

ELEGANT LITERATURE

BAD BLOOD



#032

Elegant Literature Issue #032
Bad Blood

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ABOUT ELEGANT LITERATURE

MAGAZINE & CONTEST

Elegant Literature is a magazine focused on publishing new writers. At its inception, there were few publications—if any—that only accepted work from aspiring talent and also paid professional rates.

We aimed to change that.

As far as we know, Elegant Literature is the only short fiction magazine willing to turn down work from famous authors. No Stephen King's or George Martin's here. This policy gives unpublished authors a significantly less competitive market to submit work to, increasing their chances of publication.

Our goal is to help discover new voices in fiction, and publish talented beginners from around the globe.

Elegant Literature publishes work from all genres, and readers can always find a free copy of every issue on our website.

Each issue of the magazine also corresponds to our monthly contest. One of the stories in the following pages has won the grand prize. But we don't reveal who it is in the table of contents. It wouldn't be fair for readers to skip over the other works.

We encourage you to read and enjoy each piece in the order presented. They have been curated intentionally. Please, discover the winner naturally.

The list of honourable mentions relates directly to the contest.

If you read something you like, please consider connecting with and supporting the author.

[Click here for more information about submitting to the magazine.](#)

[Click here for more information about entering the contest.](#)

Happy reading!

CONTENT WARNING

Work published in *Elegant Literature* varies widely. Some stories may deal with mature and uncomfortable topics.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

OUR PARTNERS	7
ISSUE PROMPT	8
HEAD JUDGE	9
HONORABLE MENTIONS	10
THE BOOK OF PETTY CURSES C.J. LARSEN	11
MADE OF ICE CAMSYN CLAIR	19
THE GOLDEN CHILD ANNE WILKINS	27
TATAU JONATHAN DAVID MAJORS	34
A FEW THINGS I FOUND OUT ABOUT YOU RHAYN J. ABNER	42
A HOUSE FIRE ON WOODSIDE ROAD A.K. MCCUTCHEON	49
FLAVIAN'S ALEX ZAK	57

BLOOD AND DEATH	65
MAXIMILIAN P SIDDELL	
WARNING NOTE BEFORE A PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE	73
KENNA DUNCAN	
RAGE AGAINST THE SEWING MACHINE	77
ALEX ATKINS	
JUDGE'S COMMENTS	85
ANDY PELOQUIN	

THANK YOU TO
OUR PARTNERS

SUBTXT
SCRIVENER
SCAPPLE
PROWRITINGAID
TODOIST
THE NOVEL FACTORY
IRIS MARSH

ISSUE PROMPT

BAD BLOOD

Write a story involving Bad Blood, and a needle.

How could they have said what they said, did what they did? You were close, once, but no longer. You won't apologize and neither will they. Do you turn aside and forget? No. Better to hold the grudge and bide your time...

What begins as a trivial disagreement blossoms into enduring conflict. Rivalries become feuds, then wars spanning generations. Hatred and hostility across history. Ancient quarrels seep into the stories and bones of neighboring clans. A king's broken oath to his brother sparks centuries of animosity. As we spread into space, will the trend continue? Planetary pacts betrayed by one cause mistrust among millions. Treachery, tension, and tragedy. The lines between justice and revenge blur, and old wounds never truly heal. When is the time right for a truce flag, olive branch, or gesture of good faith? Leech the venom from your veins. A transfusion to replace toxicity with forgiveness, lest the infection spread to those around and after you. Will the sins of the past dictate the rhythms of the future, or can we break the cycle of bad blood?

This contest invites you to explore Bad Blood, whatever that means to you. Fantasy, contemporary, romance, crime. All genres are welcome.

HEAD JUDGE
ANDY PELOQUIN

Thank you to our
upcoming & past judges:

HANNAH YANG
CHRISTOPHER FIELDEN
SOMTO IHEZUE
CHRISTI NOGLE
LINDZ MCLEOD
A.C. WISE
SHIV RAMDAS
OGHENECHOVWE D. EKPEKI
BEN GALLEY
AI JIANG
RICHIE BILLING
HAYLEY MILLIMAN
JORDAN KANTEY
NATHAN BAUGH
JIM HULL
DJANGO WEXLER
NICKY SHEARSBY
MAX GLADSTONE
CREAG MUNROE

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE
HONORABLE MENTIONS
PRESENTED IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

A Time for Man, and a Time for Beasts	Matthew D'Addario
Ambrosia	S. M. Walser
Bend, Don't Break	Jenn Keohane
Blades of Glory	Erin Brandt Filliter
Bourbon Red Blood	Sam Brooks
Bring Them Home, Deathblood Daughter	Rory Kranz
Eyes to See, Eyes to Sew	Marcus Hansson
Feeding Crescent	Charlie Rogers
Gentle Jaws	Molly Wadkins
Lies We Tell Ourselves	Christy Hartman
Pheromone Red	Lisa Robertson
Pinprick	Ariel Joy Chow
Respect	Michael Feeney
Seeing Red	Rowan Evans
So Tender the Flesh Falls Off the Bone	Rachel Harbaugh
The Blood Pact	Courtney Danielson
The Demise of Walter Crumb	Kit Foster
The Morning is Cranberry	Tatiana Samokhina
The Tale of Two Brothers	Jae Lee
The Taste of Grapes	Toni Juliette Leonetti
The Tower's Dreams	Jaime Gill
The Uncharted Path	CharlieB
The Weight of Good Intentions	Iseult Merlin
The Witch of Carra Lane	Tim Deschênes
To Leave A Mark	Lauren Lohrenz

THE BOOK OF PETTY CURSES

C.J. LARSEN

IT WAS THE RED SPINE that caught Angelica's eye. The color stood out from its paperback neighbors on the \$2 shelf. The spine was too narrow to display the book's name or author. She pulled it out and fingered the gold leaf on the cover.

The Book of Petty Curses

The faded leather conveyed age. How much was hard to say as there was no copyright page. Some vanity press passion project from a time before Amazon. Angelica read the introduction.

This is a book of curses to settle petty grievances. I have collected them in my travels around the World and compiled them here. Experience recommends keeping the sting of the slight close to your heart when casting. Beyond that, I cannot guarantee their efficacy.

Forsaken are those whose acts burden another. Beware the harm you cast into the world. Water spilt from the cup cannot be returned.
– M. Lowridge

Angelica skimmed over the table of contents, amused at the names of the spells, and flipped to the page entitled *Curse for the Unfaithful Lover*.

To a cup of chamomile tea, add two drops of your own blood, pricked with a sewing needle. Speak his name three times. Drink the contents of the cup at once without setting it down. He shall reap what he sows.

It could make a fun gift for someone. She added it to her stack and made her way to the crotchety old man at the register.

Angelica returned to her apartment that evening, arms laden with shopping bags from her adventures downtown, looking forward to a quiet evening at home with a frozen dinner. She dropped the bags on her bed. The clothes could be put away later. Right now, it was time to crack open one of her new finds. She pulled *Great Expectations* from the bookstore bag, and settled onto the couch to read while the toaster oven hummed away.

When the timer dinged, she grabbed the store receipt to use as a bookmark and noticed the total—\$58.00 for five used books. That couldn't be right. It wasn't right. As she scanned down the columns, she realized the owner had added a zero on the two books from the bargain shelf. What should have been \$2, instead rang up as \$20.

Ugh, enough of an overcharge to mean she'd have to drive downtown again after work tomorrow to straighten it out. The old codger probably ripped people off all the time. Probably assumed no one pays attention when they pay with credit cards. He'd probably argue with her too. She'd take the books back with her and show him the price tag.

Hadn't that little curse book had an entry for this?

She flipped open the book as she sat at the table with her still-too-hot lasagna. Ah yes, *A Curse for the Unscrupulous Shopkeeper*. It was not very complicated. Fold a paper bill in half and half again. Burn the corner with a flame.

Why not? Angelica pulled a dollar from her purse. As she folded it neatly over, she focused on the slight. Karma could pay him back for all those times he'd cheated a customer.

