



The Nabu Review
A Journal of Creative Fiction

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The Nabu Review: A Journal of Creative Fiction - May 2020

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Speaking

Kim Merrill

I pull her into my closet and tell her who I am.

Little One. That's my name. I'm you from years ago.

She doesn't want to remember. I ask her, can I talk? Say what you forgot? She shakes her head. No. I lift my hand to touch her. I tell her that I'll whisper.

Then she nods, frightened.

* * *

I like to hide in closets. I don't like to exist. If I have to talk I pretend I'm an echo. In the closet I hide in back. I tie up Daddy's laces. I put my hands in toe shoes. Mommy doesn't dance now. She still keeps the shoes. I hear her voice from the closet. I hear Daddy's too. Whatever I touch in the closet makes me not exist.

When I walk to kindergarten I pass a path through woods. Devils and monsters use the path. I run it once on a dare. I don't like the path. I like swings. I walk to swings after school. I climb the metal pole. I sit up high on top. I'm not allowed to sit there. I can sit in the cloth seat. I can aim for the top of trees. I can leap and fall in the dirt. I can lie on my back and watch the sky. When I'm dizzy birds fly backward.

Daddy comes to get me. He hangs me on a monkey bar. He pokes a thumb in privates. I like that don't I. Don't I. My hands get cold on the monkey bar but I'm a strong little thing. I go to the sky with birds. I have a beak. I eat a worm. I fly backward. After I leave the sky Daddy lifts me up. He puts me on his shoulders. I grab his forehead happy. He tells me I'm safe. Don't worry. He skips a bit to scare me. At home he holds my ankles. I get spun real fast. I scream when the carpet nears my face. Do it again! Fly me! Mommy says watch out. Time to stop right now. At bedtime he tells stories. Pirates and headless ghosts. Dire doom is everywhere and the stories end on the plank. To be continued. Finish it now! That's me and Jim and Eliza. We whisper together in bed. We dream of falling in water. Oceans full of pirates. Sharks who swallow kids.

Once we drive to Nebraska. Mommy's daddy and mommy live in a house with a porch swing. Mommy's daddy was a mailman. Now he has false teeth. He claps them at us. You git out! Grandma says he's jokin'. Don't you mind that man. Grasshoppers are poison. That's what the false teeth say. If their juice gets on your skin you die a poison death. Jim and Eliza and I sit by an open field. Grasshoppers jump. The whole field jumps. We're afraid to cross. We hold each other's hands. We run it fast and live. Now we know. Now we know. Jokes can be a lie.

Mommy flattens piecrust. To make the dough she squishes butter in her hands. Her mommy in Nebraska uses hands. That's the way. Not two forks. When she puts crust on a pan the edges hang over. She trims the edges with a knife. I can take the trims. I mold stars of dough. I sprinkle cinnamon on. My stars come out of the oven and race across the pan. I eat a star. I tell Mommy about the thumb. Why does she call it my private part? Daddy says it's his. Mommy slaps my face. The star breaks in my mouth. Nothing's real. I'm not real. I don't like to exist. Daddy says I do. Daddy says I exist so much I make him do things. Things I really like. I like it don't I. Don't I. I like to be a bird. I like to fly in the sky.

* * *

Daddy wears a gown with a square on top of his head. He gets a rolled-up paper. People clap when he gets it. Words get printed on paper. Paper makes them real. I start to look at words. I take them in the closet.

After the rolled-up paper we move. Daddy's a teacher now. The name of his school is only letters. U and

C and L and A. We live in a house that grows from a hill. Pepe next door has a goat. I ask for a goat. No goat. I can get a dog. At the dog place the dogs all bark in cages. One dog doesn't bark. She's black-and-white with floppy ears. Those are my favorite ears. In the car she sits in my lap. The name on her tag is Susie.

Susie lives on a leash outside. When she's not on her leash she's in the house with Jim and Eliza and me. We tie her to piles of indoor things we want to watch fall down. Eliza puts a bone near her mouth. Jim makes the tower of things. When she goes for the bone everything falls down and we do it again. We love Susie. She never bites or snaps.

One day she's gone. Her leash is all chewed up. Every day after school I yell out Susie's name. I know she's up the hill. I know she's caught in branches. At night I cry in my bed. I want to die. I want to be Astro Boy. I sit up in my bed. I can be Astro Boy. Astro Boy is a cartoon who has jets in his feet and two pointed black spikes for hair. I wet my hair. I make it two points. I run and blast off. I fly up over the hills. My eye beams see the tree tops. I use all my power. I send a message to Susie. Come home! Come back! Run! The next day she runs down the hill. Her breath is hot. I see her ribs. Her tongue is lapping fast. I put my face in her fur. I can't believe. I leap inside. Astro Boy is magic. Now I'm magic too.

* * *

I'm not magic every day. Maybe once a week. I keep the magic secret. If anyone knew my power I'd be eaten alive.

At school Miss Fern holds up a picture. Chagall. There is a cow that floats in a face and a person in the sky. She asks if the picture can be real. I think the picture is a dream that's real. I want to raise my hand. I can't. Miss Fern holds me like chalk. I powder. Leave white dust. I fly out windows. Hover. Touch my beak to the pane. I see chalk children. I see me. Pale. Shaking hand. Miss Fern taps me at recess. "You can be my helper. New friends will go to your desk." New friends who are not my friends line up at my desk. I tell them what I know. I know three plus five. I know reading. I know holding a pencil. I don't tell them what else I know. I know I'm a girl with the body of a bird at the window. I know Astro Boy can't save my sister Eliza. I know Chagall can't. Eliza is strapped to tables. She is having her skin pricked. She is living in a whiteness. There are walls. Rules. Doctors. Children are not allowed to visit the hospital. It's dangerous. If it's dangerous why is Eliza there? Mommy doesn't know. No one knows. Eliza is trapped in a whiteness because she woke up and couldn't move. She couldn't walk. She couldn't lift her head. She could whisper "I'm frozen." My magic sends her safety thoughts. Come home! Come back! Run!

My magic doesn't work. Every night Mommy comes home from the hospital saying no news. Daddy makes friends with people who feel sorry for us. One man brings a bucket of fried chicken. We don't eat bucket chicken. We eat vegetables. I tip the bucket to rain the crumbs and the man who brought them laughs. Then he touches my hair.

Magic makes me twirl. Magic makes me dance. Magic makes me lie on the floor for Daddy's friends. Magic makes them drink. Magic makes them water me like a plant. Magic makes them push me up and down. Magic makes them laugh. Magic makes Mommy stay at the hospital. Magic makes her not see. Magic makes a blue van pick me up. Magic makes the blue van drive me to a mansion in the Hollywood Hills. Magic makes a large swimming pool in the mansion. Magic makes everyone swim naked. Magic makes girls and grown-ups swim together. Magic makes a round bed. Magic makes a man come in. Magic makes another man. Magic makes another man. Magic makes a camera watching. Magic makes a man take us to a cliff. Magic makes the man tell us to say we went horseback riding. Magic makes the man say he will cut off our arms and legs and throw us over the cliff into the ocean if we don't say horseback riding. Magic makes me forget.

Then one day Mommy says Eliza can come home. The doctors don't know why she froze. No one knows. When Eliza comes home she's quiet. I want to hug her. I want to eat her. I want to tell her how hard I cried for her. I don't. Our family is jokes. Books. Don't-say-it.

