

THE NIGHTMARE SOCIETY

VOLUME III

THE
NIGHTMARE
SOCIETY

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Edited by Jake Tri

The Nightmare Society: Volume III
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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.

THE INSPECTION

Story by Jeremy Wilson

Illustrated by David Romero

Andrew Roberts opened the door to the crawlspace and grimaced as the musty air wafted into his face. No matter how many times he inspected a crawl, that initial draft of air would always be unpleasant. The homeowner, Mr. Latreille, was in desperate need of some pest control, which was why Andrew was there. Latreille was an elderly man from what Andrew had gathered over the phone. He had called Yancy Pest Control a few days prior in a panic, saying he heard “scurrying” in his crawlspace.

“Sounds like a bunch of big-ass rats!” Latreille had shouted. “I’d go down there myself, but I don’t want to get anywhere near those nasty things!”

Andrew assured Latreille that there was nothing to worry about; he would take care of it. They scheduled the appointment, and Latreille assured him that he’d be home all day. However, when Andrew knocked on the door, there was no answer. There was a vehicle in the driveway, but no one came to the door and there were no signs of anyone being inside. Andrew just assumed that he was out with someone.

Andrew poked his head into the crawlspace and gave a quick look around. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary from where he was. There were a few spiderwebs, some insect husks in the sand, insulation hanging down in places, and rat droppings. Andrew nodded as he pulled his head back out and walked to his truck to

put on his inspection suit. He suited up, put on his headlamp, grabbed his small bag of tools, and squeezed into the crawlspace.

As soon as he was fully inside, a new smell pierced Andrew's nose. It was pungent, almost acidic, something he had never smelled before, and it unsettled him. He exhaled sharply a few times and looked around for the culprit but found nothing. The smell faded away quickly, leaving the usual crawlspace smells of rodent droppings and general mustiness.

Andrew lay motionless for a moment before turning on his headlamp and taking in his surroundings. The crawlspace was a little taller than the entrance. He probably had twenty inches of clearance, just enough room to army crawl.

Straight ahead was the HVAC unit, and the duct lines coming from it went to either side of the house, completely blocking his view of the other side, which was the front half of the house. There was no getting over or under them. He would have to crawl all the way down and go around the ducts to inspect the other side.

He began crawling and followed the duct going to the left. As he went, he made sure to check the wood for termite damage and poked at the insulation to make sure there were no rats nesting. So far, so good. A little over halfway to the end of the duct, he heard movement on the other side. He stopped and listened.

There was the pitter-pattering of a lot of little feet in the sand, moving toward the other end of the house, which was typical of rats. What wasn't typical was how many footfalls Andrew heard moving away all at once. From what he could hear, it sounded like at least ten to fifteen rats were scurrying away in a large pack. If there were that many travelling together, there could be dozens of rats living in the crawlspace.

Andrew thought about calling it a day and writing Mr. Latreille a quote for rodent extermination, but without a complete inspection of the entire crawlspace, he could very well undershoot how much work would need to be done. He decided he'd finish the inspection of the back side of the house on his way back out and began crawling straight for the end of the duct line.

Andrew reached the end of the duct line and started to squeeze between it and the foundation wall. It was a tight fit; he had to turn onto his side and slither through, but it was passable. When he was halfway through, he looked up and was greeted by a partially eaten rat carcass lying next to the foundation wall, inches away from his face. If he hadn't looked, he would have rolled right on top of it. He pivoted and finished crossing over, and then he turned and looked at the poor creature.

Had the rats resorted to cannibalism? While highly unlikely, it wasn't an impossible conclusion. The rat was missing the lower half of its body. There were no bones left and its intestines were hanging out. There was a small blood trail that disappeared in the sand a few inches away, as if the rat had tried to get away as it died.

The acidic smell returned, and Andrew quickly looked around. There were no signs of the culprit that he could see. The smell faded away again and was replaced with the smell of decay. He didn't know how he couldn't have smelled it until that moment, maybe the airflow had changed, but rotting flesh invaded his nose.

Andrew turned and began following the duct line to the opposite end of the house, determined to get as far away as he could from the rat carcass. The state of this half of the crawlspace was much worse than the back half. Insulation had been pulled

down a lot more, but there were less insect husks and spiderwebs. The smell of decomposition still permeated the air. The only good thing about this side of the crawlspace was that it was a good foot taller than the back side, so he could stretch out a little.

As he crawled over a pipe, Andrew saw some insulation to his left that was bulging. He had finally found a rat nest. Not taking his eyes off of it, he crawled over, grabbed the bottom, and mentally prepared himself to avoid the scattering rats.

He snatched the insulation down, and rat carcasses rained down in front of him, each one in various stages of decomposition. It appeared as if something had been eating the rats and stuffed them in the insulation for later. Andrew let out a yelp and fell back. The rats reeked of the acidic smell and rot. Behind him, Andrew heard scurrying and turned to try and catch sight of the rats.

He saw nothing moving but noticed that the cold air return duct a few feet away had been knocked down completely and crushed. He crawled over to it to examine it and found that the end had tiny little puncture holes all over it. He looked up into the hole in the floor and saw that the vent cover into the house was gone as well. That's when he noticed the blood around the edges of the return hole and on the ground.

Andrew's stomach dropped as he realized something was very wrong. He called for Mr. Latreille through the return hole. No reply. He called out for him again and heard a low moaning coming from inside the crawlspace. Andrew shined his headlamp in that direction and saw legs sticking out from around the corner of the foundation for the porch.

He crawled over quickly and found who could only be Mr. Latreille lying in the corner, holding his stomach. The man was barely alive, missing a large chunk out of his cheek. His eyes

were glazed over, and he didn't even react as Andrew crawled over to him. Andrew assured him that everything would be okay and asked him what happened. No response.

Andrew grabbed the man's arm and attempted to move him. Latreille groaned weakly, and Andrew finally noticed why he was holding his stomach: he had been trying to stuff his intestines back in. They looked like chewed-up sausages. Andrew couldn't stop himself; he threw up beside Latreille.

Realizing that this man couldn't be moved, Andrew pulled out his phone. No service, of course. He told Latreille that he was leaving to get help and he'd be back soon. Latreille finally looked at him, then past him, and then began moaning weakly. His glazed over eyes widened in pure fear. Then Andrew heard the scurrying.

He turned quickly and was greeted by the sight of a centipede coming toward him. It was well over a foot wide and had to be at least eight feet long. Andrew wanted to run, to get away, but he was paralyzed with fear. Behind him, Latreille's moaning became louder and more panicked.

The centipede stopped in front of Andrew and raised its head so it was eye level with him. Andrew noticed that it had no eyes and no jaws, only large venomous claws on the sides of its head that were moving around as if it couldn't wait to bite him. The claws stopped moving for a moment, and then they slammed into the front of the creature's head.

The claws began to pull away from each other, revealing a seam in the head Andrew hadn't seen. As they pulled further apart, the acidic smell became overpowering. The claws finished separating the seam, and a light, rust-colored face squeezed its way out of the opening. Andrew became aware that he had soiled himself.

Two pure black eyes as big as fists stared at Andrew, unblinking, like those of a wolf spider. Below them an oversized humanoid mouth grinned, the human teeth overly long and clicking in anticipation. From the mouth dripped a light yellow liquid that Andrew could only assume was venom. The face looked at Latreille, then to Andrew, and back again. All the while, the mouth never stopped grinning.

Andrew finally came to his senses and tried to make an escape. As soon as he moved, the creature began to move with him. But he had anticipated this and kicked it with everything he had, knocking it back a bit. He began to crawl as fast as he could, calling on every skill he had acquired in all his years inspecting crawlspaces.

Andrew had crawled halfway to the end of the house when a searing pain shot through his calf. He turned and saw the creature chewing a bloody mass, still grinning. He looked down to his leg and saw that it had taken a chunk out. Andrew screamed, but it was cut short by the blinding pain from the venom that began coursing through his bloodstream.

The pain was so intense Andrew couldn't move. He could barely breathe. He began seizing. His vision began fading in and out. He was barely aware of the creature crawling around him to look him in the face. It got inches away and stared at him. Andrew could see his reflection in the perfect black abyss of its eyes. It never stopped grinning, even as it moved in and began eating Andrew's face.



LAST HALLOWEEN

Story by John Tichio

Illustrated by David Romero

“Adagio for Strings” blares out of the cell phone near Norman’s bed. He wipes his eyes awake, and although he already knows what day it is, it makes him smile to see the words HAPPY HALLOWEEN blinking on his phone, along with an 8-bit creepy jack-o-lantern that smiles and then disappears and reappears over and over again. Norman forgets a lot of things lately, but Halloween is not one of them. How could he? He has been celebrating Halloween for almost 50 years, and he can vividly remember each and every one of them from four years old on. He even has a fragmented idea of what Halloween was like when he was two and three, but those memories are mostly due to pictures his parents took.

Eventually pictures won’t help anymore. Norman looks at a lot of pictures lately, mostly of Halloween. He likes the progression of the costumes. Not only have the characters changed, but also the style, durability, and believability. In the early days, his costumes came in small boxes. The masks were made of sharp, uncomfortable plastic, and the outfits were often just one-piece aprons. He would joke that he was wearing a tablecloth.

In one picture from 1981, he is the Hulk. If the Hulk wanted to smash something, whether it was a tower of toy blocks, the family car, or even a big bad guy, he could. Norman wished he could smash his way out of his current situation.

In the 1990s, his Halloween costumes were exclusively rubber masks. By the time Norman was done terrorizing the neighborhood as a demon-werewolf, his sweat had pooled in the corners and grooves of the mask, and although it was freezing outside, it was a relief to feel the chill hit his face when he took the mask off. He thought that it must have been well over 100 degrees in the mask, but the reactions he received made the face sauna worth it.

As the years went by, something as simple as a football jersey or fangs passed as a costume. One year, Norman remembered wearing a nametag that read "My Name is Al Bundy." He had thought it was hilarious, but some people had no idea who Al Bundy was. When Norman explained that Al Bundy was the down-on-his-luck shoe salesman and family man on the TV show *Married... with Children*, people remembered. What a luxury to forget something and then remember it again. Imagine really remembering something, and not just shrugging it off and saying, "I think I remember that." Norman took that lost gift of his for granted.

Norman stops his self-pitying before it starts. Today is a good day. Today is Halloween. He makes himself remember the evolution of female costumes. The Strawberry Shortcakes and Wonder Women were as clunky and uncomfortable as his in the 1980s. During high school and college, the skirts got higher and the shirts lower. Who knew a firefighter could be so sexy? "If I knew you were at the other end of a 9-1-1 call I wouldn't have waited so long to dial." Cheesy line? No doubt. But it led Norman to two and a half decades of a good marriage, one beautiful daughter, and some very friendly and loyal pets. The sexy firefighter became a damn good defense lawyer, and Violet,

Norman's daughter, recently started her residency at King Hospital. Life was good.

Norman came back from Boston a few days ago. He'd spent a week visiting Violet when she was available. He'd told her he had business in Boston, but he had just waited in his hotel room for her to call. Residency is a busy time, so whenever she was available they met for coffee or a walk around town. When he left, he lied and told Violet he couldn't wait to see her at Christmas.

The sexy, firefighting defense attorney was always busy, so she and Norman had to plan date nights in advance. For the past few weeks, he'd made them as fun as he could... but yesterday had been their final one.

At the end of dinner, Cheryl had known something was up. Norman's kiss had been too passionate. If he had told her the truth about his doctor visits, she would be more concerned. Instead, she probably thinks he is having an affair. Norman doesn't know if having Alzheimer's is better or worse.

That brings us to this evening: Norman is in the town park. Every year, the Civic Pride Committee decorates an area of the park to match the current holiday. Of course, now, the park is decked out in the spirit of Halloween. There are tombstones, jack-o-lanterns, stuffed scarecrows, orange and yellow lights, and so much more. Every year, they add something new to delightfully frighten the community. They open at noon every day and close by 10. Norman has been coming here with his family for as long as he can remember, as a kid and an adult.

The lights are off now. The animatronic witch, constantly stirring her empty cauldron, has come to a standstill. Norman takes the two bottles, one of pills and one of water, and makes his way onto the display. He sits down in the backseat of a replica

Model T. In it, there is a scary family of four taking a day trip through the park. They have grotesque faces and are dressed like they have been dead since the 1920s. That's how Norman is dressed now. He takes a seat between the brother and sister in the raised backseat. He adjusts his top hat, wig, and suit. He swallows pill after pill after pill and puts the bottles down on the floor of the car.

Norman hopes they will not find him for a couple of days, maybe a week. Although someone might discover him in the morning, he supposes. *It'll be too late*, he thinks. *I'll be dead by then*. News story for sure, probably national and maybe even international news. When they look up Norman on the internet, they'll find a picture of him dead in the Halloween display. Forever linked to his favorite holiday.



IT SPOKE IN DREAMS

Story by Tanner Wisdom

Illustrated by David Romero

I don't know what it was, but it spoke to me in dreams. Every night since I was seven, when I fell asleep, I would awake in a black void. There was something with me in that darkness. I tried to get a good look, but just as I'd almost see, it always shifted out of sight. To this day, I've only seen a little part of what it is, and that's already too much.

When it finally spoke to me, it was like a herd of animals all failing to mimic human speech. It was torture. Each creature fought to be the loudest voice above the din. I had to cover my ears against the intensity, and despite that, I woke up to a faint ringing in my ears.

I let out a scream that ripped my throat. My parents came in to rescue me from the monster in my closet, a common "visitor" in my youth, but this time, the monster was in my dreams.

I told my dad what it said to me, about how it liked me and wished to stay and that I didn't want it to. He just laughed and told me I'd made a new friend and to stop being so mean. He said he had an invisible friend when he was my age, and they were lots of fun.

After my dad's comforting words, I quickly drifted back to sleep. When I started to dream again, my body slipped into that endless nothing like a smooth rock gently returned to a lake.

"Hello?" My voice echoed forever.

“Yes, hello.”

I spoke again when the pain and ringing had finally died down.

“My dad told me to be nice to you. That you are my new invisible friend.”

“A very wise man your father is, but I am not invisible.”

“Why can’t I see you then?”

“Because,” it said, “I don’t want you to. Maybe in time.”

My voice was weak from fear, but I had to learn more about my nightly guest. “Okay. Why come to me?”

“I only wish to help you, Eric.”

And that was true. For a while.

A week later, the voice told me to check in the crack between the couch and the wall. I asked why, and it just repeated itself. I asked again. The darkness convulsed around me, and I almost lost my footing on the ground I couldn’t even see. I was still shaking after everything settled. I stopped asking questions. The voice had shown me its power, and I was terrified. I suppose I still am.

In the morning before school, I did what it asked and looked down into the gap. Among the cat hair and crumbs was a small glint of red. My breath caught. I knew what it was, but I didn’t let myself believe it. I had been disappointed so many times before. I had looked everywhere when the car wasn’t in the “garage” with the rest of my small collection. I had cried because I would never find it.

I forced my scrawny arm past the leather armrest, and my fingers brushed a cold, metal surface caked in just a little bit of grime and slid it out. The toy was dusty, with hair stuck between the wheels, but there it was: my favorite toy, a cherry-red, 70’s

model convertible with plastic-leather seats. I ran down the carpeted steps to the den where my father spent most of his time.

“Dad, Dad! Look! I found it!”

He turned away from the game to check what was in my hands.

“Hey, good job, bud! I told you that you’d find it eventually. Next time, you’ll know to put it where it goes, right?”

“Yes, Dad, but I didn’t find it by myself!” I said, “My invisible friend helped me.”

If he had not been watching the big game, he might have realized that what should have been just his son’s imaginary friend was actually something that knew things no human could know. But he didn’t. Not until later.

“That’s cool, bud. You have a good time, huh?” He set his beer can down and patted me on the shoulder, and he was back to the football game.

As happy as I was to play with my car, I was more excited to go to sleep again. What would the voice tell me this time?

It helped me out on a lot of things over the years. In the winter, it warned me whenever a bad storm was coming. It was never wrong. I wouldn’t have to go to school, and I got to stay up late playing video games as quietly as possible. It might have been trying to get me hooked on its insight and advice, but it didn’t have to try so hard. After I had my toy car back and a few all-night gaming sessions, I was in its thrall.

When I got to be a teenager, I became more self-aware that having a voice telling me things in my dreams every night might not exactly be healthy. I finally called to talk with someone about what had been going on. It had to have read my thoughts. The night before my appointment, it told me something I couldn’t ignore.

“When you walk to class tomorrow, there will be a woman.”

“Am I supposed to...ask her out?”

“No, she is old and frail. Her hip will give out, and she will fall into the road.”

“Oh, my god!”

“Yes,” it spoke into the darkness. “A car will come at that moment, and its brakes will fail. Not much of her will remain.”

“Wh-why are you telling me this?”

“You can save her, Eric.”

“I can? How?”

“Catch her,” it said. “Catch her and save her life.”

When the sun rose, I got ready for school with a lump of hot iron in my stomach. The voice had never been wrong before, but I hoped this time would be different.

On the way, there was a hunched figure in a shawl far ahead on the side of the road. She was walking like it was the hardest thing in the world. The air left my lungs. The voice was right. Again. This woman’s life was in my hands.

In the distance, and the wrong lane, a glint of red almost like my toy car from years before was speeding down the asphalt. I was never athletic, but it was like I ran faster than any track star at my school. The wind whipped my long hair as adrenaline pumped through me. When her hip gave, she fell towards the road. I was a million miles away, but I had to save her. I pumped my legs faster and faster, got to her, put my arms around her too-thin body, and pulled her away from the scarlet bullet. The side of the road was covered in grass, and her landing was soft. She was screaming in agony, but she was screaming, and that meant she was alive.

For better or for worse, I had fifteen minutes of superhero fame, and I even got a thousand bucks out of the deal for a Great

Citizen Award, or something like that, which is not a small amount of money for a high school junior.

It wasn't until college when the commands, which are what I call them now, became weird. The first command that the hideous voice gave me was hardly more than a prank. I had to paint my RA's door blue. Everything up until that command had made sense or helped me later in some way. I assumed that to be the case this time, so I painted his door like I was told and waited for something to happen. Nothing did, other than he got super pissed at everyone on the 3rd floor, and we were all interrogated. I wasn't caught, but it didn't help me either.

I went to sleep the next night and hoped the voice would explain. It refused to answer my questions, but I persisted. The darkness of the dream shook again. Instead of answers, it gave me something else to do. I was to put a quarter, minted before 1964, heads-up on the corner of my desk every night. I followed the voice's instructions.

These were tests. Tests to determine if I would do something that didn't benefit me, and because I did, the commands became darker.

"When you go to the gas station tomorrow, there will be a man in front of you. I want you to follow him. When he is alone, hit him. Again and again. Until you break his arm."

"Why? Is this guy evil? Is he going to kill or hurt someone?"

The voice refused to answer. It only repeated the order until my ears were about to explode.

The ringing in them didn't go away in the morning. I couldn't hear anything other than that incessant whine by the time I made it to the gas station. A man was waiting at the counter. It had to be him. He was the only guy there.

I followed him until he eventually cut down an alleyway, and I made my move, kicking out his knee. He fell to the ground, and I descended on him, bringing my fists down with sickening thumps. He begged me to take his money, anything to stop hitting him. But I didn't come for money, and I didn't stop. Not until I heard his arm crack when he tried to block my wild attacks.

Then I left him whimpering through a blood-filled mouth. I swear I heard him ask me why. I wish I knew.

I went home and vomited. Everything in the world was now somehow tainted. I wasn't the superhero who saved an old lady. I was a psychopath on the streets with voices in his head. I tried to stay up because I didn't want to hear what I had to do tomorrow for fear it could be worse, but the voice had other plans. I started to watch a movie, but I couldn't focus on any of it, and I blacked out.

"That man today, you broke his arm and knocked out his dull teeth. Good. Tomorrow, I demand you to find him."

"Please, I don't want to hit him again! He didn't do anything to me!"

The voice ignored my protest. "When you do, kill him, and bury him in the woods."

"I won't."

"Kill him. Bury him in the woods."

"No!"

There was an earthquake in the dark, stronger than ever before, and I fell into nothing, but this time I wasn't going to back down. I kept telling it no over the ringing in my ears. The pain lasted for seconds, or it lasted years, but eventually, it left.

I was free. For the first time since my childhood, no voice came to me in dreams. I stopped leaving a quarter by my bed and regular dreams came to me with nothing lurking behind them.