There was no woosh of magical breeze through the room. The flame at the end of the lighter didn't even flicker. All the same, she felt a little sense of justice, however silly and useless her act.

Angelica might have expected it to be the last curse she ever cast. But the next day, someone stole her lunch from the breakroom fridge.

As she sat in the parking lot, eating a drive-through burrito she never should have had to purchase, her eyes landed on the bag waiting to be taken back to the bookstore. There was the little red book, promising retribution.

She didn't *really* believe in magic. She wasn't some twelve-year-old girl who thought she could manifest a date to the dance if she just focused hard enough. On the other hand, what would it hurt? After all, she got up early to make that sandwich. Who thinks they can just take someone else's homemade sandwich? It was the audacity that really irked her.

There it was, on page 15, *A Curse to Punish a Pickpocket*—close

enough to a breakroom thief.

That afternoon, June, the busy body secretary notorious for emptying the reception desk candy bowl, had to leave early with an outbreak of hives.

“Probably allergic to something she ate,” Belinda from accounting speculated.

Yes, it probably *was* something she ate. Angelica felt a peculiar thrill.

She wondered what she might find when she made it back to the bookstore. But her curiosity would not be satisfied that evening. When she finally left work, someone had double parked behind her spot. At least she had *Great Expectations* to keep her company while she waited for the driver to return. Thirty minutes and two chapters later, Angelica was still stuck, the rude driver nowhere in sight.

She thumbed through the little book of curses. Perfect, *A Curse for the Inconsiderate*. It didn't even require any materials. Just pinch your hand as hard as you can and whistle until your breath runs out.

Her whistle pulsed and faded as she forced out the last bit of breath with her diaphragm. Her nails left an indent in her palm. Nothing happened. And then it did! With a crack, a branch fell from the tree by her parking space, dropping directly on the hood of the car that had blocked her in. The car alarm squealed. A lady in clicking heels came running down the sidewalk, pulled from a roadside conversation that was apparently so important it warranted double parking.

The woman pulled the branch off the car, swearing like a sailor. Angelica took delight in the woman's agony at discovering a deep dent in the hood. Finally, the woman drove off and Angelica could go home.

The next morning, Angelica arrived at work to discover Belinda had helped herself to the last two donuts in the daily employee morale box. “You should get here earlier,” Belinda said, mouth full of ill-gotten donut.

So very inconsiderate.

A few minutes later, Angelica feigned sympathy at the long stain of raspberry filling dripping down Belinda's white blouse. Oh, yes, she

agreed, such a shame. The drycleaning bill would be awful.

Angelica found herself anticipating the next slight. She had never realized how many wrongs she had meekly accepted. But the day passed without further incident. She received a polite call from a client. Her boss even said she could leave early to deal with the bookstore.

As Angelica prepared to head out at 4:30, Joe peaked his head into her cubicle. "I'm sorry, my wife needs me to come home asap. Can you finish the Peak Partners invoice for me?"

Angelica set her purse back down on her desk. "No problem, Joe."

Angelica liked Joe. She really did. He was a nice guy, told funny jokes, reminded her of her brother. But he just assumed the single girl with no family could stay late. There was always something. Joe's kid has a concert. Joe's kid is sick. Joe has an afternoon appointment to view his wife's sonogram (because yes, they're having yet another kid). She didn't choose to have Joe's kids. Why did she have to pick up the slack? Wasn't her time valuable too?

Just one little curse before she dealt with the invoice...

Angelica heeded Belinda's advice and did get in early the next day. She was rewarded by a full box of muffins in the breakroom, all the flavors still available. While she sat at her desk enjoying a blueberry muffin and reading the news on her phone, Belinda foisted a card in her face.

"What's this?" Angelica asked, wiping the sugar off her hands to take it. A picture of flowers and *Get Well Soon* in curly script.

"It's so awful. You know how Joe had to leave early yesterday because Maggie was having issues? Turns out she had eclampsia. He got stuck in traffic and it took him forever to get home. By the time he got there, she was having seizures. She's in a coma now."

Angelica stared in horror at the sympathy card.

"You ok?" Belinda asked.

Angelica signed the card and pushed it back at Belinda. She slumped in her chair. The half-eaten muffin lay lopsided on her mousepad. The completed Peak Partner's invoice glowed reproachfully at her on her computer screen, still open from yesterday night.

No. She was not ok. Joe was supposed to get stuck in traffic. That was all. A little revenge for making her stay late. Not *this*. She pulled her little red book out, seeking desperately for some way to take it back.

There—the very last entry in the book, labeled simply, *To Reverse*.

Fill a cup with water to the brim. Carefully pour the water into another cup of equal size. Spill not a drop. Do this three times, each time saying “I repent.”

When done, return this book to the place where you found it. Leave it there. Never cast a curse again.

Angelica rushed to the watercooler and grabbed two paper cups from the dispenser. She filled one to the top and poured it into the other, carefully, so carefully, not spilling a drop. She *did* repent. She meant it with all her heart as she repeated the phrase three times, ignoring the confused looks from her co-workers. She liked Joe. She really did. Maggie made her an entire plate of cookies last Christmas. They didn’t deserve this.

“Where are you going?” June called out at Angelica’s back as she rushed out the door. Angelica didn’t answer. She drove downtown, parked in the first space she could find and dashed along the sidewalk, book in hand, heading to the bookstore.

She finally reached her destination, out of breath. She stared at the bookstore, mouth agape. Rather, she stared at the burned-out husk where the bookstore should have been. Boards covered the window and door. The acrid smell of smoke hung in the air.

“What happened to the bookstore?” she asked the barista in the coffee shop across the street.

“Oh, crazy story. It burned down on Monday. I guess the owner hadn’t been paying his employees correctly and he got a notice or something. He tried to burn the files in his office and it ended up taking out the whole store.”

Angelica stood on the sidewalk with her coffee and considered the boarded-up door. Ashy soot discolored the bricks behind it, spread-

ing out like some sort of perverse wreath. Someone had spray-painted a crooked happy face on it with a word bubble proclaiming “UP YouRs!” The board was nailed down tight.

The cup trembled in Angelica’s hand. Coffee sloshed through the lid hole and dripped down her fingers. She knelt, setting the cup on the ground and absently wiping her hand on her slacks. She prodded the gap between the base of the plywood sheet and the sidewalk. It was just wide enough to slide a thin book underneath.

C.J. LARSEN

C.J. lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, two daughters, two dogs and a cat. She likes to think up fairy tales when she should be sleeping. C.J. has never cast a curse. She's not sure if her cat can claim the same.

MADE OF ICE

CAMSYN CLAIR

RYALE WAS DIZZY WITH COLD by the time they and Eika had crossed the frozen lake and reached the base of the Glacier. The sharp studs on Eika's horseshoes allowed her to traverse the slick terrain, but the gusts that assailed them throughout their journey had slowed their pace considerably.

Eika's entire body steamed as her sweat evaporated. She mouthed at the ice, biting off chunks to rehydrate after the arduous trek. Ryale dismounted and followed her lead. They chipped at the wall with a needle-sharp ice pick, alternating between eating the chips and filling their canteen.

Their weekly journeys to the Glacier kept their community's water barrels full, making up for the government's meager allotment to the villages on the outskirts. Ryale liked to imagine the same government officials who deemed them unworthy of having enough water trekking out to the Glacier on horseback, filling saddlebags from frigid pools or chipping ice by hand, then making the long journey back week after week for an entire season without the aid of their elaborate machines.

The officials wouldn't last a day.

Ryale untied their ice skates from the back of Eika's saddle, removed the blade guards, and managed to swap out their riding boots despite numb fingers. They clucked for Eika to follow and began skirting the Glacier in search of their refuge. When they spotted the wide fissure that allowed entry into the Glacier, they bounded ahead to tuck themselves away from the wind. Eika beelined for the pool inside and gulped the water despite its near-freezing temperature. Ryale knelt beside her and dunked their canteen into the pool, drinking and refilling until their stomach hurt. Then, they poured water into the deep transport bags on Eika's saddle that they'd use to resupply the village.

