

# Tainted Tea

*Take a sip and live forever.*



Fall 2009

Tainted Tea™

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# Tainted Tea

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# Letter from the Editors

*Sigh.*

When I think of working on the inaugural issue of *Tainted Tea*, I can't help but picture the scene in *Matilda* when the beastly villain Trunchbull makes chubby, loveable Brucey eat that chocolate cake in the school auditorium. As Trunchbull said of the chef of the cake, our sweat, blood and tears went into making this issue.

But even more so, we were the glutinous Brucey who pillaged cake, stealing pieces of the day to work on the magazine. Chomping bit by bit, shoving every ounce of magazine-cake into our mouths, smearing the disgustingly tasty confection on our faces—tired, reeling, contemplating if it would be better to give up and deal with the humiliation of failure.

Suddenly, our heroine rises with enthusiasm—“You can do it, Brucey!” Matilda yells. Her exuberance causes a bedlam, fans screaming and chanting for the burly boy to finish. Faster, faster he scarfs the cake down, devouring every fluffy morsel until finally—“*burrpppp!*” He's done...and a glass plate comes crashing down on his head.

In this issue, we have great pieces to share. As we read through the stories, there seemed to be a common theme: human psychotics. From two young men who wake up literally red handed, to a boy that meets an unpleasant old woman, and a deranged doll who just needs a home (and an arm, and some eyes...), this issue dives into horror, proving that it's an emotion and not some knife-wielding, super-strengthened manic depressive out to get Neve Campbell.

So sit back, relax, turn on the lights and raise a pinky to our first issue.

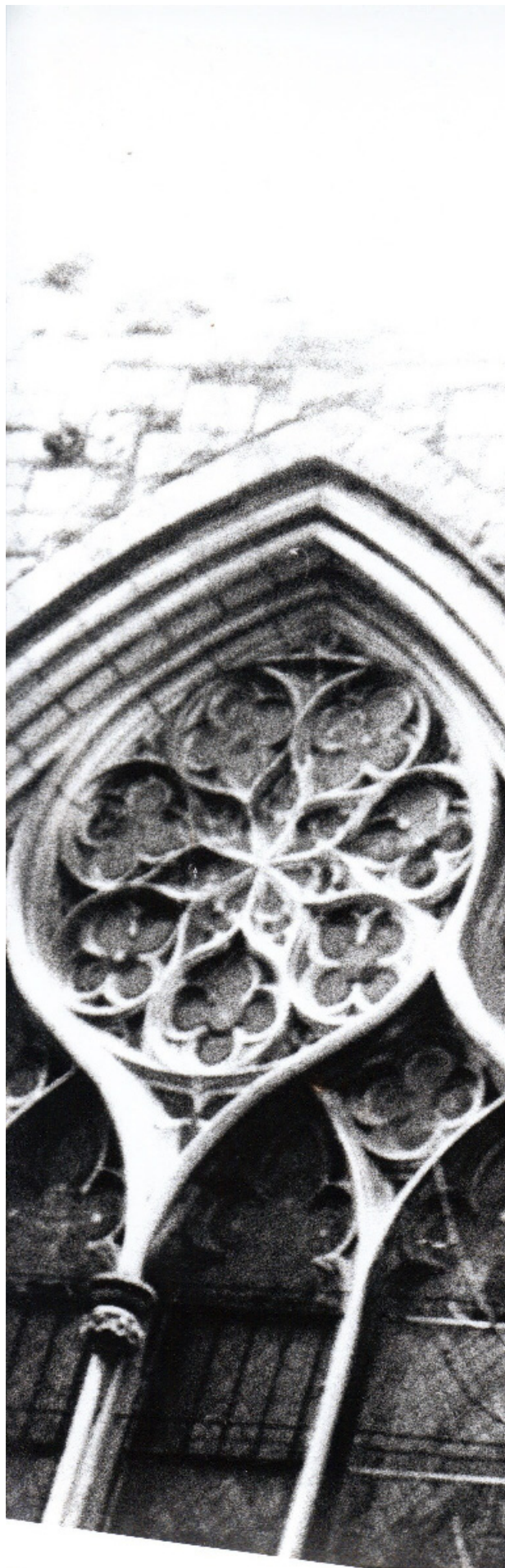


Shane R. Toogood and Kris Fossett  
Editors, *Tainted Tea*



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# The Stairs

*Kris Fossett*



*Photo by Kris Fossett*

He hated the stairs. The stairs were the worst part. The light switch, his savior that helped him escape, was all the way at the bottom of the darkness. This gave the monster plenty of time to rip him to pieces.

But Paul asked him to go to the basement. And he couldn't say no to his big brother.

With one hand gripping the doorknob, he peered over the edge. He took a small, baby step closer. He heard the low grumble of the thing that lurked in the dark corners. He trembled. He thought about a clawed hand gripping around his Smurf pajamas and almost cried.

But he didn't. Paul was in down the hall in the living room, watching *Knight Rider* and playing with his Hot Wheels. He couldn't tell Paul he couldn't get that box because he was too scared. After all, Paul couldn't climb stairs. Not with the leg in that cast that he signed a shaky "A" with black marker on Paul's ankle three weeks ago. And Paul didn't cry when he fell. Paul was too brave. And he wanted to be brave, too.

He took another step forward. His heart pounded in his chest, and small beads of sweat popped from his forehead. He took one more step, and the light shrank. In panic, he turned and stared at the door. He realized that

if he held onto it any longer, the door would close, swallowing him in the darkness, trapping him forever down in the basement with the thing that was nothing but teeth and claws. He shoved the door open and life-saving light shone on the top half of the stairs.

He tiptoed down three stairs and stopped. One more step and the darkness would touch the feet of his pajamas. He didn't want to stop because Paul would wonder what happened to him. And he couldn't let Paul down.

Paul called, "Hey Alexander, are you alright? The monster under the staircase didn't get you or anything, did it?" Paul laughed.

He didn't think it was funny. He burst into tears. He didn't know the monster was under the staircase. He thought the monster was behind the water heater and disappeared once the light shone. If the monster lived under the stairs, there was nothing he could do about it. The monster could live on forever in that darkness. And what's worse, he didn't have a chance. He couldn't reach the light in time, and the monster could always snag the back of his T-shirt as he walked down or up the stairs.

"Alexander? Do you need to me get it?" Paul called.

He shook his head and wiped his tears. "No," he answered. He gritted his teeth. If he couldn't get the box of Micro Machines, Paul wouldn't let him bike to the creek with the other boys on the block after his cast came off. Paul would just shake his head and say, "You're such a baby, Alexander. And babies can't come with us."

He was not a baby. He was brave, like Michael Knight or Optimus Prime. But then again, Michael Knight always had KITT to protect him, and Optimus Prime had a whole team of Autobots ready to help him out.

He was alone.

"Well, what's taking you so long?"

"Sorry, I had to pee," he called from the stairs. He still stood frozen on the third step.

"Okay, hurry up, then. We need more cars in the city. The Hot Wheels need some guys to fight. And you're missing this show."

He did want to play Battle. And watch TV. All he had to do was avoid getting eaten. He nodded. He took one foot and placed it in front of the other. And walked into the darkness.

The musty smell of mothballs and damp stung his nose. He clung to the railing and slid his back against the wall, as far away from the edge of the stairs as he could be.

He could see the dim outline of the light switch.

When he asked Daddy why the light was at the bottom, Daddy only said, "Because that's the way the house was built." He didn't want to press any further. He didn't want Daddy to think he was scared or anything. But he avoided the basement stairs.

Each step groaned. He winced. So much for sneaking quietly passed the monster. He heard it rumble, ready to pounce on him. But if he was quicker, he could escape. And he would be quicker. Paul was counting on him.

Bang! Squeak! Boom! Something darted across the corner of the basement. He screamed, bolted to the bottom of the stairs and slammed on the light.

Light flooded the basement. He breathed and wiped his tears from his cheeks. Suddenly, he saw all his familiar toys: his Big Wheel, his Tonka trucks, and his Little People parking garage. He grabbed Paul's green lightsaber and peeked under the staircase. No monster. The Christmas tree and the scarecrows that Mommy put on the lawn for Halloween, but no monster. Paul was wrong.

"Are you okay?" Paul called from the top of the stairs.

He could only nod. He grabbed Paul's box of Micro Machines and sprinted up the stairs.

Paul smiled. "Thanks, Alexander. And good idea, grab the Ewoks and Chewy from the basement, too, and we can play *Return of the Jedi*." He turned towards the living room. "And don't forget to turn off the light. You know how Mom hates it when you leave the light on."