It lasted two months. Then I woke up and jolted. There was a quarter by my bed, but I brushed it off as muscle memory. I convinced myself of that for a while, until I couldn't anymore.

I had fallen asleep in my bed, but I woke up in my car. Confused and sore, I looked out the window expecting the mostly empty parking lot of the local dive bar or some frat house, but I was just surrounded by trees. I was wet and covered in mud.



THE GARBAGE MAN

Story by Donovan Monster Smith

Illustrated by David Romero

The garbage man waved as he drove off on his way to the next stop on his route. It was the same old, daily routine, rarely changing, leaving no spare time for anything else. It was a thankless job, which no one ever noticed.

Rubbing his greasy hands on his shirt, he hocked up some phlegm and spat a mouthful of lovely yellow snot out the window. His front tooth was broken and turning black, matching a few of the other occupants in the upper row. His hair was jet black and appeared to be slicked back with shoe polish, or petroleum jelly, or something very similar.

He jammed a finger up his nose, sliding it up to the second knuckle as he dug around for treasure. The garbage man was a gruff, mean-spirited old coot on a mission to fulfill a deeply disturbing desire. His dry exterior was riddled with rashes and cracking skin, and he was missing a ring finger on his left hand. Rolling up to the first house on Elton Street, he hopped out to empty the cans, scratching at his wiry mess of a beard.

“Hey, Mr. McIntyre,” said the little girl, smiling and waving her hand in the air.

“Sandy, what are you doing out here? Get back inside this instant,” her mother snapped. “I told you not to talk to that man.”

Grievous paid them no mind and emptied the second trash bin into the back of his truck, scratching at his cheek like some kind

of drugged-out dope fiend. He was an addict, alright. Only he wasn't addicted to normal drugs. No, instead, he was addicted to something far worse—something with consequences and dire ramifications. If the stupid cattle ever found out, it would mean the end of everything.

It irritated him every second of every day. No matter how hard he fought the urge, he was unable to shake it. He tried to keep things under wraps for the most part, but every now and then he succumbed to the harsh reality that was his life.

The sun was shining, and birds were chirping with cheerful hearts, sitting high atop branches, watching all the peculiar animals as they went about their daily activities. The town of Summerdale was always full of smiles and joyful faces, except for the garbage man, Mr. Grievous McIntyre.

Picking at the sores on his nose, he sat staring out the windshield of the smelly, old truck. He laughed internally as a bird flew by and shat on his driver's side mirror. For Grievous, this was just another regular Tuesday.

“Damn birds, shitting on everything. That's right you little bastards, life ain't nothing but one big pile of shit,” he said, laughing at his own clever insight.

A teenage girl walked by, catching Grievous's eye like the perverted old man he was. She smiled at him and proceeded down the sidewalk, pausing for a second near the rear of the truck. There was a faint thumping coming from somewhere inside and she wondered what it could be. Was there something trapped and unable to get out?

Grievous stuck his head out the window and smiled back at the girl, his mouth full of yellow and blackened teeth. His smile quickly faded, turning into an evil smirk as he shooed her on her

way. He hated when people pestered him. It pissed him off royally.

Rolling up the window, he laid his head on the backrest. He closed his eyes for a spell. There were fifteen minutes left on his break, and he intended to use every last second of them, lord forbid.

The window was cracked, allowing a tiny breeze to sneak through. A fly buzzed past his ear and landed on the armrest next to him. Grievous watched it patiently as it cleaned itself, completely unaware of the old man's evil intent. As fast as he could move, he slammed his hand down, trapping the insect.

He closed his fist tightly around it, smothering the fly as he brought his hand up to his mouth. Opening wide, he popped the little sucker in and chewed happily like a toddler discovering food for the first time. There was a certain tang to them, and he'd grown to love the taste.

His break was officially over, and he flipped the ignition over, threw the truck into gear, and headed for the next stop on his route. As he sat at the light waiting for it to turn green, a police cruiser pulled up next to him. The officer shot him a grin and nodded in his direction. Grievous flashed his hideous, million-dollar smile, and the sight of his eroded mouth apparently disturbed the officer, since the cruiser gassed it right when the light changed color.

Up ahead, an elderly woman was crossing the street with her dog, and Grievous smashed the pedal, attempting to gun her down. Luckily for the old woman, he missed by about two feet as he zoomed past.

Grievous watched the event unfold through the rearview, admiring his art as he went. He flashed his disgusting smile at the

elderly woman as she stood on the sidewalk in shock, screaming and shaking her fists in the air.

“Stupid lady,” he laughed, grinning from ear to ear.

Stopping at the next light, he waited for pedestrians to cross. A man in jean shorts and a white tank top stopped and stared at him for a moment. It was as if the man was saying, “I know your secret you piece of shit, and I’m going to tell the world.” Grievous growled and mashed his chompers at the man through the glass, when suddenly banging noises came from the rear of the truck. The man shifted his head and peered around the side, trying to get a better read on what he thought he might have heard.

The horn blared, snapping the man's concentration. He looked up, and Grievous flipped him the bird. The man began yelling obscenities, but they were muted due to the loud rumble of the truck.

As the light turned green, the man continued on his way, crossing the street as the garbage man drove on. A few miles down the road, Grievous pulled the truck into an alleyway and stopped. He turned off the radio and immediately banging sounds flooded the cabin.

Grievous hopped out to take a look and whipped out his pocket knife out as he peered into the back of the truck. He moved some things around and then repeatedly thrust his knife over and over into the filth and garbage. He wasn’t fond of attention, and the banging was beginning to cause a scene. After a few seconds, he stopped, got back behind the wheel, and headed to the gas station for fuel.

The smell of fermented garbage and shit was embedded in his overalls. They were caked in dirt and slimy juices, and as he entered the gas station, a young lady pinched her nose, trying not

to gag. He was used to that sort of treatment, though, and it really didn't bother him much.

He grabbed a few beers and proceeded to the counter to pay, pausing to scratch his backside first. A patron nearby noticed him digging down the back of his pants and gagged at the unsavory sight. The man then bolted as fast as he could to the next aisle over.

Grievous put the bottles on the counter and fished around in the front pocket of his overalls, searching for his money. The clerk behind the register was a nice young kid who'd worked at the store for the past couple years. As Grievous approached to pay, the kid took a couple steps back, trying to avoid being gob smacked in the face by the foul stench that emanated from the garbage man.

The kid always hated it when he stopped by, and Grievous knew it, but he didn't give two shits. He'd been shopping at the store for months, purchasing cigarettes, alcohol, and other various items. Noticing that the kid had backed away, he flung a few wadded-up bills and some loose change on the counter and disappeared out the door.

The sun was shining, and Grievous cracked open his drink, soaking in the last rays of warmth the day provided. There was a stray dog sniffing around the rear of the truck, and he picked up a rock and tossed it at the lousy mutt. "Get the hell outta here," he said, digging a finger in his ear.

He raised his finger into the sunlight and checked it for any remnants left on the tip. It was just about time to get back to it, and he climbed into the truck and slammed the door behind him. The sunlight had left the seat warm, and he lightly burned his ass through his overalls as he slid behind the wheel.

The garbage truck chugged down Hawthorne Ave, the last street of the day, meaning the end of his route. It was the snooty, posh neighborhood of Summerdale, where all the rich, arrogant, upper class residents lived. Grievous hated the neighborhood more than any of the others. The people who lived in Summerdale always seemed to turn their noses up at him whenever he strolled through.

He swore that one day Summerdale would get what they had coming, and sooner than later if everything went as planned. The feeling hit him hard, and he couldn't stand it much longer. There was a voice in his ear telling him what to do, and when the time was right, he'd gladly take his revenge.

Grievous picked up the second to last bin of the day, tossing its contents into the truck. As he sat the empty bin on the sidewalk and picked up the last one, a handful of rats the size of small dogs scurried out from underneath the can. He kicked and stomped at the vermin as they scuttled past him.

The remaining trash bin hit the pavement, bringing an end to a putrid day.

Finally, he made it home—back to his one room trailer which bordered Summerdale on the south side of town. He kicked his shoes off and sat on the shredded couch he'd found a few months ago in the dump.

"Hey, Bill," he said, loosening his belt. "I had one hell of a day, let me tell you."

Flicking on the old black and white television he'd recently snagged from one of the houses on Hawthorne Ave, he cracked open a beer and kicked his feet up. He thanked the sky above that he had friends to come home to and people who cared. He always felt most comfortable when he was surrounded by friends and familiar faces, expressions that never changed.

Everyone stared at him. “Hey, there,” he said, “nice of you all to join us. Bernice, how was your day?” he asked, smiling and wiping blood from the pale skin of her forehead. There was no reply.

Grievous laid back on the roach-infested couch and took a swig of his beer. His eyelids closed. “Keep it down, will you, my head hurts,” he said as he dozed off to sleep among his silent, rotting friends.



THE CATS OF SALEM

Story by Patti Pauley
Illustrated by David Romero

“Come on, darlin’, eat your soup.”

Chloe, a blossoming girl of fifteen, gazed out of her window from the wrinkled sheets on her bed, wondering when her new friend would show up today. It was the highlight of her very long days confined to a bed since she started to fall ill.

“My stomach hurts too much right now, Larry. I can’t eat any more.”

“Chloe, please. It’s been a year since we became a family. Call me Dad.” Larry shot a snide smile at his stepdaughter. “Our family has been through so much with your little brother Zack passed on, and your mom being so upset. And you, well...”

“My daddy is in heaven with Zack, LARRY.”

Larry shot Chloe a look of disdain at her words. “One day, you’ll appreciate what I’ve done for this family.” And he briskly walked out of the bedroom.

Chloe listened carefully. She could hear her stepdad march into what used to be her parents’ bedroom to have a “discussion” about Chloe’s backtalk to her mother, Anna, who was all but disconnected after losing her ten-year-old son only six months ago to what the doctors described as “flu complications.” Now the same symptoms to which her brother succumbed, Chloe had been exhibiting over the past three weeks.

Growing a little weaker by the day, with no social interaction in her very wealthy yet secluded home on the farthest edge of

Salem, Massachusetts, the young girl's only solace came in the form of a visiting cat. One that belonged to a colony that lived down the road with Miss Hamilton, or as the children of the town called her, "the local crazy cat lady." The woman had rarely been seen outside the walls of her cat guarded fortress over the past twenty years, which made it easy for the local children to claim the place was cursed and that Miss Hamilton was actually a witch. Chloe and Zack had heard the neighborhood tales a million times over, but neither one gave them a lick of credence.

"Oh, there you are!" Chloe whispered as a blonde, patchy-haired feline climbed up the tree that stood beside her window. The cat meowed to greet her and tightrope-walked his way along the branches towards her. Chloe carefully, and as quietly as she could, opened the window, allowing her friend to get out of the chilly autumn air of October. The cat, in what had become a ritual for the pair, walked in and snuggled up beside Chloe in her sheets.

He comforted her in a way she'd felt when her brother was alive. Chloe spoke softly to her newfound friend, "I don't know why you started coming here, but I'm glad you did. I miss Zack so much. You even have the same patchy hair colors he did."

As Chloe began to tear up, the cat nuzzled up to her cheek and gave the young girl a kiss with its sandpaper tongue. And then... an intense hiss.

Chloe's mother, with a distressed look on her face, and Larry entered the room together. "So, I see you've been hiding something from us." Larry approached the bed and reached for the animal, while the cat, in a defensive position, arched his back and let out an angry growl.

"HE IS MY FRIEND! He came to me after Zack died! Don't hurt him! Mom, please say something!"

Anna, her eyes red as if she'd been crying for decades, said, "Honey, you're sick. And the doctors don't understand why. I can't risk losing another child, and we don't know where he's been."

In tears, Chloe released a defeated wail as the cat jumped onto the table beside the bed, knocking over what was left of the soup onto the floor. A now visibly angry Larry grabbed the animal by his scruff and walked towards the front of the house. Before reaching the entranceway, the pair locked up for a moment as they stared into each other's piercing eyes. Larry suddenly became extremely uneasy.

"Don't come back here," Larry murmured and scooted the stubborn feline out the front door.

Later that evening, Anna and Chloe lay in bed comforting one another while Larry was preparing another meal for the sickly child. "I'm so sorry about the cat, sweetie. I just can't take any chances."

Chloe sighed and in a morbid whimper told her mother, "Mom, I'm not getting better. Whatever Zack had, I have it too. I won't be missing my brother much longer."

Anna, looking tearfully into her pale daughter's face, all but broke upon hearing a very real truth, and as the two embraced in an emotional hug, something caught Anna's eye in the window. Inside the low-lying fog that sat on the grounds of their home under the full moon, dozens of small cat silhouettes were scurrying around the waves of the milky, dense air. The figures were moving rapidly but with grace and precision, as if a choreographed ballet was being performed outside the home.

"Chloe, I think your friend brought his buddies to see you."

As Chloe edged towards her window, a loud THUD hit the glass with such a force, it cracked ever so slightly. The pair

screamed in fright, summoning Larry up the stairs, soup in hand, and into the bedroom.

“What the hell happened!?”

Before anyone could answer, a familiar, furry face with a mischievous grin appeared outside the window. The cat swiftly turned towards Chloe behind the glass, pawing at the panel. The young teen abruptly obliged her friend and opened the window, disregarding her mother’s wishes, and the cat jumped in with a purpose, eyes fixed once more on Larry and growling ferociously.

“That’s it! I’ve had it with this animal!” Larry screamed in frustration as the duo chased each other around the room.

“Larry, stop!” Anna cried. “You’re acting insane!”

Chloe, with all her strength, fumbled out of the bed in an attempt to intervene and shielded the slightly larger than average kitten from her stepfather. “Stop it right now. Or I swear I’ll...”

“You’ll what? Threatening me now? I’ll show you how to make good on frivolous threats!” Larry pushed Chloe out of his way and grabbed the cat once again by the scruff and headed downstairs. Both Anna and Chloe, clutching her mother, made their way after them, pleading with Larry to not hurt the animal.

As Larry raced to the front door, he paused, turned to the kitchen and grabbed a butcher’s knife from the utensil caddy. The cat began to wriggle and wince, forcing Larry to clench the cat harder as he made his way outside into the fog. He then wrestled the cat onto a tree stump, and Larry brought the knife to the animal’s throat. “I told you not to come back here, you little shit. Now I’ll see that you don’t.”

“LARRY!” Anna and Chloe had made their way outside to the very horror of what was about to happen in front of them. But then...

A shadowy figure began to emerge from the darkness in the center of the yard, surrounded by what were only silhouettes before but was now clearly an army of sorts from the cat kingdom. Larry stood up, dumbfounded, allowing Chloe's friend to escape his grip and join his fellow felines in a circle, surrounding the man. The figure inched closer, eyes glowing a shade of forest green that counteracted the mist around them.

"Miss Hamilton?" Anna recognized the figure as she made her way towards her new husband. She nodded and smiled at Anna and her daughter, then quickly fixated her shimmering eyes on Larry and pointed at the man. In doing so, the fog quickly overcame Larry, Miss Hamilton, and the cats.

A moment of silence overcame the area. Chloe and Anna's feet suddenly seemed to become one with the earth, unable to move. And then, a blood-curdling scream. The fog filled with unholy, high-pitched growls, like meows mixed with gravel, and claws ripping into flesh.

Anna and Chloe clutched each other as the screams became deafening and it became difficult to differentiate the cats' screams and Larry's. And then, after what seemed like an eternity, it was silent once more. The fog lifted to reveal Larry's lifeless body among the dead autumn leaves. His neck was torn clean open.

Anna and Chloe stared in shock as Miss Hamilton, Chloe's cat in her arms and the rest following, walked closer to the pair and directed her voice to Chloe. "Child, your brother is among the others here. He couldn't stand to see you suffer the same fate he did. Larry has been poisoning you, as he did your brother. Your mother was next, so he could take the family's wealth. He's been preying on widows for years, killing, and then starting the cycle again. These are the children," she said, pointing to the

cats. “My children now. Murdered souls of innocents that have transformed into the physical feline form. Salem has always had magic in its soil, and it has avenged the innocent ever since the witch trials of my sisters, 400 years ago.”

“Zack?” Chloe murmured. The cat slunk up towards his human mother and sister and nudged them ever so slightly. Chloe then scooped him up, and he purred peacefully into her chest.

In the midst of a tearful reunion, Miss Hamilton turned around and began to leave with her pack, stepping over Larry’s bloody body in a rather victorious sort of way. “Come along, children, on to the next one.”

Anna started to run after her. “Wait!”

Miss Hamilton whipped around, stopping Anna in her tracks, and gently leaned into her ear whispering the words, *Har Har Waheguru*.

Then the fog cleared. There was no sign of Miss Hamilton, the cats, or Larry. Only Anna, Chloe, and the cat cradled in the girl’s arms remained, staring into the clear moonlight shining upon them.

“Mom, what are we doing out here?”

“I, uh...” Anna stammered, just as confused as her daughter, whose face was back to a peachy pink color.

“I don’t know, honey. Do you remember why we came out here, Zack?”

A young boy, with patchy, blonde and brown hair, stepped out behind his sister. “Nope. But the moon sure is pretty tonight.”

The trio shrugged and headed back into the house. They remembered nothing of the occurrence. All the while, a lone cat was watching in the tree by the window.



LEST WE FORGET

Story by Charles T. Daube

Illustrated by David Romero

Most folks drive over a bridge and don't give it a second thought, as if the structure has always been there, just another land mass or geographical formation.

As their tires hum across the beams, they don't think about the workers or architects that put their lives into assembling such a monumental structure. Shedding blood, losing limbs, some even gave their lives. I don't know about you, but I think that's something folks should talk about.

Lest we forget.

So here I am, a seventy-five-year-old high school dropout with so many stages of cancer inside me that I can't count them on my fingers. It's true what they say, life's short, and my tank is running dry. I've lived a full life, and I ain't got no gripes about the hand I was dealt.

You'll have to forgive my plain language. I ain't never been the learned type, and I'm tired. But before I go, I wanted to tell someone about my friend, Chuck.

Nowadays, up in New York, bridges crisscross the Hudson and East rivers like nobody's business. I helped build three of them—big mothers. You visit any part of the city and you'll see them...shit, you can't miss 'em. Have you ever seen the black and white photos of bridge workers? Sure ya have. Dirty fellas

eating lunch as they sit on a beam hundreds of feet in the sky? Some folks get queasy just looking at those pictures.

Well, that was us, that was my life.

I could talk your ear off about each bridge I built, but I've only got enough breath to talk about one. The Feradano Bridge.

Yeah, that one.

I took the job on the Feradano in a heartbeat. It was billed as the biggest project the city had ever seen. Money out the wazoo. That was the third bridge I worked on, and by that time, I was a veteran. I knew every city bridge worker by their first name, and there were plenty of guys to know. Construction is a pit-stop for most folks. Guys sign up for the paycheck only to find out there ain't much money but plenty of backbreaking labor. I stuck it out because I liked it, plus after doing it for so long, I didn't know much else.

The first day on the Feradano was identical to the rest. It brought plenty of fresh faces and soft hands. Color me surprised. I took it upon myself to show the fellas around the site and told them what they'd be doing. You could say I was a supervisor on the job but without the perks of a title or extra pay. This batch, though, they didn't know their assholes from a hole in the ground. But one of them stood out from the crowd.

It was hard for him not to—he wouldn't stop laughing.

In the middle of my safety briefing, he was standing there right in the front row cutting up, having a grand old time. I stopped, cocked my head at him, and asked, "What's a matter, you looking at your pecker back there?" The guys laughed.

He giggled some more and said, "No, I was just thinking of something funny."

I stood up straight, “Well, there ain’t nothing funny about being impaled through the face with a section of rebar. I seen it happen, and trust me, it ain’t pretty.”

That seemed to shut him up. But I swore there was still a hint of a smirk on his face. “What’s your name?” I asked.

“Chuck, sir,” he said with a sparkle in his eye.

“All right, Chuckles, let’s see how long you last out here.”

The job started and things was running smoothly. The guys were getting along, and the bridge was growing like a weed. The weeks went by and Chuckles was still laughing, and it became a gag around the site. He was always grinning, and nobody knew why. But the damndest thing was, other people started grinning like him too. It was contagious or something, like he had some kind of happy disease. I’m not gonna lie, it annoyed the piss outta me, but for some reason, I liked being around him too. He was the type of guy who volunteered for a job nobody else wanted or threw you his sandwich when your old lady forgot to pack you one. A real stand-up guy.