Eika threw her head up and spun toward the fissure entrance. With an eight-foot-tall, five-foot-wide opening, the fissure allowed plenty of light to bathe the space, but only a sliver of visibility outside. Ryale scrambled to their feet, heart hammering at the prospect of something—or someone—approaching. One thing was certain about

treks to the Glacier: Ryale went alone.

The only consequence worse than one person dead from exposure or glacial collapse would be two. Ryale had spent their first season traveling with the Winter Waterbearer every week to train for the role. Thirteen opportunities to learn the ropes and make mistakes with someone to bail them out before they became the Spring Waterbearer—at which point, human companionship ceased. In the last week of Spring, the seasoned Summer Waterbearer would accompany them to become familiar with how the Glacier may have changed since the previous year. But, it was nowhere near Summer. And even if it were, Ryale and the Summer Waterbearer would have journeyed together. No one simply *appeared* at the Glacier.

Ryale crept toward the fissure's opening and peeked out. When they saw what had caught Eika's attention, they tried to scream, but any potential noise was drowned out by the wind—which had also masked the low rumbling until the sound's origin was close enough to make the ground tremble.

An enormous piece of machinery approached with terrifying haste, its rotating cylindrical head hungry for destruction. Ryale had heard about the government machines that came hellbent on pillaging anything they hadn't already destroyed to take back to the city. Stories claimed they could level entire villages, and this one looked capable of boring a hole clean through the Glacier.

Ryale pulled the reins over Eika's head and tugged her alongside them, skating faster than they ever had until they were out of the path of the machine. Only then did they allow themselves to slow, looking back in horror as it pressed on, relentless. The Glacier was one of the last of its kind—the last in Ryale's vicinity—and the only source of fresh water for hundreds of villagers.

Ryale unbridled Eika. "Take that water home," they said, then skated back to the fissure before they could change their mind. The idea that Ryale could stop a several-thousand-ton government machine was outrageous—and their people's only chance of survival.

The machines' technology was supposed to be advanced, so perhaps there was a safeguard that wouldn't allow it to mow down a

person. Ryale dug their skates into the ground and guarded their face with their arms—as though that would protect them from the towering wall of metal mere meters away. They inhaled, braced, and hoped, remembering the Elders’ words:

Everyone who Transitioned followed a tunnel of white light to the Other Side, where they would meet Judgment. Judgment had many faces, but if one lived with kindness, She would be as gentle as a lamb.

After passing Judgment, the one who Transitioned would grant their own, choosing who or what to accept, reject, resent, or forgive. And only when one made peace with a lifetime of decisions could they fully cross over.

Never once did Ryale hear about Judgment being human. Yet, when they could finally see past the tunnel of white light, a man knelt over them, frowning. Ryale was no longer standing in front of the Glacier, hands raised. Instead, they had been thrown onto their back from an impact.

The man’s entire body sagged in relief when they stirred, and he gulped air like he’d been holding his breath for minutes. “Thank you for being alive.”

The tunnel didn’t lead to the Other Side, after all.

Ryale tried to sit up, but the man stopped them. “You shouldn’t move. I’ll call a medic.” He surveyed the scene, eyes wide. “No one told us people lived in the glaciers.”

That’s because people don’t live in the Glacier, Ryale thought, but didn’t waste energy trying to explain. “Where’s Eika?” they asked.

“Where is what?”

“Where. Is. Ei. Ka. My horse,” they repeated, slowly, in case this government man did not understand Common speak.

“The horse is out there,” he said. “First one I ever saw in real life.”

Ryale pushed to sit up again, resisting when the man objected.

“You really shouldn’t move,” he said.

“You really shouldn’t tell me what to do.”

That silenced him. Ryale did sit, though pain electrified their body. The back of their head throbbed from where it had smacked against the ice. Once they were upright, they noticed something else: they were back inside of the fissure. Water dripped into the pool. The machine's drill, now idle, pressed against the entrance to the Glacier—that must have been what knocked them back—but it hadn't pushed all the way inside. Eika peeked in through the narrow space around the drill, nostrils flared with concern, but hesitated to approach. Ryale didn't blame her.

They turned their attention back to the man. "You didn't destroy the Glacier."

"We did plan to harvest the glacier, yes, but couldn't get through the ice. Good thing, too, or you'd've been toast. No way I could've seen you standing outside with how big the machine is."

The man chuckled. Ryale found none of what he said to be funny.

"Where were you going to take the ice?" they asked.

"To a purification plant. Then, I imagine it'd be sent to a distribution plant."

"So there would be more water for communities with unsustainable allotments?"

He shrugged. "Hopefully. My job is just to take it to the distribution plant. What happens after that is above my pay grade."

Ryale tipped their head. "Why?"

The man chuckled again. Ryale was still baffled about what made any of this funny.

"Because the people in charge of those decisions make more money a year than I'll ever have," he said.

"So you don't care?"

Finally, his expression sobered. "I never said I didn't care. I just can't do anything about it."

"Have you tried?"

He avoided Ryale's gaze. "You said something about unsustainable allotments—are you from the villages?"

Ryale noticed the glaring change of subject but nodded anyway.

"Are you here for water?" he asked.

They nodded again.

"This place is miles from the nearest village," he said.

"I know."

"Did you come all this way to collect water *by horse*?"

"Fortunately for the village, Eika and I are far more competent than your machine."

Ryale whistled for their horse. Despite their pain and fatigue, the sound was loud and sharp enough to cut through the wind. Even then, they weren't sure if that would convince Eika to brave the machine and strange man. She snorted but obeyed, closing the gap between them.

Ryale rubbed her forehead when she lowered her head toward their chest. "Good girl. Let's go home."

"Wait—you were out cold when I found you. There's no way you're not hurt."

Ryale knew that they were hurt. They didn't know *how* hurt, but as long as they made it onto Eika's back, she'd ensure they both got home. "There are doctors in the village," they said.

"The medical outposts have more supplies."

"If you want to help so much, maybe you could bring some of those supplies to the villages." Ryale tapped Eika's elbow for her to kneel down. They untied their boots from the back of her saddle and began the painstaking process of switching footwear while injured.

The man finally stopped staring and nodded. "I'll try."

Ryale paused and looked at him. "Really." Their tone presented more of a challenge than a question.

He toed at the ice with his boot. "I've been harvesting water from different places my entire career. I mean, I knew the people at the top kept the most for themselves, but I didn't realize the degree that other folks were getting short-changed."

As Ryale replaced the blade guards on their skates and tied them back to the saddle, they wondered what the man would do when facing his Judgment. They turned back to him and asked, "Suppose you *did* take the entire Glacier. And another after that. And another, until there were none left. Then what?"

“Then... then we’d all run out of water.”

Ryale nodded and climbed onto Eika’s back, then cued her to stand. They motioned to the saddlebags. “We only take as much as we need, not as much as we can hoard. If we get the miracle of rain or snow, we don’t take from the Glacier until we need to again. We hope that the precipitation will help the Glacier build back.”

“You really care about the land.”

Ryale glanced at him. “And you really ought to.” They gathered their reins and nudged Eika toward the fissure. When they heard the man’s voice again, they were already squeezing past the drill into the open.

“I do now.”

Ryale opted not to respond—they had neither the power nor desire to acquit or condemn the man’s past, present, or future actions. As they forged ahead into the wind, they trusted Judgment to grant the final verdict.

CAMSYN CLAIR

Camsyn Clair (they/them) is a 27-year-old Black, queer psychotherapist, artist, and horse lover from Maryland. Cam's writing stalled during college, and they didn't return to stories until signing up for the NYC Midnight Challenges on a whim in 2022. They never looked back and have since thrived off the thrill of prompt-based writing competitions.

As much as Cam enjoys writing stories, their favorite part of the creative process is collaborating with others through beta reading and sharing completed work. Cam loves the writing community as much as the art itself and is so grateful for the opportunity to have such skilled and supportive writers to look up to. When not writing, Cam can be found bonding with their Mustang horse, Zen, teaching horsemanship lessons, gardening, drawing, or causing chaos in tabletop role playing games.