* * *

At the end of school Miss Fern tells Mommy I can skip third grade. Fourth grade is giants. They'll rip my arms

off and say fe fi fo fum. I hold my breath till I can't. Then I blow out the breath and it makes a wave that washes to another side of the world where Daddy gets a Fulbright. The Fulbright pulls us out of Los Angeles. It is true magic. I will go to third grade in Andernos, France.

Before we go I learn Je m'appelle Kimberlie and Ou est la ou le ____? Also Ecole Chat Chien and Lundi Mardi Mercredi Jeudi Vendredi Samedi Dimanche. We ride a boat for five days. It has a deck with chairs on it. When I stand on the deck I see pirates underwater. One has a knife in his mouth. He puts a finger on his lips. Shhhhh. Don't tell. I like pirate stories but I don't want to walk the plank. I look around the deck. Maybe they'll choose the lady in a wheelchair. She's old and won't mind. But what if they want kids? For easier chewing? Jim walks up behind me. Time to eat. Come on.

We sit at a round table in the children's dining room. There is a tablecloth and heavy silverware. A waiter with a towel over his arm serves hot food. When he lifts the dome I see a pirate hook. I blink. I see an omelet. I understand the sea. Things live underneath. People bob on top. I want to be an octopus. I want to dive to the bottom and hit the murk. I want to shoot out ink.

* * *

In Andernos the ocean is near. We walk to salty flats. There are bubbles of clams and crayfish. Muck that sucks your feet. I'm careful on the seaweed. Seaweed covers holes that lead to a deep lair. In the lair are blood-sucking octopuses who live on dead pirates. They like pirates but their favorite food is English-speaking kids. I am careful on the seaweed because Eliza and Jim and I are the only English-speaking kids in the town.

If I do get sucked in I will speak French. I know more words. Croissant. Pain Chocolate. Gribouille. Gribouille means stupid. The teacher says gribouille. We call her Madame. Gribouiller is the verb of gribouille. It means scribble. In Andernos we sit at wooden desks for two people. On the top corners of the desk are two wells of purple ink. We dip pens in. We write letters that go straight up and down instead of slant. We practice strings of each letter on lines in our cahiers. If the ink pen blobs it shoots purple spiders on the page. These are gribouilles. They are very bad. I get called gribouille. When it happens I get tears in my eyes. I stare at the dirty neck of Pascal in front of me. He doesn't care about gribouilles. He laughs when Madame hits his head.

* * *

Daddy gets fat eating pastries. After school he meets Jim and Eliza and me at the creek on our way home. He brings paper and folds boats. We float them on the creek. I push mine with a stick and drown an entire family. The old men who play Bocce ball don't hear the cries. After the creek is the pastry store. We buy éclairs. We say "Gluttony is a sin we gladly commit." At the Andernos house the Seven Deadly Sins hang in picture frames. I pass Gluttony Sloth Wrath Greed Pride Lust and Envy as I climb the stairs to my room. In my room is a bed with a dark headboard. The headboard is huge and carved. When I have to fly backward and then forget I dive through the carved dark wood. I wander in a forest. I peck carved wood with my beak. The house is full of dark wood. It creaks with sound but is not haunted. I know this because I check. I open every drawer. I lift the Deadly Sins. I punch through all the pillows. I tell Eliza and Jim we are safe. They look at me like I'm gribouille. They know they're safe. They know it. In their classroom they have a teacher who speaks some English. In their classroom they're not alone in a sea of bobbing words that make no sense. I was Miss Fern's helper. I never made mistakes. If I did I scratched them out. I had a pink eraser. I can't erase gribouilles. I want to use a pencil! I scream this in the kitchen. Mommy says calm down. I'm having a big adventure. Someday I'll look back.

I do homework from the Ecole grammar book. Daddy helps. We sit against the dark headboard. I hold the open book. Underneath a noun is a red square. Under a verb is a blue triangle. Under an object noun is a green circle. A red square does a blue triangle to a green circle. I start to see that words do the same thing in French as they do in English. A sentence is a string. Words are sounds. Words are alive. One day at school I understand everything. I write stories in French. I have no gribouilles. I have Bon! Tres Bien! Charmant! I am in French heaven. I twirl berets. I suck Gauloises. I fall into soft baguettes.

* * *

In Andernos third grade isn't important. Our parents take us out of school before the year is done. Madame tells the class to write Au Revoir in big letters. I say goodbye to Pascal and my desk mate. Goodbye makes me sad even when I'm happy. I'm happy to drive around Europe with Mommy and Daddy and Jim and Eliza. We stay in campsites. Mommy and Daddy count the seconds while Eliza and Jim and I race to set up the blue tent. We get fast pushing the metal sticks into dirt. In the backseat of the car I make up friends for Eliza and Jim and me. I bend my fingers into shapes. There's Duck. Mad Duckter. Horse. Crocodile. Dog. Rabbit and Bent-Ear Rabbit. These friends live in a magic land where animals speak to kids but not grown-ups. Grown-ups are so gribouille they don't know the land can be reached by jumping into a gutter. You shut your eyes and when you touch the bottom of the gutter you swim through clear water until you get to Duckburg. In Duckburg the animals love you. My knuckles get sore when they talk. In my best story there is an evil committed by the Mad Duckter. He scares everyone so much they won't go to his castle. But Duck and Rabbit have grande valeur. They crash into the laboratory of the Mad Duckter and learn he's not evil. He is misunderstood. He has a brave heart but his Mad Duckter laugh gives the idea he's insane.

Our parents sit in the front seats with paper maps. There are pencil marks on famous cathedrals. To Eliza and Jim and me the cathedrals look the same. When the car stops we say "No, another cathedral?" I look at the gargoyles. They stick out their tongues and their eyes bulge. One of them blinks. He is not evil. He is misunderstood. The gargoyle begs for help so I sneak him into the car. He crawls over the front seat. He grabs the steering wheel. He opens his wings of rock and knocks our parents unconscious. Eliza and Jim and I have to hitchhike by ourselves. In Paris we climb the Eiffel Tower with our bare hands. We go hand then hand then hand. That's the way through fear. You think about each bar and not the space between. Under my skin I am steel. I am made of metal knives that slice through dire doom. I am a surgeon. I cut the sky. I fly through the slit. Stitch it.

* * *

There's a closet behind the sky where everything goes dark. I like to hide in closets. I don't like to exist. She cries when she hears me say this. She's a grown-up now. Grown-ups shouldn't cry. I use my finger to wipe her cheek. She takes my hand and squeezes. Steel inside the bones. Blisters on my palm.

The Mysterious Glow on the Hill

Rosalie Viper

At night when you look up at the top of the hill, a strange glow emanates from the dilapidated shack at 22 Darmstatter Road. From the stories my family tells, the house has been unoccupied for 30 years or so, and the old residents were never seen after they left town in 1924. No one ever knew why the house was abandoned, but watching it at night, it's easy to hypothesize a reason.

The only neighbors close enough to the shack were at the bottom of the hill; my house. And one night I sat up in my bedroom and watched the light fade in and out from the mysterious building. It blinked randomly, as if sending a message to whomever dare decipher it.

I used to be a part of the Boy Scouts and we learned Morse Code for one of our merit badges. I decided to try to decode the message, and to my shock, the message was as follows:

“Behind the bookcase is the key.”