“Hey, Chuckles!” I heard a guy yell. “Whatchu’ smilin’ about, the wife let you put a finger in last night?”

“Not my wife, she’s a lady. That’s why I stopped by your house this morning,” Chuckles replied as he walked on, as if it was the most casual greeting in the world.

The fella stammered, not knowing what to say as his little wise-ass remark was kicked right back in his face. That’s how a man survived in this world, he knew how to take shit, and he knew how to throw it back even harder.

I started to like Chuckles more with each day. I found myself laughing more, more than I’d laughed in years. It took me a few weeks to figure out why my stomach was sore when I got home as if I’d been doing crunches all day. I took him under my wing,

teaching him everything I learned over the years. He did everything that was asked of him, but nothing more and nothing less, the real government worker type.

He was a good listener, but as I gave him instructions, I always got the sense that he was somewhere else. Like he knew it wasn't the type of material that you stored in your long-term memory or something. Surface information, you know? I could tell that he wasn't destined for this life, that he wanted bigger things for his family. He'd just had a baby boy, and his wife was a real looker from the picture he'd shown me in his wallet. That was good. A man needs a family of his own, something to work for, and something to come home to.

Otherwise, a man would resort to the other side of town where the neon lights stayed on till daylight, places that handed out VD and black eyes like Halloween candy.

So, Chuckles was doing good, but he wanted more. That was fine with me because, like I said, construction is a pit stop. Some guys stay and some go. Some of the best friends I ever made I'd only known for a week or two and never seen them again. Their faces and voices just became stories for me to tell around the site. I hoped that wasn't the case with Chuckles, but even then, I knew I'd be talking about him the rest of my life.

Everything on the bridge was good until Tony showed up. He was the new foreman, and to put it lightly, he was a shit. He was the son of some city councilman, silver spoon kind of guy, a starched white collar in a greasy, blue collar world with a stick up his ass. There was no other way to put it.

He had the polar opposite personality to Chuckles, whenever you were around him, you'd feel anger boil in your veins. There was no life inside of Tony's eyes. They reminded me of a black amethyst ring my kid sister had; I could get lost inside its stone,

like I was falling into the world-ending depth of a black hole. I'd forgotten about that ring as I grew up, but now standing on this bridge as a middle-aged man, here it was again, staring back at me.

Sparkless and cold, you could tell Tony's existence was based purely on business.

I could continue to speak about his shit qualities, or I could let you form your own opinion. Anyway, like I said, Tony cared about nothing but the bottom line. He wanted to get this bridge completed, no matter the cost. He had us working overtime, weekends, nights—you name it. Pushing us here and pulling us there, still, nothing was ever good enough. Everybody was miserable, myself included...well, everyone except Chuck.

Despite the circumstances, Chuckles kept his head up, he kept wearing that smile, and his spirit kept us going too. Even after working three weeks straight, his contagious laugh brought a little light into the world. It was the type of laugh that anyone could pick from the crowd. It made you want to laugh, even in your darkest hour.

We began to share Tony's goal. All we wanted was to get this bridge done, just to be away from him. He aimed to finish the bridge early to impress the higher ups and slaving away just to never see him again seemed like a fair trade.

You see, when you get to be my age, you start to realize that life isn't defined by years, jobs, or decisions—it's defined by moments. When you look back at the big picture of your life, certain moments stick out further than the others, a highlight reel of sorts.

This was one of those moments.

My life changed on a windy Tuesday afternoon. Like I said, we were the types to eat our lunches on suspended beams. We

were tough sons of bitches with lead in our guts and steel in our bones, but the one thing that rattled us was wind. You see, in bridge construction, wind can be a real problem. Back in those days, there were no safety regulations, at least none that were enforced. We didn't have no harnesses, nets...shit, we weren't even given hardhats.

But there were ways to keep us safe. That was the foreman's job. The general rule of thumb was that if the gusts got to exceed thirty miles per hour, the job would be postponed until the weather passed. This day the wind was blowing sixty miles an hour, and we kept working. The guys held tight to the railing; their boots were barely able to stand on the catwalks. Their eyes kept looking at Tony, expecting him to give the signal to pack it up for the day. We received no such signal.

As the wind shoved me, I had a bad feeling. I couldn't help but think that something was going to happen, but I had no power to talk sense into Tony. Nobody did.

Concrete was being poured at the base of the bridge that day, and looking back, maybe that's why Tony wouldn't let us go. Pouring bridge footers is an expensive and critical piece of the process, and as long as it wasn't raining, Tony wouldn't interrupt it for nothing. The wind started blowing harder now. The guys took turns looking my way to see if I was going to do something, to see if this was as dangerous as they thought. I just gave them a nod, silently telling them we'd get through it.

Chuckles came walking towards me carrying a spool of braided wire. His long hair whipped through the wind. His flannel shirt tugged against his torso. He smiled that same old smile that reassured me that everything was going to be okay. I guess just as the guys were looking to me for guidance, I was looking to Chuckles for the same.

His presence in that moment is something I'll never forget.

A massive gust of air howled through the steel beams, vibrating the tools and picking up anything that wasn't tied down, including Chuckles. He started to stumble, off-kilter from the heavy spool. His free hand hopelessly groped for any support.

All he found was more wind.

And off he went—just like that—arms and legs spread and kicking the New York wind. All the other guys were hunkered down, their heads buried against their chests. I ran to the side of the bridge and skidded to the edge, nearly sailing off myself.

What I saw haunts me to this day.

Chuckles fell through the air, almost gracefully, silently, calmly. From a hundred feet up, he looked like a speck of color through the ferocious wind. But through my pinched eyelids, I saw him land inside the fresh concrete footer the workers were pouring. He splashed and seemed to float for a second, bobbing like a buoy, until more concrete started flowing.

Then I didn't see him no more. He disappeared.

I ran to Tony where he stood statue-like watching the guys struggle to work. "Chuckles fell off the railing!" I shouted through the screaming wind.

He just looked at me with those bovine eyes. Unmoving, rooted to the steel beams beneath his feet.

"Did you hear me? He fell into the fucking concrete, you gotta stop them and pull him out!"

"No, he didn't." He stared with defiance.

"What?"

He took a deep breath of wind. "He didn't fall into the footer. He fell into the river. I saw it."

"No, you didn't! I was the only one who saw!" My arms flailed and teardrops flew into the wind.

“Poor guy fell right into the river. We’ll have to call things off for the day.” He shook his head. “Did I see him carrying a spool?”

I was baffled. “Yeah! The fuckin’ thing is in the concrete with him!”

His arms crossed. “A shame, those spools don’t come cheap.”

“You fucking bastard!” I’d never considered myself capable of murder, but in this moment it was all I could dream of. It ran through my veins like ignited kerosene.

Tony sensed the storm building. “I’ll have no more of this tone. Unless you’d like to jump in after him or find a new profession, I’d advise keeping your mouth shut.”

And I’m ashamed to admit it, but that’s what I did. I kept my mouth shut and went along with the story, with the lie, because I couldn’t do nothing. I had a family, mouths to feed, kids to clothe, a wife to care for. I felt powerless. It ate me up inside. I’ve lived with this lie for over half of my life.

Chuck’s family got a small settlement from the company, which was the least they could do, but would you believe that scumbag docked the wire spool from the inheritance? I tell ya, God made some bastards in his time, but none like Tony.

After the accident, the media and the higher ups accepted Tony’s version of the story. I mean, why wouldn’t they? But the thing was, Chuckles was never found. The explanation was that the strong current took him out to sea, and he may never be found. His family had to accept the reality that their husband and father left for work one morning never to be seen again.

Eaten by bottom feeders, swallowed by the sea.

The construction resumed shortly after. I went along with the job, and so did the rest of the crew, but our hearts were gone. When Chuckles fell, it felt like he took our spirits with him.

Those last couple months were the longest of my life. I barely talked to anyone. I refused to look at Tony. I could tell that it was fine with him because he knew he'd won.

I spent my time thinking about a new career, something better I could be doing with my life. I had plenty of ideas, but change never came naturally to me. I guess that's why I'd worked on bridges since I was a teenager, convincing myself that it made me happy.

More often than not, I found myself looking over the railing at the concrete footer: a perfect cube with gray edges. It looked like any other. It wouldn't stand out in a crowd, but inside was a secret, a secret only I knew. I pictured him inside there, frozen in time, the bridge worker using his body and soul to hold up the structure. The world he helped to build resting on his shoulders. There was something tragically poetic about it. I couldn't bear to think of him inside there, my friend, concealed and forgotten like some mob hit.

My only hope was that the fall did the job before the concrete did. It was an awful thing to wish for, but I wished for it every night. Suffocation ain't no way to leave this world.

Either way, Chuckles deserved better.

The day finally came that we'd all been praying for—opening day. It turned out to be a big spectacle, cameras, writers, the whole nine yards. Tony pulled every string, called in every favor to shine the biggest light on his accomplishment. Despite the accident, we still managed to beat the completion date by two weeks. Hundreds came to see the bridge, and the papers billed the project as a feat of engineering, as New York's most iconic structure. A giant party formed on the east entrance of the bridge where cameras flashed, a brass band played, and people stuffed their faces with cotton candy.

The whole thing made me sick.

The band stopped, and Tony stood behind a large podium. Every eye was on him, and his voice echoed throughout the crowd, reciting a fancy speech that someone else wrote. To the people who knew him, he sounded like a real jerk-off, but the ignorant crowd ate it up. He said those in attendance would be the first people to walk across the structure. They could be part of history.

Little did they know, they were about to be a witness to it.

When the speech was done, Tony requested his picture to be taken on the bridge, by himself. The ecstatic crowd thought it was a grand idea. A thick, red ribbon was stretched along the pylons at the entrance. Tony pulled a pair of shears from his jacket pocket and snipped the ribbon, turning back to grin for the cameras. His smile seemed to be held by clothespins, all teeth and counterfeit joy.

He casually walked a hundred yards down the bridge's center and turned to face the crowd. So proud, so heroic—standing there with his chest puffed out like he built the damn thing all by himself. The flashes and pops swirled throughout the crowd, and in his defense, it was a nice picture.

But then a different kind of sound happened. A bigger pop. An explosion. The bridge shook.

The crowd sucked in a collective gasp.

Another explosion caused the bridge to lean to the left. Nobody breathed. I looked at Tony, and although he was a hundred yards away, I've never seen a person's eyes get so big.

Like he knew.

Tony started running, sprinting towards the crowd, running as fast as his silver spoon legs would carry him. Giving everything

he had to get to our side, to feel the solid ground beneath our feet.

But the bridge had other plans.

When he was twenty yards away, the bridge dipped, sending Tony to his knees. Every set of shoes in the crowd took a few steps backward. Tony reached toward the crowd with fingers I felt like I could touch, but chose not to.

I saw his mouth move as he said something...but it was so loud, the snapping wires, the crumbling mountainside, and the twisted steel. I'd never seen anything like it. It truly was a spectacle now.

The bridge gave a final moan, and the steel lip fell right off the edge. Everything collapsed in the blink of an eye, into the Hudson, including Tony. The bridge I'd spent two years of my life constructing was demolished in thirty seconds.

That part hurt.

Nobody moved, they just stood there with cotton candy in their grips and blue-stained tongues in their mouths. The children cried, and the news stations captured every moment. I kept a scrapbook of the headline articles printed the following day.

I was even in a couple of the pictures.

The riverbed was suddenly filled with steel skeletons as the twisted metal cut the current—it was a big mess. Unlike Chuckles, Tony really did fall in the water. Rescue boats were sent out for Tony, and after two weeks, they finally found him...but not before the crabs did, and from what folks tell me, their little pinchers were particularly fond of his face.

Poor Tony.

For such a big disaster, he was the only casualty. It was billed as the grandest project in the city's history, but now its legacy would be the greatest disaster. Researchers and experts were

called in to scour the riverbed for clues, scratching their heads to determine the cause of failure.

In the end, faulty concrete footers were found to be the culprit. They figured it must've been a trapped air pocket that gradually expanded and caused a weak point, leading to a deadly domino effect. People accepted that explanation, myself included, because like any urban legend, it's partially true.

But the real truth, which nobody has known since now, was that it was a man named Chuck. We called him Chuckles. He sat inside that concrete. He bided his time and brought down that bridge with his own unbreakable spirit. He got his revenge. And just when I didn't think it was possible, I loved him even more for it.

It's funny, as the bridge fell into the Hudson that day, I could've sworn I heard his laugh through the chaos—like his spirit was finally set free. Now, decades later, as I lay on my deathbed, I can still hear Chuckles laughing as the wind rolls in, reassuring me that everything will be okay.



CAGED

Story by Amanda Passalacqua

Illustrated by David Romero

I open my eyes and take in my surroundings. I'm in a new cage, in a new area. I try to stand and walk, but I fall back to the ground. They must have given me something pretty strong this time. I'm not sure how long I've been out. I look into the other cages lined up on the walls, just like mine. I don't recognize anyone anymore. My family and some friends used to be here with me. But when they were taken away the last time, they never came back. I can vaguely remember the last family member they took. He was a brother or a cousin. The white coats mess with your mind, and you start to forget things. They had strapped him down onto the table, some of us watched, while others didn't pay any attention. They stuck his arm with a needle filled with a clear liquid. He met my eyes before the drugs began to work. He looked almost happy. He must have known he would never wake up.

My head follows the length and width of the cage, taking in its space. It's bigger than my last cage. The cages have bars on them so they can drug us with darts instead of coming near us. I remember their mistake on that. They keep us in cages to "control us," they say. They think we're too stupid to understand, but some of us can. I've heard them talking.

They talk about experiments and new drugs they want to test on us. See how we will react to them. See what they will do to us. Sometimes they like the results. They smile and laugh with

excitement. Other times they frown and shake their heads. I don't know if they were happy or unhappy with my results, but I've been moved for a reason.

I'm awake sometimes when they're experimenting on me. I scream, but no one cares. They don't care if you're in pain, as long as you don't disturb their tests. If our squirming gets in their way, they strap every part of us down, and they aren't nice about it. I'd rather be asleep than awake for some of their horrific experiments.

A few of the white coats stop in front of my cage. I stand there, not showing any emotion. They have clipboards and are talking to each other. I pick up on a few words, "new drug" and "affecting her." They say something about me being alert to them. How can I not be? I never know when it will be my turn for more tests. After they move on, I inspect my fellow inmates. They're either sitting or walking around their cages. None are banging on the bars or trying to squeeze themselves through them. I notice many more white coats in this room compared to the last one I was held in.

A beep sound draws my attention. A white coat walks through a door that leads to outside of this room. He is pushing a cart towards our cages. It must be feeding time. I'm so hungry. They don't feed us much, and when they do, it's only little pieces to keep us satisfied. If I was in the room I was before, everyone would be trying to claw their way out of their cages to reach the food. This room acts differently. I expected them to throw the meat at us like they did before, but here they walk up to you. They hold out the meat until you take it from them. How odd. When it's my turn to be fed, the white coat holds the meat out of my reach. He moves it slowly closer and closer, telling me to "take it nicely." When the meat barely touches my fingertips, I

lean out a little further and snatch the meat away from him. I quickly pull it back into my cage and tear into it. My teeth rip strips off that I then scarf down. This meat tastes much better than the stuff I was fed before.

I am licking my fingers clean when I see a new white coat enter the room. Once he enters, everyone is scrambling around. He's followed by several other white coats. Showing him papers, test tubes, graphs, charts, anything to try and talk to him. He nods when he walks past someone who hadn't approached him. He makes his way over to the cages. He doesn't have a clipboard, but everyone following him does. I watch as he talks to the others in the cages. He asks them questions, and some actually answer. Others he gives objects to, and then he gives them very specific instructions.

When it's my turn to be evaluated, he talks to the other white coats that are surrounding him. "This is experiment number 450493. She has been her for four years." He stops and looks directly at me. "We put her age between fifteen and nineteen."

He speaks to one of the white coats. "Bring me a washcloth and a bucket of water." The white coat leaves the room.

"How long has she been in sector seven?" asks one of the white coats with a clipboard.

"This is her first day. I received notice this morning that she was being moved. She has shown some extraordinary intelligence compared to the others in sector five." He looks at me again, a scary spark in his eyes. "I had to see her for myself."

The white coat has returned with the bucket of water. He hands it to the one in charge. He speaks to me. "I know you can understand me. I have been watching you. I've read the reports. You have caught my attention now." He clears his throat. "I am

going to hand you this water, and I want you to wash your face and hands. Do you understand my directions?"

I try to answer, letting him know I understand, but it comes out sounding more like a groan. He hands me the bucket. It barely fits through the bars. I set it on the floor in front of me. I look at him, and then I kneel down next to the bucket. I reach into the bucket and take out a small towel that was floating there. I press the dripping wet towel against my cheek, pushing it up and down in jerky motions. I continue to wash my face until I think it's clean enough to satisfy the white coat. I drop the towel back inside the bucket, and then I rub my hands together until most of the dirt is off of them. I stand back up and look at him for his next instructions.

"Very good." He looks at his surrounding audience. "Take note that she did exactly what I told her to, no more or no less. This is a very rare find." He turns his attention back to me. "I am going to ask you some questions. If you can, try to answer them."

I nod my head.

"First question. Do you know where you are?"

I move my mouth, trying to form an answer. My lips won't do what I want them to. I answer him the best I can, "O."

He nods his head while everyone takes notes. "I will take that as a no. All right. Second question. Do you know who you are?"

My lips form the word I want to say, but with no sound. I stop and try again. This time I say a word, "No."

"Make a note that she has used a whole word, not just sounds. Third question. Do you like the food here better than the food you received in the last section you were in?"

"Yes." My voice still sounds scratchy.

He tells everyone, "In the last section, it was seventy percent vegetables and thirty percent meat. In this section, it is sixty

percent meat and forty percent vegetables.” He lifts an eyebrow to me. “Do you want to go outside?”

“Outside?” I ask.

He talks to one of the white coats. “Bring a couple of guards. I want to test her outside of this cage.”

The white coat is caught off guard. She looks at the one in charge, her eyes wide. “Are you sure that’s wise? It is only her first day in here. Maybe we should give her a couple of weeks to adjust. Observe her a bit longer.”

“This is my experiment and my facility, and I want her outside. Now.” The voice of the white coat in charge has an authoritative tone to it. A tone that says he doesn’t like to be questioned, ever.

The white coat that was talked down to doesn’t move. The fear she is feeling is all over her face. Whether from realizing her mistake when she questioned the one in charge or from me about to leave my cage, I cannot tell.

The one in charge lifts a small, square thing he is wearing around his neck and slides it near the door to my cage. The beep I heard before sounds again. “Come. I will take you outside myself.”

The other white coats back up. Everyone in the room has their eyes on me, including the other prisoners. I pick up the bucket of water and step out of my cage. Most of the white coats stop what they’re doing and exit the room. There are two plus the one in charge left. My eyes are darting around the room. I check the other cages and the others that are in them. I see the thing next to my cage that made the beeping noise.

“Look at that. She is even going to clean up after herself.” The one in charge laughs. He takes a few steps over until he is

next to me. “Come. I will show you where you can leave the bucket. Then we will take you outside.”

I look at his face. He is smiling down at me like I am a prize that he has won. I smile in return. His first mistake was getting too close to me. I use my empty hand to reach up and pull him down by his neck. I bite a chunk out, ripping away flesh and muscle. He removes his hand from my back. He is yelling about what I have done. He’s holding his hands on his neck, trying to stop the bleeding. I use my bucket to hit the other two white coats while their attention is on the one bleeding. I rip off the thing that unlocked my cage from around one of the white coats’ neck and toss it to the closet cage. The girl inside catches it without a problem, like she knew what I was going to do before I even did it. She blindly feels outside of her cage for the thing to swipe the square key in. Once she finds it, she uses it on her cage door. Then she tosses it to the next cage. I can hear the cages being opened as we snack on the two white coats. I didn’t notice the one in charge crawling to one of the desks. He picks up the phone and pushes a button. I hear him say, “The infected have escaped! Help me!”



IN THE FLESH

Story by Sam Vinson
Illustrated by David Romero

Almost every culture has its own stories of shapeshifters. Werewolves have been heard of almost everywhere in Europe and North America. India has its were-leopard, Argentina's Lobizon, even the loup-garou of France and Haiti. Shapeshifters have almost always been seen as dangerous. Most places even treat shapeshifters like witches, believing them to be harbingers of dark magic and evil. And, most importantly, they've always been something people feared. After all, if you can't know which of your neighbors is truly your neighbor, how can you trust anyone?