### **About Kris Fossett**

*Kris Fossett is an editor of Tainted Tea. Though she studied journalism in college, her passion is fiction. Sometime before she dies, she plans to publish a novel.*

# The Devil's Choir

*M.C. Brody*

*"Perhaps a lunatic was simply a minority of one." – George Orwell*

Ian's torment began one blustery winter night in 1973. A young college grad, he'd landed a job as an investigator for the Office of the Public Defender. He'd worked very late that arctic January evening and found himself in Newark's Portuguese section savoring a well deserved late supper.

With a belly full of warm, salty meat, Ian closed his meal with a snifter of Lepanto brandy and a double espresso. He took a deep pull from his Viceroy. Satiated, he leaned back in his chair and rubbed his middle. He took a large sip of brandy and enjoyed the warmth it produced as it branched out and trickled down his chest.

As Ian relaxed in his chair, he felt an angry twinge writhe inside his belly. He heard a shrill scream call out from somewhere in the night. None of the patrons or staff had seemed to notice. He looked through the window and scanned the block where the dreary shades of gray reminded him of old black and white movies. The sidewalks were empty save for mounds of dirty snow that had been deposited by the plows. Winter had sucked the color from the streets. The only exceptions to the colorless night were the red, yellow and green that waited their turn to shine from traffic lights. He tilted the snifter against his tongue and lapped up the last bit of brandy.

He approached the bar and ordered another espresso. The single scream had evolved. It sounded as if a choir stood directly behind him spilling cries into his ears. Again, no one in the restaurant had so much as flinched at the commotion.

"Hey, you hear that?" Ian asked the bar-

tender.

"Hear what?"

"Sounds like... You hear 'em?" Ian said.

The bartender shot Ian a puzzled look.

"Never mind."

He felt another sharp pain wriggle violently, churning his gut. He broke into a cold sweat. He perceived the entire collective moaning in terrible agony. They sounded desperate, anxious. An unsolicited scene flickered in his mind's eye. He witnessed hundreds of writhing bodies as they thrashed and slithered forming an immense ball of slick, roving flesh. He somehow understood that they fed from one another's angst, each moment the mesmerizing moans becoming more intense.

Outside, the frigid night air penetrated Ian's lungs. The choir followed as he walked west on Ferry Street toward his tidy condominium in the business district. He crossed an intersection where five points formed a treacherous traffic pattern just before the train station. The choir's moans were suddenly so ear-splitting that he plugged a forefinger in each ear expecting to find blood on his fingertips. He hugged his gut and lashed his head about wildly searching for the source of the incessant noise.

He saw a woman's silhouette about thirty feet ahead of him inside the underpass. He yelled, "Hey, over here! You hear 'em? Ma'am! Hey!" She ignored him. Panic-stricken, he raced to her and snagged her arm from behind. "What's happening? For God's sake, help me!" The choir had blocked all worldly sound barring him from hearing his own words. He yanked on her arm forcing her to face him. The instant he'd fixed his eyes on her, the infernal choir blared as if they sang through a bullhorn pressed to the

side of his head. Waves of fiery pain rolled and crashed in his belly. He felt as if he were on the brink of implosion being wrung like a sponge on the verge of spurting blood and bile.

Before he could react to this misery, his huge hands moved as if they knew precisely how to remedy his affliction. He watched, stunned, as they reached beneath her scarf and crushed her throat like huge lobster claws. He brought her to the ground and straddled her. Her tiny mitten hands punched at him wildly but her assaults fell on him with the force of a gypsy moth. He watched his hands squeeze her neck so savagely that he thought they might pop her throat open like an infected pus-filled boil. He bounced her head against the icy concrete with the constant rhythm of a metronome set to quarter-note speed. Blood splattered the ground like a busted water balloon and melted a slight depression in the ice. The colorless night made the pooling blood appear black.

The choir silenced and the pain in his belly lifted. Ian was at once overwhelmed with feelings of intense relief and immeasurable horror. Tears quickly froze as they fell from his eyes. He propped her corpse in the crook of a guardrail and a wide cement column. He wrapped her bloody scarf around her neck with tender care as if she were still capable of catching cold. He laid her hands across her lap, closed her legs and welcomed back the sounds of the city. An airplane rumbled above. A train boomed overhead. A bus roared past.

He ran.

He'd gotten a block from his home when he had to stop to spew his semi-digested dinner in the snow.

During the weeks that followed, Ian turned to drink to dull the stinging compunction that gnawed at him. He cut ties with family and friends. After several reprimands regarding his sudden drinking, he was fired from his job. The days and nights became a swirling blur, and he soon found himself behind on mortgage payments. Within a year, Ian was homeless and unemployable.

Ian spent his sober hours at the library reading every book on the supernatural he could find. As the years went by, he kept a journal detailing the choir's manifestations and its victims.

Writing in the journal gave him hope and purpose. He dutifully investigated the details of his entries making it his life's mission to uncover this mysterious affliction. After thirty-seven years, the tattered leather-bound journal had just two blank pages remaining.

Ian's day began just before dark. He awoke from his resting place beneath the Jackson Street Bridge to the harsh wailing of sea gulls. Approaching his sixtieth year, it was necessary that he lay in his makeshift bed for a bit in order to work out the stiffness that settled in his joints during sleep. He watched the sea gulls circle above the river. Colossal splotches of dark cloud cover bruised the sky. He smelled a sweet static scent that warned of an imminent storm. Wind gusts slapped his face with gravel and whipped scattered trash into mini funnels beneath the bridge.

He started down West Market Street. The first raindrops decorated the sidewalk with polka dots the size of bottle caps. About halfway up the block, an all too familiar twinge slithered in his gut. He let out a loud yelp and gave his gut an angry jab. The choir began to wail. "Oh, no. Please God, help me." As he staggered down the block, people took great care to steer clear of him. A large middle-aged woman glared at him from the steps of her front stoop. When Ian neared the stoop, she popped inside her door with the speed and agility of a gymnast.

Shortly after sundown, the city of Newark would have one less resident, a pretty little thing with long black curly hair and smooth sun-kissed skin. As had been the case with each manifestation over the years, the choir used Ian's eyes as the window through which to identify their prey and assert their desire. This assertion was delivered in the form of a frenzied guttural riot from which Ian could not escape.

Powerless, Ian watched the knife in his hand slice her tiny neck. The chorus squealed with unbridled jubilation. She was nearly decapitated. Her tiny head held on to her tiny body by cervical vertebrae and a few flimsy flaps of body tissue. She lay dead, bloody, a horrid mess of jaggedly severed flesh. Appeased, the choir quieted to whisper then melted to silence.

Thunder cracked overhead. Ian's hulking hands were caked with blood. He drew quick

shallow breaths as he frantically washed his hands in dirty water that sped along the gutter. He stuffed his blood stained duster into a storm drain. A mix of tears and rainwater ran down his cheeks as the purple summer sky pelted him with raindrops. His shame and remorse were no less palpable as they had been decades ago when his affliction began. He reached for the fifth of vodka he kept in his hip pocket and was dismayed to find it nearly empty. His hands trembled.

As Ian neared the train station, he watched the blackish water that rushed the underpass swallow the ankles of weary passengers as they exited the bus. The choir returned and maintained a low restless growl. A dull ache throbbed in his gut. This unrest both confused and concerned him. Rain shot at the pavement and soaked his matted pewter hair causing his scalp to itch. As he trudged down the block, he kept his lips partially opened so raindrops could find refuge on his dry tongue.

The bar was just inside the train station's east entrance wedged beneath train track #1 like an ingrown toenail. Most outsiders that wandered in clutched their wallets and bags with white knuckles and fidgeted awkwardly in their stools. It was just a filthy dive, but Ian could not escape its cozy feel. The bar regulars came from all walks of life and converged inside these walls like old chums. It was truly remarkable. If the regulars were to sign a registry, in the occupation column you'd find: iron worker, stripper, stock broker, waitress, professor, scientist, police officer, train conductor, and lawyer just to name a few. Here, titles and skin color were unimportant. Drink was their brotherhood. Ian's eyes welled with tears if he dwelled on his circumstance for too long. He often mused that he would have to die in order to escape his misery. He choked back tears and resolved to clear his mind and enjoy this cozy little shithole.