THE GOLDEN CHILD

ANNE WILKINS

CONTEST WINNER

MY SISTER, RUTH, HAS ALWAYS liked gold. The golden star stickers she would proudly show Mother. The golden glitter she would pour over her little projects. And the golden medals she seemed to always win at school.

I preferred silver. After all, I am the second sister.

Silver stickers seemed to be the star my teachers chose for my school books, *good work Abby, but not quite gold*. I saturated my projects with the sparkles of silver glitter, and any medals I received were always shiny silver.

Silver for second place.

Silver for *not quite gold*.

Silver for *not quite good enough*.

Mother says she loves us both the same. But Mother wears gold around her neck, not silver, and I see the way her eyes are drawn to the brightness that bubbles from my sister.

Ruth is twenty now. She is the golden child, and I...

I am the silver child.

Ruth brushes her long hair in front of the mirror. Her hair is also gold, like Rapunzel, Mother used to say. She's graduated from golden stars and golden glitter, to now adorning herself with golden trophies from rich admirers—a gold bracelet around her delicate wrist; golden earrings that dangle low; and a gold necklace that rests on her pale, slim neck.

I lay my eyes on her neck for a moment too long, and she notices me watching her.

"Do you like it, Abby?" she asks, and she twists her latest trinket in her fingers. "John got it for me. Just before we broke up."

I say nothing.

John has gone the way like so many before him: hypnotised by the golden spell my sister casts upon those around her. They are drawn to her, the warmth of her smile, the brightness of her sunshine, but just like Icarus, they all burn when they fly too close to the sun.

"You know, if you did something with yourself, Abby, you could be quite pretty."

Ruth says this to me like she is paying me a compliment, but all I

hear are the words could be. I draw my curtain of black hair around my face, as if it can protect myself from the sting of her words. I hear her little laugh. “Maybe a haircut would help,” she adds, looking at me in distaste. “Or maybe not. Anyway, what do you want?”

“It’s about Mum.”

“Can’t *you* deal with it?”

“She’s getting worse.”

“You know Abby, we’ve had this discussion.” She sighs as if she’s having to explain herself to a toddler. “Mum’s just going to die anyway. I don’t want to pay for care. Everything we pay for comes out of *our* inheritance, and you know that means less for you and less for me.” She smiles as she says this—her radiant smile—but there is no warmth in her words.

“She’s in pain, Ruth.” My words are like a whisper from a half-person, a silver star sticker about to peel. They are hard to hear and hard to say. Cancer spreads and takes more from our Mother every day. I do what I can, but it’s not enough.

“Increase her medication then. I really don’t see what this has got to do with me.” Ruth continues brushing her hair. “Anyway, I’ve got more important stuff to do.”

She’s going on another date. More treasure hunting, trophy collecting. Our conversation is over.

Two weeks later Ruth visits Mother in her bedroom offering her fake apologies, explaining how busy she’s been. Mother sits with Charlie on her lap. Her eyes light up to see her golden child, but Charlie hisses and jumps off. I retreat into the corner with Charlie, where both of us watch from the shadows. My sister should have been an actress. She fawns over our mother, holding her hand, smoothing her brow, filling the room with her brightness. Her little laugh, which can be so cutting and cruel, floats around the room as if it’s only capable of happiness. Mother feeds off her favourite child, and for once there are spots of colour in the yellow hollows of her cheeks, while I only grow paler and Charlie stops purring.

Later, when Mother needs help to get to the toilet, Ruth turns to

me. “Be a dear, Abby, I’ve just had my nails done. I don’t think I can take Mother. Not this time.”

Not any time.

I lift Mother’s frail body from the bed and carry her to the bathroom.

Mother once used to feed the sparrows in our garden, but now she’s become a sparrow with only hollow bones and feathered limbs—a tiny bird woman.

“You’re a good girl, Abby,” says Mother when I carry her back to her bedroom. Her hand briefly touches my cheek. “Don’t you forget that.”

Ruth is waiting for us when we return, but there’s no sign of Charlie. She fluffs up Mother’s pillows, pretending to be useful. “You know, I’ve always loved this necklace, Mother,” she simpers. Her hand reaches out, drawn to the gold around Mother’s throat.

When she leaves Mother’s room, she has gathered another golden trophy for her collection that she now wears around her neck. Her pale, thin neck.

It’s another month before Mother passes. Ruth acts as if it is an inconvenience. If she could, I think she would have had Mother buried in our backyard to save on cost, but since that is not available she chooses the cheapest funeral she can. Her eyes brim with false tears, and lies drip from her red-stained mouth, all while she flaunts our Mother’s gold around her neck, on her wrists and on her fingers. Mother’s jewellery box has already been well raided.

“I’ve left the silver for you, Abby,” says my sister, but Mother never owned any silver. Gold had always been her favourite. I’m only left with emptiness.

That night, under the watch of a silver moon I let my tears out. Real ones, unlike my sister’s. They stream down my face, and I slowly rock myself in the comfort of my own arms. I overhear Ruth on the phone downstairs talking with a vet about euthanising Charlie, and my world grows even smaller and tighter ‘til I feel I cannot breathe at all.

In the morning it is the heat of the sun glaring through my bedroom window that wakes me. My sister is in a foul mood. The lawyer is coming today, to read the will, and my sister had to postpone a date. Her gold prospecting will need to wait.

The lawyer, when he arrives, is formalistic, his suit crisp, just like his tone. He starts, "It may come as a surprise but your mother was perhaps much wealthier than you both might know."

My sister's eyes spark as if struck by a match.

"How wealthy?" she asks, her body craning forward in her seat.

"Well, she owned a number of profitable mines in South Africa."

"Mines?" my sister asks. She now sits perched on the edge of her seat.

"Yes, and she has bequeathed these to you both as gifts." The lawyer clears his throat, "Silver mines to my daughter Abby, and gold mines to my daughter Ruth..."

Of course, I think, silver for the silver daughter. Gold for the golden child.

Ruth puffs up. "Which is worth more?" she asks. The greed is a hunger in her eyes.

"The gold ones are currently reaping almost a 2:1 profit compared to the silver mines." Ruth's eyes cast to me. *See, they say. You were always second place. Not quite good enough.* The lawyer continues "But the diamond mines are worth considerably more than either, and they were also gifted to Abby."

"Diamond?" My sister's smile slides off her face and is replaced by a scowl. "Diamonds... for *her*?" She looks at me with disgust.

The lawyer nods.

"GET OUT!" my sister yells. Her golden facade breaks, exposing the ugliness that has always been lying just underneath. She points one perfectly manicured finger at the door, and the lawyer timidly withdraws from the inferno that is about to erupt.

As soon as the front door closes, she turns on me, her words like needles. "This was what you planned all along, wasn't it? Sucking up to mother, when she was sick. Oh, what a clever little game you think you've played sister."

I can't listen to her venom, so I start up the stairs to my room.

"Don't run from me!" she yells. "I'm talking to you!"

I'm almost at the landing when she grabs my hair. My long black hair, the hair that I should have had cut. She clenches it in a rage and yanks me back. "I don't come second place," she spits into my face. I think she means to throw me down the stairs. I grab my mother's necklace that's around her neck, her thin, pale neck.

And that's all I remember.

The lawyer heard screams and found us both in a tangled heap at the bottom of the stairs with Charlie nearby. My sister's neck was broken, snapped.

But then silver has always been much stronger than gold.

I'm at her funeral now. The cheapest I could find. I cry my fake tears for my golden sister, but I don't wear silver or gold.

My favourite is now diamonds.

ANNE WILKINS

Anne Wilkins is a former family court lawyer, and now a sleep-deprived primary school teacher in New Zealand. She writes in her spare time (which she has very little of). Her love of writing is fuelled by copious amounts of coffee, reading and hope.

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TATAU

JONATHAN DAVID MAJORS

THE SOUND OF PERSISTENT TAPPING filled the room. The sound held a specific rhythm as the old woman toiled away at the intricate designs. The large man lay there, devoid of emotion as she tapped with her instruments, marking the flesh of his forearm with symbols and patterns which might seem meaningless yet were anything but.

