to see her slowly sinking, the floor making the fatty flesh above her knee bunch up as it tried to swallow her. Emerson turned back in time to see the owner charging at him like a football player. He let go of the door frame and ducked. The owner flew over him, landing in the middle of the floor. His hands got stuck. His knees and feet got stuck. The left side of his face pressed against the tile, and it began to greedily suck him down. They were like mice in glue traps; the more they struggled, the more ensnared they became.

His mother fumbled out her cell phone, but it tumbled from her grasp and promptly disappeared.

Emerson backed away in horror and confusion.

“It has to feed,” the owner moaned as his head sunk beneath the floor. His legs popped up and stuck straight in the air while the rest of him was being digested. Emerson watched the man’s muddy boots kick the air, and then fall limp as they sank.

His mother was up to her chest, wheezing under the constricting pressure. “Help,” she gasped. Emerson reached out for her hand, he tried to find something she could grab onto, but there was nothing to be done. She sank too, and for a while all Emerson saw was the top of her head, and then that too was swallowed.



The black and white checkered floor began to swirl like toilet bowl water, the colors turning into blurred streaks. And then it was still, spotless and unassuming.

Emerson backed away, and when he was back near the “new” carpet, he turned around and ran. Despite his terror and sorrow, he couldn’t help but think about the motorcycle he could afford now. And how much Frankie might like the weather in California.

SAM GREEN

Story by Alex Olson

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

I know you're dead, Miranda, but sometimes I still talk to you. You know that voice everyone has in their head? The one you talk to internally while lying awake at 3 am? You're that voice to me, which isn't too weird I guess, since you're my sister.

An Internet forum that I'm a part of suggested keeping a diary, especially after year one, with so many first-steps/first-words.... and my first gray hairs, how about that?

I dunno, I guess it's easier talking to you than writing, but I'll give it a try anyway.

Dear Miranda....

Year One went by in a dizzying flash, but it wasn't easy. God, was it not easy. I think I was half asleep for most of it, groggily wiping crap off Trevor, blindly shoving frozen meals into the oven so I could stuff them in my mouth for dinner.

But now it's Year Two, and I'm starting to see the little glimpses of the person he'll become. Little frowns that will be his frown, forever. He'll use it when his car won't start, when his wife is pissing him off... Ha! He's asleep with peanut butter smeared in his hair and I'm thinking about marrying him off and letting another woman take care of him.

This is a good stopping point. There's more, but I want to take a bath, maybe secretly smoke a cigarette. I have maybe two hours. Two! Whatever will I do with my time?

--Liz

Matt got Trevor a weird little toy. He said it was a prototype a client gave him. I don't know how Matt is going to market the thing; it's hideous.

It's a little monster, the size of a teddy bear. It looks like Elmo from Sesame Street, if Elmo was stomped to death and left in the bottom of an oozing dumpster, so his fur turned a sickly, puke-green.

"You're thinking of Oscar," Matt told me.

"No, I like Oscar, but this thing is gross."

Sammy Green is what it's called. It's a robotic, interactive toy with a plushy, fluffy covering, perfect for naptime, learning time--anytime!

Honestly, I don't know how Matt keeps his job as a copywriter because reading that pitch made me roll my eyes but, you know, I'm a supportive wife.

Sammy Green is programmable. Press his nose and hear him say: "Hi Trevor! I want to play with you!"

Clap his furry paws together and he'll proclaim: "I love clapping! Can we sing, 'If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands?'"

I hoped that this toy would be like the rest of them; glanced at, then ignored in favor of Cheeto Puffs and climbing on the kitchen table. But of course, Trevor loves it. Screamed with

laughter when it said his name. Within two days, he was saying

“SamGreen, SamGreen!”

“Mommy” still eludes his vocabulary.

Maybe I’m jealous. “SamGreen” has managed to get Trevor to count to five and taught him the first half of the alphabet. Never mind that Mom read him dozens of number books and tried, literally every day, to get him to count.