I read it over and over again, wondering what the words meant. I eventually brought it to my father, asking him if he knew what the message intended. He brushed me off after his face blushed - embarrassed by the words.

Curious, I walked through my house, examining all the bookcases. There was one situated next to an old stained-glass window holding our vintage books from generations past. I felt around the wooden frame, and to my surprise, a “click” of a latch echoed quietly through the room.

My heart sank and I looked around, hoping my father didn't hear the unlatching of the secret door. I slowly and silently shifted the bookcase away from the wall, and behind the oak shelves were spiral-stairs leading up.

I cautiously climbed them, desperately hoping they wouldn't creak as I did. The higher up the stairs I went, the more pungent the odor inside the small crevice became. Between the walls, a smell of decay enveloped my senses. I gagged, covering my mouth and nose immediately. Nausea wiped over me as I reached the steps' apex. I was losing my balance as I grabbed for the iron railing of the staircase. The cold metal shocked me back to the present.

Taking a slow deep breath, trying not to overwhelm my senses, I grabbed the cracked, wooden floorboards. A sinking feeling hit the pit of my stomach and just as my eyes looked over the edge of the floor, something's large, gaping eyes glared back.

I flinched backwards, but its ice cold hands had already grabbed my fingers. I blinked rapidly, trying to convince my mind that I was just seeing things. Its image wouldn't wane. The beings huge, dark, sunken eyes dilated as I noticed a dark fluid seeping from its lips. A terrifying smile spread across its face, and as its lips retracted I saw its blackened, sharp teeth and snake-like tongue.

A smell emanated from its mouth - horrible, like the sweet smell of rotting fruit and garbage. I dry-heaved again as it inched its face closer to mine. Holding my hands down, it paralyzed me. I closed my eyes as it chattered its teeth together. Darkness hit me - I passed out from fear and when I awoke, I was in an unknown place.

The walls were dripping, rotting away from the building. I couldn't feel my legs and began dragging

myself to the small, dusty window perched about three feet off the ground. With all my strength I pulled myself towards the cracked glass. Horror filled my body. I looked down the hill. My house now rested beneath me and I watched as my father stood in my bedroom window, smiling at me.

If She Could Have A Dance

Chelsea Neel

Eyes closed. Dry temperate air — breathe in, breathe out. “Okay,” thinks Margaret, “it’s time.” She reaches out to find a void. Her hand racing around in a panic, she tightens her right eyelid and peeks out the left to see she’s alone. “Dammit Joe!” she says as she dizzies herself spinning to find him, “You can’t keep walking away each time. I know you think I’m crazy, but it’s gonna work!”

In the other room Joe stands sipping his hot coffee staring out a window. “I’m not a fucking idiot, you can’t just hypnotize me Maggy,” he whispers through the steam rising from his mug. The trees are beginning to sway, wearing new dresses of orange and yellow; some are even pink if the light catches them at the right angle. These days, the sun has grown a little lazy in its rising and then rushes to its sleep. Joe loves this time of year, it reminds him of when he was young “JOE where ARE YOU?!” ... and free.

Ya know, it’s not really Margaret’s fault, she first fell in love with Joe in a smoky jazz bar while he sat at his drums, filling the room with intricate detail under all the other sound. “Ooo a man with rhythm” she thought to herself as she watched sweat bead down his face in focused concentration. They were younger then, Joe with his black framed glasses and buttoned shirt with rolled up sleeves, Margaret with her delicate curves and reddened lips. She first saw him weeks before he knew her face, always sitting there on his throne focusing on his craft as music swirled around the room like stardust. He hadn’t noticed her at the back week after week always listening, swaying to his every beat. As hope would have it, one night Joe finally saw her dark tousled hair resting on her pale skin. He couldn’t help but notice her thin ruby lips. It was like she was suddenly illuminated in the corner, dark blue dress beaded at the hem resting just below her knee. He couldn’t tell if she was real or a dream the way the candle at the high top table illuminated the long slim cigarette in her hand. He could almost smell her perfume across the musty windowless basement bar. “I hope she doesn’t leave” thinks Joe as his heart raced to match his drumming. When the musicians changed he approached her and asked if he could buy her a drink, which she only welcomed if she could have a dance.

“I’m in the kitchen,” responded Joe.

“I don’t know why you always leave me like that,” said Margaret as her footsteps grew closer.

Years had passed since their courtship had lent itself to “yes dears” and “I love yous.” Their exchange now more a diatribe than delicate, a little rough like a whiskey neat or dry martini, nothing like the sweet summer Daiquiri Joe bought Margaret that night long ago. “It’s just that I’m still waiting for that dance — your good looks got you very far, sir, and all that smooth talking made me forget I even asked, but we’re older now and I’m still waiting.” Joe looked over his shoulder at her big brown eyes, “I always loved it when you’d beg me.” Margaret’s porcelain cheeks turned to scarlet. After all these years he could still make her a little clumsy, a little weak. “You know it’s not quite fair that you won’t dance with me, it’s not like I expect much out of our old skinny legs, anyway. I never would have laughed at you then, and you’re a lucky man I don’t laugh at you now,” she said with a chuckle, “It’s just that one would expect a drumming man to be a dancing man, with all that rhythm you’ve got.”

Grabbing his cup from his hand with a smirk, Margaret poured him more coffee, then added a little cream and sugar just before turning with it down the hall. “Perhaps a little less joe will calm his nerves enough to dance with me,” she thought as she went to their room. As she sat against her pillow, Margaret remembered that night, the way her Joey held her for a long moment before buying her that drink. She had never

held the plank of a ship before, stiff and rigid, like it were terrified of the ocean, itself. The way his spine was like a solid pipe as she reached her arms around his neck, covered with cold balmy dew. How his hands pressed her hips evenly on either side like wooden salad tongs. This cool collected man nervous at her touch, unable to find his rhythm as she stood awkward in his arms. "It's just that I really expected my drumming man to be a dancing man..."

Your Child

Tim Frank

As Rostov's eyelids inched open, caked with the gunk of dried tears, a shooting pain angled down from his wrist and along his arm. He was chained to the radiator in the basement again. His tongue was a leather sock and he had a headache like a saw prising open his skull. It was dark, and where Rostov lay - in a pool of his own vomit, shit and piss - it was darker still. He yanked at the handcuff three times then let his arm dangle. Before him was a bottle of water and packet of aspirin. He could just about reach them with his free hand. He knocked back a few pills and gulped the water down in seconds, gasping once he'd emptied the bottle.

'Let me out!' cried Rostov. 'Let me out of here!'

After a while a door opened, illuminating the staircase that snaked down towards the bowels of the basement. A woman wearing a green pleated dress and fifties style wedges, appeared in the shaft of light.

'Honey,' Rostov pleaded. 'I'm sober and I'm never going to drink again.'

'What about the baby?' his wife, Carol, said.

'I'd never hurt that child or the one we're expecting,' he yelled back.

Carol took a step back and began to close the door. Light was slowly edged out by the darkness.

'OK, OK, just release me and I'll never lay a finger on our baby again. It's just the booze that's got me into this mess. I'll get back on the wagon, permanently, and things will change.'

Carol relented. She released her husband from his cuffs, helping him stay upright as he staggered up the stairs. Then Rostov hurried into the bathroom for a shower.