My family has lived in Utah all my life, and I always heard stories of shapeshifters. In our culture, we call these creatures skinwalkers. Anyone who's browsed the dark web has probably heard the stories of places like Skinwalker Ranch. Well, that's not the only place where people have seen things they can't explain. The truly terrifying stories come from the Rez. People there have all sorts of stories about all sorts of terrifying things. But getting them to tell those stories was hard. The people around here are tight-lipped for a reason. They believe that even just thinking about certain monsters draws them nearer. And once they've spotted you? Well, let's just say, you're better off dead.

I was a naturally inquisitive child, but my parents weren't always happy with me prying for answers to certain questions. So, when I couldn't get them to budge, I would go to my

grandfather. He was a respected member of the tribe and seemed to have a limitless amount of knowledge. I could have spent forever listening to his stories. He was always so calm and collected and more than happy to oblige in my quest for answers to the world's mysteries. I rarely ever saw him shaken, and when I did, I knew it was for good reason. I remember a night when I was a child when a member of the tribe approached him and asked to speak with him in private.

Being the little snoop I was, I decided to sneak away from my parents and follow the two of them. My grandfather pulled the man onto the porch of his trailer, and they sat down and lit some cigarettes. I could see the man's face, dimly lit by the flames of their lighters. His eyes were wide with fear, his face a mixture of fright and confusion. My grandfather sat back in his rocking chair, his dark eyes focused and intense. He began speaking our native Navajo tongue. I tried to get closer so I could hear better, but because I was so young, most of the things being said went directly over my head. From what I could gather of the conversation, the man had seen something that truly made him fear for his life. For the first time, I saw my grandfather's forehead wrinkle with concern. Then I heard a word that I had never heard before: skinwalker.

Later that night, after my parents had gone to bed, I crawled out of my bed and snuck out of our trailer, headed for my grandfather's. I knew he would still be up, rocking back and forth in his chair, smoking like a chimney. And that's exactly where I found him. He gave me his usual gentle smile as I climbed the steps to his little porch and motioned for me to come to sit in the chair opposite his. I pulled my body into the old wooden chair and got comfortable.

“Why are you up so late, little one?” Grandfather asked, his voice thick with smoke.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I said with a shrug, trying my best to sound innocent.

“You know, your parents would kill me if they knew you were out here with me at this time of night,” he said with a low chuckle. “So promise me you won’t tell them, hm?”

I smiled slyly and nodded. “I won’t, if you answer a question.”

Raising an eyebrow, my grandfather put out his cigarette. Leaning back in his chair, he gave me a small nod. “Shoot.”

I took a moment, trying to think of the right way to pose my question. If I asked him what I wanted to ask him, I could get in trouble for eavesdropping. But the curiosity of it all was eating away at me. I had to know. Before I could stop myself, I just blurted it out. “What’s a skinwalker?”

The look that came over my grandfather’s face made me want to crawl out of my skin. I had never seen him look at me with such anger or such shock. He shot forward in his seat, reached out a hand, and grabbed the sleeve of my pajamas. He gripped me with such force that I thought for sure he would rip my arm right out of its socket.

“Boy, don’t you ever say that word, you understand?” he whispered harshly. His eyes burned with such fury, and he practically spat on me with every word. “Do you understand me?”

Too afraid to open my mouth, I just nodded my head, my eyes welling with hot, sticky tears. My grandfather loosened his grip and patted my shoulder. “I’m sorry, boy. I’m sorry.” His eyes finally returned to normal, and he stood from his chair. “Come on, I’ll walk you home.”

After I snuck back into our trailer, I crawled back under my covers and stared at the ceiling. As hard as I tried to just close my eyes and fall asleep, my mind was too busy overanalyzing everything that had just happened. My grandfather was never the type to snap at people, especially at me. But the way he reacted was far more fearful than it was angry. This was a man that was rarely scared by anything, especially old ghost stories. But now, looking back on that night, I know that it was so much more than some old wives' tales. And now that I know what I do, I wish I could forget all about it.

I turned 23 three months ago. My friends and I decided to celebrate by going to a music festival in Arizona, a few hours outside of Phoenix. But to get there, we had to do about ten hours of driving. My friend Devin decided that we should load up his camper and make a trip out of it. Booze, greasy drive-thru food, and a concert to top it all off was the perfect way to celebrate. Our other friend Josh decided to come along for the journey. Josh had moved out near Mesa a few years back and planned to meet up with us at the festival. The whole thing began on a Saturday morning, so Devin and I decided to drive in the day before and then camp out at a rest stop along the way. So, we got all our stuff packed up Thursday night and headed out mid-morning that Friday. My parents gave me the usual talk about staying out of trouble, sticking with my friends, yada-yada. They were always treating me like I was still some reckless little nine-year-old, always causing mayhem and mischief. And sure, I did my fair share of all that, but I had grown up a lot since my grandfather got sick. Who would have guessed that all those years of drinking and smoking would finally catch up with him? But still, I told

them that I would make it back in one piece, even if that's not what happened.

Devin and I ended up leaving the Rez at about noon that Friday. We got a chance to catch up with each other and talked about all the usual crap people talk about when they haven't seen each other in person for a few months. We talked about our crappy minimum wage jobs that were barely putting us through school, our endless nights of trying to find dates, the stupid movies we had watched on Netflix... all of it. We stopped at questionable burger joints and gas stations and ate as much junk food as humanly possible. We even snagged a pack of beer and cigarettes for the night. Then, finally, after what seemed like forever, the sun started to set, and Devin and I decided to call it a night. None of the good bands play right away in the day anyway, so we figured we'd just get a few extra hours of sleep to kill the hangovers we were bound to get. We found a spot on the GPS where we could crash for the night and headed in that direction. By now, the roads were getting pretty empty, without much of anything other than desert on either side of us. The sky was already dark, the moon hanging low and full in the sky. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but something about the way the moon shone down on the sand and pavement coupled with the eerie quietness that had taken over the RV just felt off. I found myself starting to grow more and more exhausted, so I laid my head against the window and closed my eyes. I was just beginning to drift off when we heard it: a scream unlike anything human or animal.

Devin slammed on the brakes, and my eyes flew open, alert and ready. "Dude, what the hell?" I hissed, checking for any bruises left by my seatbelt.

“There’s something in the road!” As he turned to me, I could see that Devin was as white as a sheet. His hand pointed shakily out the windshield. My eyes followed and spotted the shape of some sort of creature. From where I was sitting, it looked like a coyote. Medium build, smallish snout, pointed ears... all the things you would expect to see on a wild coyote. But somehow, the more I stared at it, the more wrong it looked. For starters, its limbs were long and gangly. Its tail seemed hairless, like some sort of giant rat. Its snout was pushed too far back in its face, revealing almost human features, but most striking of all were the eyes. They were the most unnatural shade of umber that I had ever seen and certainly not something that I had ever seen in nature before. A voice in the back of my head kept telling me that something was wrong, that we didn’t belong there. But my mouth could barely spit out the words.

“I’m just gonna honk at it, see if it moves,” Devin announced, his voice quivering with uncertainty. His hand moved towards the steering wheel.

“Dev, don’t...” I stammered, the twisting sense of dread in my stomach rising higher and higher.

“Would you relax? They’re way more scared of us than we are of them.”

Big mistake.

Devin held his hand down on the horn, giving a loud, long blare. That was when all hell broke loose.

The creature turned and stared us directly in the eyes, and then it stood up on its hind legs. It started to grow taller, its features morphing into some stage between human and animal. Its face twisted into a grotesque shape, all gnarling teeth and saliva. Its paws became massive hands and feet adorned with razor-sharp claws. And those eyes—those dreadful eyes—

seemed to glow even brighter. Before either of us had time to register what was going on, the beast let out a howling scream that caused the hair on the back of my neck to stand straight up.

“Devin, floor it!”

Devin did. He slammed the gas pedal down, and the RV took off. But there was just one problem: the thing hadn’t moved. It almost seemed to move towards us. At this rate, hitting it would just cause it to go straight through the windshield. Both of us began to brace for impact, already fearing the worst. We waited, and waited, and...nothing. Devin slowed down, but not by much. I looked in the rearview mirror, trying to see where it had gone. I checked every inch of the horizon, but there wasn’t anything there.

“What was that thing?” Devin’s voice finally asked, piercing the silence.

My mind was in no condition to try and rationalize what we had just seen. All I knew is that we needed to keep moving and get to safety. “J-just forget it. Let’s just keep driving until we find a motel or something.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.”

After another forty or so minutes of driving, we finally managed to find a sleazy, little motel to stay in. But at that point, the place felt like the damn Plaza. We didn’t even bother to unload any of our suitcases from the RV. We just checked in, went right to our room, locked the door, and closed all the blinds. The two of us sat there for what felt like an eternity, unwilling to acknowledge what we had just seen because, quite honestly, neither of us were truly sure what we had seen. Both of us tried to come up with explanations—a trick of the light, a bear with mange, some sort of unknown species—but none of them made sense. We both knew that what we had witnessed was not natural

and couldn't be explained away with logic and reasoning. Our minds raced alongside our hearts. The more I began to think about it, the more I started hearing fragments of my grandfather's old stories. That's when it hit me. I had a name for what we saw. I had always known it, but never had I been able to put a face to it. I turned to Devin and felt the color drain from my face.

"Dev...I think we saw a skinwalker back there."

Both of us stared at each other, just sort of silently coming to terms with everything. Devin may have grown up outside of the reservation, but he'd still heard enough of my stories over the years to know that what we saw out there was not something to be taken lightly. He just sort of nodded his head as all the pieces of the puzzle began to come together. "If that's the case... I mean, if that's really what we saw back there... What do we do?" he asked, barely enough strength in his voice to make the question audible.

Somehow, the answer came naturally. There was only one person I knew of who could help us now, but to get to him, we were going to have to go back in the direction we came. Back through the desert, through the territory of the beast. "We'll leave first thing tomorrow morning. We only travel during the daytime. It can't hurt us in the light of day."

I don't think either of us got any sleep that night. I texted Josh sometime after two in the morning to tell him that something had come up and that we had to turn around and go home. After that, I just set my phone aside and laid on the crappy motel bed, staring up at the mold-covered ceiling of our room. I didn't want to close my eyes, not even to blink. Every time I did, the image of the creature—its odd limbs, distorted face, and glowing eyes—crept closer and closer in my mind. My ears could still hear the hideous scream it made. My arms were covered in a permanent

layer of goosebumps, despite it being hot and dry in our cramped, little room. All I could do was lie there, unmoving, until the sun came up.

The journey back felt like a race against time. Devin had his foot pressed hard against the gas the whole time, trying to get that stupid RV to move as fast as possible. We still don't know how we managed to get away with it all without getting pulled over. We only made a few stops and made sure that we made them as fast as possible. We were both mute nearly the entire way, as if speaking about what we had seen would somehow make it come back. We managed to make it back to the reservation by nightfall. Neither of us stopped to unload our things from the RV. Instead, we headed straight to my grandfather's trailer. He was sitting on his porch, wrapped in an old blanket my grandmother must have made years ago. His rocking chair creaked steadily as he leaned forward and backward, his eye glued to us as we told him about the horrible things we had encountered. He listened intently, nodding along as if he had witnessed the whole thing himself. When we finished our tale, his chair halted its rocking, and he stood to meet us.

"You must both go and speak with the elders. Tell them all you have told me, spare no detail. Only they can help you now." And so, my grandfather walked with us to find the chief and elders. He spoke to them in a hushed voice, explaining that Devin and I had been marked and that we were in desperate need of help. That night, a ritual was performed to grant us special protection by masking us from the creature's sight. Devin spent the evening with my family and me. My parents took turns guarding the trailer, making sure that nothing came after us. Because, you see, talking of a skinwalker—even just thinking of

it—is like firing a flare into the night sky. It makes you easier to find. And when a skinwalker finds you, it never, ever, lets you go. So whatever you do...

Don't think about it.



FIVE MINUTES, TOPS

Story by Mike Cleopatra
Illustrated by David Romero

“Daddy, can you please pull over? I’ve really gotta pee...”

“No, Maggie, for the last time we’re still on the highway. I can only pull over whenever I am allowed to pull over, don’t you understand that?”

“But I’ve been holding it for forever!”

“Well, you’re just gonna have to keep holding it! Now’s just not the time.”

I hated when everyone fought like this. It completely ruined the point of going on a vacation in the first place. My headphones couldn’t drown out their bickering no matter how loud the music was. My sister, Maggie, was the worst at nagging, and my father was a champ at fighting back. Together, they created a never-ending loop of childish noise.

“Mommy!” Maggie continued, “Can you please make Daddy stop for me?”

My mom turned around to face us. Her blue eyes tried to pacify us when the tone of her voice failed to do so. “Honey, I promise we will as soon as we have a chance. You’re eight years old. I know you can hold it for just a little bit longer.” She turned back around and sighed. “I told you we should’ve stopped at that last exit. The kids are getting really irritable.”

“Tricia, dammit. How was I supposed to know that there’d be nowhere to pull over for at least twenty miles after that last exit?”

“I know, but the fact of the matter is it’s almost 10:30 at night and there’s no way we can make it through two more states to Florida tonight. Besides, I’m exhausted, and the kids are worse off than I am!”

“You think you’re so smart, huh? You think you have the answer for everything, don’t you?” My dad always felt belittled, even though it was usually only going on in his own imagination.

I just wanted the fighting to be over. Oh how I wished there was something that could stopped the whole thing from going on any longer. From the bottom of my heart, I would have given anything to just find some peace.

Sure enough, just as luck would have it, I looked straight ahead and saw a small building coming up. It was the size of a shed and seemed to materialize out of the darkness of the night—a true miracle. I pointed to it. “There’s something now.”

Everyone stopped yelling at each other and stared. My mom spoke up. “Honey, I don’t see any signs or any other cars or anything. Sure looks like a rest stop to me, though. What do you think?”

“Far as I’m concerned, that’s the best chance we’ve got. Even if it’s not a real rest stop, she can at least relieve herself quickly behind it. I don’t see a parking lot, but I can pull over right up there.”

We pulled up to it, and it was wrapped in a shroud of darkness with no source of lights protruding through any windows. Maggie was already beginning to open her door when my dad yelled, “Hey! Five minutes tops, okay?”

“Okay, Dad, whatever! I’ll be right back!” She slammed the door and took off for the building.

My mom looked back at me, “Do you mind going with her to make sure she’s alright? It’s too dark for her to be out on her own.”

“Sure thing, Mom.” I exited the wagon and slowly followed her down the dark, rocky path about forty feet towards the building. I watched as she opened the front door and ran inside into the darkness. As soon as I had reached the entrance, I turned around and stood with my back pressed against the door, standing guard, although admittedly I was just waiting my turn. All the constant talk about having to pee had begun to get to me, and I felt the urge myself. I heard her feet patter along the concrete floor inside as she walked through the building. Patiently enough, I waited and waited.

After a few moments, my dad began pressing on the horn. I heard him roll down the window and yell, “I said five minutes tops! Everything okay in there?”

Cupping my mouth, I yelled back, “I’ll check on her!” I turned around, grabbed the handle, and opened it. The door was unlocked, and the lights were still off.

The room reeked of stale urine and mold. “Maggie? Maggie, what’s taking so long?” My foot splashed in a warm puddle and made a loud noise. I took a step back and felt the wall for a light switch. “Maggie, why didn’t you turn the lights on?” My hand fumbled around and found the switch, I flicked the lights on and stared in horror.

My dear sister was nowhere to be seen, and all I could find was a small pool of blood in front of a single toilet against the back wall. There was no sink, no mirrors, no windows, no stall doors, just a single toilet sitting by itself in the open. I approached it and looked inside. The inside of the toilet bowl was caked with a thick layer of crusty blood. It hummed a low-toned

growl as the water level slowly began rising, its water a dark crimson color with a handful of opaque white fragments floating inside. I screamed for my dad, and he burst through the doorway in a heartbeat.

He was just as confused as I was. I don't think it completely hit him until he began shouting at me. "Where did she go?" He shook my shoulders and stared into my eyes. "Where did she go, Dayton?" His voice cracked as he yelled.

I bawled, and then we began bawling together. It made no sense where she could've gone to, none whatsoever. As we walked back to the car, my dad screamed for my mom. I watched her face explode into tears and hysterical crying. That broke my heart too.

We called 911 and waited along the side of the highway for them to arrive. It took over an hour before we saw the first set of lights appear in the distance. The officer got out of his vehicle, put on his hat, and approached us as we sat on the grass outside of the building. "Are you the family that called us concerning a missing daughter?"

My dad wiped the tears out of his eyes. "Yes, sir."

"I'm Officer Gimbel. Now, can you tell me what exactly happened here?"

"There's not much to tell," my dad scoffed. "She went inside the building to use the bathroom, and she vanished."

The officer rubbed his chin and stared at the building. "Well, frankly, I gotta tell you, this place was hard to find. I've never heard of this building before."

My mom shuddered. "What?"

"Yes, ma'am, this building must be brand new. I drive by here all the time, and there has never been a bathroom right here. Believe me, I would know."

My mind teleported to the moment I saw it in the car earlier. And I remember seeing it seem to appear out of nowhere... I remember it showing up right when we needed it... I also remember how I said I'd give anything to have some peace on this trip...



DEAR HUSBAND

Story by Edgar Nickols

Illustrated by David Romero

The moon hung high over the town of Rainier as Ben Carswell pulled into the driveway of his home. It had been a late night, a very late night indeed. He told his wife that he'd been working late at the office, but his neck smelled of Black Diamond perfume and his collar was stained with ruby red lipstick. Any attempts he had made to try and hide them from his wife were long gone. She saw the stains when she did their laundry and could smell the perfume when he crawled into bed next to her.

Yet she stayed. Why? Because that was her duty, to stay by his side in sickness and in health and give him the love that, in her eyes, he so rightfully deserved. That was all she had ever wanted, to do her duty as a wife and be the pillar that held up their marriage. To the world, it was a perfect marriage, never a glimpse shown of the secrets she kept hidden deep down below. Yes, this was her duty, and it was an arduous one at that.

Ben sat in his car for a moment and looked to their living room window. A light could be seen faintly shining through. Most likely it was coming from the kitchen, but Anita had never been awake when he returned home from a late night. He guessed that she was tired of hearing his excuses when he returned home from a late night. Inside, he knew that when he lied to her it hurt her badly and that she must have started going to bed early

because she could not stand the pain. That was fine. The well of excuses that he drew from had run dry some time ago.

The loathing he felt when exiting his car was palpable, but so was the anxiety that built up with each step he took towards the front door. First, his mistress, Alice, had cancelled their date, and now, he had to see what was up with Anita. A wonderful night it was shaping up to be.

Ben opened the door, cautiously stepped inside, and looked towards the kitchen. On their dining room table was a candle, casting minuscule light and flickering shadows. A folded envelope rested next to it. Anita was nowhere in sight, and the house was deafeningly quiet.

“Nita!” Ben called out.

“Nita” was what he had called her when they had first started dating, back when he was in love with her. It had been so long since he had called her that the very word felt more like a foreign sound rather than a name.

With no answer and the house as still as death, he walked up to the table, sat in one of the chairs, and pulled the letter from the envelope.

To my Dear Husband,

This is a very hard letter for me to write, but I must, and I know I must. But that reality does not make it any easier.

From the first time I saw you I knew that there would be no other man that I wanted in my life. No other that walked the way you walked, none that could brighten up a room the way you could, and none with a heart as kind as yours. The very thought of you was intoxicating. But knowing how amazing you were, and how remarkably average I was, I relegated myself to love you from afar. And things might have stayed that way, but then you

asked me on our first date. I knew from that moment on that my life would never be the same.

From the first time we kissed to the birth of our first child, there has never been a day that I have not been completely devoted to you. But my Dear Husband, I must confess that in our time together I have done some unsavory things to protect our life together.

During the fall of our first semester in college I could feel you drifting away from me. I know it was not by design, that's just how things go sometimes. People get busy, and they spend less and less time together until they spend none at all. But I could not let that happen. I took steps to get you expelled from college. Once you were gone, I dropped out as well to be with you. When you started working, I made complaints when you got too busy or started looking overworked. I would not let you be run ragged by some company who couldn't care less about your wellbeing.

The next time I interfered was when we started floating around the idea of getting married. My effort and dedication to you during the hard times was paying off, and the joy was matched only by the rage I felt when your mother objected to the idea. I always wanted a mother-in-law, but I wanted you far more.