Fucking Sammy Green.

Oh, Trevor just woke up. I know because I heard Sammy say, “Hi Trevor!”

--Liz

Something weird today. Trevor went with Matt’s mother (she offered to take him for the night, how insane is that?) and so I cleaned the house. I got Trevor’s room all neat and tidy, all the toys stuffed into the toy chest. I put all his stuffed animals on the bed, Sammy Green in the center, Woody and Buzz on either side of him.

I snapped a picture with my phone and posted it on Facebook. “Just finished cleaning Trev’s room, it’ll be destroyed in seconds, lmao #ToddlerTornado”

When I lowered my phone, Sammy Green was on the floor. It was weird but I didn’t think much of it, you know how clumsy I can be, Miranda, so I tossed him back on the bed and went into the living room. I collapsed on the couch and took the tiniest of naps-- I didn’t even sleep through a whole episode of Family Guy.

But what woke me up was a ripping sound. Like a dog was tearing up a t-shirt, but we don't have a dog, so I went in Trevor's room, thinking maybe a raccoon?

Sammy Green was on the floor again, but this time, Woody and Buzz were sprawled next to him, their heads torn off, white stuffing spread out all over the floor like fluffy dandruff.

The heads were upright, sitting neatly next to each other. Their lifeless eyes stared at me.

That's a little melodramatic, I suppose, but it was creepy as hell. I cleaned up the mess and tossed the destroyed toys in the trash. Trevor didn't notice. Sam Green is his favorite.

--Liz

That fucking thing has to go. Matt says I'm acting crazy and maybe I am, but I am NOT having it in my house. It used your voice, Miranda!

There's a game mode feature on it, and Trevor plays little word games like "What sound does a cow make?" and Trev says "Moo-moo!" and Sammy Green says, "Good job Trevor!" Yesterday, they were playing in Trev's room. And I swear to God, Sam Green said in his creepy voice: "What sound does a dead sister make?"

Trevor babbled something, and when it responded it sounded just like you. It said: "I miss you, Lizzie. Why did you let me drive that night?"

Oh god Miranda, I'm so sorry, I just moved on with my life, like nothing happened. Our entire family acts like you didn't

exist, but Dad gets real quiet sometimes and Mom drinks almost daily and it's my fault.

I'm sorry.

--Liz

I broke its neck and buried it in the yard. Buried it deep with the bugs and dirt and worms. I broke its neck so it wouldn't talk anymore, but when I was done burying it, I heard it speak. It was muffled, warped and faded, but I heard it.

"If you're happy and you know it clap your hands!"



THE LIZA REGISTERS

Story by Alex Olson

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

Tom had an ugly voice. It sounded like gravel being poured down a funnel. The consonants grinded against the vowels. He didn't speak his words, he spat them, hawked them up like phlegm. He spoke in short, terse sentences, minimizing the syllables. When he spoke, people thought he was mean. When he kept quiet, they thought he was a nice guy.

His coworkers thought he was nice. The other cashiers were impressed that the old-timer had caught on to the self-checkout machines, and that he could keep up with the rushes of customers. His knobby fingers, swollen with arthritis, would dab at the touch screens with ease.

"My mom can't even work her cell phone," Jake said. He was 19 and often worked the closing shift with Tom. He changed careers every month. Tom envied him a little. Not so much his age, but the options. Jake could change his life in any direction he wanted because he had the luxury of time.

Tom would have changed just one thing. He would have steered the great ship of life slightly off course, and taken Liza to the doctor sooner. She would've protested, but then the cancer would have been caught in time, and he wouldn't be working at a Super Mart, five days a week, holding onto something he was sure he imagined.

His wife's voice was in the machine.

Her voice was a foil to his. It was smooth, gentle, soothing. Liza had said: “I love you” in that voice for 35 years. That voice had laughed, yelled, joked and scolded him for most of his life. Now, it told customers to: “Please take your change.”