The old woman spoke without ceasing her work. "All these years you come here, never once I ask what you do. Well, now I ask."

The man grunted and answered. "I used to hunt whales, but the whaling dried up. The white man had no respect. They didn't fear the gods of the deep, nor the white god they believed in."

Never ceasing her work, she asked, "So what you doin' now, with no whales to hunt?"

"I still hunt, just not whales," he said, going quiet once again, and in his silence she sensed he would say no more.

Many years she had given her people the tatau. So many years she could do it with her eyes closed. It was easy for her to glance away from her work and not make a mistake. She did so. She glanced toward the corner of her hut where his belongings sat. There was nothing remarkable about his possessions. They were the usual things any sort of man carried. Except for the harpoon. It leaned against the wall, sharp and imposing. Much blood it had spilt, she could tell. She couldn't help but wonder, if he no longer hunted whales, what did he hunt?

She finished her work in the form of a ringlet which encircled his forearm. There were many like it all over his body yet not a one was the same. All of them done by her.

He stood and walked over to his belongings to retrieve her payment.

"Aren't you going to inspect my workmanship?" she asked.

He rifled through his things and spoke without turning. "I know it's good. It's a part of me. I'll have the rest of my life to admire it."

He stood and walked to her, pouring the contents of his pouch into her open palms. She counted the contents, almost greedily. The money was correct, but that was secondary. What was most important

were the other items: thirty-two human teeth. Every time he used her services he always paid her exactly the same. Some money, as well as some human teeth.

The teeth were invaluable to her. She made them into small au neede combs. Their small size made them ideal for fine detail work. She never used these on him. He was always very particular. He always brought his own ink and his own au. She wondered about his ink's contents. She wondered about what his au were made of. She knew they were made of bone. But the bone of what? Or whose?

Hours later he sat in a corner of the inn. He had finished eating his bread-fruit and was now smoking his pipe while drinking pineapple rum. He tried to numb himself as much as he could. The night would be long and painful. The pain of the fresh tatau paled in comparison to what lay ahead.

While sitting there he noticed a man coming inside. The man asked a question of the innkeeper who pointed where the tatau'd man sat smoking in the corner. The man approached him.

"Are you the man they call Tatau?" asked the man.

"I am," said Tatau.

The man looked nervous. He glanced around and then looked back at Tatau. "I have work for you."

"Do you have my fee?" asked Tatau.

The man nodded and reached into his pocket with a bloody bandaged hand. He retrieved some money and a wadded rag. He pushed it across the table.

Tatau didn't even glance at the money. He picked up the wadded rag and opened it. It contained a cleanly bleached human finger bone. In the weak flickering light of the inn it looked yellow. Tatau smiled and put it in his pocket.

"Tell me," said Tatau.

The man wasn't sure if he should sit down, but did anyway. Tatau didn't seem to object, so the man told his story.

"There is a man from the village of Banana. His name is Oro. I believe he was once a fisherman or maybe a hunter. I don't recall,

but now he makes a living from extortion. He uses his strength to get whatever he wants from whomever he wants to take it.”

“What did he take from you?” Tatau asked.

The man’s face fell. He looked like he wanted to cry. “One night he forced his way into my home. He stank of drink and he bore the eyes of a devil. He beat me and tied me up, and then, he—my daughter...”

Tatau raised a hand and the man fell silent. The man’s tears had already begun and Tatau knew the man would have trouble continuing. That was no matter. Tatau already knew enough. He told the man to worry not. It would be dealt with, and the man, thanking him, frantically left and went home.

Tatau retired to his room. In the darkness, he stripped himself bare and sat on the floor. He pulled a large candle from his pack and set it down before him. It was a candle made from whale tallow. He needed to use a candle rendered from fat. Something about a candle made from the living, now dead, made it especially ideal for his purposes.

He preferred a whale candle. Though they were becoming harder to acquire they still burnt the cleanest and the longest of any candle he had ever found. This made them perfect.

He struck a flame and lit the wick.

He brought the flame to rest underneath his newly marked ink and held it there. He gritted his teeth as the flame burned hot. The smell of singed hair and skin stung his nostrils, and yet he held it there.

The process was always painful. He had done it so many times and knew what to expect, yet that never made it any easier. Not all the departed were as forgiving as some.

After a few moments the inked designs seemed to quiver and move in the dimness. The movements could be attributed to a trick of the light, but Tatau knew better. This was the desired response. He grit his teeth harder and fought through the pain. The first burn was always the hardest.

Seconds later a scream ripped through the night. A scream so loud it would awaken the entire inn, perhaps even the village. No ears heard this sound, not even his own. He felt the scream deep in his

soul. He let the scream continue for a few breaths before finally removing the flame from his arm.

The scream went silent.

He gave it a moment to rest. After a while a pained voice spoke. "Where am I? How came I to be here?"

"I took your life," Tatau said, "it now belongs to me."

The voice wanted to argue. Denial always comes first. Tatau applied the flame again. The voice screamed. He removed the flame. Silence.

"How has this come to be?" asked the voice.

"You are imprisoned in the ink I've made with your blood, inscribed by the bone of one who bore a grudge against you. Your soul resides on my flesh until you are released."

"How long will that be?"

"You will work off your sins by aiding me in my quest."

"What is your quest?"

"To spill bad blood."

"Define bad blood!" demanded the voice.

"The blood of bad men, such as you," said Tatau.

The voice continued to resist for hours into the night. The flame needed to be applied numerous times. The voice resisted more than some but not as much as most. Tatau subjugated the voice and it became compliant.

Tatau lit his pipe, blew the smoke onto his body and engulfed the inked designs in a cloud. The voices of the departed began to awaken.

There was the usual confusion brought on by so many voices speaking at once, but Tatau quickly brought them to order.

He told the voices of the target and where the target lived. He asked if they had information on Oro or the village of Banana.

Several voices knew them. One voice knew them well.

He maintained a dialogue with this one voice: the voice of Akamu the silent runner. He remembered Akamu. The man had been a thief and a killer. He crept into houses and left without a trace. The man had led Tatau on a merry chase. Tatau caught him eventually. Akamu

didn't die well.

"There is a guard posted at the west gate of Banana," spoke Akamu. "His name is Aleki. He always sleeps at his post."

"Good," said Tatau. "What do you know of Oro?"

"He is dangerous and strong. He always drinks at night, and once good and drunk, he invades a hut at random and preys upon who lives there."

They continued their dialogue and Tatau devised a plan.

The very next evening Aleki the guard was fast asleep just as Akamu had said. Tatau was sure he could walk past him right through the gate, but the torches there were bright and he didn't want to be seen. He would have to scale the wall. It was tall but not impossible. He invoked the power of Kekoa, the departed warrior known for his jumps. Kekoa had died well, as a warrior should. Tatau cleared the wall in a single bound.

Inside the village walls he invoked the stealth of Keaka and kept to the shadows. Now nigh-invisible, he also invoked Akamu for his silent steps and ran on quiet feet from shadow to shadow as he searched for Oro.

It didn't take long to find him, stumbling drunk through the streets. People gave Oro a wide berth and avoided his gaze at all costs. Tatau knew he would be doing this village a favor.

As predicted, Oro stumbled his way to a nearby hut and entered uninvited. As Tatau drew near he could hear the sound of an altercation. He would need to move fast.

He peeked through the doorway to witness an unconscious man laying bloody on the floor and Oro standing over a young terrified girl.

"Oro!" boomed Tatau.

Oro stopped, drunkenly turned, and struggled to focus his eyes on the man who had spoke his name.

Tatau raised his harpoon over head and let out a war cry. Awareness began to dawn on Oro, but it was too late. He wouldn't be quick enough.

Tatau needed not invoke any of the departed for this task. The hurl of his harpoon had always been fast, true, and deadly. He had hunted whales long before he had ever hunted man and his technique had only grown sharper.