Ian's adrenaline rush had run its course. Pain oozed back into his muscles and joints. The choir growled softly and a distant throe continued to throb in his gut. The bar smelled of stagnant water, stale smoke, and rodent infestation. Fruit flies whirled in small circles like carnival

fish trapped in tiny softball sized bowls. When it stormed, as it was now, mucky water ran down the mirrored wall from the crumbling fiberglass ceiling. Ian felt the bar top vibrate as a train departed above. As the train gained momentum, the velocity of the streaming water increased.

Ian scanned the crowd, pulled two crumpled dollar bills from the front pocket of his jeans, and flattened them on the counter in front of him. It was 10:16 p.m. according to the train departure monitor, and the second wave of patrons had started to arrive. A few Knotty Heads gathered in their regular section in a back corner. They got their nickname because they all enjoyed the same brand of cheap liquor. Patricia Powder, a quiet local loon whom blanketed her entire body in a ¼" thick layer of baby powder, stood just outside the door. Her eyes were fixed on Ian. She held out her right hand repeatedly making the sign of the cross and chanted something Ian couldn't quite make out.

Ana, the bartender, placed a pitcher of Michelob and a frosted mug on the counter in front of Ian. As long as the owner wasn't around, which he seldom was, she didn't charge him. In exchange, Ian helped with errands such as running to the newsstand for change, cleaning, and taking the garbage to the dumpster in the loading dock.

"What's up, Uncle Ian? You want your book?" Ana said. Ian, eyes closed, smiled in the direction of her voice. He massaged his temples in hopes that he might be able to hush the choir. Ana was a petite kid in her early twenties with long caramel hair and a pale narrow face. In the city of Newark many folks were not particularly fond of the homeless. Many bar regulars that worked here in town pretended not to see Ian as they strolled the streets with colleagues during lunch hour.

Ana hadn't been one of those. One warm August day almost exactly one year ago, Ian spied Ana approaching the station. He buried his nose in his newspaper assuming that she would ignore him as the others had done. He was startled when he found that, not only had she acknowledged him, she'd snuck up behind him and tapped his shoulder. "Hey, Unc. I'm headed for a nibble before my shift. Wanna come?" she said. He liked that she called him uncle.

“Helloooo, Earth to Ian. Anybody home? I asked did ya want your book,” Ana said. Ian’s eyes remained closed while he continued to massage his temples. “Oh, um, yeah kiddo. I’ll take my book, thanks. Got any aspirin?” Since Ian didn’t have a home in which to store his library books, Ana kept them for him behind the bar. She plucked his book from the shelf. “Here you go, Unc.” When Ian opened his eyes, Ana was gone. He thought he saw her in his peripheral vision as she zipped off in the direction of the office. Ana ceaselessly ricocheted behind the bar even at times when she hadn’t a single customer. Ian believed the little girl was incapable of being still.

Ana returned with two aspirin on a bar nap and a plastic cup filled with cool tap water. Ian set his book down and popped the aspirins into his mouth. They were the powdery kind that stuck to his throat. The aspirin began to melt on his tongue. They tasted terrible. He picked up the cup of water, took a swig, and tilted his head back. Before he could right his head Ana had disappeared again. The bar must have been three deep by now. If she didn’t keep a steady pace she’d find herself in the weeds.

Ian pressed the frosted mug to his forehead. He pulled a pack of matches from his shirt pocket and used a corner of the cover to clean beneath his fingernails. Some of the blood that hadn’t washed away had settled in the creases of his nail beds and had darkened to a red so deep that it appeared black.

Ian greedily chugged his first beer then quickly poured more from his pitcher and chugged that one too. He despaired at the angry twinge that had resurfaced in his belly. Raucous music from the jukebox could not mask the ever climbing wail of the choir. Ian felt betrayed and cursed the torture between his ears. “It’s done, now leave me alone. For God’s sake, I can’t take any more,” he whispered to himself. He examined his stained hands with disgust.

A scraggly woman in a flight attendant’s uniform caught Ian’s eye. He observed that her head was buried in the crotch of a scrawny, light skinned fellow who the bar staff called The Freak because he only spoke when he ordered his drink. Although the puny man didn’t come off as particularly threatening, the sight of him invoked

goosebumps. Judging by his dress, he was some kind of pencil pusher.

Tucked away in one of the corners that made up the zigzag-shaped bar, Flight Attendant Lady’s head bobbed up and down fast as a piston. She looked to be playing a game of peek-a-boo with the bartenders as her head repeatedly disappeared beneath the counter only to reappear within a second.

Ian buried his eyes in his book and hoped Ana hadn’t spied the display but it was too late. Just then Big Jeff shouted, “Uh oh! Ana’s goin’ for the pipe!”

Ian didn’t dare look. He imagined that the lead pipe’s loud thud would startle the flight attendant and cause her to bite The Freak’s dick clean off. Ian wondered if blood would spill to the floor in heavy half-dollar sized clumps or if it would spurt out, propelled by the erection, like decapitated Kung Fu warriors in the movies. Ian felt the hairs on his arms stand up and braced himself for the worst. He buried his head in his book so when the cops arrived he couldn’t be held as a witness.

With impeccable timing, oblivious to the fornication, Rodney punched up “The Devil Went Down to Georgia” by the Charlie Daniels Band on the juke box.

Ana froze. “Fire in the hole!” she shouted.

Big Jeff shouted back, “Fire in the hole!”

Oblivious, Flight Attendant Lady’s head continued to bob. Ian smirked as he predicted what would come next. Ana plucked a sawbuck from Rodney’s pile and poured herself a shot of Bacardi 151. She poured him a chilled shot of Absolut vodka. They clinked glasses. “To you, darlin’,” Ana winked at Rodney. She dipped her fore and middle fingers into the liquid, took the shot into her mouth, lit her rum-drenched fingers afire, and spewed out an impressive fireball.

Ana had strategically positioned herself near the amorous pair nearly setting them afire. Ian watched Flight Attendant Lady frantically pat her wiry tufts. She straightened her blazer, wiped her mouth on her right sleeve, and walked through the door as the crowd’s jeers followed her into the lobby.

“Hey, the hotel’s the other way!” Yelled Big Jeff.

Ana lowered the jukebox and climbed on

top of the bar careful to mind the decrepit ceiling fan. She motioned her arms similar to the way flight attendants might during preflight instruction. She said, "Thank you for choosing our bar. We realize you have a choice in where you drink. Please note the exit located to the left of the juke box. We want to remind you that this is a blowjob-free bar. We ask that you please refrain from giving head at this time. If you have your junk out, please return it to your underpants and secure your belt. The bartender will be around shortly to serve refreshments. Thank you."

The bar was overtaken by a wave of rolling laughter. A Knotty Head, cackling like a hysterical hyena, nearly fell from his stool. The Freak stood at the bar struggling to stuff his junk back into his pants. As he followed Flight Attendant Lady into the lobby, he turned and shot Ana a scornful glare. Needless to say, he didn't leave a tip. Ian chuckled at Ana's little performance and continued reading. Wiseass, he thought.

In the smoky bar, the night wore on and the choir bellowed. It was 2:52 a.m. Ian lingered while she cleaned up. He sat at his barstool and rested his uproarious head in the palms of his giant hands.

"Hey, you feelin' alright, Unc? You look pale. You eat today?" Ana asked.

"I'll be alright. I think I got a bug."

"Why don't you top off your beer and I'll bring you some blackberry brandy. My dad used to say that blackberry brandy will knock a bug right outta ya," Ana said.

Ian stood and moved slowly all the while holding his head. He lifted the bar flap with his free hand and walked behind the bar to a sink. He ran cold water over his hands and splashed his face. Eyes closed, he grabbed a handful of napkins to wipe his face.

Angry waves tumbled in his belly. He turned to the mirrored wall and inspected his reflection. He stood there for several minutes plucking bits of napkin from his beard.

As the choir grew more anxious, a horrible thought occurred to him. Dear God! No! Ana had already locked the front doors and was in the walk-in fridge arranging the kegs. Ian frantically

searched every corner of the bar praying that he'd find The Freak, but he didn't find anyone lurking in the dark shadows of the bar. He ran to the walk-in fridge and swung open the door. His head whirled in agony. Startled, Ana lost her balance and fell out of sight behind a wall of kegs.

"Ian! What the hell!" Ana said.

Ian's huge frame took up the entire doorway, his head nearly touching the top of the frame. Clutching his head, he started toward Ana. He was ready to traverse the wall of kegs when... "Shit, the office," he thought.