That night Carol and Rostov finished dinner and began to wash up. It was Rostov's turn to dry. The baby, Alex, was happily covering himself in raspberry jam in his high chair - globs of it falling into his tray like clotted blood. Rostov reached over to touch his wife's pregnant belly but instinctively she swatted him away. Rostov sunk his head in resignation and dropped the dish cloth into the sink. He went to watch the news in the living room.

After Carol had put Alex to bed there was a knock on the door. Rostov flicked the telly on mute as Carol opened up. There was some indistinct chatter by the front step, then two men wearing suits and grey overcoats hustled into the kitchen where Rostov joined them. Without an invitation the two men seated themselves and flashed their badges.

'I'm Chief Inspector Belle,' said the man with a neatly clipped moustache and sideburns, 'and this is my partner Inspector Green. Do you know why we're here tonight?'

The couple shook their heads. Belle crossed his legs and felt his chin.

'Let me ask you, what's life like on an army barracks such as this? I'm sure it's a very supportive, close-knit community, right?'

'It's an extremely friendly place to live, yes,' nodded Carol.

'I can imagine,' said Belle. 'And in times of trouble it wouldn't surprise me if you all close ranks.'

'What are you getting at detective?' said Rostov.

Detective Green took out a couple of pictures of babies, and spread them neatly across the surface of the dining room table.

'I call this the Nickelodeon line up,' Green chuckled.

'Excuse me, Mr and Mrs Rostov,' said Belle, 'but inspector Green is new. People expect great things of him. I don't. Anyway, do you recognise any of these children?'

'They're so young,' said Carol, 'they could be anyone and the photos aren't very clear. No, we can't be sure. Can you tell us what this is all about? We want to help but we're clueless.'

'Mrs Rostov,' said Belle, 'these are babies who belong to parents that live in this army barracks. The children are missing. Surely you must have heard the news?'

Rostov slid the photos back towards Green and said, 'We know nothing, and that's the truth.'

'Listen,' said Belle, 'I served in the forces for a short time. I know what it's like for soldiers coming home from a war zone. PTSD they call it, don't they? I mean these guys they can just flip...crack under the strain and god knows what they're capable of. How long were you out there Mr Rostov?'

'Over a year,' Rostov said.

'What happened to you on your tour?'

'Nothing out of the ordinary. Why?'

'I'm just trying to piece together what might have happened to these babies. Some possible motives.'

'But I don't understand why are you bothering us?'

'We intend to follow all possible avenues. We're interviewing everyone in the barracks that were posted in Iraq in the last couple of years. The fathers of the missing babies were on tour during that period and we think there might be some kind of connection. It's just a theory for now but to tell the truth we don't have much to go on.'

'So, because we fought for our country, we're suspects?'

'For the moment nothing is being ruled out. These children are just missing for now, but who knows what will become of them. But I would just like to add this; be careful Mrs Rostov, I wouldn't be surprised if your child is next.'

'You're way out of line Inspector,' said Rostov, 'how dare you come into my house and speak to us that way? I'd like you both to leave.'

Belle smiled sheepishly, then nudged Green who ceased scribbling his copious notes.

'Let's go,' said Belle.

Carol showed them out. She returned with a furrowed brow, wringing her hands.

Rostov leaned against the kitchen countertop and sighed. 'Don't let them get into your head. I'm sure the babies will turn up soon, unharmed. And you have nothing to fear about me.'

'I'm phoning the Duncans,' Carol said, 'I think I recognised their child but I didn't want to say anything just in case.'

'Well I'm turning in,' said Rostov.

'Just like that? You're not concerned that one of your friends might have lost their baby?'

'I'll start to worry when there's some concrete news.'

'I don't get you. Fine. Go to bed. Just bury everything like you always do.'

'Jesus, Carol, give me a break, I'm trying.'

That night Rostov had to face his dreams stone cold sober. He was determined to clean up his act but he was scared of the thoughts that lurked just below the surface of his mind. He settled down into bed and popped four sleeping tablets into his mouth. He was ready for a rough night.

After what seemed like just an hour, he saw a young barefoot woman pad lightly into his room. She had olive skin and balanced a baby on her hip. The woman had searing white eyes and a tattoo on her forehead in the shape of a red and black egg. The baby's head was split open with large chunks of brains exposed, shrapnel lining its cheeks. The infant was quiet and held a maniacal grin, revealing blood splattered gums. The woman cut through the silence with a bone chilling cry. Rostov sat up straight in his bed, soaked through with sweat. It was only midnight. He felt he was going crazy because he was convinced he hadn't slept at all. In fact, he believed he'd seen something that wasn't just an apparition, but something alive, made from flesh and blood, something from beyond visiting this world. He couldn't come up with a reason to fully explain why, but he knew dreams weren't that vivid. He'd had terrible nightmares since he'd returned from Iraq. This was different. He needed a drink, something to dampen the pain and obliterate the memories, but he resisted the urge.

His wife wasn't beside him so he went to look for her. He stepped carefully along the darkened hallway outside his bedroom. A beam of moonlight from the spare room was all that allowed him to find his way. He heard the rustling of his wife's nightgown as she moved out of their baby's room. She was cradling their son's head in her arms as he slept quietly. Rostov stopped. She had no sense of him being there. She opened the cupboard along the hall and lay Alex upon a bundle of blankets and pillows. She stroked his cheeks and gave him

a kiss upon his forehead. Rostov rushed back into the master bedroom so he couldn't be seen. Before she could return he was under the covers pretending to be asleep, fuming that his wife had hid the baby from him once again.

The next morning Rostov was hunched over a bowl of cornflakes while his wife was feeding the baby formula from a bottle.

'What did the Duncans say?' Rostov asked.

'Couldn't get through, but I'll call again tonight after work.'

'No need, I'll pay them a visit after my shift.'

Rostov was a gardener working in the barracks - digging up turf, planting flowers and shrubs, mowing the lawn in the summer. But it was autumn now and most of his time was spent raking up leaves. Once he'd finished work that day, he decided he'd have a drink. Just one. He knew his wife would smell it on his breath but he felt she'd lost all faith in him anyway, so what did it matter?

A few hours later, night descended on the barracks and Rostov was propping up the bar, having knocked back six pints with whiskey chasers. In one of the booths beside the exit a dim light exposed someone Rostov recognised, a man who held a tearful expression, smacking his palm against his forehead intermittently. It was Jameson, who served in Iraq at roughly the same time as Rostov. He was married and had a young child. As if trying to float down a choppy river, Rostov pushed himself away from the bar and moved towards his friend. He wanted to say hello and fish for news but as he struggled to steady himself he saw Jameson stand, grab hold of the door that led outside and then limp through it. He disappeared out of sight.

As Rostov stepped out of the bar the fresh air hit him like a boxer's jab and his knees buckled. He looked around and finally saw Jameson in the distance, staggering towards the park, the place where Rostov had spent so many hours working.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion and then as he entered the park he heard the most terrifying sound. It was high-pitched wailing like he'd never experienced before. As he got closer to the source of the shrieking, he could make out two men underneath a tree laying objects in a shallow hole dug in the ground. It was then that Rostov realised the objects were babies. He stopped in his tracks when he witnessed one of the men raise a muddy spade over his shoulder and sent it crashing down to the ground, bludgeoning to death one of the children. There was the sound of a skull cracking. Before Rostov knew it, the murderer had passed the spade along to the other man who took his turn to bash in the brains of another child. The cries were swallowed up by the night until silence reigned amongst the flowers and trees that surrounded the dead infants.