He let fly his harpoon with a deadly accuracy, piercing Oro's heart and protruding out his back. Oro staggered a few moments before realizing he was dead and then fell to the floor with a heavy thud.

Tatau didn't speak to the girl. There was nothing to say. She ran to where her father lay once she realized Tatau meant her no harm.

Oro was large and heavy, therefore, Tatau did need to invoke the strength of Ikaika. He drew in the harpoon line, dragging the body towards him. He never once passed the threshold of the door. After all, Tatau hadn't been invited.

With Ikaika's help he lifted the body and threw the mass over one shoulder. He bled back into the shadows via Keaka's stealth. He would need a safe place to drain the blood and extract the teeth. These things took time.

The voice of the departed shaman, Kapule, spoke and said, "I know a place."

It was going to be a long night.

JONATHAN DAVID MAJORS

Jonathan David Majors is a machinist who enjoys writing and building worlds. He lives in Memphis Tennessee with his wife Melanie in their home which is crowded with far too many books. Perhaps one day they will manage to get around to reading all of them.

A FEW THINGS I FOUND OUT ABOUT YOU

RHAYN J. ABNER

1. You used to have Mom's eyes. In the last photo you two took together, that's all anyone would focus on. The fog made a halo around the mountains behind you, and the salty wind messed up her hair, but the two pairs of jade-colored irises were the main attraction. You could barely form sentences, and you still upstaged me. Every person who saw you two on the mantle commented on how precious you were and asked how she managed to lift you onto her shoulders. No one ever asked why I wasn't there.

Do you know how disappointed she'd be if she saw the dark brown contacts you wear now?

2. You refuse to play anymore. I saw the violin in the dumpster that sits a few floors below your balcony. The snapped neck, cut strings, and desperate body sitting in the stench of black bags gave me chills. I couldn't find your bows anywhere, but I figured they didn't look any better.

I spent so many years hating the sound of that thing. I slammed my bedroom door so many times to keep the sound of you practicing out of my head. Either that, or the sound of the sewing machine every time Mom made you a new silk bag. If another person had used the word "prodigy" or "gifted" in the house one more time, I would have taken the rest of your baby teeth out with the case. To see that you had beaten me to it was almost cathartic.

What did your professor say when he found out?

3. You left that girl because she reminded you of too much. Part of me thought it may actually work out. During the birthdays, the funerals, and that one last Christmas, she was one of the few people who didn't give me the side eye. Her hugs were awkward, and I could always feel her heart beating against my chest, but it was a hug, nonetheless. That's when I realized she was as sickeningly sweet as you were. It almost made me want to remember her name.

At first, I thought it was a coincidence. Maybe you just had a type. But while she was waiting for you to open her car door, a breeze ran past her, picked up her hair, and looked as though flames were

dancing across her face. By the time her locks fell back into place, I almost threw up in the neighbor's rose bush. By the look in your eyes, you almost did, too.

I bet you even got a whiff of the coast every time you leaned into her face.

4. Sometimes, at the coffee shop, when you think no one's looking, you pick up a straw and plop it in your latte. Then, you catch it in your mouth, blow out, and watch as the bubbles break the milk design on top. I would have laughed, but you would have noticed me. The first time you did it, you blew too hard and your chocolate milk went all over my laptop and stash of books. I can't believe they still made me watch you afterward. The books still smell sour on the last three chapters.

Please don't ask me why I haven't gotten rid of them.

5. Your hands are exactly like Kevin's, and I hate it. I don't need to tell you why I hate it. You've probably heard all the stories, and Mom's side of the family calling me a liar. It made sense though. My dad was something no one wanted to discuss, and your dad was Kevin. And Kevin resulted in you, the one thing in Mom's life that happened on purpose. Who were people supposed to believe? I'll tell you this. I'll lie about a lot of things in my life, but never about that. There was a reason why I kept mom's sewing needles under my pillow. I didn't lie.

If you really believe I did, I will revoke my remorse.

6. You're the reason I can't go into toy stores anymore.

The last time I was in there, my bag bumped into the frogs, which toppled on the elephants, which brought down the ragdolls in dresses, and the bombs went off. The teddy bear laid there against my feet, with its sewn-up mouth, hard nose, and beady eyes piercing my thoughts. I wanted to walk past it, step on it, even, but all I could do was look at it. Soon enough, I saw your 7-year-old hands crawl from its back and clench around its cotton-filled stomach, as if they needed

to be afraid of me.

I never went back again.

7. You only cry when you don't think people are watching. Once a month, for the past year or so, you go out onto your balcony and clutch the metal rail in front of you. You still squint your eyes whenever your thoughts duel with each other. Eventually, you lean your chest over the railing, as if to hide your face, and let your body tremble as the sobs escape you.

After a while, I'm almost impressed by your self-control. You rarely scream anymore. But I also hope you don't stop anytime soon. The crying is the easiest part. Once that's over, you just sit outside, and wait for the huge pocket of air pushing all your organs out of place to burst already, so you can stop feeling like you're touching the world with gardening gloves. Believe me when I say, it will never burst.

8. You still think it was all my fault.

How could it have been my fault? She was the one who refused to visit after I moved out. I was so nice to her during the last day. I even sent her a text to tell her I was safe but of course that wasn't good enough for her. She always used you as an excuse for every missed call and no-show. Your recitals always came first.

It was meant to be a surprise that night. I was going to come up for the weekend, completely fresh from the nap on the train, a case of new knitting needles and I was going to tell her about the scores on my last English exams, how my advisor once called me "promising," and how my roommates and I had only gotten one noise complaint that month.

When I walked in, your name was plastered all over the living room. A banner stretched from the fridge to the pantry with the words "Congratulations" nearly slapping me in the face. A half-eaten sheet cake sat on the counter, right next to Kevin's watch.

Then she walked down the hallway, and I saw her smile melt away when she saw me. The smile she always had plastered on for you.

I just wanted to talk to her. That's all I wanted. She just made me

so mad. The look she always gave me, the way her face wrinkled in a way to tell me how much I disappointed her, ruined me that night. It always made me want to steal the breath right out of her throat. I wanted to reach in and take out every stupid sigh and mumble right out of her lungs.

The slap came out of nowhere. If she knew me at all, she'd know not to retaliate. I don't know when she had gotten so strong. Before I knew it, the watch flew across the hall, the cake went in her hair, and the knitting needles with her name carved in them jammed into her shoulder. She fell back too fast, and took too many steps back. She should have fixed the railings on the balcony months ago, or at least closed the glass door.

If it makes you feel better, I don't think she felt anything. She fell out the same way trains bolted past our house. All at once, filling the world with her screams for a fraction of a second, and then became nothing but a passing echo. In less than a second, she was a snapshot, and then she was gone. The only thing left was you.

I didn't mean for you to see that. I told you to go back to bed, but you just stood there. You didn't say anything, or even move. It wasn't until I saw your blank eyes, wet cheeks, and hands clinging onto your band t-shirt that I even knew it was all real.

I should have given you a hug and apologized. That's what a good sister would have done, right? I should have let you scream in the crook of my neck, listen to you tell me how much you hated me, and held you until you fell asleep. The world should have blurred into an infinite smudge once I saw how much I destroyed you.

But none of that happened. I just stepped past you, threw up in the sink, and left the door open as I walked out. It took me a week to feel anything. That's what I hated the most.

9. I have her necklace here waiting for you. I know you've been looking for it, but I knew what you'd do if you saw it in my hands. It only would have confirmed a decade's worth of rumors. I even washed the blood off the chain so that you wouldn't have to. The last remnants of her went down the drain, so you don't have to think

about it anymore. If you don't know where I live, just go to the building across the street from yours and go up the same number of floors it takes to get to your place. My door will be open.

I know it will mean nothing to you, but I don't feel good about it anymore. I wanted to get rid of that smile, wipe it off her face, but now I only wish that I could have been the reason for it.

Your eyes would look wonderful once it's around your neck, and you've spent enough time without it. I suggest you come find me before someone else does.