He picked up every shift he could. He took hours from college kids who needed to study, from teenagers who wanted to go to a concert, from middle aged women with sick kids. The four self-checkout lanes hummed when he was working. No errors, no crashes, no freezes.

The Liza registers preferred him.

It was crazy and weird and it made him think that maybe his kids were right. Maybe he should stay at a nursing home. Relax in a waiting room for death.

Today, he clocked in and strode to his station. It was a Tuesday, and the last rush of the afternoon was hitting the checkout lines. Polly, the girl who he relieved, had gathered a horde of irritated customers at the self-checkouts. All around him, Liza spoke to the customers:

Remove bags now.

Unknown item in bagging area.

Tom, I love you.

Would you like coupons?

If you have a shopper’s card, swipe it now.

Tom worked through the crowd, typing in access codes, resetting the machines, fixing the rolls of receipt paper.

“Oh, thank you,” one woman said. “I’ve been in line for hours. That other girl couldn’t get them to work.”

He smiled and went back to his station.

The customers thinned, then disappeared. There would be a lull for a while, then a slight burst as the people who worked afternoons got off and stopped to pick up groceries.

He pretended to straighten the candy rack next to one of the registers. “Our son called me today. Says he’s up for a promotion at work. His wife is almost done with law school; did I tell you that yesterday? I suppose I did...”

He told her all he could think of, whispering furiously like a lunatic, trying to remember everything their son had said, trying to convey how excited he’d sounded. But it was like talking to her grave. An animated, responsive version of her grave. He tapped the screen, wanting some sort of acknowledgement.

“Hello,” Liza said. “How can I help you today?”
A customer with a cart full of soda walked over. Tom frowned and drew away from the register.

At the end of the shift, Jake helped him shut down the machines. They moved methodically to each one, running the security scans, tallying the totals and then turning them off. It made Tom feel like an executioner on a battlefield, stalking to each fallen soldier and driving a spear through them for the last time.

“I guess Super Mart is pushing out a software update for these things. Gets installed in two weeks.” He patted the register. “Increased security, better customer service, and a new voice. That will be cool. I get tired of hearing the chick that’s on there now.”

Jake started to shut it down, but Tom moved in front of him.

“You can clear out early, if you want. I’ll shut the rest down.”

“Really? That’s awesome dude. I was gonna try to catch a movie.”

After Jake was gone, Tom kneeled and pretended to tie his shoe. “I don’t know if you’re really in there, Liza, but I guess we’ve got to say goodbye again.”

Feeling more weariness than sadness, he shut it down.

“Goodbye, Tom.”

Tom put in his notice, planning on leaving before the update could go through. But Jake had gotten the timetable wrong: the update was to be installed when Tom was on the clock.

A technician came in and crouched near each machine, fiddling with the inner workings. Tom glared at him, but the technician didn’t notice.

Each register monitor went black, and they slowly booted back up.

“Hello,” said the new voice. It was deep, bland, and male. Tom thought it sounded sinister, like a barely concealed devil.

“How can I assist you today?”

“That should do it,” the technician said.

“What about that one?” Tom said, pointing. The register on the far end was flickering in and out.

Tom walked over, aware that his heart was beating dangerously fast. A high-pitched whine was coming from the speakers. He thought it was an electrical problem at first, but as it grew louder, he recognized the voice.

His wife was screaming inside the machine.



THE CRIMSON WOLF

Story by Logan Arney
Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

To say Randall Carnegie obsessed over wild game would be an understatement. Ever since his wife died, hunting was the only thing he enjoyed. He was a bitter old man, angry at the world, even angry at the society that made him a rich oil tycoon. He was alone now, never had time for a family, so he moved to the island years ago to escape the system he had grown to hate. Killing made him feel better, but he wasn't sure why... maybe it was the adventure, or the sense of animalistic pleasure. Whatever it was, he was addicted.

In his small woodland cabin, he had very few personal items... his clothes, guns, and his trophies. Elephants, rhinos, panthers, and other exotic animals crowded his wall space.