Rostov vomited and collapsed to his knees. He couldn't believe what he had just seen. Maybe the alcohol was playing tricks with his mind? He'd never experienced anything so shocking in his life. Not since the war that is. The noise of his retching alerted the men to his presence and they gathered around him. He recognised Duncan and then Jameson followed. They were both from his battalion that had been posted in Iraq. He believed this was the last few seconds on this earth.

'I won't tell anyone,' Rostov pleaded.

The men loomed over him.

Duncan said, 'We're not going to hurt you.'

'I don't understand, what are you doing?' said Rostov.

'We had no choice,' said Jameson, slurring his words. 'They're here.'

'Who's here?'

'The families we killed. They've come for us, for revenge and to take over our babies' bodies. We couldn't let them take our children so we had to kill them ourselves.'

'But this is madness, you're all sick. Look what you've done. You'll never get away with this.'

'We don't want to; our children are gone. There's nothing for us to live for. They'll come after you and your kid too Rostov. They will take over your mind, there's no resisting it. Now go before you get blamed for what we've done. Remember your child is ripe. That means he's ready to be taken over. Kill him before they can get to him.'

Then Rostov's mind went blank. He was suddenly transported to another time and another place. He recognised where he was but he felt too disoriented to pin it down in his mind. Then he realized why - he had

been hiding from this experience for a long time.

In a city turned to rubble, bodies - both Iraqi soldiers and UK forces - were strewn across the wasteland, as inanimate as the concrete they lay upon. Tanks traversed deserted streets as soldiers were given the all clear to march forward. Rostov moved through this barren scene, taking pictures and dictating some ideas for the army magazine. Around every corner on bullet ridden walls he found strange signs - blood red and black coloured oval shapes. He took some shots of them, clueless as to what they meant. As he passed a deserted building with cracked doorways and smashed window panes he heard the whimper of what could only be a small child. Rostov went to investigate, stepping into the ground floor of the block and then down into the basement where he could make out the deep tones of a man's voice emanating from behind a cluster of burning firewood. Rostov lifted his rifle and aimed it into the smoke as he saw movement behind the blaze.

'Come out!' he said, coughing.

'Please,' came a woman's voice. 'We peace, we peace.'

'Come the fuck out!'

A woman, *the* woman, that he'd seen in his dream that wasn't a dream, appeared. She was barefoot and carried a baby on her hip. There was an elliptical tattoo on her neck.

'No kill, please,' she said.

'Where's the man? I heard a man's voice.'

'What? No understand. Please, no shoot.'

'I'm here to help. I won't shoot but get the man out here, now.'

Just then someone in Iraqi army fatigues jumped out from behind the flames, screaming and aiming a Kalashnikov. Before Rostov knew it, he was firing his weapon, pointing instinctively as smoke from the fire burnt his eyes, blinding him temporarily.

Then everything went quiet. As the smoke cleared Rostov could see what he'd done. Three bloodied carcasses. He stepped closer to the corpses, crouched down and looked into their eyes. The woman was still alive. With her last breaths she uttered the words, 'I take your child.'

Rostov felt himself jolt back into the present moment - the park, the trees and the grass beneath him. He had to get back to check on Alex. A part of Rostov felt he was subject to some kind of mass hallucination - his mind warped by his experiences in Iraq just like his friends - the other felt his child was in the utmost danger and only Rostov could save him. It was very late. He guessed his wife would know he'd been drinking and when he sneaked into his home and crept up the stairs he discovered his wife asleep in their room and that Alex had been removed from his cot again. Rostov searched all the usual hiding places - the cupboard, the closet under the stairs, behind the curtains in the living room and the wardrobe in the spare room where he finally found him. Alex was so calm, breathing deep and easy. Rostov gathered the baby up in his arms and, along with a bottle of vodka he'd stashed underneath the sink, he carried them down to the basement.

The place stunk of bleach and faeces. He positioned Alex on a quilt and watched the baby's pudgy hands grasp at thin air as his chest moved in and out. He could only dream of such peace and at that moment he felt more love for the child than anything he could imagine. Rostov took a swig of liquor, lay in the fetal position beside the infant and waited. But he didn't know what he was waiting for and when he heard footsteps moving down into the basement he couldn't think of any excuse to explain to his wife why he had taken the baby and why he was drunk again. But there was something strange about the sound of the steps. They were light and echoed ethereally in a way he'd never heard before, creating sounds like pebbles skimming across a lake. This wasn't his wife. Rostov sat up straight, wiped his bleary eyes and blinked furiously, trying to wake himself up from his dream state. But no matter what he tried the footsteps kept thrusting through his consciousness until out of the shadows a figure unmasked itself. It was the woman who had haunted him last night. She was panting like a dog. She carried the deformed baby - skull shattered and the flesh of his eyes torn.

'Who are you? What do you want?' Rostov said.

'You know, you know,' said the woman.

'I won't let you take my boy.'

'There be no choice. You took mine, now I take yours.'

The woman pulled up her shirt and revealed her belly. On it was a black and red oval-shaped tattoo.

'This is mark of my home. Our people in town you and you friends kill. The town special. We know suffer, we know death, we know to control life after death. We special people in Iraq and you pay for it'

'I don't understand, you mean that your people in your town have special powers?'

'Yes.'

'Look I didn't want to kill your child. What happened out there wasn't me and trust me, I'm sorry for your loss, so sorry. But I can't allow you to take my baby. Take my life if you have to but not my child's.'

The woman knelt down and placed her baby beside Rostov's.

'I come not for you. I need you baby's body for my baby.'

Rostov reached for the bottle of vodka and chugged back all that was left of its contents.

'I can't take this,' he said, slurring his words but seeing things as clearly as he ever had. 'There must be some other way.'

'No choice.'

'But surely you understand I can't lose my baby?'

'It is fair. Justice. Now take you child and strangle the neck so my baby can become you baby.'

'I won't. I won't!'

But as if he was an automaton being controlled by outside forces he reached over to Alex and put his hands around the infant's tiny neck and began to squeeze. Rostov grimaced and then cried out, 'No!'

The baby began to struggle as the Iraqi child became fainter to the eye, slowly disappearing from sight.

'I can't stop,' he said, 'please god help me from hurting my little boy.'

The woman gave a ghoulish grin and nodded in encouragement as Rostov's hands tightened their grip.

Alex struggled, but not in the throes of death as one might expect, but in a spasm of wakefulness. His eyes shone, as if recognising his dad for the first time.

'Alex,' Rostov whispered, 'I can't protect you anymore. I pray that you thrive in another world because this one doesn't deserve you. I certainly don't.'

Rostov collapsed onto the unforgiving concrete, teeming with ants. A dripping faucet could be heard from behind the washing machine in the corner.

Rostov came to as he felt sharp stabbing pains against his cheeks.

'What have you done? Wake up!'

It was Carol. She was slapping and shaking him until his mind cleared and the light from the single bare lightbulb brought the scene into focus.

'Carol,' Rostov said, watching as she carried Alex's limp body, 'I didn't mean to kill him, but you've got to believe me I had no choice. I can't explain because you'd never understand.'

'What are you talking about? Alex is fine. But you've had your last chance, you have to leave this house, for good. You're so drunk you don't even know whether you've killed your own son or not.'

'He's OK? Can I see?'