Ian left Ana in the fridge and hurried toward the tiny office that also functioned as the storage room. On his way, he checked behind the ice machine. Nothing. He pushed open the tattered door to the office. The fluorescent light was already on, flickering. Not many places to hide in here unless The Freak buried himself beneath the boxes of bar naps and the bags of 12 oz. clear plastic cocktail cups. He kicked them aside throwing the cups across the small room. He looked beneath the desk where the drop safe was bolted to the floor. Nothing. He pulled on the large free standing cabinet where the petty cash box was kept along with bottles of liquor. Locked.

"Behind the juke box!" he thought. He went for the door and heard the tremble in her voice as she said, "I—Ian, W—what are you..." Thunder cracked outside shaking the small office. A train moved out overhead and dirty water coursed down the mirrored walls. He was about to explain himself. For the first time this evening, his eyes found hers and, immediately, the choir brought pain that licked the back of his eyeballs. He knew he was plunging.

"This is it. My God, this is it," he thought. Maybe if he could run far away from here, the choir would spare Ana and move on to a new target. The small office closed in on him. He bolted past her and rammed into one of the cheap particleboard shelves that held the cordials. He crashed to the floor along with several bottles of thick sweet liquor. He clutched his head and began to sob.

His long bent legs fluttered like a butterfly fanning itself on a log. Cradling his head, he swayed and moaned, swayed and moaned. Disobeying her intuition, Ana bent over him. She touched his cheek, and he smacked her hand.

Stubborn, fighting her intuition, Ana persisted and bent closer. Independent of his will, as if his hands were a separate entity, they found her tiny neck. Acid tears poured from his eyes as he watched his hands squeeze hard. Her eyes bulged and her mouth opened wide. She fell to her knees between his legs. Her nails dug into her neck as she tried to wiggle her fingers beneath his grip. Finally, her hands fell to her sides and her eyelids fluttered. Salty tears and gooey mucus ran down Ian's blistering face. As he sobbed, he sprayed Ana with the slimy mix. The choir shrieked in frenzied pandemonium.

With unexpected fury, Ana's hand came up from her boot fast and true. With an undisputable will to live, she plunged her boot knife into his chest. She choked violently as she continued twisting the blade. She pulled it out. Ian's body jerked, and Ana screamed. She involuntarily reacted by plunging the knife into his chest a second time.

Ian's hands fell into his lap. The choir's keening faded and the devilish pain evaporated. Ian and Ana sat on the floor facing one another's tear streaked faces for what seemed like a millennium. The staring contest ended when Ian's lips curled into a demented smirk. To Ana, he was unrecognizable. She drew in a sharp breath and sprung backwards leaving the knife inside him. When Ana summoned the nerve to look at him again, his warm, sincere smile had returned. In the second smile, Ana recognized the Ian that was her friend.

Ana scrambled to her feet and peered into the lobby. Patricia Powder pressed her face to the glass and looked upon Ana with woeful eyes. With all that baby powder she doused on herself, she appeared to be more of an apparition than an animate being. Patricia held out her right hand and made the sign of the cross, then quickly tip toed away towards the station's east exit. The lobby was empty and still.

Ana looked back at Ian and the knife that protruded from his torso. His complexion appeared grayish in the dim lighting. Broken glass mixed with sticky liquor stretched along the grimy floor. A shard of glass jutted from Ana's knee. She felt a painful squirming twinge swim in her belly. She attempted the journey to the other side of the bar to retrieve the phone, but tripped

and found herself on the floor again. The glass shard dug deeper into the burning gash in her knee.

Her face was hot and slick. The room swirled. She forgot about getting back on her feet and crawled, trying not to put pressure on her injured knee. The resident sewer rat peered out from beneath a cooler and twitched his nose. Ana thought she heard a shrill scream. The scream, screams rather, drew nearer with each passing moment. She heard an entire group moaning as if in terrible agony. She made it to a sink and knelt before it on bended knee as if proposing marriage. She peered over the bar but saw no one. Where was it coming from? She cupped cold water in her trembling hands and splashed her face. She yanked the shard from her bloody wound and poured some vodka over it. She pulled herself up and regained her footing. The moaning crowd grew so loud that, if she closed her eyes, she would have expected to be standing beside a large choir. She took a giant swig of tequila straight from the bottle and found it difficult to swallow. She patted her face with bar naps and turned to the mirrored wall to inspect her battered neck. The instant she'd fixed her eyes on her reflection, the infernal choir blared as if they sang through a bullhorn pressed to the side of her head. Waves of fiery pain rolled and crashed in her belly. She felt as if she were on the brink of implosion being wrung like a sponge on the verge of spurting blood and bile.

### **About M.C. Brody**

*M.C. Brody was born and raised in New Jersey and has, at various points in her life, worked as a bartender, a halfway house shift manager, a higher education administrator, and a federal defense contractor. She graduated from Rutgers University with a degree in Criminal Justice and completed graduate coursework at Stevens Institute of Technology. She lives on the Jersey shore with her husband and their three dogs.*

# Andrew

David Petteys

**Editor's Note:** Andrew is a four-part narrative poem. Tainted Tea will publish Parts 3 and 4 in the next issue.

## One

On sunny days he sat in the garden, thinking of him. The dead things, they were a comfort, for nothing could top his melancholy more that it had already been.

He was a simple man from a simple name. Lie upon lie build his fame, construing love with his own, personal perceptions of bitter shame.

He wore black, day in, day out, a reminder of what he was forced to live without. Stripped with white pins, this day's frock wore, though the legs were rising and the elbows tore.

His house on the hill, noble and plain, a fence ran around it, rusted by rain. In the garden he sat, distressed as a dame, drunken too much, in the shadow of pain. A tree sat beside him, a willow in fact, weeping so gently, a lover laid tact. Roses crept up the gate, withered and sad. Statues and urns tipped over, all in moss clad. A brick matrix led from gate to gate, grass grown through the cracks, neglect of years gone too late.

A fountain pointed to the sun, at the cove's center she stood; an angel in algae, dumping pots of water and mold, of whom watched the world with a grave fear, beneath her stone hood. To see such malice live amongst such good was enough that stone understood.

Could happiness arrive on such a day? Could Mr. Johnson absorb the evanescent gay, knowing that all things to come and he'd be okay? Were his tale not a pearl thrown to the ocean's bottom, lost; for

that of a little girl, his path, did she cross? He woke from a dark dream only to find, a dress the color of cream, erect from the sublime. He said not a word as she curtsied and bowed. Truth to her name, "Judith," she vowed. Judging by her sophistication in both countenance and dress, she came not from peddler nor wealthy sow. Her stealthy motive for entering the gate, left much to confess, for she came in an instant, and he knew not how.

Her voice came with the softness of angels, no syllable out of place, but each phrase spoke with a courtesy which dangles, and she professed:

"Why sit in this place, a garden dead and overgrown? I have yet to see men smile when they are alone."

"A tale, my dear," came the man's voice, queer from lack of exercise, "for another time and place. Now be gone little girl, leave my face!" He added in defense and secret reprise. But how could any one person, tall or small, give in to such a request, when one needs to know upon which ground such a condescending accusation lies?

"Anger is not charming," spoke she.

"What of me do you find alarming? What in your mind seeks curiosity?" replied he. All anger provoking not one hint of cordial felicity.

"I have heard a rumor," said she, "yes, a very powerful rumor that be: you were once put together, yet broken pieces are what I see."

“Are rumors not tainted lies, toyed with on a biased premise, the truth set free?” answered he, “Why should I care of what others speak of me? Would you not let me be? I have much time I’d like dedicated to misery.”

“Mr. Johnson,” she exclaimed, not giving up, “I may be but a girl of merely nine years, yet I know nothing must be something when eyes are filled with tears!”

As she made such observations of him, he never looked up or claimed a single stirrup; still he sat there silent, till another sentence, did his face seem to erupt:

“You will not leave me then what will you do? You suggest that I implore my heart unto you? Could you hear a tale of passion and blithe, a tale of horror and blood, of murder and scythe, of sadness and rue; is your heart too tender and lithe? Oh tell me, oh tell me, oh sweet, Judith?!”

“But my uncle is as always, cleaver in hand,” the girl replied, “if you would not believe that bloody heads rolling into sand, have not deflowered my mind, I could have lied.”

“You speak things from a mind well bred.”

“My uncle says: my smart passion comes from my father. Whose character I study fiercely, for he is now dead.”

“Dead? Sorry to hear.”

“Do not worry of offense or cheer. I knew not my father; he has been dead before I was but one year.”

“Dear, do you know anything of lust?” He inquired, distracted elsewhere.