But after several years of being there, he had grown weary of what the island had to offer, and with only a few small villages sharing the land with him, he was ready to move on.

But there was one story that kept him there, the ultimate "hunt" so to speak. He heard rumors from some of the villagers about an infamous "Crimson Wolf" that roamed the outskirts of the island. There were rumblings of sightings in the last couple months, but nobody could say for sure if they had seen it. It was a mystical animal to the villagers, one that was sacred and that protected them. Randall didn't give a damn about all that "nonsense," he just wanted to kill it.

Randall rose early one morning and decided it was finally the right time. He was going to track down the Crimson Wolf and put it on his wall, a symbol that he had conquered every aspect of the small, primitive island. Once that was complete, he'd pack his belongings and find somewhere new. Maybe somewhere remote in China or the Russian wilderness, he didn't know.

The island had a small mountain protruding from the middle of it, it was jagged and uneven, the top giving way to a steep cliff. It was incredibly dangerous to climb, with a small handful of male villagers making the attempt each year to prove their "manhood", but regardless of the danger, it was the best vantage point on the whole island. If there really was a Crimson Wolf, he'd be able to spot it from there.

Randall took nothing but a water canteen, binoculars, and his rifle. He secured everything on his back, looked up the face of the cliff, and then began the climb.

Every movement up was a test, a challenge of the greatest magnitude. His heart was beating like it hadn't in 20 years, adrenaline and fear pumping through every fiber in his body. He loved it.

It took him nearly an hour to reach the top, but when he finally did, the view was breathtaking. He really could see everything, the crystal white sand next to the piercing blue ocean, the dense foliage hiding the jungle he had hunted so many times before, the vast openness where the beasts of the plains roamed, he could see it all.

Supposedly, the Crimson Wolf kept to the outskirts of the plains, which made sense as that would be the best area for it to hunt.

Randall sat at the top of the cliff for the entire day taking in the view and watching for the wolf, he was exhausted from the

climb, his old bones and muscles ached from the physical exertion. He sat back and slowly closed his eyes.

A couple hours later, a cool breeze whipped across the cliff awakening him. The sun was starting to set and he needed to start making his way down the cliff side. He was angry at himself for falling asleep, it had been a wasted day. As he stood up and gathered himself, he heard the shuffling of dirt behind him, accompanied by a low growl.

Randall's stomach dropped, adrenaline took hold of him as he slowly turned around. The coat of the beast was almost blinding, like a raging fire. It was the Crimson Wolf.

"How in the hell did you get up here..." Randall whispered to himself.

He had hunted several wolves in his day, but this was by far the largest he had ever seen. Its eyes were a piercing blue, its fur thick and bushy, almost like it had a lion's mane around its neck. Its fangs dripped saliva as it snarled and hissed, its incisors twice the size of any normal wolf.

Randall had confronted dangerous beasts before, so his movements were calculated and slow as a sloth. He quietly grabbed the rifle slung around his left shoulder, the wolf took a step forward, testing him.

He knew the moment he pointed the rifle at the beast, it would charge forward. He would only get one shot.

Randall took a deep breath in, he knew it could very well be his last. He slowly disengaged the safety and raised the barrel.

The wolf snarled and rushed forward. Randall hesitated as his eyes met with the wolf's. He stumbled back, nearly falling off the edge of the cliff... he then pulled the trigger.

The wolf slumped down into the dirt.

BAM!

BAM!

Randall fired two more shots into the beast, ensuring it was dead.

He stood there for a moment, rifle still aimed, watching the cool wind pass through the wolf's thick fur. He then grinned and started laughing hysterically, raising his arms in victory as the sun started sinking under the horizon.

...

"I found it." Randall tossed the tail of the wolf onto the desk of the village merchant. "And I killed it."

The merchant slowly picked up the tail, his hands visibly shaking.

"This animal is sacred... The most sacred. You should not have done this."