Carol pointed Alex's face towards Rostov who looked into his baby's eyes and in his foggy state of mind he could swear he saw irises shaped like ovals, coloured red and black. At that moment he felt he'd found some kind of strange salvation, and although he knew this might be one of the last times he would be allowed to be in touching distance of his son, he believed he had bestowed upon his child a great gift - a genuine legacy. He had given life.

Space Race: Aliens, President Kennedy, and Conspiracy

Tim Frank

[Note to Readers: The U.S. Government—widely recognized for its accuracy, efficiency, and expediency—has always denied the existence of aliens; the kind from outer-space, not the kind from outer-countries. We will flatly (because of the shape of this page) state for the record that we believe aliens do exist, and the government also believes this, but the government (“every once in a while for the people”) has conducted a cover-up about aliens, using top-secret blankets in top-secret hangars in top-secret places no one has ever heard of such as Area 51, Nevada, The Pentagon, and The Bermuda Triangle.]

As early as October 1957, the Soviet Union (“Roo-skees”) launched the Sputnik 1 satellite, following a failed attempt to launch a Beatnik. A couple months later, the U.S. (“Yang-kees”) launched the Explorer 1 satellite into the exact same space. Ever since then, the U.S. and Russia—and, later, even the Chinese, French, Indians, and Elon Muskians—have openly admitted that there is a space race. This clearly means two things: (1) Aliens are routinely racing in space; and (2) Various earthling government representatives (astronauts, cosmonauts, Argonauts, and Whatnots, including people, monkeys, dogs, and guinea pigs) have traveled to space to observe, and probably participate in, the races.

Using either deductive or inductive logic, one can easily draw, or at least sketch, one’s own conclusions about aliens (assuming one has paper and pencil handy; caution—do not use deductive or inductive logic near water). The reader does not need to rely on any governments’ misinformation program which simultaneously maintains that a space race does exist, but aliens do not. Millions of people believe that aliens exist. In fact, more people believe in the aliens than they do in the government, mainly because more people have actually seen aliens in person, whereas they have rarely ever seen their government representatives, except possibly in a TV commercial around election time.

Even the most casual observer realizes that even spendthrifts like Congresspersons would not approve and fund a program to spend a gazillion dollars, work more than 60 years, train hundreds of space cowboys and cowgirls, hit golf balls on the Moon, drive Radio Shack RC cars on Mars, station the L. Ron Hubbard Telescope up yonder, and build an International Space Station (IHOP) —with various nations like China, Spain, Texas—just to pick up some rocks and invent Velcro. Okay, it *is* the government we’re talking about, so maybe the foregoing makes sense, but we think it makes even more sense that the government would do all that stuff because they are in cahoots (Latin for “secret meetings”) with extraterrestrials (Latin for “more than one extraterrestrial”).

Of course the government can’t just come right out and say: “Good evening, fellow citizens. We want to inform you that we are in cahoots with extraterrestrials.” Such an announcement would cause uncontrollable panic, not seen since the distressing Cabbage Patch doll shortage of Christmas 1983, wherein “anything for my Susie” parents—demonstrating the true spirit of the season—attacked one another during festive Yuletide riots (really) at K-Mart’s. If the government actually said that aliens exist, good citizens would start wearing aluminum foil hats and spend too much unproductive time learning to speak Klingon, rather than spending so much productive time watching ESPN channels 1 through 42 and “So You Think You Have Talent and Can Survive On An Island and Can Dance *and* Can Be An Idol and Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?”

Concerned for its citizens’ safety and security—along with believing that most citizens are not smarter than fifth graders—the government obviously has no choice but to keep any alien encounters secret, and therefore to employ an official double-secret probation technique called the cover-up. The technique was, and still is, most widely used by Mary Kay and Revlon, but the government isn’t too

concerned with cosmetics, except when used on animals, most of which don't even wear makeup. But the government is concerned with presidents of the United States, particularly any who are young, smart, handsome, Catholic, and choose to live in Camelot, rather than in D.C. Of course that president was John Jack "PT-109" Fitz Gerald Kennedy. Tragically, on November 22, 1963 (it was a truly terrible day for America and the world), President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. Ever since that fateful day, many Americans believe there was a conspiracy behind the president's death, and that the government conducted a cover-up.

Unfortunately, many Americans did not trust the government, and people believed the government was certainly capable of conducting secret operations and then covering them up. Most Americans were familiar with the infamous 1947 Roswell incident where everybody knows the government orchestrated a massive coverup of a crashed alien flying saucer, to convince people that it was just a regular ol' weather balloon; at least they didn't claim that it was swamp gas! The Roswell coverup set the standard for ensuing mistrust of the government, especially when it came to matters about space and anything to do with humans traveling to or in space, or any non-human beings who were probably traveling around in space. After all, it was only sixteen years after the Roswell incident - with the subject still very fresh in everyone's mind - that President Kennedy was sadly taken from the nation and world, and the collective "us" of our country. So it is completely understandable that most of the public did not believe President Kennedy was killed by only one man - a lone gunman. Claims of a conspiracy and a government coverup took hold immediately. The various conspiracy theories involved Vice President Lyndon "Daddy Bird" Johnson, The Mob, Jimmy Hoffa and the AFL-CIO, the CIA, the FBI, the Black Panthers, Siegfried and Roy's White Tigers, the Russians and KBG, "WKRK in Cincinnati," Fidel Castro and Cuba—to name just a few. Some Americans even believe that President Kennedy's assassin was the grassy knoll or the Texas School Book Depository building! However, officially the government concluded that the president was shot by one, and only one, man—either John Wilkes Booth or Lee Harvey Oswald. (An expert criminal profiler noted that the shooter would be a person who used "at least three names.")

A quick investigation by the astute Warren Commission eliminated the first suspect, mainly because he had been dead for almost a century. Therefore, Oswald had to be the man. When arrested, Oswald did not help his case when he yelled—in Spanish and Russian—nonsensical comments like: "Hey, no way I could have pulled this off solo! Just watch the 'Kennedy Conspiracy' shows on the *History Channel!*"

So the Roswell incident and the tragic assassination of President Kennedy solidified for many Americans a distrust in the government and a stalwart belief that the government could possibly in fact be involved in both conspiracies and coverups.

A certain percentage of the public believed - and still does believe - that the Roswell incident and President Kennedy's untimely demise were actually indirectly, and possibly directly, related. The theory is that U.S. presidents are briefed about the most important ultra-secret government projects and activities, and that President Kennedy was well-aware that a UFO and alien beings were discovered at the Roswell crash site, and the remains of both were housed in a likewise ultra-secret government facility. For some, that belief led to a rather short leap to concluding that UFOs, aliens, and outer space were the real reason behind President Kennedy's affinity for, and urgency about, the U.S. space program. In short, he wanted to get Americans into space in an effort to find out what was up with aliens. Despite the fact that aliens may have been visiting Earth since at least 1947 - and most likely for centuries or millennia - it seemed entirely plausible that outer space would be a pretty good place to run into aliens. And one place that aliens might be more inclined to visit was the Moon, mainly because it was closer to outer space and there was less traffic.