“Lust? Why I say, though the word seems foreign to me, I dare. Yet, as of late weariness and despair, that somewhere beneath the surface, I must! What is this lust?” did she inquire, as she wound around her finger, a curl of hair, tight eyes meeting his stark stare.

“Lust,” he began, “is a thing of thieves, an emotion of coveting for what men do not require. Coveted objects are treasures that men should not acquire.”

Judith pulled the curl taught, her brow waved with angry fire. To Mr. Johnson, his heart filled with delight, noticed the color of her mane: an auburn perhaps: reminded him of his love, a symbol of plight, fright, and delight, braided from three to one. Before his mind’s eye, the past’s pain for that instant, came undone. As he found the path again at its root, he wondered the might: lust, a mental infatuation, unable to transcend the haze of selfishness, was not something he felt in ego’s gaze, acute. But something he knew unequivocally, to be pure in intention and felicity to boot.

“My sight is not lost, yet I am rumored to be blind. My heart knows ten thousand things, putrid and divine...” A pause followed the indefinite clause.

All the while he wondered to tell the tale, he saw how a maze formed between the bricks laid at his foot: walls formed from grass shoot, a labyrinth of sorts, interrupted by prying tree root. The man Johnson, sun at his back, watched a beetle course through the trap, shiny and black. It wound through the passages of grass grown against clips, as words of affection read on dead lips.

“From a hill of January snow, the tale unfolds,” he gave at last, “in the town of Fort Worthmerry, my life’s endeavor beholds...”

A gale blew through the space, a great wuthering blast.

“Terrible weather we are having?” She added aghast.

No response to the tedium came. Simply, he watched his feet, talking to grass, voice lame.

Mr. Johnson and the girl sat alone in the overgrown pass.

“...for I was a lad, not yet a man, my father, under his hand, lay my future’s potential prosper, all

'twas at his demand. Now, he was not a man free of sin or blame, when referring to I, and what I became. He claimed from the start, it was in my name, that in my blood, God scribed notions of fortune and fame. So about I went, a boy not yet sprouted; prestige and possession, my heart's view of lust, did then, as it does now: severely doubted."

"Why, Mr. Johnson, did you then do as you were told? Bowed to your father's command as if it were bold? When, indeed, it was not in your heart to reprimand?"

"Questions inspire intellect, and intellect is the road to truth, but deflect all questions till the end, my dear, sweetest Ruth."

"Judith," she corrected, all prim and proper and tooth. She sat on the grass, smiling behind hair of copper and the beauty of her youth.

"Were I able to find such might," he went again, "such indomitable courage to deny my father and other grown men, the consequences of my actions would make me question whether or not it was worth the bother, if indeed they had not damned me then.

"But anyway, I digress: my heart is clouded, shrouded in my past obsession; and upon my shoulder weighs it's silent oppression. Oppressed by love long lost, a tragedy I should have repressed."

"How, good sir, could love depress, when the sun shines brightly, and the swallow sings full-breast?"

"Ah, if such things were that simple, I could move on or grow as my garden might; but how could true love lost, ever be made right? The sun may shine bright, the swallows may swirl in flight, singing gaily, the songs of delight, but they know not of what occurred on that cold January night.

"Would you, my dear, born again as a swal-

low, sing despite: a cause for attention, a cause for spite: a love ever equivocally construed by fright?"

Mr. Johnson, frock wrinkled and frayed, stood and paced about, less a requiem than a dark parade. Tempered, stomping heavily upon the braid laid, he could neither live nor die without such thoughts and doubts for conflict to upbraid.

Tall and limber, though he once stood stout. Legs made of reeds and a birdlike snout. His eyes were sad, worn by doubt. And his lips slack, succumbed by an ugly pout. With brow a' wrinkle, hair wisped all about, the man, he were not happy, if he ever were, I could scarcely doubt.

Judith sought to implore, being the type to make kittens purr and lions roar; but the words he spoke, gave her not one chance, his head was filled with hurt and soggy romance. He aimed them not at her, but seemed to throw them at the world; a world of thought that were filled, indefinitely, with evil and cur:

"Ma'dear, one of innocent childhood, would you say that I, a man of coin and name, be also a man of good?"

"Why, as I have never seen in all my years, I say that I should!"

"Indulge me then, on the wine of would, were it possible for love to ever become falsehood?"

"If," and she explained, "God taught man to love, and love is ultimately good, then I cannot see how any man could!"

Words of a child, pure as intent and free of malice, were apt to maim, if the wine of would surmounted its chalice.

"Well," Johnson spoke, "in Love's name, I held a golden palace, yet in God's name, I was shunned to covet a phallus."

"Sir, oh sir, I do not understand what of this you mean: do you say that when He saw your love, God's face were green?"

“I do, in fact, though your naiveté should forgive my tact. I’m forgetting what your virgin ears lack.”

“So,” said she, “you loved a maid, though in Satan’s name, not in Christ’s, were her intentions laid? Were they laid upon a filthy price?”

“Alas, if my heart were stolen by a mere dame, to God nor my father, would I be scoffed to shame. I confess, as the sky is usually blue, my heart were tamed by a man, as plainly as we are here, and the words I bequeath unto you.”

“A man?! That is the source of thy rumor? The source of love and sorrow heard not above a murmur? Why, pray you, does God judge thee, when indeed, it was within his white workshop, love’s truth was forged to be? The logic behind these words, and the trouble they have gorged, in my eyes, I cannot see!”

“Were there truth apparent to you, I beg you bestow it upon me! Me, who once loved another, is solitary versus we.

“But this is merely the crux of my story, not its crust; a story of bleeding forgery viewed as lust, ending as a tragedy, carved ever in misery, it must be.”

“Mr. Johnson, sir, if you please? I, Judith Turner, begeth upon her knees! Tell your tale to me, open my eyes, as if for the first time to see! I beg not in vain, nor in glory nor gain, but in relevance and sympathy for your disdain. Could it perhaps be too plain, or is it a thing worth more in secret than in pain?”

## Two

Pain is apt to maim, when spent from the start upon the rein of fame, as the tale of Mr. Johnson, to the girl, Judith, did he claim. Were it never to smile, a clown could go insane beneath the solace of sadness and unresolved pain. Forever a mark, bitten by the heart: satanic art dressed as cupid’s dart. A long time, Mr. Johnson sat in silent vexation, for a cloud above his head, did fall, the rain

of that wretched game and spiteful conflagration. Sun still to his rear, the story, to his lips came near, though ridden by envy and pain-stricken fear.

“Was in January, as I have earlier professed, where I have sought to cry upon the breast of permanent rest, a prayer for the memory of a lover, a wondering pest. Although, the tale which led to that day, I could not doubt, were as difficult to flout about; glorified for its beauteous society, for the witness of an uncle’s wrath, selfishly had he taken the malicious route.”

“Who,” said she, brows twittering about, “should see something that could alter them about, construe purity so evilly? Could not such anger, fierce and red, not be covered with a clout, and gone without instead?”

“Once more,” he told, “I’ve forgotten to tell: from a certain dame’s lips, the dejection once fell. Clear as a bell, she knowingly sent me to hell. Along a track of broken dreams, tedious riddles were told. Known in a week, my passion whispered across the wold. Had she known all along, the knife her song pulled? For flexed that tongue, did she, a snake in the grass, waiting to scold a secret malice. Behind her intentions, the truth could never be more wrongful or callous. Yet again, however un-bold, there is much still untold from this tale of love old. A heart fluent in pain, do I hold; an intelligence, disdainful and cold; a knowledge not quite concise nor plain, but a thing worth more to me than rubies and gold.

“One must know, from the beginning of the story’s telling,” said the man Johnson to Judith, whose court did she hold, “my tears, soaked and swelling, were not always to be fears in darkness dwelling. In the past, my aims were high. Upon a mountain did they stand. I was a man determined to forge a fortress in gold, by the blood of his own hand, though not at my father’s supreme aspirations did I command. I doubted my father, with every wish he did waste the bother, to make for me a future, a future of business and white collar. But, this was not my goal, a desired contradiction did I please, my silver dreams of pride did my fancy appease; I would whittle wood with my

hands, before I lay down and died in the sands. Wills of prowess and wealth were not at my demands. Nor the matrimony expected of me, did I find with gold bands. I wanted nothing so simple as to lift straw and milk cows, a day's tough labor filled with grunting, sweat dripping from hard-earned brows.

"I advertised, oh sought out this work, I thought I must do to find my desirous place. In the town of Fort Worthmerry, as if by divine guide, did I come to face. At first, not one business came to call. Until, upon the threshold of old man Potter's farm, did I fall. I did not expect to work under him, no not at all. Had I the prediction of events unforeseen, indeed, I cannot say I would run from that doorstep—no, not at all.