Randall leaned forward and put his hands on the old wood,

"I've been around a long-time son, there's absolutely nothing sacred on this Earth. Nothing. I assure you of that."

He pulled a leather pouch from his belt and tossed it next to the tail. It was filled with gold coins.

"I need some men to climb the cliff and retrieve the body before the buzzards get to it. I couldn't carry it down by myself. This should be more than enough to convince them."

"Mr. Carnegie, no villager will do this, it is considered a sin in our culture to even touch the Crimson Wolf."

Randall threw an even larger pouch of gold on the desk.

"You know your people could use this money."

The merchant grabbed the two pouches and poured them out on his desk, he then took a deep breath and sighed.

“I will talk to the elders, but I cannot guarantee they will help you.”

Randall scooped the gold back into the pouches and headed towards the door.

“I know I’m not well liked around here... if they help me with this, I will leave the island for good. You know where to find me.”

...

Randall’s eyes ripped open, an empty bottle of whiskey was lying at his fingertips. His fire had dwindled, and he was still half drunk, sitting in the middle of his cabin. He heard a low groan coming from right outside the door.

“It’s just the damn wind... you’re still drunk,” Randall said to himself.

He stood up and tried to stumble to his bed, but the groans become more and more audible.

He grabbed a pistol from a nearby shelf and slowly walked toward the door. The groans continued, it sounded like a large wounded animal wailing in pain. Randall ripped open the door. Nothing but the dark of night.

“The elders have decided not to help you.”

Randall spun around, the village merchant was standing inside.

“How did you get in here?”

The merchant gazed into the flickering flames, “I told you, the Crimson Wolf was a sacred animal. You made a horrible mistake.”

The fire roared to life as the merchant looked up with blazing blue eyes.

“You must pay for what you have done.”

The heads of each trophy started to shake on the walls, the painful scream of each animal shrieked through the air.

The merchant dropped to his hands and knees, his skin sluffing off in large fleshy chunks, his bones twisting and snapping. His scream turned to a low guttural growl. He looked up at Randall and grinned as the flesh from the sides of his mouth ripped open.

“The Crimson Wolf protects thissss island... he livesss in all of usssss.”

Blazing red fur started erupting from the merchant’s back as he started laughing in a garbled, nightmarish tone.

Randall raised his pistol and fired all six rounds. The bullets did nothing.

He rushed out of the cabin into the darkness. He then fell to the ground in terror. Beasts of every kind had encircled the area.

The merchant, now fully transformed into the hulking wolf, walked outside the cabin, its piercing blue eyes more intense than ever.

“This isn’t real... this isn’t real!” Randall screamed.

He threw his pistol toward the wolf, it fell to the dust harmlessly.

The animals slowly started to close in.

“This isn’t possible!”

Randall pulled out a large hunting knife and glared at the wolf. As he looked into its eyes, a calmness came over him. He knew in that moment he was going die.

Randall raised his blade. “Let’s get this over with.”

Every animal roared and rushed in. Randall was torn apart in a matter of seconds.

In his last moments of consciousness, he looked down to see a panther's face buried deep in his stomach cavity, viciously tearing his intestines apart. He then turned his head to see the Crimson Wolf simply watching, its blue eyes glowing brightly from within the darkness.



THE HOUSE ON POLLEN ROAD

Story by Alex Olson

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

It starts like a horror movie would, with someone inheriting a house from a great-uncle, a gift from a skeletal Santa Claus you saw once at a family barbeque.

The difference is that instead of a blushing young couple with a waving infant in tow, it's my brother and I bounding up to the house on Pollen Road, as if we were children again, racing up to the newest rental to declare which room was ours.

Bill brings many things with him: two children, boys, 8 and 12. He also brings his dead wife. I can tell because he sometimes starts sentences with, "Lesley would love-," and then he cuts off abruptly, as if the sentences themselves are a symbol of how her life was cut short.