On the morning of the wreck that claimed your mother's life, all did not go as planned. She lived through the wreck despite her brake lines being cut and slamming directly into a tree. She was a tough woman. She fought me until I gripped her head and twisted her neck until it snapped. She would have made a wonderful grandmother.

I must apologize for how painful the whole thing must have been. At that point in time, I was not very good at breaking people's necks. I've gotten better since. I had to. Everything I did

was for us, for the love I am bound to protect. But I do have a lingering smidge of guilt. Your twin sister was also heavily opposed to us getting married. I heard her at the rehearsal dinner, and I knew that if anyone could make you change your mind it was her. It hurt me dearly. She was so much like you in almost every way, and I wanted us to be friends. But she was like the others, trying to tear us apart, and for what? Pointless as it was, it could not be ignored. The day she was decidedly missing was a hard one for the both of us. I could see the agony, the overwhelming concern for your sister. And for me, it was one of the darkest times in my life seeing you that way. I feared so much that you would push me away, but much to my surprise, you pulled me closer, allowing me to be the center of your world like I had always dreamed. But still, I was hurting because I knew I could set your mind at ease.

If only you knew that your twin sister was buried beneath the very floorboards beneath our bed. I never quite believed in twin telepathy, but the night that you awoke gasping for air and clawing at the covers gave me reason to believe that her time had expired. The utter sense of loss and being lost that you described to me was enough to send a chill down my spine.

Ben clutched the letter with uneasy hands, tears streamed down his face and he clenched his teeth tight. He never heard the steps approaching from behind and did not notice the presence standing in the kitchen doorway.

You could not understand the crushing pain I felt the first time I saw you with her, and every time afterwards felt like being stabbed in a nearly closed wound. Each time I saw our car in her driveway and your clothes on her bedroom floor, it was enough to make me sick. Despite my carelessness at times, you still never noticed me watching from the bedroom window. But the worst

pain of all was not seeing you together; it was hearing all those sweet words you once said to me. The very words that once gave my life purpose were the very words that snatched it away in an instant.

I did my best to ignore the obvious signs and continue to be the best wife I could be, but it ate away at me. Even the very shade of red lipstick on your collar was enough to make me fume. My head told me to get revenge, but my heart told me to keep being the pillar holding us up. But I can feel myself crumbling at the base. I know you want to be with her forever, so I'll make that happen.

An icy hand rested on Ben's shoulder. He shuddered at the touch, and his breath caught in his throat. The other hand brushed against his neck; he could clearly feel the cold metal of a ring as the fingers fluttered against his hot skin. Then there was a sharp pain, and the world went black.

"Mom...sister...don't leave me. Somebody help me."

"I can help," were the last words he heard.

When Ben woke again, his arms and legs were bound and his cries for help were muffled beneath a rag stuffed into his mouth. His blurry vision began to adjust. Above the pit he was in was a figure with the light of the moon to its back and a dark veil of shadows across its face. Anita clutched a shovel thrust halfway into the ground. Ben could feel her piercing, unblinking gaze burning into him. He turned from her and saw to his left Alice, the woman he had gone to see during his late nights after work. Her eyes were wide and glossy. Her mouth was stretched and twisted from what must have been her last desperate screams. Her skin was grey and icy to the touch, a far cry from the warm, smooth skin that had filled the void in his life.

Ben turned away quickly but came face to face with the rotting flesh of what appeared to be horrible, twisted images of his once beloved mother and sister. His sister's arm was permanently outstretched, reaching over to his mother, grasping at something he would never know. Perhaps it was the final motion of any hope she had, a desperate attempt at finding any sort of means of escape, no matter how small. And now she was here, reaching out towards him while his mother's neck craned towards him slightly, putting her face in the dirt despite her facing up right. Their air of decay filled Ben's nostrils, and he closed his eyes tightly, forcing tears out that rolled down his cheeks.

"I've done everything for you, but it was never enough. The love I've given over these many years, the countless hours I've spent being the support to guide you through the daily troubles of life, it was not enough. I...was not enough. It hurts to admit, but I cannot deny what is in front of my face." Anita bent down and that unblinking gaze transfixed Ben in a way that he had never experienced before. "I promised to love you more than anyone else ever would...and you hurt me more than anyone else ever could. But I made a promise, not just to you, but to myself. I've manipulated for you, I've lied for you, and I've killed for you. Now I'll make your last request come true. Your sister and mother will never leave you, and you and your mistress can be together forever. As much as it hurts, I'll do it for you. I'd do anything for you."

Ben broke away from Anita's gaze and looked towards Alice. He remembered when those glossy eyes were full of warmth and love, and when his mother and sister's cold, rotting flesh were pulsing with life and laughter and their problems seemed so far away. Ben closed his eyes and let these loving memories take

him away. The cold was numbing, and the first few scoops of dirt that landed on him felt like a dream. By the time he thought to even struggle, it was far too late. He was surrounded by loved ones, and that was enough for him.



THE DEVIL'S STAIRS

Story by Danny Nicholas

Illustrated by David Romero

The kids finally spilled the secret about the stairs to Sean, which they'd received from the kids who were in the grade before them, who had heard it from the class before them.

Apparently, the legendary stairs were haunted by the Devil himself. Sean was dismissive to even the merest suggestion that the Prince of Darkness would hang about by some moldy, old stairs in the middle of this stick-in-the-mud town. Even so, if such a thing were true, how come it never brought any interference from the Vatican?

The only counterarguments his friends presented were flippant half-completed shrugs. Others stuck out their tongues and called Sean nasty names.

The stairs were chiseled into the side of a railroad bridge built out of stone. They started at the mouth of a tunnel and came to an end at the train tracks above. The service tunnel was said to go so deep it led straight to Hell. Hence, why Satan could visit God's Green Earth, and claim those rickety stairs as his own.

"The Devil's Stairs" the children dubbed the place. They weren't very creative—they were only fourth graders after all. The story goes that since the stairs were the Devil's property, he was allowed to come up from the bowels of his fiery hole at the stroke of midnight on the thirteenth night of the month to taste the earth for only thirteen minutes and then return forthwith to his kingdom of darkness.

Normally, that would be gravy, the flavor you needed for the story to endure. However, there was one extra touch to the story which had intrigued generations of children. It was said, if one was so bold, a person could stand on the thirteenth step of the stairs on the thirteenth day, facing the bridge, and wait for the Devil to appear for his thirteen minutes. In that short time, the Devil would climb up behind you. If your courage remained steel, you would not look back. You would stand frozen, looking at the train tracks for those unholy thirteen minutes until the Devil retreated, thereby rewarding your bravery with a guaranteed trip to heaven, no matter how sinful you were. On the other hand, if your bravery weakened and you did look back, even for a glance, the Devil would drag you into the long, dark tunnel below, and you'd be his obedient lap-dog for eternity.

"Well, does anybody know of anyone who stood on the stairs?" Sean asked his classmates. No one had a reliable answer. They could only report hearsay. "Baloney," he shouted at his friends. "Fake! Phony! Sham!"

For lunch, Sean wound up with five bonus knuckle sandwiches chock full of lettuce, tomatoes, and pain. "I'll prove it," Sean screamed, his eyes hot with tears. "And then you will be sorry!"

Across the schoolyard, the boys chortled back: "Go to hell, Sean!" And out of all the punches he took that day, that one was the harshest.

Luckily, the thirteenth night was that night.

Contrary to its reputation, the Devil's Stairs looked like a stairway reaching up to heaven. Sean strained his neck to drink in the full presence of the structure. His socks were soaked in muck after trudging through the woods. The air was ice cold. Even if

the Devil didn't tell him hello tonight, Sean knew he was leaving with the sniffles, and any chance of being reprimanded by his parents for sneaking out was shoved away to be worried over another time. Ultimately, if this worked, he could shoot the president and still float off to heaven.

The face of the bridge was normally an ugly dirt red in the daylight. Tonight, it was gorgeous. The stones touched by moonlight were a glittery white, shimmering like stars in the sky. The only spot the moon couldn't reach was the tunnel. Sean took a few sloshy steps toward it. It was wide enough that a train could fit through, and one probably did long ago, before someone made the proper decision for trains to pass over it instead.

There was no end to the tunnel. It was a passage to darkness, impenetrable and utterly opaque. There were echoes seeping from the tunnel. Perhaps, Sean thought, it was water slithering through the stones or animals scratching along the walls. Maybe it was the howls from the souls of the eternally damned. Sean knew, without question, if the Devil were to crawl out from somewhere, this would be the spot.

Sean's shoes didn't stand on anything dry until he stood on the stairs. They were cut on the left end of the bridge. The year 1903 was chiseled into the first riser. Time and weather had dulled the chiseled numbers to just a faint impression of marks. Sean estimated there were thirty steps leading to the top of the tracks. He wasn't sure what it looked like above him, nor did Sean want to find out. All he had to go was thirteen steps up, and no farther.

He checked his watch. It was ten minutes to midnight. Sean began climbing. He was on the thirteenth step in less than two minutes, and he stood, his body striking a stiff posture as solid as an iron post, facing forward.

An owl hooting in the trees made Sean jumpy. The alternative, to abort, didn't exactly flutter though his mind; it circled, like a descending predatory bird. He could lie to his friends. It wasn't as though anyone could prove he wasn't here tonight. A tiny lie, Sean thought, it wouldn't hurt anybody.

Go to hell, Sean. That wound was deep. He wanted to prove all those heckling faces wrong, even if it was only to himself. He would know truly that the stairs, the entire story, was a big, fat fraud. When Sean knew the truth, he could show his face in class without grimacing.

It was two minutes to midnight. The air was cool but dense. Sean coughed when he breathed in too much. Otherwise, he waited motionless on the stairs, waiting for... For who? Mr. Tall, Red, and Ugly? Sean would keep the faith until 12:13 and then vamoose to warm bed sheets and dreamland.

Midnight struck.

Sean stole a look below at the entryway of the tunnel. What did he expect, Beelzebub making a grand entrance on a flaming horse? The tunnel didn't change. It was the same dark place as it was a few minutes before as it was back in 1903. Now an internal timer was set, counting down from thirteen minutes. Sean stood straight, shivering in the cold, waiting and waiting.

A sound pierced through the night.

A steady grumbling, booming to a gritty howl.

It wasn't emerging from the tunnel, instead it was screaming towards it. Towards him.

The owl fled from the trees, and now there was only the roaring.

Sean spotted puffs of smoke over the tree line. A train was coming. It would be over him in less than six minutes, which

worked out perfectly. Once the train crossed the bridge, it meant his watch was over, and Sean could go home a proud solider.

Over the ratta-tack-tacking of steel rollers hammering old steel tracks, something snuck inside Sean's radar. A tip-tapping. It sounded like a deer was behind him, but it didn't match up. How could a deer climb stairs? He heard cloven hooves treading on pavement, the click-clack of toes finding footing, hesitating, then the slow tapping as claws took the stairs, one step, and two, then three.

They had ten more to go before they reached him.

Sean didn't move a muscle.

A tip and a tap—

Don't look back.

Was it the Devil? Sean hadn't counted on Him appearing. No, this was supposed to be some dumb fairytale told by fourth graders. The Devil was not here! Not here!

The clacking of hooves ended on the stairs behind him.

His nostrils caught a burning, funky smell of dirt and death. Sean put a stopper on a cough by clenching his teeth together.

He saw the misty snorting of wet, icy breath expelling from behind his shoulder and evaporating into the night in front of him.

The chugging of the locomotive galloped. It would be overhead in less than three minutes.

Sean stood frozen. According to the lore, all this would be done in a moment. He just had to stand. *Don't. Turn. Around.*

It was only a peek, but it was enough. The Devil was there, goat-faced and snarling. His red hand reached for the boy's head.

Sean screamed as loud as a train whistle. His soggy PF Flyers sprung forward, up the fourteenth step, then the fifteenth, sixteenth. Sean passed up the twentieth.

He heard the clatter of hooves speeding up, gaining on him. They were nearly on top of him. Sean reached the summit of the stairs and put himself in quite the pickle.

The Devil was behind him, with a few more seconds on Earth to go. At Sean's front was an unstoppable train about to cut off his only escape. For an instant, Sean weighed his merits. Option one was an all-expense paid trip to Damnation. Option Two was be squashed by a train engine like a fly splattered on a windshield. Option Three was so slim it was hardly considered an option: Make it over the tracks before the train closed him out, and he could return home, alive and undamned.

Sean leapt over the tracks. The eye of the train's headlight swallowed him in its white glow. He braced for impact against a dice roll of three different outcomes.

It was Sean's lucky night.

He landed safely on the opposite sides of the tracks. He looked back at the whipping blur of the train. The piping air whistle squealed in the night. The Devil was only a flash of red in the whirl of blazing velocity, tossed and batted, like a red jellybean caught inside the barrel of a clothes dryer.

The train flickered for another second, and then everything was clear. Coolness settled once more in the night. Sean went up to the tracks. The rails were flaring with heat from the pounding of train wheels. Only a step from where he was, he found what was left of the Devil.

Two splintered, red, curvy horns lay on the bridge. The train had hit the Devil so hard it had knocked the horns from his head. Sean held the horns. They were completely weightless, yet they were as thick and rigid as a brass instrument.

In the stillness of night, Sean could hear the horns speaking to him in soft whispers, as sweet as the bedtime songs his mother

hummed to soothe him to sleep. They requested darkness, complete and utter blackout, the coolness of a grave and the cover of shadows. The tunnel, they sang to Sean. They needed to return to everlasting midnight, to the place where thirteen was the luckiest of all numbers.

Sean climbed down below the bridge and went inside the tunnel with the horns. Once he was deep enough to never turn back, the horns made another request. Sean accepted it, although not before making a deal with them.

The fourth-grade boys were in the full swing of a baseball game. They hurried to squeeze every ounce of the inning before the school bell could call them away. But it wasn't the bell that signaled the end of playtime.

Under their feet, the field started to wobble. The earth opened up, swallowing the pitcher's mound. Boys in mid-play stumbled away, eyes frozen wide. Chewing gum tumbled from dumb-stuck mouths. Catcher's mitts slipped from sweaty hands and dropped on the roiling ground. A volcanic jet of gas burst from the crack in the earth.

Stepping out from the smoke like a nightmare made flesh, the fourth graders watched as Sean presented himself, twirling a black iron pitchfork carefree in his hands. The boy's head sported two great red horns, thrust into his forehead and welded on with a brunt churn of skin and bone.

A wall of flame spouted from the ground with a deathly roar, blacking the sky.

The boys started to cry for their mothers.

Sean, the Prince of Darkness, didn't let any of them forget how they told him to go to hell yesterday.



BELOW LAKE GREEN

Story by Kristoff N. Chester

Illustrated by David Romero

I had grown up in my small village, by its small lake, in its small country. Always small. I never saw towering buildings or the giant mountains. Everything was small. I was fine with it being that way. Big things happen in big places. In my hometown, nothing big could happen. There was a safe feeling in being small, being hard to notice, but I know now what it is to be truly small, and sadly, I was not alone in seeing value in being small.

Lake Green, they called it. A small lake near my village, so small it barely showed up on most maps, just like our town. They gave it the name Lake Green because of the ugly hue it has due to years of it being used as a dump for waste and chemicals. The other children and I always thought it was silly that companies and even countries paid our town to pour that stuff into the lake.

We had a game we would play, daring each other to dip our toes or fingers into the water. It always left thick green residue that would cling to us for hours. My mother always scolded me for that. She warned of things in the water, things bigger than me, bigger than our town. Mothers have a way of being right about the worst things.

I grew up, and in time, I left my small town with its small lake. I went to the big city for higher education and promised I would go back to my home to be a doctor or lawyer or something important to our humble location. While there, I learned a great deal about the chemicals and waste that were being dumped

routinely in Lake Green. The more I learned, the less of a game it seemed. Cancerous bile, mutations, and viruses I had never heard of, nor could even pronounce, that is what they were putting in the lake.

I met others who were concerned with the dumping and the growing possibility it could kill, assuming it hadn't already been responsible for deaths. I myself once spoke to one of the men who handled the dumping, a bean counter and money lover who worked as an aide to the mayor of my town. He told me that the money from dumping was the greatest income the town had. If the dumping stopped, the village would dry out. He warned me to go back to my studies and not provoke things bigger than I.

I tried reaching out to others about the dumping, but I was hardly able to gather support. The world seemed to not care about one small lake, next to one small town, too small to notice. I filed petitions and reports, but it was never enough to make anyone powerful stop and look. I decided I had to try something drastic.

I returned to my village and was shocked to see fences and guards around the lake. They said the lake was now being blocked off because children had been playing in the water and had gotten sick. I hated myself, but I felt a little happy. This could be something that would turn the heads of people. It could make them notice this small lake next to a small town.

I tracked the sick children down and tried to interview them and their families. The children themselves were stricken with large tumors on their skin and discoloration in their faces. They cried in pain and kept fevers of 104. One of the children's mothers refused to speak in front of a camera, but alone, she whispered to me of a demon.

Dathothua, she called it. The vile one. The vermin. A king of waste. She said he hid in the lake from other, more powerful

spirits and that it was his human slaves who ensured a constant flow of waste was going into his lair. I felt so bad for the woman. I knew that her mind was broken from the tragedy that had come to her child.

I was finally ready to bring my findings, interviews, reports, and photos, to the public. I felt bad, though. I was using pictures of dying children to shock people into paying attention, into doing what I wanted, but I had to. This dumping could not be allowed. I would not be small any longer. My town would not be small anymore. We would be seen.

I was packing my things when two men forced their way into my home. They claimed to have been sent by the mayor and that they were there to make sure I made it safely to an interview. I had not planned any such thing with the mayor. I knew that they had other motives, but before I could respond, they threw themselves at me and put a sack over my head. Everything was dark under it. Roughly, they grabbed me and tied my hands behind my back. Then I was pushed into a car.

I laid there in the back seat for what felt like hours, until once again, they seized me and dragged me out of the car. After more manhandling, they threw me down. I could feel I was in a boat. I heard the thick water sloshing under the wood. Someone cut my hands free, and as I struggled to get the sack off my head, I felt the boat being pushed and drifting out.

Finally free and able to see again, I realized I was in the middle of Lake Green. My heart stopped as I recalled the pictures I had taken, the discolored faces and tumors. Then other images invaded my mind, images of *things*, of monsters and writhing tentacles under the water. I once again felt small as I realized how much bigger the lake was than me and how many things could be below me right then. Things bigger than me.

I couldn't stop myself from breathing heavily. My chest hurt. More things swam through my mind. Things with large mouths and long teeth, but empty darkness for eyes. Slithering fiends coiling under the waves. It was then I noticed that the boat was shaking. There were waves on the surface of the lake, like something below was moving and causing a disturbance in the water.

I held the sides of the boat tightly. I closed my eyes even tighter. The things in the water became worse, more frightening. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. I don't know why, but I wondered if this was what it was like to die. I heard myself mutter, begging for mercy from the phantoms in my mind. I could feel tears coming down my face.

Suddenly, the boat jerked, and I screamed as it tipped over. I fell into the water, more like slime honestly. Something grasped me. It was huge and took up most of my body, like a huge hand had grabbed me. It pulled me down, down, deeper and deeper. Deeper than I thought the lake could go.

It was no longer a small lake. It was like a vertical ocean of greenish goo. I held my breath, my eyes still shut. I could feel my body burning, wanting, needing, to breathe. Then all at once, the water was gone. I felt air. I opened my eyes and saw I was in a cave, some massive underground cavern.

I coughed and gagged before falling to my knees. A voice spoke to me, not in words but in my mind. The phantoms and thoughts scattered, as if frightened away by something worse than them. I looked up and could only scream.

Looming before me on a throne of rock and bone was a monster many times my size. It was covered in black fur, like a rat, but there were places in its fur that had a faint green glow just under the skin. It had a head like a rat, but its body was that of an

emaciated man. A long, slender tail came from its back, at the end of which was a large clawed hand, the huge hand I had felt grab me. It spoke to me again in my mind.

“I am Dathothua, little one,” it said. I remembered being a child, feeling small in a small town next to a small lake. I had felt safe being small, too small to notice. Now I realized the horror of how small I really was. Too small to be noticed by the titans that lurked in the real world. The creature leaned in toward me from its throne. I could smell rot and death coming from its nostrils. Again its voice boomed in my head. “I noticed you...”