"On the opposite of town had this enterprise been found, within the newspaper, a plow's hand, within printed words of black and white, were my skills to be bound. Old man Potter, as one came to know, walked mile upon mile in search of his paper, hampered not by torrential sunshine or violent snow. I swear, as one might never be able to assume, that my path were laid out before God, a pawn within his hand, was I to move as he declared prudent; you must think me a fool, Judith, my wise and youthful student."

"Indeed! I do not! Only men of naïveté and prejudice could possess such a want. I do however, have a query, not a taunt: I have heard this name: Potter? A name I know too well to guess. My dear cousin's father, such a name does he possess."

"This is no coincidence to be sure, the name Potter is known throughout and alongshore, from the gutters of London, to the most desolate moor; however, the same Potter as your uncle's name bears, do I doubt this man held, for the name Potter has been a commonplace eld as time. One could find such titles in noblemen's rhyme as well as on a beggar's glout slime."

"Anyhow, when all hope did seem gone, lost reverie held a fiercer brawn than the current of

fate-sent blawn. Until a call came for me, and a workingman, I did become. I was sent to a ranch, beckoning in straw and dung, to find my first interview, and the tale's whitest dream, did shortly come."

"How, and I reach my question in rightful ignorance," the copper-headed girl observed, "did you find company among stable boy and farm hand, then to come about this mansion of present wealth and inheritance? Am I dumb, or do I sit within the garden of another man so lacking in green thumb?"

"That bit is soon to come, though keep it in mind, thou must. As I told thoust before, I had to run, fleeing from my circumstance, heart laced with tragedy and clever romance, tucked beneath wings of proclaim'd lust; as my secret heart's endeavor became known, a loathing from my master did I make myself prone, among a slew of other things."

"So your love, a match only heaven could employ, came from this farm of straw and hay, of laborious joy?"

"Ah, as you skip ahead so much, as I must. My skills as storyteller, as metal left to the storm, have become littered in rust. Veracity hides in your question, as truth beneath dust; evoke my lover's fortune to behold, forever in secret if thou must. Not once had I assumed, as shoveling hay for the pony's a-nay, did I bust a sweltering sweat, with a friend, a close friend, who should become more than lust, you can trust.

"His name was Andrew, old man Potter's great nephew. Did my vanity ever seek to implore fanciful lore? Of that, I am sure, despite your youth, you already knew. Rain to a ceaseless drought, his presence became accustomed to me, as it inevitably grew.

"Lust, as it has come to be branded, an open invitation, to his bed had I landed. Now, I knew not from the start, my comrade's initial form of mindful forbearance. As all men, of my ailment, come to dream in silent resplendence, such fantasy kept in the mind, afraid of diction and social malice."

“Yet, upon one night, as the sun and crows laid to rest, so had I come to admire at the smoothed and hardened muscular breast, speckles of hair about his barrel chest. More of his face, I came to know. Eminent amber, fierce embers within his eyes, did they glow. His lips, smooth as beach-found glass, turned by the ocean tide, a kiss forced upon me, and within a stack of hay did we hide. Ardor burned in his thoughts as if I were not welcome to his advances. Could I ever become lame beneath his tempered romances? Of course not, his passion I did hire, every night upon the setting sun’s grace, did our secret affection transpire. Never would a word be spoken, as our infinite desire toward one another did upon greed and shame take its token. I feared suspecting that Andrew’s mind was made up, to keep silent of our smut.”

“Had he not shown love for you? How un-admirable, this man Andrew seems, leaving wounds to discover, blames to construe? Were not you blue, without his words to comfort your contrarious inclination? Could Andrew too, not be found within the paradise of clever temptation?”

“Oh Judith, justice, you need not do. I understood his emotion: upon fire, did he find crew. He would shout and scream, angered by his temptation, finding our passionate embrace, nothing more than demonic inspiration. He need never speak a word to define, what his body language said for his mind.”

“You say he need never speak poetry to prove his compassions were in truth?”

“One kiss could tell a million truths, such as I told Ruth.”

“Ruth? Was she a woman, you once knew? Or a woman, perhaps, tamer of your heart; could such emotions as love, ever be felt upon two?”

“Either guess would be more elegant than the truth. Andrew’s wife, she did ever, as I assume she still does: bear the name of Ruth...”

“Into a parlor, not quite fancy in plenty, did we

enter upon breaking. Upon the rising of noonday sun, sent we to be taking. A place with gentle-woman and hot tea and scone, did I find a secret solace, a wise counsel did she lend to me. Ruth was my confident, though at the time, I knew not she was she.”

“You knew not she was she? Of this, what did you not see? ”

“Simple as it is, I knew not Ruth as Andrew’s bride-to-be. Nor did I assume, within her belly did he sprout, an act of divine retribution, a punishment throughout; Eve’s worst wish, as God’s wrath comes too mild. Within Ruth’s womb, from Andrew, was she to mother a child.”

### **About David Petteys**

*David Petteys is a college student in New England, majoring in English Literature. Poetry happens to be one of his avocations, and some day, he hopes to publish novel-length works. Since a young age, he took a keen interest in reading the finest works by the finest language artists, and now hopes to replenish the world with the very pool he drank deeply from, incorporating a new sense of style to the loveable classics; and most importantly, he aims to address issues prevalent in this era in a manner that is both tasteful and unique.*

# A Trip to Grandma's House

*Rick McQuiston*

"I dare ya'. I double dare ya'. What's the matter, Spencer? Chicken? Bobby Spencer is a chicken!"

I wasn't chicken. At least, I told myself so.

"I got money that says you won't go up to the front door, wipe the dirt off and look inside with a flashlight."

"How much?"

"Two bucks," Burt said. He was bigger than the rest of us, and he was a jerk. He made me glad I was only a visitor to this neighborhood.

Not that I didn't like the neighborhood. Even though I only came here maybe five or six times a year. The old church we'd pass on the freeway, the monument to war soldiers in the park, the crazy office building that looked flat from the front, as if would come tumbling down. And of course, Grandma's house. That little white house with the wide driveway and the odd little path around its perimeter. All these landmarks were as much of the visit as Grandma herself.

After dinner, me and my brother Danny would sit and listen to Grandma's many stories. She would talk about everything from her school days to when she met Grandpa.

It was during one of her stories about the nearby streets, which brought up the old empty party store only 500 feet from her front door. It was an old looking building that was always closed.

Me and my brother and five or six kids from the block would use it as a base. Timmy Sutton and his brother Joey said that once, about two years ago, there was an open sign in the window. None of us believed them though, not even Burt. And he was the one always making up

stories!

"That place ain't ever been open," he would say.

I didn't believe them either. At least until that cold, gray Christmas Eve.

The car rumbled down the road with Dad at the wheel. We passed all the landmarks and eventually approached Grandma's house.

As we passed the old party store, my brother Danny suddenly shouted, "Hey look! The old store is open."

Sure enough, the closed sign had been replaced with an open sign. Inside I thought I saw someone move. I wasn't sure, but there definitely was someone inside.

I found myself anxious to get to Grandma's so I could meet up with the neighborhood kids and finally see inside the old store. The whole gang was gathered around although no one dared to go in just yet.

"The store's finally open," Joey Sutton yelled as we approached the corner.

"Got five bucks says you won't go inside," Burt challenged.

Again, all eyes turned towards me. I knew I couldn't back down.

The steps leading to the door seemed to be made of mud. Each felt a mile high. An aged steel storm door loomed within inches of my hand. The door handle felt aged and neglected. A rusty blank sound escaped as the handle turned, allowing access to the inner door. It creaked a hollow noise as the interior of the store was revealed to me at last.

Surprisingly, the inside was not at all as dirty as I had expected. Four light bulbs hung loosely from thin wires and the cash register sat



Illustration by Shane R. Toogood

quietly from its space on the countertop.

“Well hello there young man,” a friendly voice said. “How are you today?” A large woman about sixty or so gently walked out. “I’m Grandma Olcher and this is my store, as I’m sure you’ve guessed. Would you like a candy bar?”

My fear of a stranger was soon overruled by my love of chocolate.

“Thank you,” I replied.

As the folds of plastic were removed, the old lady’s eyes were riveted to mine. She seemed to be talking to me through those eyes.

*It’s all right dear. Nothing to fear. Only free candy bars in my odd little store.*

Then, I felt the unpleasant feeling of worms in my hands. Looking down, I seen the candy bar was full of maggots! Literally hundreds of worms were neatly encased within the chocolate.