I let Bill have his pick of the rooms; there are at least two dozen and any of them are fine with me. The children scatter before him like scouting drones, and we can hear their chirping, their echolocation, as they charge up the winding staircase, brushing dust off the bannisters and receiving cold stares from the portraits of relatives long past.

Bill finds a room at the tippy-top of the house, with a wide circle window that looks over the chilly, grey lake. The glass is completely new; there's not so much as a smudge on it. It's of little surprise that there is such a window in this house (did I not say this starts like a horror film) a window that is so beautiful

and so inviting that it's almost asking for someone to please, please fall through it.

"I can get some work done here!" he declares. "Enough to afford the property taxes, anyway." I can hear the air rushing into his nostrils as he breathes deeply. Bill is an artist-writer-painter-musician-graphic designer... he's an unemployed creative. As I watch him set the furniture up in his "studio" I bite back the urge to tell him to knock it off. Knock it off, Bill, and find a boring, stable job that you'll work at until you're 65 and retire to your trainsets and knickknacks. Knock it off, Bill, before it's too late. You've never created anything worth a damn, why would that change because you have a nice view?

But I don't say that. I never have said that, and likely never will.

Bill bustles about, stacking books on a shelf, tacking old pictures on the walls, placing a vase that Lesley made him on his desk. He stops, once, and shivers, looking around at me. "Cold," he says, and then goes about his work.

Downstairs, on the 1st floor, the children discover an old, full-sized mirror with gold etchings along the side. They gasp when I approach, and then their round faces turn to me, eyes filled with terror. "Did you see that?" the oldest boy whispers.

"Ghost," says the youngest, shuddering.

"Ghost? What?" I look in the mirror to see myself... my own reflection sends a chill up my spine and twists my stomach into knots. My skin is white as chalk, my eyes sunken and black.

"I'm... I'm dead..."

I gasp and run from the room, the revelation sending shockwaves through my body. I run so fast that I knock over a small table near the doorway, making the children scream.

I throw myself on my bed like an angry teenager, hiding from the world. I curl up and sob quietly, so quietly and pitifully that I can hear the conversation echoing from downstairs

The kids tell Bill about a ghost-lady they saw in the mirror, and the words “Aunt Mary” float up to me. I hear Bill explain gently how Aunt Mary was very sick and very sad and that’s why she did that bad thing to herself. “Auntie Mary used to live here,” he tells them.

“She died? Like Mom?” says the oldest.

“That’s right. But there’s no such thing as ghosts.”

The conversation comes through the grate clearly, but there is another sound in the air, and it is louder, clearer, and I can feel its vibration. It’s as if this new noise is on my frequency, my plane of existence. My voice is like a dog whistle to living people, so what dead thing was making this sound?

I creep out of my room and stand at the top of the winding staircase. The sound is below me, but getting closer. It’s a low moaning, punctuated by steady thumping. Something is dragging itself up the stairs. I want to run, to do the human thing and bolt from the house, screaming hysterics, but I can’t leave the grounds and besides, what can hurt me now?

A shambling, black form emerges, and I wish I had a candle to hold closer. It’s a person, a woman, her hair matted to her head like a helmet, skin darkened, her dress in black tatters, barely holding on. There are slash marks up and down her body. Her moans remind me of a gurgling fish tank, and the way she holds her head sideways as she crawls on all fours makes me think of a broken toy.

It’s Lesley, the dead wife Bill drags with him.

I kneel before her, and she puts her head in my lap, like a scared, lost puppy seeking comfort. I smell dirt and damp grass

and the coppery, meaty smell of old blood. She turns slightly and grins lazily up at me, teeth rotted black and the tunnel down her throat resembling an abyss.

“Who did this?” I ask the creature, but I already have an idea of the answer. How else was my creatively unemployed brother affording this move? The air reeks of blood money and insurance claims...

Lesley nods against my knee and moans one word: “Bill.”

I take the poor thing to my room and get her extra blankets. “Tomorrow,” I tell her, “we can begin the haunting.”



THE NIGHTMARE SOCIETY

VOLUME I