THE DOCTORS

Story by Kristoff N. Chester

Illustrated by David Romero

Adeline paced nervously by the window. She was too afraid to look outside. She knew they were on the way. She still couldn't believe her husband, Frank, had called them. "You can't keep giving all your time to take care of him. He isn't going to get better," he'd said. She couldn't believe that. He would get better, he had to. The baby had been coughing a bit lately, sure, but that wasn't the same thing as being sick.

Her heart stopped when she heard the sound of tires coming to an abrupt halt. They were here. Her husband walked to the door and opened it while she stood there frozen in fear. At the door were three figures clad in black coats with long white masks and goggles. None of them had any skin showing. For a moment, Adeline wondered if they were even human. The largest one, flanked by two smaller colleagues, reached out with a gloved hand and gave Frank a quick handshake. He thanked the doctor for coming so quickly and pointed to the baby's room.

The doctors, walking single file, stepped to the room. Adeline tried to stop them, boldly stepping in the way. The huge doctor had to tilt his head down to look at her. He said nothing while she looked at her own reflection in his goggles. The smaller two stepped around them and entered the room. The baby was crying.

They wouldn't like that. They would say it was more proof he was sick. They would say they needed to take him away.

She crumpled to her knees and gripped the doctor's coat, begging him to just go. She would look after the child herself. Everything was under control, she promised, but the towering masked figure just looked at her and put his large hand on her shoulder. He shook his head, then stepped around her, and entered the room, closing the door behind him.

It seemed like an eternity she knelt in front of that door, hearing the shuffling of feet and the baby crying. Suddenly, the door swung open, and the three doctors marched out. The large one was the last to leave, and in his arms was the still-crying baby. Adeline screamed and reached out for him, but her hands only brushed against the thick coat. She stumbled and flailed, trying to catch him. Frank was on the other side of the room, his head bowed and his hand covering his face.

Adeline didn't have time to worry about him. She had to stop those monsters from taking her baby! She pushed her way out the front door and saw them walking down the dirt trail that was her driveway, going past the car they had come in. A stabbing pain ran through her heart, realizing this had to be so much worse than she had thought. Taking as deep a breath as she could, she willed herself to run and scream for them to stop. The three never even slowed down. They just marched down the trail. Each step sent more pain through her as her bare feet hit the uneven, rough ground, but she wouldn't let anything stop her.

The three walked until they came to a ditch in a field not far from her house. The two small doctors turned and held their hands up to her and shook their heads. Adeline stopped before them, breathless and wild-haired.

“Ma'am, please. I am sorry for your loss, but your child is already gone. We have to dispose of the body, or he will possibly spread it even more. Is that really what you want?” The doctor's words cut deeper than any knife ever could. They knocked the last of her strength out of her chest. She fell to the ground before the doctors' feet. They sighed and walked by her. One dropped a white flower by her hand as he went. Adeline laid there and wept, tears flowing down her face. She then heard a faint, muffled sound of screaming.

A new surge of fear and will rushed over her. Her baby wasn't dead! She was sure she heard him! Pulling herself up to her feet, she saw the big doctor standing before the ditch, looking at his empty hands before turning away. A primal shriek escaped her lips as she ran on hands and feet toward him. The doctor stepped to the side and allowed her to stagger past. She stopped and looked at him only for a moment. Before he had seemed too imposing, but now, with his head low, he seemed meek. She wanted to say something, but the crying from the ditch drew her attention.

She left the doctor standing there and came to the edge of the ground and looked down into what seemed more like a canyon. The echoing cries and screams of “mommy” and “daddy” resonated up at her. The opening in the earth looked like a pit into the depths of hell itself. She couldn't look away nor move forward, only scream in horror and heartache.

Covering the ground were the bodies of children of all ages, babies, toddlers, and so on. Their skin was so pallid she could see their veins even from her high vantage point. They writhed and strained, all the while calling out for help and their mothers and fathers and siblings. Hideous black cysts dotted their bodies,

some clawed at each other and the ground with pitch black fingers and toes.

Adeline didn't know how long she had been there or when Frank had recovered her unconscious body. She didn't know how many victims she had seen down in that pit. She didn't even know which of them had been her baby boy once. All she knew was their screaming that echoed in her ears, screaming in the false hope of being pulled up from the nightmare of sickened flesh.



THE SLEEPING

Story by Jessica Rougeau

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

Jay sat anxiously on the exam table, waiting for the doctor, reading every piece of medical literature taped to the pasty, white walls, all blatant reminders of symptoms and conditions she could pretend not to have until she came in for testing. Dr. Kaplan knocked first and then entered the exam room. “Hi, Jay! How’s everything??”

“Good.”

“Any heart episodes or emergencies recently?”

“No.”

“Alright, we’re going to do a device check. Let’s get you hooked up to the monitor so I can get a reading of what your heart rate’s been up to first.”

Dr. Kaplan began her strategic placement of sticky electrodes on Jay’s legs, arms, and chest, allowing the attached wiring to drape over her body. Jay averted her eyes while the doctor did this. She was sick of being poked and prodded. She hated it. Once the main hulking wire from the set of electrodes was plugged into the monitor, she resembled a full-on cyborg.

“Okay, Jay, I am going to observe the electrical activity of your heart from the last month and check for any abnormalities, extreme palpitations, dangerous heart rate, things like that.”

Casually at first, Dr. Kaplan observed the sharp dips and dives of Jay’s heart rate. Her patient’s internal workings came

streaming through like a ticker. Shifting uncomfortably in her seat, Dr. Kaplan moved closer to the monitor's displayed results and hit the print button instinctively. She ripped the sheet from the printer and began circling portions of Jay's results and scribbling the date and exact time of each episode.

"Jay. Do you recall feeling any extreme arrhythmias or even a shock from your defibrillator on October 3rd around 2 a.m.?"

"No. I was asleep."

"Okay. What about October 13th around the same time?"

"No. Same thing, I was sleeping."

"Alright. There are a few more of these episodes that concern me as well. The most recent being over a week ago, again around 2 a.m., on October 23rd. Are you sure you cannot recall experiencing any type of alarming heart rate or labored breathing? I really need you to tell me. There seems to be a clear pattern here. Don't be afraid..."

"Hey, Kap? Are you going to press the red button?"

"What?"

"The red button. On the monitor? The one that speeds up my heart on its own. It feels like I'm about to have a heart attack or something when you press it. Like I have no control over my own body."

"Well, yes, we must check that your defibrillator is working the way it should, and the red button test tells me that information. It is your safety net. But, Jay, are you able to at least remember anything from a couple of days ago that may have caused any issues for you?"

Jay retreated into her thoughts, watching Dr. Kaplan's mouth continue to move in a hazy, slow-motion slipstream, allowing her doctor's pleading words to fall deaf and meaningless. She didn't need to listen anymore. She knew exactly what the doctor was

referring to. She knew what happened on the 3rd and the 13th and at 2 a.m. on the 23rd, and every ten days since the accident. The one that almost killed her.

Well, the accident did kill her. For twenty minutes, or so she'd heard. First responders brought her back, restarted her heart, and she was left with no memory of what had happened. They said her heart was beating so rapidly it threw her into cardiac arrest. It was undetectable until now. Jay felt guilty for surviving when so many others with this hidden condition did not. She struggled with the fear of her reality and the sinister way her body could betray her at any moment. She was afraid to sleep, afraid of her buried memories, now impossible to remember. Since then, she wrote all of her cardiac episodes down in run-on sentences and fragmented thoughts, attempting to scribble whatever details she could recall. Her account of those specific dates came easily now, burned into her mind and paralyzing her dreams:

– October 3, 2019

Dreamed I was awake in bed & could not move my body or lift my head. A dark figure was looming over me & touched my chest. The silhouette looked human. I felt some type of electrical surge go through me like a shockwave & cause my arms and legs to vibrate. I could not speak. My body levitated off the bed for what seemed like stories high & then suddenly plummeted back down. The falling felt so real. Woke up screaming.

– October 13, 2019

Dreamed of Dark Figure again tonight. My body felt melted to the bed. Useless. Dark Figure grabbed me by the throat & lifted me upright. I was limp, dead weight. I could not scream. Dark

Figure arranged my arms & legs into a sitting position with my palms facing upward. Dark Figure placed a knife in my hand. Told me to cut. I dragged the knife across my face and neck multiple times. I could not stop. Woke up choking.

– **October 23, 2019**

DF was here again. The walls were expanding & contracting around me until finally stretching so far away. Darkness in all directions. I couldn't move or make noise at first. DF told me to get up & my body responded. We floated down into the darkness, my bed slipping away until it sunk into a black abyss behind us. Feeling like I was at the center of infinite nothingness. Looking ahead, I saw one side of my bedroom wall with a mirror coming into view. DF and I stood in front of the mirror. My face & neck were disfigured. DF touched my chest again, ripping it open to reveal my frantic, thumping heart, pumping blood, beating erratically. A red button appeared on the mirror. DF pressed it. My body seized. I felt the intense electric shockwave pulse through me. Woke up in the hospital.

“Jay? Are you alright? Jay, look at me.”

Jay snapped out of her mind's nightmarish retelling of the past month, but it was the only way she coped. A confession to only herself.

“Yes, I'm fine, sorry. I was in my own head for a minute. I'm okay. I don't have any memory of any type of episodes or defib shocks. I'm sorry. I don't remember.”

Dr. Kaplan gave her a sympathetic but doubtful look. “That's okay, then. I'm going to schedule some additional tests for you with some specialists. It's important you keep these appointments. I need you to go to these appointments. Please, do

not cancel them. You know I will find out. We all just want you to be safe and healthy.”

As Dr. Kaplan wrote notes on Jay’s file, the only thing Jay could do was stare at the red button. That fucking red button.

“Alright, Jay, last part. I am going to check your defibrillator device on the heart monitor. You may feel some discomfort and increased in heart rate, but it’s only me. Just breathe normally. It will be quick, I promise.” Jay nodded.

As her body seized up in anticipation, she suddenly heard a faint dripping sound. The sound grew louder and heavier, not a drip anymore but a rushing flood. Jay anxiously looked toward her doctor for some reassurance, but Dr. Kaplan’s face was gone. Black blood burst out of her eyes and mouth until she was utterly faceless and drowning. Her head was now a black, punctured void on a floating body, the same dark figure Jay had seen in her dreams. Before Jay could even scream, the doctor pushed the red button.



MY GRANDMOTHER CARRIED A BURDEN

Story by Maggie Louise

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

My grandmother was a victim of kyphosis, which is a sometimes slight or extreme curving of the spine that causes a person to have a hunch. You've probably seen people with hunches walking about with a cane, steadying their bodies as they try to keep from falling face-first into the dirt, or maybe not. My own grandmother's back was so hunched that the lady was almost bent into a perfect U by the time of her death. There were many speculations as to how she obtained the hunch, all the way from not letting a back injury from her childhood heal properly to her own "hunch" of knowledge that she let me in on when I was of proper age to tell.

You see, my grandmother had grown up poor. When I had gone to visit her lonely self on her farm pushed back into the woods of Nevada in the middle of nowhere, I was young, and I didn't know the difference between somebody having a lot of money and somebody having nothing at all. I didn't notice all the decay around her home or how dirty things were from her lack of upkeep or money to spend to get things fixed. I just knew that my grandmother was kind and that I had a lot of fun when I went there. Those were the simple parts of life.

As I've mentioned, the older I got, the more stories she would tell about her life back in the day, anything from a sexual encounter with a man she had her eye on to the five-year-old

daughter she had lost. Apparently hard times had been passed down within the family, and the same farm I visited, that very farm she grew up on and raised her daughter on for such a short amount of time, had been plagued with economic hardships and deaths.

There were watering holes scattered around the area, and since my grandmother hadn't any running water back in the day, she relied on those things. There was a serious drought when her daughter, Anna, was only five years old and most of the watering holes had swelled to dry, cracked landscapes, so a search for more water in the area was conducted by my grandmother herself. She didn't want to leave Anna at home by herself while she went searching, but Anna was nearly lifeless with dehydration and wouldn't survive the trip. My grandmother explained that she wouldn't be long, and she would come back with two whole buckets of clean water, but Anna was practically begging her by this point not to leave her in the house where her own grandparents had died years earlier. She finally caved in and, using up all her leftover energy, allowed her screaming daughter to hop on her back, which had been in perfectly good condition at the time.

They walked miles and miles that day in the squelching heat, having to stop every so often because Anna became seemingly lifeless on her back and she thought she had lost her. After miles of walking, they came to a watering hole. It was like a godsend in the middle of nowhere, completely deserted, and she sat down to scoop some into the buckets, wondering how she was going to get all that water back home with Anna still attached to her back and in dire need of medical attention.

As she corralled water into the buckets, her hand grazed the top of the water and she realized it was no spring, but a hot spring

river. Against better judgment to never even submerge her face in the water of a Nevada hot spring, due to the amoebae in it, she still gathered the water knowing it could be their last hope. Anna dipped her face in the water and drank until she couldn't drink anymore. She was still much too lifeless to walk back home, so my grandmother carried her and the heavy buckets the rest of the way home.

Anna died the next day. It had been a brain infection caused by the water from the hot spring. She didn't even have a proper funeral because of the lack of income. Her cremated remains just stayed in a jar that sat on my grandmother's fireplace, where they constantly reminded her of her struggles.

The story left a deep feeling of pity and sadness in my gut, and I never really forgot. I visited my grandmother multiple times before she passed away, but the last time I saw her before her death, I realized that there was so much more involved with her story. Her hunch had been so developed that she was nearly bent all the way to her toes. I helped her around the house while she rarely brought herself to her feet. By the end of the weekend, she felt so drained and saddened by all the help I had given that she said, "I'm cooking supper tonight the best I can. You were supposed to be enjoying your stay here, and you did so much for me." Against all my judgments and begging her to allow me to cook supper, she got up and walked out of the room and into the kitchen.

When she exited the room, I noticed her spine moving from under her shirt in an unordinary fashion. It looked like every vertebra bubbled and popped and took a new form under her shirt, leaving distinct waves. She brought a hand to her back, rubbed a spot, and continued walking into the kitchen.

I never mentioned the fact that I saw the arm of a small child, maybe about the age of five, reach up out of her shirt as if they were attempting to get a better grip on her.

She died only a few weeks later.



BEAUTIFUL WATERS

Story by E.J. Morris

Illustrated by David Romero

I remember the boat swaying and rocking more then I'd ever seen before. It was as if it was trying its best to throw us off its back.

I remember the captain's voice calling out to us through the storm, all while we scurried about the ship, trying our best to stop her from keeling over.

"All hands! To your stations! We have a mighty gust coming our way! I can feel it in the air!" As his words set in, a bit of fear found me and my fellow shipmates as we took our posts and readied ourselves for what was to come.

The storm's first forceful push came and went within a few minutes, while the second crept up on us and hit us with everything Nature seemed to have in it. The mast was the first to go. The deafening sounds of it cracking away from its place on the ship would send any man into a panic.

Soon after the worst happened, the ship continued to thrash back and forth even more so than before. The captain's voice began to drift off as the waves found their way aboard. At first, I couldn't make out what the captain was saying through the different sounds echoing now from the ship itself. It almost sounded like he said, "Mer..."

Just as I began to drift off into thought, a sudden agonizing pain struck me head-on. I toppled over the side and fell a few feet

down. The terrifying water embraced me with all of its forceful might.

I don't remember much after I met the waters. I remember setting my sights up as lightning danced across the blackened, rain-ridden sky. The water engulfed me, filling my lungs with a burning sensation that gripped them tightly as I began to sink. The bubbles that leaked from my mouth seemed to catch the pure shine of the lightning as it streaked across the surface, casting just a bit of light around me as I began to lose hope for my life and those of my crewmates.

I couldn't bring myself to try and swim upward. It was as though my body had made peace with being lost to the depths, when I knew good and well that I wasn't ready to die just yet...

Just as I began to close my eyes and let the ocean take me, my eyes fixated on what I thought to be a group of beautiful women. They shimmer and darted through the waters at a high rate of speed. It was truly a haunting sight. I thought to myself that maybe I had drowned after all, and this was the hell that the sea had in store for me. Or maybe I was inching closer to death, and those creatures had just been a trick that the sea was showing me as I drifted further and further down.

I remember my mates saying that if you go too deep into the abyss, it was likely that the waters began to play tricks on the psyche, I know too well that it was no trick. No matter how many times I tell myself that it was, I know good and well what I saw that night.

There must've been at least a dozen of them, maybe even more than that. I could only make out bits and pieces of the terror when the water would light up from the storm above. The women seemed to move like sharks after their prey, streaking across the water and darting from left to right. Their skin was a murky white

that seemed to give off a bit of shine as they moved. Each one had long hair that seemed to trail behind them as they swayed. Their legs looked to be missing and in their place each had a tail like none I'd ever seen before, each with different, beautiful colors that almost made them seem elegant as they flipped up and down, pushing the creatures forward.

During the long, few seconds I'd first seen them, I hadn't noticed the soft melody that seemed to relax my body and calm the raging storm above. The song was embedded into my mind. To this day, I still hear it even when I go to sleep at night.

With the enchanting song in my head, I began to notice other details about what had been happening around me. Within my own panic, I had not yet seen or understood what had been happening right before my eyes. I started to see that the beautiful women darting around in the water were, in fact, hunting some sort of prey.

A prey that I had just broke bread with an hour ago. In the darkened sea, I hadn't even noticed the red tint that trailed down towards me. When I did, the sight snapped me out of my trance, I quickly began to swim upwards. I had no idea how long I had been down there. I'm sure it was longer than any man could've normally lived.

As I finally broke through the surface, I gasped for air. My hearing crept back with faint popping sounds, only to return to the shrill cries of my crew. My eyes shot about in search of them and I discovered that the ship had capsized.

Horrifying screeching sounds came from the vessel that had started its descent to the depths. Its nose was completely submerged now. Pure thoughts of terror and a deep feeling of loneliness suddenly caught in my throat like a stale piece of bread.

With each spark of lightning that lit the night sky above, the horrid feeling in my heart began to swell and fester. I couldn't believe my eyes when they caught the creatures clutching onto each side of the boat. The beautiful, beastly women I had seen underwater were now ripping at the ship and screeching as their faces contorted into a horrific sight. Their skin was pale and rotten. Some even held onto my crewmates by their necks, like predators hauling off their meals to their den. Some were already tearing away at some of the men, feasting upon them.

In all of the commotion, I began to let myself sink once again, hoping that the black water would take me, instead of forcing me to face the same fate the rest of my crew had to sadly endure...



WELCOME HOME

Story by Charles T. Daube

Illustrated by David Romero

Sarah breathed heavily as she carried a large, green storage container down the front stairs of her split-foyer home. She balanced the awkward weight against her torso and flipped on the exterior lights with her free hand. Making her way to the bottom of the outer stairs, she placed the green container on the stone walkway. She stood for a moment to catch her breath, her favorite Moody Blues t-shirt rising and falling with each breath.

It was 6:30 P.M.

She craned her head toward the sky, noticing the rapidly falling darkness. These early October evenings seemed to pass by in an instant. The stars were already beginning to peek out from their hiding places. Sarah was drained after a full day's work, but her determination outweighed her exhaustion. The approaching darkness wouldn't deter her on this Thursday night.

Her husband, Nathan, was away on business and returning home the following evening. Sarah and Nathan loved Halloween, and Sarah's one wish was for her husband to come home to the spookiest house in the neighborhood. She knew he'd love that. She loved surprising him, and after five years of marriage, they'd never lost the spark.

Sarah was well prepared for her mission. She had all the works, witches for the trees, spiderwebs for the bushes,

tombstones for the yard, and more lights than she could count. This year, she was going to do it big.

She opened the box stuffed with decorations and lights. Sarah took one last breath, savoring the crispness of fall, and said to herself, “Okay, let’s get this shit knocked out.”

Sarah went to work fighting to untangle the various cords and light strands, silently cursing Nathan to do a better job packing up the decorations. She loved Nathan, but he knew how to half-ass things, especially tasks which required patience, and it drove Sarah crazy. She reminded herself that this was her biggest marriage complaint, and it wasn’t really a complaint at all. Everyone had their flaws, and life was good with Nathan.

After winning the battle with the lights, Sarah began routing the orange strand through the wooden railing down the stairs.

A sudden sound scratched behind her.

Her breath caught in her throat. She turned, peering through the yard and into the driveway. A small, brown leaf skittered across the asphalt, shooed away by the wind. She exhaled, smiling a nervous grin. Her eyes scanned the yard, looking for anything out of place, yet there was nothing. The cool air summoned gooseflesh on her exposed skin, and she shivered. Sarah rubbed her braille-textured arms and resumed her task.