RHAYN J. ABNER

Rhayn is a fiction writer that specializes in horror, thriller and speculative fiction. Originally from California, she moved to Ireland in 2017 to get her MA in Creative Writing from the University of Limerick, and has lived there ever since. She currently works in marketing as a content writer.

A HOUSE FIRE ON WOODSIDE ROAD

A.K. MCCUTCHEON

A MAN SITS ON THE concrete curb of a dead end street in a crumbling Atlanta suburb, watching the yellow house being devoured by fire. The man did not choose to seat himself—knees almost grazing his chin—across the street from the roaring flames. That directive came from the first police officer who responded to his frantic 911 call and found him pacing back and forth on the patchwork grass in front of the house.

The tall dark-skinned cop—tree-trunk arms straining the sleeves of his blue uniform—approached him, yelling, “Is anyone inside?”

“No,” the man yelled back, backing off the lawn. “No one inside.”

The cop pointed toward the curb. “Stay back and stay put, right there.”

Even from a distance, the fire blasts heat like a furnace. The steamy summer evening buzzes with gnats fleeing the inferno. The man swipes at the bugs, pulling up his T-shirt to mop his sweaty face. Funnels of dark smoke foul the air, stinging his throat. The street rumbles as emergency vehicles arrive: two fire engines and a paramedic van roll in and park near a second police SUV. The man blinks at the strobe-like reflection of the flames on their shiny paint.

He watches his neighbors stream from their homes and pool together in small chattering groups—lured from their dinners or their TV shows by the howling sirens and the throbbing red lights—to gawk at the greedy flames licking the windows and lapping at the front porch. Firefighters scramble to extend hoses, pivoting to aim torrents of water at the blazing structure. The fire hisses and sparks. The man wonders what his neighbors are talking about, what they think they know.

What do they know about any of it? None of them live next door to these people. There’s a limit to what a person can take. Enough is enough. He had to do something. Who could blame him for what happened?

He sucks on his tongue to work spit into his parched mouth. He’d kill for a cold beer. He thinks about Amber. He’s thankful his wife is spending the weekend with her ailing mother. Better for her—and him—that she’s not here to see this.

His thoughts are interrupted by shrill whining... from inside the house? The sound reminds him of his boyhood home: the desperate cries of his rabbits when wolves prowled nearby. The screeching grows louder. What *is* it? His brain settles on the source... it must be that dog. The brown pit bull that nipped him. Did they leave it alone in the house? Then he sees the other police officer—the short white cop with a shiny bald head—dragging the dog by its collar across the yard. The beast is growling and snapping at its savior. Damn dog wasn't supposed to be in the house. And the fire was never meant to spread to the house. His gut twists with remorse. He doubts anyone will believe what he says, even if he swears to it. He figures it won't be long before the cops start asking questions.

He's glancing around nervously for an opportunity to slip away unnoticed when a glistening movement attracts his attention: a narrow ribbon of water winding down the pot-holed street toward the densely wooded acres beyond the cul-de-sac. He decides that following the water's flow offers the quickest escape route. Then—

The charred air vibrates with a series of thunderous cracks as the shingled roof splinters into jagged shards and collapses with a heaving roar. The assembled crowd releases a collective gasp. Smoldering embers swirl upward into the twilight gloom.

The man stands and scans the scene for the proximity of the police officers. He spots them at a distance, wrestling with the squirming dog to loop a rope through its collar. Weaving his way slowly behind the throng, he quickens his pace as he nears the end of the cul-de-sac. The shadowy path through the trees lies just a few steps ahead. He is moments away from vanishing into the hushed darkness of the woods.

Suddenly, a sharp popping sound explodes behind him, followed by another, and he is struck by burning pain in his back and side. The shattering impacts halt his forward movement. His balance disintegrating, he wobbles, then crumbles to the ground.

The man lies on his back in the dirt, arms twitching, his breathing roiled by wheezes. A crimson stain blooms beneath his body. He fixes his stare on the inky sky, pierced by the needled branches of

pine trees. As his vision begins to blur, the face of his assailant looms into view above him.

Earl Washington and his wife Lila have lived in the yellow house on Woodside Road for thirty years. They raised two daughters and sent them to college—on Earl’s salary as a city bus driver and Lila’s wages as a school cafeteria worker—through decades of frugal living and conscientious saving.

When the neighborhood suffered the declines of ageing infrastructure and diminished services, they witnessed the exodus of long-time friends, one household after another. Earl and Lila spent late nights sipping coffee at their kitchen table, talking about finding a new place. All those talks, all those nights, and they always arrived at the same conclusion—they fell in love with the house as newlyweds, and their feelings hadn’t changed. They loved the wide front porch, the quiet evenings swaying on the cushioned porch swing; the sunny spot on the kitchen floor permanently occupied by their old pit bull Daisy; the two peach trees Earl planted in memory of two baby boys, each born still and silent.

How could they ever leave this place?

Then Wade Turner and his wife Amber moved into the brick house next door.

It started with the peach trees.

Lila woke early one Sunday morning to the high-pitched revving of a chainsaw. The next sounds were ominous crackles, followed by heavy thuds. Lila padded on bare feet to the window and parted the curtains. She screamed for her husband.

Earl, shirtless, in pajama pants, barreled down the front steps and huffed over to the chain-link fence at his property line, waving his arms. “Hey, man, what do you think you’re doin’?”

Wade looked through the fence, removed his ear protection, and shut off the saw. “Hey, neighbor. Y’all’s trees are hangin’ over my driveway, see there? That sticky fruit’s droppin’ on my wife’s car. That’s her Mustang there, and it’s a mess. I’m just choppin’ the

branches on our side. The tree's fine, see there?"

The ensuing strident verbal volleying drew curious neighbors to their windows on both sides of the street. After the initial heated talk had simmered, Wade conceded he should have informed his neighbors of his intent to trim their tree. Earl conceded the tree had overgrown the property boundary, and grudgingly agreed that Wade could trim branches on his side.

Later, Earl commented to Lila that he noticed a West Virginia license plate on the Mustang. "Hillbillies," he grumbled.

The next day, Wade's wife Amber delivered a peace offering to the Washington's front porch: a homemade peach pie on a glass plate, covered with a delicate pink tea towel.

Lila returned home from work that afternoon, picked up the plated pie and towel, and hurled them into the trash can at the side of the house.

From her kitchen window, Amber spotted the pink towel protruding from their neighbor's trash, and tearfully informed her husband. Wade wrapped an arm around his wife's shoulders and glared through the window at the Washington's home, his jaw clenching hard.

Then there was the music.

Earl and Lila preferred Soulful Nashville sounds—the kind of music they could dance to; and they did, twirling around their kitchen, giggling like teenagers.

Wade and Amber liked their music loud and thumping. Their taste ran to hybrid Hip-Hop Country with socially eviscerating lyrics.

When their neighbor's bumping beats intruded from next door, Earl and Lila increased the decibels on their tunes. Wade and Amber countered by pumping up the volume on their sounds.

The frenzied musical escalation continued night after night, concluding only after sleep-deprived neighbors stomped across the street, pounded on doors, and demanded that the ruckus be turned down.

Then there was the mail.

U.S. Mail began disappearing from the Turner's mailbox. Earl and Lila denied any knowledge of the thefts. Wade purchased a securi-

ty mailbox with a wireless camera, cursing when he cut his thumb during the installation.

Then there was the porn.

Boxed DVDs of bestial pornography appeared in the Washington's mailbox. Wade and Amber denied responsibility. Earl installed a video doorbell at the front door. Lila cursed when she saw the total charges on their credit card bill.

Then there was the dog.

Earl leaned on his front porch railing and jutted his chin. "I'm telling you, it wasn't my dog that bit you. Daisy never leaves the house, unless she's in the car with us. Hell, most every family on the street owns a brown pit bull. They come from the same litter."

Wade massaged the tender puncture wound near his left knee. "That animal is a dang menace." He spat the words, poking an index finger too near Earl's chest. "And I'm tired of clearin' its shit off my lawn. If you can't keep it off my property, I'll take matters into my own hands."