Why else would President Kennedy have been so adamant about putting a man on the moon? And why else would he want to beat the Russians? Clearly, the president had the truly visionary perspective that the Moon was the closest place to Earth where there might be aliens, and he probably had been briefed that the Soviets figured the same thing! After all, why would the Soviets also be so interested in outer space and the Moon? Does anyone really believe that humans wanted to go to the moon for the main reason that President Kennedy famously proclaimed in September 1962: "We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard"? Go to the Moon just because it is hard to do?! But of course he couldn't come right out and say, "We choose to go to the moon because we hope

to meet some aliens up there.” That would have given away the big secret: that the president and the government knew for a fact that aliens exist, and that they were sure of that because of the UFO and alien(s) discovered at Roswell!

Unfortunately, the president did not live to see his brave vision completed. As we know, the president’s life was abruptly taken just thirteen months after he delivered his “To the Moon” speech. For some, it seemed that there was a strange and unseemly coincidence between the Roswell incident, the president’s interest in space, and the loss of so great a man, so soon after his declaration to land a man on the moon. For some, there was actually no coincidence, but rather a conspiracy to prevent the president from moving forward with his bold initiative to go to the moon, and to do so in less than eight short years. For many people’s thinking, a conspiracy was enacted, and then a coverup was put in place. Of course if either the conspiracy or the coverup were true, or both, they did nothing to stop the progress of the President Kennedy’s principal legacy regarding the ultimate travel from this planet - the establishment of NASA’s Human Space Flight Program, dramatically accelerating the space race.

The Russians beat the US by putting the first man in space in 1961. The US beat the Russians by landing the first man on the moon in 1969. There have been six operational space stations - one currently. Five hundred thirty-six humans have traveled in space. There are almost four thousand satellites. Thirteen countries have space programs. Multiple countries are working to land on the moon. Rovers have explored Mars and at least one satellite is leaving the solar system. Several countries are planning missions to Mars. Thousands of space tourists have paid for tickets.

Almost \$3 trillion has been spent on space projects. A Tesla sports car is orbiting the Earth. Vroom! The space race is alive and well. Aliens are no doubt amused, watching the race.

BaJuees

Jason Gaidís

It moved. The lamp by the bed moved.

Evan closed the dresser drawers, turned, and saw the lamp move in the shadowy darkness of his bedroom. The lamp hadn't moved like it had been touched. It had moved like it had been willed to move by a monster that lived inside closets and under beds.

Evan knew this monster. Although he'd never seen it with his eyes, and Mom and Dad swore that the creature didn't exist, he knew the truth. He'd felt its presence plenty of times: in the shadows, close behind him, just out of sight. He also knew its name.

It was called *BaJuees*.

Earlier, Evan had seen his dresser move and knew the creature willed the drawer to open. He'd ran to shut the drawer, but then the lamp next to the bed moved. BaJuees could have changed his room to be deadly at any time. Maybe the rug wasn't a rug anymore? Maybe BaJuees changed into a boy-eating monster pit full of his monster friends?

Regardless of the danger, he had to be brave. Mom had asked him to be brave when he first told her about BaJuees and he couldn't disappoint her. Dad would tell him to run, so that's what he did.

As he ran, he was sure that huge tentacles - just behind him and out of sight - slithered out from the closet and reached for his feet. He knew the rug was now a pit full of BaJuees's friends, so jumped into the air just in time to feel the tentacle barely missed him. He landed face down on the far side of the rug, scrambled to his feet and kept running.

He tripped over a tentacle - and not one of the numerous toys on his floor - and fell, rolling and kicking the tentacle away. Then he was up leapt the final three steps into bed. He bounced against the wall then pulled the covers over his head.

BaJuees growled under Evan's bed, probably mad that it missed dinner. Mom said that it was just the heater vent making the noise, but Evan knew the truth.

Daddy's Problems

Jason Gaidis

I arrived at the small house and radioed Dispatch that I'd arrived. I clicked on the body camera attached to my bullet proof vest and Dispatch informed me that whoever made in the 9-1-1 was not responding, although the line was still active.

The ocean of thigh-high grass, that separated the house from my squad car on the gravel road, was turning to seed. Two ropes hung from the old oak tree and I couldn't tell if they were nooses or remnants of a tire swing. From the porch, the house still looked abandoned: the paint chipping from rotting planks; the windows opaque with grime and neglect; the graveyard of unread newspapers molding at my feet. Even the door was so rickety that I knocked on the frame.

"Indianapolis Metropolitan Police."

Silence.

I knocked on the door again. "IMPD, is anyone there?"

After a few moments, the door creaked open and the rancid smell of rotting food and human excrement made my nose tingle. Behind the smell, a young girl, she couldn't be over five, peaked her wide eyes from the shadows.

"Is your mother or father home? I'm here to make sure everything is alright," I said.

She opened the door a little more, and stepped backward. I could see now that she was holding an old cell phone to her ear. "Daddy is here," she said, before turning and vanishing into the shadows beyond.

I stepped through the door and removed my sunglasses, allowing my eyes to instantly adapt to the lower light of the living room. The girl stood next to someone who appeared to be her brother. Both wore pressed clothes like they'd just returned from church - which wouldn't be out of possibility since it was Sunday. Both children had nothing on their feet, freshly combed hair and dispassionate expressions on their faces. A trail of crayons connected the coloring books at the children's feet to the mountain of use microwave dinner trays in the corner and the colony of flies that called it home.

"Lisa, who is this?" the brother asked.

Lisa closed and ended the call on the phone, then dropped it to the floor.

"Charlie - 178, the call ended," came Dispatch's voice through my ear piece.

I keyed my throat microphone, "Copy, stand by."

"He's here because of Daddy", Lisa said to her brother.

Lisa motioned for me to follow them as they walked past the entry way to the kitchen and down the unlit hallway. I followed them, clicking on my flashlight and glancing into the kitchen as I passed. It was a mess with beer cans, molding food, bugs, and syringes and rubber tubing next to the sink.

Following the children down the hall, I shined my light into the first bedroom and saw nothing except the red reflective eyes of rats peering back at me. The smell of shit and piss became stronger as we passed the bathroom where my flashlight caught the overflowed brown mass of the toilet and the brimming bath of excrement in the tub.

As soon as I was beyond the bathroom, and shining my light at the master bedroom door, the smell of death smashed into my face, causing my senses to heighten, the hair on my neck to stand, and my hand to reach for my service pistol.

"Children, get back behind me," I said to the two. I keyed my throat mic, "Charlie - 178, require backup, same location."

The children moved around behind me without brushing against me in the narrow hallway, as the dispatch voice came through my ear piece, "And officers in the vicinity, respond for backup," then came the address. Immediately, another voice came on and said, "Charlie - 133, show me going five miles out." Charlie-133 was my

my good friend, Christopher, and I immediately felt better that he would be backing me up.

I keyed my throat mic twice to acknowledge all, then drew my weapon. I flipped on the pistol's tactical light and slid my flashlight back into its holder as I moved closer to the death beyond the door.

"Police! Is anyone in the bedroom?"

I heard whimpering beyond the door. It was faint, but it was there. I kicked the door just inboard of the knob and the door flung open, revealing a musty room with filtered light from one window. The smell of death was overpowering as I scanned from the center of the room to the left corner, then back toward the right. My flashlight landed on the man sitting in a chair. He was naked except for his underwear. The business end of the double-barreled shotgun rested in what was left of his mouth, at the bottom of what was left of his head - his brains and bits of skull plastered across the wall and ceiling behind him. His left toe still rested on the trigger near the floor.