She worked her way down the railing, wrapping the plastic cord in-and-out, in-and-out. She loved decorating, and she was good at it. It was a trait she prided herself on. Unlike others, she was blessed with the natural ability to see potential—how things could look, and not only how they appeared on a retail shelf.

The wind gained momentum, its invisible energy howling within her eardrums. Its phantom fingers sent tiny shockwaves against her blue shirt, causing it to billow like an old pirate sail.

As she was halfway down the railing, a sound boomed behind her. A different type of sound, quite different.

A crash, things breaking. She braced herself, every muscle in her body tensed.

She could have vomited her organs at that moment. Her head snapped around to see a broken tree branch lying on the driveway. It was a large branch, easily measuring six feet in length. Its dry twigs lay amputated and scattered on the blacktop. She looked upward, seeing the enormous tree looming over the yard. It stood as a dark silhouette against a pin-pricked sky. Its spindly arms stretched in every direction. Sarah wondered which one would be the next to fall.

She was suddenly on edge. Her gut instinct was screaming that something was wrong about this situation. Something unnatural was blowing through this October air. This was the type of wind that shushed the crickets and birds, every living creature submitting to the unfathomable power of Mother Nature's voice.

They felt it too.

She fought the feeling and decided to finish the current strand of lights, hating to leave something half-done, but she needed to clean the driveway soon. Someone could damage their car if they didn't see it. Not that she was expecting any visitors tonight.

Her hands began to move frantically, eager to finish the chore she had been so excited to begin. Her anxiety grew. She told herself that everything was fine, but the empty reassurances came up short. The thing about Sarah was that she loved scary things, but she hated being scared. Since Nathan had left last week, she had been afraid, barely sleeping as she tossed and turned in the lonely bed. The interior lights remained on during the night, and the alarm system was top notch, but Sarah never felt safe by

herself. She knew it was a childish fear, to be scared of the dark, of intruders, but she couldn't help but feel anxious—like some unforeseen danger was waiting, and all of her preparations and worry wouldn't help when it came knocking on her door.

She felt that way now, as if some hidden eyes were watching her, the lurking pupils slithering up her spine from the shadows. It was a sense of unease that she couldn't put her finger on, a sense of fear that erased all rational thought.

A half hour had passed since she'd walked outside, and every trace of daylight had been extinguished. She finished the current strand and plugged the cord into the socket. This would be the moment of truth because these crappy outdoor lights liked to stop working for no reason, but she was in luck. The strand illuminated an orange glow around the railing. She smiled as she prepared to continue her work.

The bright orange glow clouded her vision as she peered into the driveway. Something caught her eye. The broken branch lay on the driveway as it was. But now, a person stood in the driveway amongst the tree's carnage. Sarah froze. She couldn't believe her eyes. She didn't move, and neither did the person. They remained stationary for what felt like an eternity, Sarah's heart beat with a newfound arrhythmia. The person stood just outside of the porch light's reach. Sarah could only discern a large figure with long, grayish hair hanging around its shoulders. The person's clothes were tattered and riddled with holes.

"Hello?" was all Sarah could think to say.

In lieu of a traditional greeting, a metallic thud collided with the pavement.

THUMP

Its sound was full of strength, and finality. The glistening moonlight reflected on the object. Sarah might not have been the

most qualified person when it came to tools, but she knew an ax when she saw one. The light reflected on the ax's head and beamed into her unbelieving eyes. Sarah understood this time of year brought out plenty of people who enjoyed scaring folks for fun: weirdos, trick-or-treaters, pranksters. But if this was a joke, it wasn't funny.

"You better get the hell out of here before I call the cops," she said in her steadiest tone. The person called her bluff, remaining still and twisting the ax so its head flickered in the light. Its metal edge scraped on the driveway with each turn of the wrist. The blade looked deadly sharp.

She needed to run. The figure stood roughly twenty feet from Sarah, and she believed there was ample time to run inside and lock the door. She was reminded of Nathan's handgun inside the bedroom closet.

I hope I still know how to use it.

"That's it. I'm get—ting my husband." She struggled not to stutter through the lie. "He's got a gun." She made her move, turning to run up the stairs.

But something tugged on her arm and wouldn't let go.

She pulled harder, not daring to look back, and she was spun around to be face-to-face with the person from the driveway. Her intestines felt as if they'd been tossed into a blender. She stood on the third stair, yet she was eye level with the figure. He was a large man; his wide body dwarfed her dainty frame.

She looked into his face; it was a horrible sight. *It is a mask I'm looking at.* That was the only thing she could understand. An elderly man mask, the rubber skin wrinkled and pocked with scars and hairy moles. Long, white hair hung straight down from the tops of the ears. The crown of the head was bald, but the eyebrows were silver and overgrown like weeds surrounding an

abandoned building. A dirty plaid shirt was buttoned around his torso, its fabric badly stained with various discolorations.

The mask was terrifying, but the eyes beneath the mask were worse. They were the only living thing she could see on the face, yet they were yellowed and spiderwebbed with red, broken blood vessels. The most horrible eyes Sarah had ever seen, or that she had ever imagined seeing.

The eyes of a madman.

The man's lungs pushed and retracted the rubber mask to his face, suctioning then swelling. Rotten breath exited the tiny slitted mouth-hole, seeping into Sarah's nostrils. He smelled like a wild animal.

As his crushing grip on her arm tightened another click, she could feel the bones aching to break, if only to relieve some pressure. Sarah couldn't remember the last time she had drawn a breath. She was involuntarily mesmerized by his ghastly stare. Those horrid eyes remained locked into hers as she stood paralyzed with fright. His dominant stature loomed over her like the massive tree did the yard below.

She suddenly thought of her neighbors, of someone who could hear, of someone who could help. She inhaled and opened her mouth wide, intending to release the loudest shout the world had ever known. Aiming to burst this man's ear drums, she could put an end to this nightmare, to this psycho.

The sound of her voice exited her body, building with intensity, but was abruptly cut off. She suddenly couldn't remember how to scream. A dull pain spread warmth across her scalp. Her mouth hung slack as liquid dripped like a burning candlestick down her brow. She didn't understand. She was filled with confusion but lacked the cognitive power to decipher reasoning.

The wind blew harder now, tossing her hair wildly and breathing menthol against her hairline—crimson beads dropped on the shoulders of her favorite blue t-shirt. It was all so surreal. She had a strange feeling that she might never speak again. All she could do was stare, stare into those yellowed eyes, stare at the eyes that never blinked, that never flinched, that never felt, as the warm liquid dyed her faltering vision a hazy shade of red.

Nathan's flight landed on time, and he rushed home to be with his wife. Sarah claimed she had a surprise in store for him, and Nathan couldn't wait to see what was up her sleeve. He dreaded traveling, but it was always nice to miss home, and it seemed to keep their marriage fresh. It kept them appreciative of their life and each other. The saying had proven true: distance did make the heart grow fonder.

He turned into their quiet subdivision, relieved to finally be home after a long day of traveling. As he pulled into the driveway, he noticed a peculiar sight: a broken branch lay in the driveway and a strand of orange lights dangled loosely from the porch railing. His brows furrowed in confusion.

The branch was far too large to drive over in his sedan, forcing Nathan to stop the car. He exited the vehicle to clear the obstruction and saw that Sarah's box of decorations had been overturned and scattered in the yard. His mind struggled to comprehend why she would leave the house in such disarray; it was not like her.

His sedan's engine hummed a steady tune in the night air. He looked toward the house as the porch lights shined brightly on the stairs, illuminating a collection of dark stains which extended down the driveway. His inquisitive eyes followed the blemishes

as they led a path to the branch where he stood. He was shocked to find the wood was splattered with the same dark stains.

He looked at his feet and saw that he was standing in a crimson puddle that traveled to the road. Nathan's headlights shone on the tree limb and his lower legs. "Sarah?" he called into the night.

THUMP

Something dropped behind him, hitting the pavement with the force of a falling anvil. His heart sprinted and hurdled inside his chest.

He turned, and in that moment, Sarah's wish had come true. Nathan had come home to the spookiest house in the neighborhood.



SHE WAITS

Story by Mike Caringi

Illustrated by David Romero

It was an average Tuesday evening in the middle of June, and Lisa was alone in her apartment, preparing a nice meal. Her apartment was a single-wide trailer where she had lived by herself for the past three years. There wasn't much to its design. It was a simple layout of a single hallway with doors that led to a kitchen, a bathroom, a master bedroom, and a laundry room, each room the same size and shape as the others. Her hallway was utilized as a general living area, and that's where she spent a majority of her spare time.

Tonight, she was boiling her angel hair pasta noodles and bringing her marinara sauce to a slight simmer when her cellphone rang. The beginning of "The Sound of Silence" by Simon & Garfunkel was her jingle, and it grew increasingly louder the longer it played. She pulled out the phone from her back right pocket and stared at the screen. Currently, her battery was on 12%, the time was 7:34 PM, and the call was coming from an anonymous number.

"I'll just let the voicemail get it," she said aloud to herself as she tucked it back into the pocket of her jeans. "If it's important enough, they'll leave a message." She brought her attention back to her cooking and pulled out a single noodle to sample it. Hot to the touch and soft enough to melt in her hands—it was

perfection. She shut the burner off and set up her strainer in the sink.

With both hands, Lisa lifted the hot pan off the stove top and poured the boiling water into the strainer. It splashed a little bit onto the top of her left hand and burned her. Not enough to cause any serious harm but enough to make her wince and have to pour cold water from the tap onto it before it blistered. After drying her hand off, she opened a drawer next to the sink, pulled out a box of bandages and applied one to the burn.

The simmering sauce began making popping noises as it bubbled. She walked back over to the stove and gave it a quick taste. One lick of the spoon and she immediately spoke out loud to herself. “Mm, how in the world is that so perfect? Just the right amount of garlic, right amount of oregano. Oh, man, I’m excited!”

As she shut off the burner, she felt her phone begin vibrating in her pocket right before “The Sound of Silence” began blaring once more. She rolled her eyes and reached for it. “My God, what could be so important?” The screen again said it was an anonymous number. She hesitantly pushed the button to answer it and lifted the phone to her right ear. “Hello?”

A low-toned, muffled voice quietly emerged from the speaker. It spoke for almost half a minute before Lisa began responding. “Are you serious? Like, when? Wait, you’re on your way now?” She squinted her eyes as if she was trying to read words that were hanging in the air. “Okay hold on, so you’re on your way now, but you’re not sure when exactly you’ll get here?” She paused for a moment. Her eyes widened, and her pupils dilated. “Pfft, that’s fine, I can wait for you! I’m just going to finish this meal and take a quick shower. Then I’ll just sit tight until you get here.” Silence continued to fill the room except for

the low indistinguishable murmuring coming out of the speaker. “Alright, I’ll see you when you get here. Thank you for calling.” She clicked the button to end the call and put the phone back in her pocket. A large animated smile grew on her face as she blushed.

She stared down at the meal she had spent the last half hour preparing and then slowly lifted up her head and stared out the window to the street out front. It was dark and empty except for the streetlight that cast its light onto the ground at the end of her driveway where it met the main road. Moths of various sizes were flocking to the light in an endless dance. She watched them for a few moments in a daze and stood in her kitchen in complete silence. The smile on her face slowly faded into a neutral slant that appeared to be losing its excitement. It was as if her mind had become a void—a vacuum solid substance.

After a few minutes, a single fly flew by her head and whizzed past her ear. The buzzing irritated her eardrum, causing her to shake her head and return to Earth. Her attention returned, and she stared back down at her food. The only feelings she now felt were emptiness and displeasure.

“Well, now I’m so excited I’m hardly even hungry anymore. I wasn’t expecting any company...” Her voice trailed off as she slowly turned her head to glance across the hall and into the bathroom. She left the sauce on the stove top and the noodles in the strainer in the sink and walked into the bathroom. The door slammed shut behind her as she turned on the hot water faucet in the bathtub and began undressing.

“Maybe if I shower first, I’ll get hungry again. Oh, I just don’t know. I’m getting awfully anxious.” Establishing self-motivation can be rather difficult, especially when your brain goes from trying to relax to trying to prepare at the drop of a

dime. She stared at herself in the bathroom mirror and began rubbing her cheeks, examining her eyes and the dark rings that had appeared underneath them over time. Steam from the hot water in the tub began fogging up the room and the mirror. With her left hand, she wiped a large smudge through the condensation so she could see herself clearer.

“Ugh, Lisa, hunny, you’ve got to get yourself straightened up. You’re nowhere near presentable enough to have a guest over.” She let her brown hair down from the ponytail she had it scrunched up in and flashed a very slight smile again. She looked at her left hand, at the burn she had just obtained. With one quick rip she removed the bandage she had on it. The water continued to pour out of the tub’s head until she pulled up on the spigot to activate the showerhead. Then she stepped inside to wash up.

Exciting thoughts ran wild through her head as the water pressure massaged her scalp. Although the idea of the guest showing up unannounced gave her anxiety, it also made her feel important. It had been a long time since anybody made the initial notion of wanting to be in her company. People always admire the feeling of being wanted, and nobody likes the feeling of being the only one to ever make an attempt at first contact. Perhaps this was why they call it alienation.

Now, this particular phone call came off as important to Lisa, so important in fact, that after her shower she applied another bandage to her burnt hand and then immediately proceeded down the hall to the bedroom of her apartment and lay in her bed for almost two full hours before she dozed off. She didn’t even take the proper time to dry herself off and put on her pajamas. She just curled up on the mattress and watched everything slowly fade to black as she waited.

When she awoke the next morning to the sound of her alarm clock playing the beginning of a derivative of “Caro Mio Ben” by Luciano Pavarotti, she slowly lifted her hand and smashed the clock to silence it. Digital numbers flashed 7:00 A.M. at her as she blinked her eyes repeatedly, trying to familiarize them with the harsh sunlight shining through her windows. She awoke in the bed alone, with her hair still wrapped up in her pink towel and her sheets slightly dampened. In the brief moment of coming to, she had the realization that her guest never arrived.

She equipped a frown and made a little pouting noise from between closed lips. “Go figure, alone yet again... But, but maybe he’ll be here soon. Yeah! He’s just running a little late, but that’s okay. Well, I’ll have to call in to work. He should be here anytime, and I don’t want to miss him!”

Desperation is an ugly dress to wear, and it had become the only item currently in her wardrobe.

Lisa grabbed her phone from the pocket of her jeans that rested on the floor. The screen remained dark even after she pushed the buttons. “Damnit, I forgot to charge it overnight. What if he called back?” She scurried to her desk and grabbed her charger cable and plugged it in. A symbol of a battery with a 1% logo popped up on the screen.

“While this charges, I’ll have to take care of my hair and get dressed. God, I feel like there’s never enough time in the day.” She wrapped herself up in a dark red robe that was draped over the corner of her door and made her way down the hallway. Once inside the bathroom, she spent exactly one hour and thirteen minutes blow drying and straightening her hair and applying her makeup. She walked out of the bathroom looking like a peacock had exploded on her face and a gorilla had been tugging on her hair.

The mirror in her bedroom told her that her eye shadow was over abundant and her lipstick wasn't a complimentary color, but her brain told her that the arrival of her guest was very important and that she must dress to impress by any means necessary. Mirrors are also known to lie, so she felt better trusting her gut instinct on this one.

She opened her closet and grabbed the first items she saw: a neon green tank top and a pair of pink capris. "This will be the cutest combo. Who doesn't love watermelon in the summer?" She laughed at herself as she danced around her bedroom in the process of getting dressed.

The alarm clock on her desk now showed 8:33 A.M., and she realized that she still needed to call in to work. Her phone was at a charge of 48%, so she unplugged it and typed in the number from memory. It rang for around thirty seconds before the answering machine picked up the line.

An automatic and monotonous tone recited a script in her ear. "Hello! You have reached the offices of Dr. Amanda Vandersan and Dr. Darrell Lennan. Our hours are Monday through Friday from 9 A.M. until 4:30 P.M. If you are calling to schedule an appointment, please press 1. If you are calling to cancel an appointment, please press 2. If you are calling to make a payment, please press 3. If you are calling with a general question, please leave a detailed message with a return number after the tone. If you are calling with an emergency, please hang up and dial 911. Thank you, and have a nice day."

It was a recording she had come to memorize after working there for two years, so she knew to sit tight and leave a message for the secretary. "Hi Carla, this is Lisa Subira. I'm afraid I have a family emergency and will not be in today or tomorrow. Please inform Amanda for me. Thank you!" She hung up the phone

feeling relieved rather than guilty. This guest appearance was of vital importance, and she'd be damned to miss out on the opportunity.

Her stomach growled, reminding her that she had abandoned her meal from the night before. She walked down the hall and into the kitchen and stared at the mess. The noodles had hardened into strings that resembled plastic, and her sauce had thickened into a thick, crimson paste with the density of freshly paved asphalt. Disgust coursed all the way from her stomach up to her esophagus. Immediately, she ran across the hall and vomited into the toilet. Her lipstick smeared as she wiped her mouth on a piece of toilet tissue and flushed it.

There was no way she could eat now. Anxiety was upsetting her stomach, and the last thing she needed was to get sick in front of her anticipated company. She slowly got up from the floor in front of her porcelain throne and made her way into the living room. A denim-colored recliner held her imprint from the years of chronic use, and that's where she sat to relax herself. She turned on her television and put it on to a random episode of *Benny's Family Court*. It wasn't one of her favorite shows, but it was one of the only ones that consistently aired during daytime and primetime hours. "Alright, forget the food. I'm literally going to sit in this chair until he gets here. Should be anytime now!"

A week passed by, and she had called out for the entire five day stretch of her work week. She knew her paycheck the following week would be literally nothing, but she didn't care. Her apathy had hit an all-time low. Her anticipated guest had still not arrived. Nothing's worse than being let down by the only thing to excite you in years.

She would have abandoned hope had it not been for the daily phone calls she was still receiving. Every day, like clockwork, her phone would ring from an anonymous number at exactly 4:13 P.M., and every time she answered, she recited the same script in response. “Are you still coming? When? Ugh, okay, I’ll just keep waiting then. I really need to see you.”

And that’s exactly what she did.

Benny’s Family Court played on repeat in the background while she continuously drifted in and out of consciousness. She even continued to neglect her hygiene as well as her food intake. Not only had she not bathed or eaten anything since the night she got the first phone call, but the same noodles and sauce continued to sit out and rot in her kitchen.

From the outside, it’s easy to assess that she was being led on or that her imagination was getting the best of her, and she was sure to be let down one way or another. But when you’re enthralled in the moment with an idea that gives you pure infatuation, it’s hard to separate reality from dreams. To Lisa, this was as real as the minor burn on her hand or the job that she had loved for years or the people she had always interacted with on a daily basis. Perhaps to her, this was even more real.

It was now the beginning of July, the 3rd to be specific, and Lisa had quit her job. She was down thirty-six pounds, and her phone rang constantly. Whenever it was a number she recognized, she ignored it and let the messages fill up her voicemail. On this particular night, her mother had called eight times with only ten minutes between each one. During the ninth time she called, and in turn the ninth incantation of “The Sound of Silence” played out loud, Lisa finally answered it.

“Hello?” Her voice was very weak. It truly sounded like it pained her to utilize her vocal cords.

“Lisa? This is your mother. Why have you been ignoring my calls? Nobody’s heard from you in weeks!” Her mom’s voice was squawky, like a bird protecting her eggs from predators.

“Sorry, Mom, I’ve been busy with things.”

“You sound like shit, are you sleeping alright?”

“As a matter of fact mother, I just woke up.” Her voice was still weak, so to her mother this sounded accurate.

“Well, I just saw your old friend Kelly’s mother down at the supermarket, and she said that she heard from her friend Tabitha that she had heard that you quit your job. Why in the world would you go and do a thing like that?”

Lisa hesitated before she responded. “...Mother, it’s my life. I’m allowed to make my own decisions, aren’t I? I don’t need to explain myself to you.” Her voice continued to be monotone and emotionless.

“Don’t you get snarky with me! I’m just looking out for your best interests, that’s all. All I’m trying to say is that it’d be nice to hear from you from time to time, you know? We still care about you. By the way, would you care to come over for dinner tonight? I’ve got ziti in the oven! I know it’s your favorite.”

The thought of eating pasta made her feel revulsion. Lisa stared blankly at her wall without blinking. Her attention span was minimal at best. A single fly landed on the side of her face, but she didn’t budge or bat an eye at it. Her muscles hardly even twitched at the itch of its legs crawling across her cheek before it became airborne once again.