My screams filled the air only to be mixed with her mocking laughter. I stumbled as I retreated towards the door. The hard, polished floor met my palms nearly snapping my wrists.

Regaining my senses, I could feel her behind me and turning my head revealed such a terrible sight that I nearly fainted.

She was completely upside down, floating six inches above the ground. Her face had elon-

gated in such a way to where her chin was touching her chest. The hair on her head was rapidly growing, no...moving around her entire body. Occasionally, one would burrow into her skin, only to crawl out again at some nearby point.

"It's alright dear," the unchanged voice calmly stated. "I love children. I have something for you."

Outstretched arms reached eagerly for me. Where there used to be hands, there were now pulsating mounds of rubbery matter, resembling wet clay. Being small, I was able to escape and was met outside with surprised looks.

"We gotta call the police! There's a monster...a witch. Grandma Olcher is a monster!" I screamed.

"You're crazy," Burt shouted as the rest of the gang nodded in agreement. Even my own brother didn't believe me.

"Bobby, we didn't see or hear nothing. We were all watching from the side window. All we saw was an old lady give you a candbar. Then you dropped it and just freaked out."

I knew what I saw. I wasn't imagining. It happened.

I left the corner without another word. When I reached the opposite curb I turned to look back. That was when I seen Burt going in and I noticed a pair of eyes looking at me from one of the rear windows of the store...eyes that were three feet apart from one another. I ran back to Grandma's house.

Nearly four months have gone by now. Dr. Tolan says I'm doing much better. He says I imagined it all, and I'm beginning to believe him.

Dr. Tolan says that going back there will be good for me. Says facing the truth is the right thing to do. The truth that it's just an old store with an old lady running it. No monsters, no witches, no fat, upside down ladies with changing faces.

Everyone's waiting in the car for me now. We're going to Grandma's for Easter. Part of me is looking forward to it. Looking forward to finishing the hallucination. But I must admit, there's still a small part of me that's scared.

As the miles went by, the familiar landmarks came into view. The old church by the freeway, the monument to soldiers, the building that looks flat. We gradually moved past them all as we've done many times before.

Finally, we turned onto Grandma's street and passed the old store. It looked as it had always looked, no lights and dirty and old.

The usual group was hanging around by the front of the store like so many times before. They were all there, except for Burt.

I noticed one last thing before we swerved into Grandma's driveway—a pair of eyes looking at me from one of the rear windows of the store. Eyes that were three feet apart from each another. Sinking back into the seat, I shut my eyes.

### **About Rick McQuiston**

*I'm a forty-one year old father of two who slaves for a development company by day and churns out horror fiction by (mid)night. I've had nearly 200 publications so far, and recently finished my fourth anthology book, As Mean as the Night, which is available on Lulu and Amazon. Currently, I'm penning my first novel and a book of novellas. I'm also a guest author at Memphis Junior High School and editor of my own ezine, [www.geocities.com/many\\_midnights](http://www.geocities.com/many_midnights).*

# Crashing the Dance Party

*J. Toogood*

Photograph



# Red Ganded

*Jessica Fowler*

When I opened my eyes, I saw red. Bright red, smeared across the lenses of my glasses, cutting my view of the dusty ceiling fan above me in half. When I went to take them off I saw the red caked on to my hands too. It was buried under my fingernails and splattered on my palm. For a second I thought maybe I was still tripping, but then the unmistakable, metallic smell hit my nostrils and I knew that it was real and it was blood.

Am I hurt? Just then I felt a burning sting from the knuckle of my right hand, and I saw that they were skinned and raw. I must've been in a fight, I figured. Gary probably pissed me off at some point when we were both tripping, or vice versa. But even that didn't make sense. Compared to Gary I was about as intimidating as a bug is to an incoming boot. He was a full foot taller and worked out every day, whereas I could barely carry two boxes at once up the stairs when we moved in. Since high school it had been the same, Gary the strong, cocky athlete and I was just Jeff, the funny friend. But aside from the normal day after headache, I felt no pain. The blood that stained my skin and clothes was not mine. The only explanation was that the stuff we took last night in combination with the vodka had incapacitated him to the point where I could actually beat him in a fight. I got up in with a start, excited to gloat. It would be a first.

I stumbled around the junkyard that was our floor on my way to Gary's room. Every inch was covered with clothing, pornos, DVDs, empty bottles, unwashed dishes and our ash trays, overflowing with cigarette butts and joint roaches. Our mothers were never allowed to visit, not that they'd want to anyway. Living paycheck to paycheck from service jobs and putting off college for as long as possible wasn't exactly what they wanted for us. I kept telling my mom I'd go back

to school, just to shut her up, but I felt somehow that it was too late, that I had already come too far. Looking at the dingy mess that we called our apartment, I realized how content I was to blend in with it all, to not have to worry about wanting anything more.

I kept imagining the look that would come over Gary's smug face when he woke to discover I'd kicked his ass. He was snoring loudly from the bed, his clothes and skin soiled even more than mine. His white T-shirt was practically dyed a rusty red now. I searched for a cracked lip or a puffy eye but to my disappointment Gary appeared just fine. I shook him and he grumbled loudly, coughing in my face. The smell of his acrid morning breath mixed with the coppery smell of the blood on us both made me gag.

"Dude, what the fuck happened last night?" I asked.

"Get the hell out of here! I'm trying to sleep," his voice boomed. I knew if I kept asking him I would end up feeling pain, so I went to the bathroom. I looked at my reflection in the mirror, finding bloodstains on my face and neck too. I tried to retrace our steps in my mind. I remembered lying in the park when the acid finally started to take effect. I remembered how the jungle gym started looking like a giant squid, the slide becoming the long tongue of a dragon. I remembered the kid.

No.

I blinked out the memory, told myself that it was a dream, a hallucination. It was just me and Gary there. But I couldn't stop seeing it in my head. He danced down the bike trail, singing whatever he was listening to without realizing anyone was watching. He looked about fifteen, with tight jeans and a tight polo shirt the color of a green M&M. He was having a great time, and I

started smiling and dancing on the ground too. But Gary saw something else. He started to get up from the ground, his fingers curled into a fist.

“What the fuck is that? It’s coming after us. It doesn’t know who the fuck it’s messing with,” Gary said, unable to tell the difference between people and things.

“It’s just some queer kid,” I said, lying back down on the ground. Gary had grown up in a household that equated homosexuals with pedophiles. I remembered this just as my head hit the grass and I heard the sound, that definite sound of a fist hitting flesh. By the time I got to the bike trail, the kid’s face was unrecognizable beneath the blood. Gary just kept hitting and hitting him, then when the kid couldn’t stand up anymore, he started kicking.

“Jeff, help me! Help me destroy the fag,” Gary said, his dilating pupils giving him the wild look of a rabid animal. When I looked down, I didn’t see the kid anymore. He was replaced by an enormous red parasite, his flailing arms and legs looking like giant antennae. I started kicking, too.

No.

It didn’t happen. Just a bad trip, I reassured myself. I was incapable of something like that, and even despite his brutal nature Gary was too. Then I looked at the sink, see the aqua blue cover on the white iPod. I picked up the iPod, picturing Gary scrambling to get everything he could from the kid before we jetted. The song was still paused.

I had seen enough horror films to know I had to get out of here, had to destroy the evidence, had to run. I pictured Norman Bates sterilizing the motel room and in an instant I was shedding off my blood-covered clothing and trying to scrub the blood off my skin, my hands shaking uncontrollably. I ran into my room and started filling a suitcase with everything I could grab.

My hand was on the doorknob when I thought of Gary. We were in this together and he would know what to do. I started to settle down, telling myself that Gary would handle everything and we would both be okay. I went back into his room but before I could shake him again I heard three sharp knocks on the door. I was frozen, listening to the knuckle hitting the wood, unable to

keep from imagining my knuckle hitting the kid.

“Police. Open up!”

“What is that noise? Who the fuck is knocking?” Gary asked angrily, his eyes still closed tight.

“It’s the cops.” Gary sat up in his bed, looked at me, at himself, at the suitcase I was holding.

“What are the cops doing here?”

“Arresting us,” I heard myself saying right before they did. I was glad when the cop handcuffed my hands behind my back, glad that I couldn’t see the red stains on them that no amount of soap or denial could wash clean.