Whimpering from the far corner. Turning, gun still leveled, I saw two emaciated children roped to a bar on the wall. Their mouths were gagged with duct tape. One was not moving, but the other squirmed and whimpered, eyes closed to my light.

I moved toward the children, while simultaneously holstering my pistol and keying my mic, "Charlie - 178, require EMS same location. Three victims. Area clear."

I dropped to my knees and, as gently as I could while not being slow, removed the duct tape from the responsive child. She looked at me. I knew those eyes. They were the same eyes from around the door when I first arrived.

I turned to face the two children who had ushered me to this room and caught a last glimpse of them as they dissolved into the grey light from the window. Smiles now on both of their faces.

Then the other bound child, the brother, began to move. I went to work freeing them and wondering what my body camera would reveal about tonight.

Petrification

Leslie Soule

This evening, the wind howled like a banshee, as a cloaked figure stood hunched over in a circle of statues.

“Ow!” exclaimed Rella, clutching wildly at the third-eye region of her forehead. *Why does second sight have to hurt so damn bad?* She gazed at the statue with her physical eyes as the migraine gripped her head with all the strength of a bodybuilder and threatened to squish it into goo. *This was a bad idea, she surmised – a very bad idea indeed.*

“Yo, noob,” the sorcerer said, snapping his fingers and pointing at her from across the way, “You shouldn’t do that, you know.”

Do what? I didn’t do anything but touch one of the statues.

“They were people once,” she said in her defense. *Maybe they still are, somewhere underneath all that stone.* Still, her head throbbed mercilessly. The pain was all-encompassing. *I had no idea that the statues were going to hurt me.*

“There’s a reason why the Order forbids others from coming to this place.” The pain began to subside and Rella looked around at the courtyard she stood in, surrounded by rose bushes and statues. He tossed Rella a glass potion bottle and she caught it deftly. It held a cloudy translucent liquid of pale hue.

“Thanks,” said Rella to the stranger.

“You gonna start trying to read dead people’s minds?” said the sorcerer. “Is that why you’ve come?”

Of course it is. Only, she wouldn’t tell him that. She’d come out of pure curiosity. And she wanted to test her powers of telepathy to their limits. *Can I read the minds of people who have turned themselves to stone?*

“No,” answered Rella. “I merely wanted to see the Castle of Shadows.” She looked up, and saw the dark castle itself, imposing, looming over her.

“Good,” the sorcerer said. “The living dead do not like to be disturbed.” He turned, and the hem of his crimson robe swished itself over the stones. “Drink that before it gets warm,” he said, and then began to walk off.

“Wait!” Rella rushed forward. *Maybe this sorcerer knows more than he lets on.*

The man turned, but his gaze did not look friendly.

“I did – I tried to read the mind of one of these statues. I’m a researcher for the Archival Keep, and I ran across the tale of the seven. I wanted to know why they’d turn themselves to stone – what could possibly have driven them to such utter despair!”

She fought to hold back tears. Then she uncorked the bottle, and drank down this strange liquid – anything, to get rid of this headache.

“You fool,” the man replied. “You poor, poor fool.”

“It was worth a try,” said Rella.

“Have you learned your lesson?” he asked. Then he looked down at the empty bottle, his green eyes glittering. “What is my aid worth to you?”

The wind howled. Rella struggled to come up with an answer. “I can give you access to the Archives of the Willow Tower.” She took a key from the pocket of her robes.

The man smiled, chuckling softly, and looked thoughtful for a moment. He was rather handsome, and young, for a sorcerer – not like the tired old men that Rella was used to working with in the Archives. Rella led him to the Willow Tower – the home of the local Wizards’ Circle. A staircase spiraled up around the outside of the tower, and she walked up and up and up, with him following, until she reached a green door at the top.

“The wizards here like helping people, but their help is not free. Usually, they charge a fee, to use the Pan-aceagyrosphere, but as it is the weekend, the other wizards are out, and we should be able to use it. I don’t think they’ll mind.”

Rella stuck the key into the lock, and turned until she heard a click. They entered into the tower and Rella was struck by how barren the interior was, since she'd been here last. Inside, there was one bookcase, against the wall, two tired old wooden chairs, and a stone pedestal, with a glowing glass sphere that emitted a white light. By some unseen force, the orb turned slowly on the pedestal.

"Put your hands on the sphere," said Rella. Now it was her turn to feel powerful. The stranger set his hands upon the orb and his eyes grew wide in amazement. Clearly he felt the energy of the orb.

"What do you think?"

"It's wonderful."

Rella nodded. "Yes. Thank you – hey, I don't know your name."

"My name is Zerovius, but you can call me Zer."

"And how did you come to be a wizard, Zer? Did you always have the gift?"

Zer laughed heartily. "Gift? What exactly do you think we do? Shoot flames and lightning from our hands? No, none of us have the "gift" unless you mean the gift of knowledge and the ability to research, like everyone else. To have access to the secrets of the Order, is to have the gift." He took a key from his pocket and held it aloft. "This key has more inherent magic than I do."

"Is that key...to the Tower of Shadows?"

The man nodded. Rella had so many questions.

She pointed in the direction of the courtyard, below. "How did that happen? They turned themselves to stone, right? So they must have had magical powers. And what happened to me, when I tried to reach them telepathically..."

Zer, by a great effort of will, took a hand from the sphere, and set it on her shoulder. "Do not worry about such things. In any case, it is a long, drawn-out tale, and there is time for the telling of it later." He turned toward Rella and she saw how the moonlight streaming in through the window cast his face in a pleasing arrangement of light and shadows. Lightning cracked, and rain began to fall.

"It appears that we have some time," Rella replied. She walked over to the two chairs that stood by the wall, and pulled them over, sitting in one and gesturing toward the other. And they talked until morning, about how the seven turned themselves to stone.

Meet the Authors

Author Bios

Kim Merrill's plays have been produced regionally and off-off-Broadway, with support from the Edgerton Foundation New American Play Award, Playwrights First Award, Sloan Foundation, and publication by Dramatists Play Service. I have an MFA in playwriting from Columbia University, and my book manuscript "Red Girl Jumping" has received recent fellowship support from the MacDowell Colony, The Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, and Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

Rosalie Viper grew up in a strange town in northern New Jersey where all my unusual encounters started. My stories are a work of fiction, brought to life through dreams and visions. I aspire to share my stories with the world, to find a place where I can escape to and to influence others to follow their dreams.

Chelsea Neel is a wife and cat mom who lives in California. On her days off she enjoys good coffee shops and quiet conversation over games of SkipBo. And she is married to a drummer who does not dance.

Tim Frank specialises in the comic, the dark and the surreal. He has written a semi-autobiographical novel, *Devil in my Veins*, and is currently writing a sci-fi thriller novel.

Jim Peterson is a poet and short story writer. A former U.S. Army officer, business executive, and high school English instructor, Jim resources his diverse background to creatively present readers with poignant relatable experiences about the human condition. Jim's work has appeared in various publications including *Revelry*, *Florida Writers Magazine*, *The Showbear Family Circus*, and *Space*. Jim lives in Melbourne, on Florida's Space Coast.

Jason Gaidis holds a degree in psychology from Purdue University and a MFA in literary fiction from Ashland University. His first publication is forthcoming from *Third Street Writers*.

Leslie Soule is a fantasy/sci-fi author from Sacramento, CA. She has an M.A. in English and is currently working on the final book of her fantasy series, *The Fallenwood Chronicles*.