“Not tonight, Mom, I’m expecting company.”

Her mother cooed through the phone, “A suitor, eh? What’s his name? Is it someone I know?”

“Oh Mom, you don’t need to know about all of my business. But I’ll talk to you soon, okay? He should be here any minute, and I have to finish getting ready.”

Her mother sounded only slightly relieved, as if she could hear her daughter’s eyes rolling over the phone. “Okay, hunny, I just wanted to see how you were doing. Maybe we’ll see you tomorrow for the holiday? We’re planning to launch fireworks at Uncle Dino’s.”

“Sure, Mom. It depends, but that sounds nice.”

“Alright, hunny, we love you very much. I hope you have a good time tonight. You deserve some fun and happiness!”

“Sure, Mom. Goodbye.” And she hung up the phone.

Her mother on the other end sniffled and released a tear as she put the house phone back on her receiver. Very few things can break a parent’s heart worse than instinctually picking up on something being wrong with their child, especially when they are ignored so they cannot attempt to help.

Lisa felt no guilt or shame. She continued to sit in her denim recliner and stared mercilessly at the front door. Perhaps in another universe her desperation could materialize into the human being she was waiting for. But for now, her stomach continued to growl, and the food in her kitchen continued to mold. She sighed and rested her head against her closed fist to prop it up. “This anticipation is killing me,” she said to herself in a depressed tone. And so she waited.

Two weeks later, Lisa remained sunk into her denim chair. *Benny’s Family Court* no longer played on the television, and instead, only a test pattern with a very loud continuous beeping tone played. Physically, she resembled a skeleton you would find inside the basement of a torture chamber. She had lost a total of

sixty-eight pounds. Flies swarmed around her as she sat with her mouth agape. Her eyes were sticky and puffy, like two small, glazed donuts. The food in the kitchen now produced a stench that smelled worse than a burning corpse. The entire trailer had become a cesspool, and it smelled even worse. Maggots and flies infested the kitchen, and they spilled out into her hallway. Her hair had hardened into a matted mess that stunk of sour, curdling milk, and it was able to break off into chunks with the slightest touch. Her muscles had deteriorated to the point that her head could barely hold itself up anymore, and she couldn't stand without leaning on something.

Her phone rang continuously, and she barely had the strength to lift her fingers to check the callers anymore, except for once a day at 4:13 P.M. when the anonymous number showed up on her screen. Only then did she put in the little amount of energy she still had to answer it.

However, when the time struck on this particular day and the phone didn't ring, she began to cry. It appeared that the guest was no longer delaying his arrival and had ditched her altogether. Her cries were weak, and she sounded like an asthmatic struggling to keep air down.

All of a sudden, there was a knocking on her door. She let out a very short "go away!" that sounded like a combination of screaming and pleading. The knocking continued again, only this time it was fiercer. The sounds rattled her skull and made her nauseous. Conceding, she responded, "Fine. I'm coming."

She very slowly stood up and walked towards the door. She looked at the mirror on her path and admired her neon green tank top and her pink capris, ignoring the fact that they now were extremely baggy on her and stained with sweat. She also took a quick second to run her finger along the edge of her bottom lip,

trying to re-smear the lipstick that had smudged a month ago. The bandage on her left hand hung on by a single centimeter of adhesive that remained.

She opened the door and smiled. With a great sigh of relief, she used her remaining energy to speak. “There you are! I thought you’d never show up! Please, come on in!”

The guest helped himself inside, and his large, boney hands gripped the doorknob and closed the door behind him. He let out a maniacal laugh as he let down the hood of his black cloak and lifted his scythe into the air.



TRUNK-OR-TREAT

Story by Nicholas Gray

Illustrated by David Romero

“Hey, wait up!” Ronald cried after the two boys that were making their way to the next car. Ronald was a chubby kid who loved Halloween, but the other boys moved faster than him, and it was hard for him to keep up. Carlos and Johnny had already given out the requisite “Trick-or-Treat” and were receiving candy in exchange. They were looking down at the treats they had just acquired when Ronald finally reached them, panting and heaving up a storm. “I’m going to throw up if you guys don’t slow down!” he said in a hoarse voice. Carlos and Johnny just looked at each other and laughed.

“If you weren’t eating your candy as soon as you got it, maybe you’d be able to keep up instead of us having to wait for your fat ass every time we stop!” Carlos said. The lady who’d just given them a handful of candy gave the boys a glare, and Carlos apologized. He hadn’t meant anything malicious by his comment. In fact, the two boys traded blows all the time. Carlos would call Ronald a fat ass, and Ronald would call Carlos a shit stick for some reason. The two weren’t trying to start a fight. It’s just the way they spoke to each other. Johnny usually rolled with it. He wasn’t involved in their personal roasts.

“Your mom says I keep up just fine,” Ronald retorted. The lady put a hand to her mouth and gasped. Ronald didn’t

apologize. Carlos gave him a shove just strong enough to push him back an inch, but not enough to damage or knock him over.

This time, the two boys waited for Ronald to get his candy when they started to make their way to the next trunk.

That was Halloween back in 2010. They were twelve years old and approaching the end of their trick-or-treating phase. Soon, it would be Halloween parties instead of going trunk-or-treat. Oh, yeah, they weren't allowed to go door to door for candy like kids used to, not after what happened in 2007. A kid named Mathew went out trick-or-treating with his family, a big unit—four kids total, so keeping an eye on them all was a difficult task. Mathew apparently got bored of waiting for his younger siblings and went on ahead. His family didn't even notice he was gone until they got home and did a head count. A search party went out looking, but Mathew was never found. Ever since then, moms and dads around the neighborhood didn't trust their kids to go out alone, and to make it worse, they set up trunk-or-treating at the church, and the whole neighborhood was on board with it. "It's safer," they said.

Whatever, the boys thought. All that mattered in the end was the candy, and though they thought it was lame, candy was candy. Even though there was less candy to be found at trunk-or-treats, they didn't care. In the end, as long as they got their delicious, savory candy in their bags, or in Ronald's case, a cauldron, they were fine.

When Ronald showed up with his puny cauldron, the two boys laughed. The thing couldn't fit two handfuls of candy in it! Ronald was embarrassed, even though the other boys should be the ones that should have been embarrassed for carrying around pillowcases for trick-or-treating bags.

As they made their way near the end of the last row of cars participating in trunk-or-treat, they started to realize that their pillowcases, and Ronald's cauldron, seemed a little light this year. Every year, fewer cars showed up to the church for the event. Whether because their kids were growing up or they had other things at home they had to attend to, or maybe Halloween itself was dying off, regardless of the reason, all they knew was that there were fewer people coming, which meant less candy for them.

"Wow, we have almost enough candy to feed fat ass here for the trip back to the car!" Carlos said sarcastically. "A fine year, I say, gentlemen!"

Ronald frowned, looking down at his cauldron. "I don't know, guys, it seems that my pail is pretty full."

Carlos and Johnny glared at him.

"Yeah, and that's not going to last you very long," Johnny finally said.

"You're kidding me! His candy will be gone by the time we reach Mr. Brown's truck!"

Mr. Brown was the father of one of their bullies, so they liked to prank him as much as they could. They constantly doorbell ditched his house, and they had done worse things to him as well, like TPing his front lawn. They turned around and saw Mr. Brown's truck, which was two trunks down from the parked car they were next to.

"Shut up, Carlos!" Ronald replied as they turned back to face each other.

"Just spitting facts!"

"Maybe we can hit up some of these cars again and get double treated?" Johnny asked, knowing what Carlos's reply would be.

“You kidding me, man? You know these soccer moms are stingy with their Snickers! There’s no way we’re getting extra treats from these people,” Carlos stated.

Johnny’s dad had dropped them off at the trunk-or-treat event. The church wasn’t far from his home, but Carlos and Ronald needed to be picked up, so Johnny’s dad drove his minivan over to their houses, picked them up, and dropped them off at the event. Johnny’s father usually participated in trunk-or-treat at the church, and he was the only dad in Johnny’s friends’ group that did. He’d decked out his “man-van,” as he called it, to look like a monster with teeth and a tongue extending out of the trunk like a rug. But things came up. Johnny’s father’s excuse this year was that he had a child at home he had to take care of; Johnny’s sister was sick with a bug that was going around, and Johnny’s dad had to nurse her back to health. He was a single dad, due to Johnny’s mom passing away four years prior. Johnny barely remembered her because he was only eight years old when she died, but it was still sad to think about. He did remember some things about her, but the loss didn’t affect him as much as it did his father.

They started to walk away with their heads down because they all knew Carlos was right. These moms and dads always refused to hand out extra candy. Maybe it was the area they lived in that made them ration their goodies. They didn’t really know, but they knew that this was the end of the line, and they had made out like bandits who were only able to steal three dollars out of the cash drawer.

They were walking away from the trunk-or-treaters and heading towards Johnny’s house when Ronald spotted something in the back of the parking lot. “Look, guys! We missed one!”

They turned around to see where he was looking. He pointed to a beat-up sedan that had its trunk popped open.

Johnny thought it was odd he hadn't seen that car earlier when everyone was setting up their decorations, but he just assumed whomever the car belonged to had come in late to the event, which would also account for the lack of decorations around it.

"You fool. That's just somebody's broke down hooptie!" Carlos replied.

They all stared at the car. Its lights were out, and it seemed totally abandoned.

"I don't know, guys. What if they have king-sized candy bars! Or, since maybe no one has been hitting them up, thinking it's abandoned, they have handfuls of candy just waiting to hand out!"

Carlos and Johnny looked at each other, probably with the same thought on their minds. "Dude, you're crazy if you think we're going to go over there. That car is creepy as hell!" Carlos said for the two of them.

"What are you guys, pussies?"

"What? No! We're just not stupid!" Johnny retorted.

"All I hear is a bunch of clucking from a couple of chickens!"

That was a good comeback at the time, and they didn't quite know how to respond, so they just stared at him.

"Fine, you chickens stay here. I'll go over and investigate that hunk-of-junk. If it's abandoned, then no big deal. I'll just walk back, and you guys can cry out your "I told you so's." But if they have candy, I'll call you guys over...if there's any left when I'm finished. Sound good?"

Carlos and Johnny knew this was a bad idea, but before they could retort, Ronald started making his way towards the trunk of

the car. His cauldron banged against his leg as he half jogged, half walked over to the open trunk.

Carlos and Johnny were looking around as if to see if anyone else was watching this go down. It was like the time they were looking out for any spectators as Ronald peed in a bush four blocks away from Johnny's house. He had really needed to go. They had told him to hold it till they got to Johnny's house, but he couldn't wait any longer and had told the two boys to be his lookouts. So, they were.

Ronald started to slow his pace, as if having second thoughts, and he also needed a breather from the half-jog across the lot. He slowly approached the secluded car. The air felt dense with tension. Carlos and Johnny were nervous, squirming in their spots but unable to move. They knew that even if the car was abandoned, they should have accompanied their friend, just in case something did go down, but it was too late for that. Ronald finally made it to the old sedan. Johnny didn't know about Carlos, but Johnny was sweating buckets. His palms were clammy—just like they were when they kept watch while Carlos wet down the bushes.

Ronald peered into the trunk. From Johnny and Carlos's observation point, they couldn't see his face, so they didn't know what he was feeling, but they imagined he was suffering from the same anxiety they were, if not more! Ronald turned towards Johnny and Carlos and then looked back at the trunk. Then he began shoveling big handfuls of something into his cauldron. Carlos and Johnny stared for a second and then realized what he was doing. He was stuffing that thing full of candy!

"The bastard's going to keep it all for himself!" Carlos yelled. Their anxiety dissipated and now half relief, half anger filled their bodies—relieved that their friend was okay but angry

because he hadn't clued them in on the apparent goldmine he had just come upon. They began to run towards the sedan, ready to get their share of the find. They yelled at Ronald to stop stealing all the good stuff.

Then it happened.

Ronald was scooping candy into his cauldron when all of a sudden, he seemed to seize up. He turned to Carlos and Johnny, his face pale. The two boys stopped in their tracks.

"What is it, Ronald?" Johnny called out.

Ronald turned back to the car and stared at the candy again, but this time he wasn't filling his cauldron with the treats. He was just shuffling around the candy. Then he stopped, backed up a couple of steps, turned, and ran!

Ronald ran past Carlos and Johnny at speeds they'd never seen him achieve before, screaming a scream only a terrified child could make. Carlos and Johnny just looked at one another. They should've started running too, but they were curious about what Ronald had found. They ran over to the sedan, but once they were a few feet away, they slowed their pace and walked cautiously towards the trunk. When they were close enough to peer in, they did. Ever since then, nightmares have plagued the boys, making a permanent home in their lives.

A small, desiccated body lay buried underneath the pile of candy. Its jaw was contorted. Drooping pieces of flesh hung off the skeletal face, and the body itself was bloated. Its eyes no longer existed. Only black sockets remained. The one knee poking out from the mound of candy was covered in a green and white substance.

They boys began to pull themselves away from the sight. Carlos threw up, and Johnny thought he was going to heave as

well. Then Carlos, wiping puke from his mouth, yelled in a groggy voice—“Run!”

Carlos darted one way, and Johnny went the other. Johnny lost sight of Carlos, but Carlos eventually made it to Johnny’s house where he met up with Johnny’s father. Johnny’s father had tried to make the young boy speak. He could see that Carlos was frantic about something, but Carlos couldn’t put what he saw into words. Johnny struggled putting it into words himself.

Johnny ran to the closest adult he could find, which was, of course, Mr. Brown. He wasn’t too happy to see Johnny. Johnny understood why. But once Mr. Brown saw the boy’s mortified expression, he stopped packing up his trunk-or-treat supplies and knelt down to try to calm him down. Johnny was going on about the body in the candy, but the man didn’t understand. Eventually, after Johnny’s hysterics eased and he realized he was safe with an adult, he told Mr. Brown what happened. At first, Mr. Brown thought Johnny was pulling his chain, but Johnny assured him he was not. Then Mr. Brown asked Johnny to take him to the car. Johnny was hesitant, but Johnny knew he had to get an adult to believe his story and get to the authorities, so Johnny ushered Mr. Brown to the car, where he saw the remains.

“Good god almighty,” Mr. Brown said under his breath.

The cops were called, and the sedan was quarantined off. There was no license plate and no paperwork of ownership inside the glove compartment, so the owner of the vehicle couldn’t be identified. Caution tape surrounded the area, and police officers made disgusted faces as they were interviewed by reporters that surrounded the scene.

The missing boy from three years ago was no longer missing.

It’s safe to say trunk-or-treating was never the same again. They tried to continue it, but fewer and fewer people were

involved in it, and eventually the church stopped hosting it, putting an end to it all together.

All three boys had to go for counseling after that petrifying experience. They didn't talk much about the event after that. They thought if they were silent about it, it would disappear from their minds, but oh, they were wrong about that. Every night, they had the nightmares of that day replaying in their minds, but for Johnny, it was different in a mortifying way.

In his nightmares, Johnny is the one who approaches the trunk. He's the one who shuffles through the candy, and he's the one who finds the missing boy. He stares at the trunk boy's bloated face, and the boy's empty eyes stare back at him. Sometimes he reaches out to touch him, and as he goes to take his hand away from the corpse, a boney arm pops out of the mound of candy and a cold, skeletal hand grabs his wrist so tight he can't squirm out of its grasp. The trunk boy's emaciated skull emerges from the pile of candy and begins to shriek in a tone growing louder. "TRICK-OR-TREAT!" it shrieks, over and over again as his horrible face gets closer to Johnny's.



WHEN A SIREN CALLS

Story by Joe Sullivan

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

I was on my way home after visiting my girlfriend at her mom's house and decided to stop at Letchworth State Park. I had been there once before but hadn't been to the gorge overlooks in the northern part of the 17-mile long preserve. It's one of the most popular tourist destinations in New York, after Niagara Falls and Howe Caverns, but it was late in the fall, long past leaf season, so on that evening I was practically alone as I stopped at each of the scenic lookouts.

I was sitting on a bench at the Tea Table Overlook when I noticed a young woman talking on a payphone across the road. I hadn't seen a payphone in years, forget about witnessing someone using one. She looked to be in her early 20s, had dark brown hair, and was wearing a red wind jacket with the hood up. I didn't watch her for too long because I knew how creepy it'd be if she caught me staring at her—it being near twilight and no one else around but the two of us.

Which was why she startled me when she appeared by my side on the walkway. "Oh, hey! You scared me," I said, my voice cracking.

She looked me over, not quite facing me, as she leaned against the waist-high rock wall with its "no climbing" signs every few feet. "Have you been here before?" she asked.

“Yeah, but I only saw the waterfalls, and I only stayed one night...”

“It’s nicer up here, I think,” she replied. “Especially now that everyone’s gone.”

“Do you live nearby?”

“Yes.” She sat back on the wall.

I could now see most of her face despite a few errant strands of hair that spilled out from her hoodie. She was a pretty girl. She reminded me of a Dawson’s Creek era Katie Holmes with the way she pursed her lips.

“Hey, could you do me a favor?” she asked cutely.

“Maybe...” I already felt a little weird talking to this girl who was probably ten to fifteen years younger than me. I was hoping that she wasn’t going to ask for money or drugs.

“Could you get the phone if it rings again?”

“Why?”

“It’s my boyfriend. He knows I come up here when I don’t want to deal with his crap.”

“I guess...” I was now curious. “What should I say to him?”

She crinkled her nose at me and smiled. “Tell him you’re on a date with me.”

I can’t quite remember the idle chat we made over the next few minutes before the payphone rang. But when it did, I didn’t hesitate to get up and head toward the phone, ready to serve as this girl’s receptionist.

Before I crossed the road, I looked back—I’m not exactly sure why. Maybe it was to gauge the girl’s reaction to see whether she was messing with me. But when I did check on her, I saw that she was standing on the rock wall where it was explicitly stated that one should not stand. She was looking at me funny too—I might’ve described it as a smirk had the light not been so

dim—and before I could even register that she was in danger, she had turned abruptly and dove headlong into the gorge!

I yelled and ran to the wall, climbing up onto it myself and looking over to try and see if there was any hope. But there was no way to see directly down due to the shape of the rock face. When I heard a car coming, I jumped down and ran toward the road—all the while the payphone kept ringing.

Luckily, it was a ranger, and he stopped when he saw me coming. “Sir, this girl just jumped into the gorge!” I rambled on with the details of what had transpired. The ranger listened carefully, but his face revealed little emotion.

He got out of the car before I could finish with everything I had seen that evening. He was tall, about my age. “Dark hair, jeans, red windbreaker?” he asked.

I nodded. I noticed that the payphone had stopped ringing. “I was gonna get the phone for her...”

“Christ, really?” he remarked. “We can’t get rid of this payphone because of the pavilions and camping area nearby. It’s state law.”

“Huh?”

“You’re lucky you didn’t answer that phone,” he said, wringing his hands.

I was beside myself. Why wasn’t he getting on his radio and contacting the emergency rescue folks? “I’m telling you, this girl just flung herself into the gorge!”

The ranger took a few steps toward me and patted me on the shoulder. “You did see something here, sir, just not a flesh and blood person. I’m sorry I didn’t make it in time,” he said. “I usually try to get here before six, but I was running late. She won’t show if I’m here.”

“What do you mean by ‘not a flesh and blood person’?”

“Christine was my girlfriend. She took her life here in ’99.”

“Okay...”

He pointed across the road. “She called me from that payphone before she did it. I tried to call her back, but it was too late.”

“So, I would’ve talked to you from ’99 had I picked up the phone?” I said, trying to make sense of it all. “She wanted me to talk to you?”

The ranger shook his head. “No. She wanted you to follow her.”

“I’m not tracking...”

“I come up here at a quarter to six to prevent guys like you from answering that phone,” he said. “I don’t know who’s on the other end, but there have been witnesses saying that people answer that phone and then jump into the gorge moments later.”

“Is that what all the memorial plaques on the tables are for?”

The ranger nodded. “There have been nine deaths here since Christine’s. They all jumped from the same spot. I know for a fact that four of those people answered that phone.”

“You’re saying she’s trying to get people to take their own lives?”

“I don’t think it’s her,” he replied. “That’s not her spirit. She was troubled, but she wasn’t like that. Vindictive. She wasn’t angry at the world.”

“Then something else is drawing people here and convincing them to jump?” I asked.

“I guess the only way to know for sure would be to answer the phone...”



THE NIGHTMARE SOCIETY

VOLUME III