### **About Jessica Fowler:**

*Jessica Fowler will graduate from Temple University with her degree in magazine journalism. She is a two-time recipient of the Edith Garlow Poetry Award and Pricilla Fox Pfizenmayer Journalism Award. She was the managing editor of The Communitarian, the newspaper of Delaware County Community College where she received her associates in journalism.*



## Trick 'r Treat

**Synopsis:** The film is an interwoven story that follows five different people on Halloween night: a high-school principal that has a dark secret, a couple who blow out a jack o'lantern out before midnight, a college virgin and another about a group of teens that pull a prank that goes too far. Finally, a story about an old man who is visited by a trick or treater.

**Cast:** Brian Cox, Anna Paquin, Dylan Baker and Leslie Bibb.

**Director:** Michael Dougherty.

**Reviews:** Based on five reviews, *Trick 'r Treat* received 100 percent positive on Rotten Tomatoes.

**Why See It:** The film was supposed to be released back in October 2007 when it was pulled by Warner Brothers with no explanation and no other release date was given. It has been playing film festivals since and the feedback has been great.

**Release Date:** Now available on DVD and Blu-Ray.



## Paranormal Activity

**Synopsis:** A couple moves into a house in the suburbs and begins to believe their house is haunted, so they set up cameras throughout the house to catch the demonic spirits.

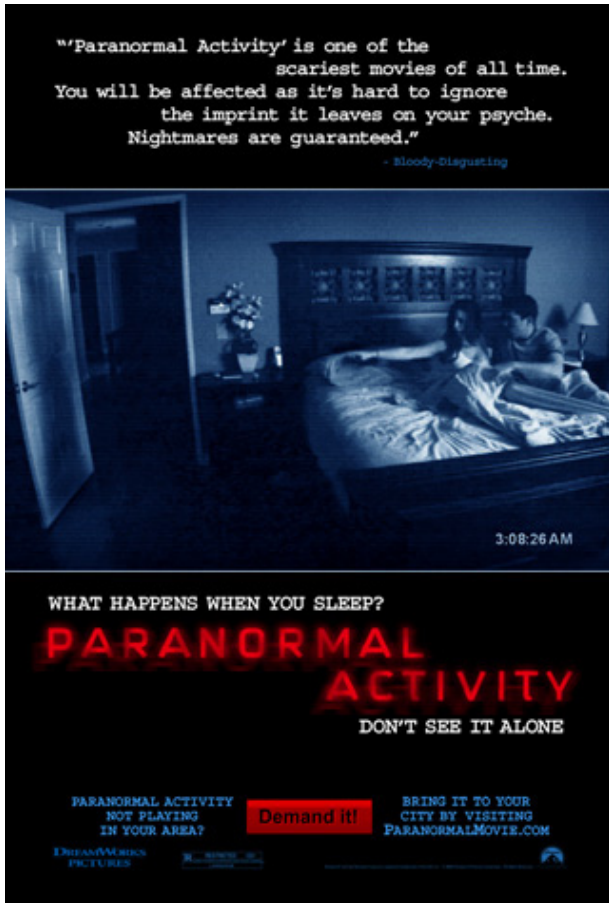
**Cast:** Katie Featherston and Micah Sloat.

**Director:** Oren Peli.

**Reviews:** Based on seven reviews, *Paranormal Activity* received 100 percent positive on Rotten Tomatoes. Director Oren Peli won the Honorable Mention award from Scremfest in 2007. Rumor has it, this movie made Steven Spielberg cover.

**Why See It:** Being called the next *Blair Witch Project*, the film was shot cinéma vérité style, a style where the film looks like a documentary but really isn't (think *Cloverfield* or *Quarantine*). The film was shot back in 2007 where it has been making the festival circuit before finally being released (however small) into theaters with hopefully a DVD release to come soon.

**Release Date:** Limited Release



# Stranded

*J.Toogood*

Photograph



## **About J. Toogood**

*J. Toogood is a senior at Upper Darby High School. Toogood is a swimmer and yet a fast food lover. He lives in a suburb of Philly with his chug, Guinness, and a chinchilla named Beasie.*



Spotlight

# The Remake Epidemic

Jim Kennedy

I'm tired of seeing '80s slasher movies being reinvented because producers want to bring a film to the current group of teenagers that are eagerly waiting to lay down their \$10.00 for a movie ticket.

Instead of seeing original ideas such as *Let the Right One In* or *Trick 'r Treat* (see pg. 26 for details), we get rehashes of '80s movies like *The Stepfather* and *My Bloody Valentine 3-D*.

Soon enough Hollywood will find it is necessary to, what they deem, "re-imagine" films made after the year 2000. How long will it be before we see *Saw* remade? (I hope never.) I'm sure I'm not the only person that is tired of these "re-imaginings".

Some of these remakes could prove to be okay or even good for that matter. For example, *Sorority Row*, spawned from 1983's *The House on Sorority Row*, was a blast by not taking itself seriously and allowing the audience to have fun.

Yet, with every good remake there is its ugly sister. Take 2003's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* which takes a classic horror film and ruins it. Remakes like this just tell the same story with the same results; there is no reason to re-make them.

People are beginning to get tired of Hollywood touching the classics like *Chainsaw* with remakes of *Friday the 13th* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Those films are cherished by the horror community, and there is no reason to remake them.

A prime example of a useless remake is the film *Quarantine*. It's a shot-for-shot remake of the original Spanish film, *.Rec*, with one new scene put in for American audiences.

I beg Hollywood to start releasing some of these original films. While the ideas may not



"One, two Freddy's coming for you..." in 2010!

be 100 percent original, their executions are. Give these upcoming films such as director Ti West's *The House of the Devil*, Lars Von Trier's *Antichrist* or Olatunde Osunsanmi's *The Fourth Kind* wider releases and not dump them in New York and Los Angeles and then release them six months later on DVD everywhere else.

All horror aficionados deserve to see these movies or ones like them in full movie theater experience. I don't want to see a remake of a remake anytime soon.

Photo courtesy of the World Wide Web.



# Video Games

Tim Yockey

Over the years there have been many horror video games that have come and gone. I'd argue that prior to the original PlayStation, horror videogames simply weren't worth noting. Horror games were just like any other *Sonic the Hedgehog* or *Super Mario Brothers*, but with unsettling things thrown in the attempt to capitalize on the setting. This all changed when *Resident Evil* was released.

*Resident Evil* scared me rotten. The game started off with the cast being chased into a mansion by monsters and continued to prod you along this journey with eerie music haunting you at all times. I played this as a child and having creepy music introduce you to every new room when going through a door just terrified me. The first time you come across what you think is a human he turns out to be a zombie, and things just get worse from there. As the game progressed you get introduced to countless new forms of death, from zombie dogs to a colossal snake to creepy giant spiders and genetically altered humans. Everything screamed horror, and this continued on with each release.

Enter *Resident Evil 2*, a game with new heroes, new setting and new baddies just itching to tear your face off. While they did away with some of the lesser conventions from the first game (R.I.P. music when changing rooms), they introduced a lot more shock value in having monsters pop out of ceilings, barrel through doors and generally try to catch you off guard. They succeeded. I played this game religiously, beating it easily over 10-15 times, and some parts still scared the pants off me even though I knew they were coming.

*Resident Evil 3* built upon the prior two games success and offered more of what made

the earlier two works classics. The big new way to instill trepidation was with the idea of the Nemesis, who was a frightful super zombie armed with a rocket launcher, absurd strength and a strong desire to see you dead. He would pop up at the worst of times, trapping you in confined spaces and unexpectedly giving you a boss fight you may or may not be ready for. He wouldn't just appear, he'd tear through a wall to get to his goal: you.

Alas, I feel resigned to admit that I never got to beat the next game in the *Resident Evil* series, *Resident Evil: Code Veronica*. I owned it, but I didn't get the chance to tear into it until after playing *Resident Evil 4*, and well, the game play changes were drastic enough to make me not wish to return to the older designs.

*Resident Evil 4* and *5* changed the formula of *Resident Evil* into more of an action game than a horror game, which was more fun overall. The tension was toned down, which was disappointing, but the intensity shot up. They replaced shocking moments with a feel of dread from having overwhelming odds of vicious humans possessed by a monster controlling them to tear you apart.

While the gameplay may have changed over the years, *Resident Evil* is still capable of terrifying me. Other games may have taken aspects of *Resident Evil* and built upon them in better ways (I'm looking at you, *Silent Hill* and your artfully designed blood and darkness filled environments), but the originator still stands tall as the king of the hill. *Resident Evil* still has a fine place in the market these days, and with each new release, at least one fanboy will be there eager to make a purchase.

**SHAKE**  
Publications

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