After dinner that evening, Earl told Lila he would pick up her favorite pistachio ice cream at Coldstone Creamery. He left the house and drove directly to Long's Guns & Ammo. When the store owner handed him the Smith & Wesson pistol, Earl's hands were shaking. He had never owned a gun, never fired one. He returned home without Lila's ice cream. He told her the shop closed early on weeknights.

Finally, there was the flag.

Wade waved goodbye as Amber's car pulled out of the driveway. "Drive safe, honey. Say 'hey' to your mom. Hope she feels better." He wasn't looking forward to celebrating the Fourth of July weekend alone. They always enjoyed grilling barbecue and watching fireworks together. He stopped to admire the American flag he installed near the front door the day before. Stars and stripes billowing in the breeze...

He noticed Earl and Lila driving away in their old Honda. Then he saw the Confederate battle flag mounted on their front porch.

Wade froze. Outrage heated his face. He hadn't served two tours in Afghanistan to defend the flag of traitors and slavery.

He grabbed the barbecue lighter from his grill, marched up to the yellow house, ripped the flag down, threw it on the ground, and flicked the lighter switch. The polyester material ignited instantly.

Suddenly, embers lifted by a gust of wind leaped onto the roof and erupted into flames. Panicking, Wade fumbled in his pocket for his phone and called 911.

Minutes later, a tall cop asked him if anyone was inside the house.

With his last gurgling breath, Wade murmurs, “Sorry.” His arms still. His eyes are open, glassy.

Earl Washington hovers over Wade’s body, gripping his newly purchased pistol with trembling fingers.

Behind him, a commanding voice rings out, “Drop the gun!”

Earl whirls toward the sound, gun in hand, waist-high, its aim directed at nothing.

Three shots discharge from the tall cop’s Glock semi-automatic. The bullets strike Earl’s chest, neck, shoulder. He drops to his knees, releasing the pistol from his unfeeling hand, and pitches forward onto the ground next to Wade.

Two lifeless bodies lie side by side, their arms touching as if in an embrace. Their blood flows together, seeping into the loamy soil where a great civil conflict raged centuries ago. Tonight, there will be no surrender, no truce, no victor.

On the dead end street, a yellow house breathes its final smoldering sighs. Firefighters poke at the rubble as Lila screams in the arms of the cop with tree-trunk arms.

At the brick house next door, a flag emblazoned with stars and stripes hangs listlessly in the dark.

A.K. MCCUTCHEON

California native. World traveler. Lifelong lover of words and moving pictures. Her writing has appeared in *Elegant Literature* and *On The Premises*. She can usually be found clicking away at her laptop in the pre-dawn hours, until the Muses must toddle off to sleep.

FLAVIAN'S

ALEX ZAK

“NOEL,” DANIEL READ FROM THE sheet in his hands, and for the first time took a long look at the young man seated in front of him. A stocky guy with a close-cropped haircut, small rimless glasses over his blue eyes and a muscular body covered by a white t-shirt that seemed clean but in need of an ironing. He smelled of strong perfume mixed with sweat. Black masking tape covered the left temple of Noel’s glasses, and the cheekbone below it bore a bruise. He looked younger than twenty, though the sheet said twenty-five.

“Noel,” Daniel repeated. His back pain made it hard to concentrate. “I am Daniel Symonenko, a lawyer with Flavian Entertainment, and I will be reviewing your application. You are to fight... let me see... Mr. Ruangrit Suwan. First of all, I must ask, is English your native language?”

This was the first time Noel had met a lawyer face-to-face. Tall, plump, and bald, with almost invisible eyebrows over clear yet unreadable grey eyes, Daniel contrasted sharply with the charismatic, energetic lawyers from legal drama TV shows. The outcome of this interview was critical. A rejection would be a disaster. Ruangrit predicted Noel would chicken out, and if rejected, Ruangrit would declare he failed on purpose—that’s even more disgraceful than honestly chickening out. Would Lissette believe him the rejection was for-real? Even if she did, the whole situation would be pathetic. Almost as pathetic as that night in the club compound. So he did his best to impersonate an American accent:

“Yes, sir. My family moved to Galtea when I was three.”

Daniel looked at Noel, tilted his head slightly, glanced at the sheet in his hands, and said:

“Good. So, let us proceed. Since we deal literally with matters of life and death, absolute honesty is expected. I must warn you—this conversation is recorded, and any inconsistency between your answers and the facts we might later uncover will lead to an automatic, unappealable disqualification. Am I clear?”

“Yes,” nodded Noel. What a tiresome old bastard, he thought. All I want is to stick a knife into Ruangrit’s tattooed neck without going to court. And Ruangrit is fine with that. Not with getting stabbed, but

with letting me try, so long as he may try to do the same to me. Why can't we simply upload a video where we both say it? Why does this geezer have to be involved? But Nesi says uploading a video is not good, if one of us goes belly up the books say it's murder. And Nesi knows these things.

"Good. I will now explain how we will proceed. After this interview, you will have to read and sign some papers. Besides your signature, you will need to fill out a, umm, quiz about the terms in the papers, as Flavian Entertainment must ascertain that you have read and understood them. Afterwards—substance test in a laboratory, right here, and you are free to go home. Our secretary will call you to arrange an appointment with a psychologist in the next few days. He will evaluate you, and then, a week from now, is the big day, right? In the morning of the event we will meet again, here, for you to sign those papers once more, and pass another drug and alcohol test. If all is in order, in the evening the fight will happen. Your opponent will go through the same procedure, of course. Now, at any time during this week, you may abort your participation without any liability to Flavian Entertainment or your opponent. What I mean is that you may decide not to fight, and neither my employer nor the other, umm, young gentleman may sue you for damages. I want to make sure you understand."

What Daniel actually wanted was to smear his lower back with large quantities of tiger balm to dull the needles piercing his spine. But the stink, oh, the stink of it wouldn't do. Not here in the office. He forced himself to concentrate on Noel's reaction. If there are signs the knucklehead is insane, or that he would back down before the fight, it's better to disqualify him right now, without wasting the time of the psychologist and the lab geeks. But Noel's eyes, piercing and rarely blinking, exhibited composed determination.

"I will not decide not to fight."

"I want to stress another point, even though it is all in the papers you will sign soon." Daniel glanced at the small pile to his left. "You and your opponent may ask to stop the fight at any time, again with no liability towards any party..."

“You mean to surrender?” interrupted Noel. He pondered what would be sweeter: to snuff Ruangrit or to have him surrender? To make him beg for his life in front of his gang, in front of Lissette... Lissette... would she even come to the arena? Probably not; she would demand they both call it off, if he knew her at all. But she will know Ruangrit surrendered, and this thought was sweet enough to give him the motivation to listen to whatever else the old fart wanted to drone on about.

“I mean that either one can ask to stop the fight, at which point the referee will whistle. Upon hearing the whistle, you are to stop fighting, or your legal protection will be void! The referee, who is, by the way, an expert martial artist and equipped with a tranquilizer, will intervene if you make any attempt to deal potentially lethal damage after a whistle. Do you know what potentially lethal means?”

Noel nodded. Spitting in Ruangrit’s face is not ‘potentially lethal,’ and no martial artist can stop it anyway, he thought. His smile unnerved Daniel. Almost all applicants the lawyer interviewed for Flavian’s came to beat one another with hands and feet, and he could understand why anyone would want to do that. But those few who chose knives or more exotic options always made him shudder. Of course, such hotheads always drew the biggest crowds; there were several boxing rings in the megapolis, but only Flavian’s hosted fights with authentic melee weapons.

I remind him this combat is deadly dangerous, thought Daniel, and the dolt smiles! No, he will not back down. Perhaps he is crazy? Does he realize how this may end for him? Well, if he does, he’s probably sane, right?

“The agreement you will sign outlines the compensation you will receive upon the completion of the event. What I need now is for you to name a next of kin, you know, in case...” Daniel left the sentence unfinished intentionally.

“Next of kin? You mean family?” Noel answered quickly and then slowed down. The gist of the question hit him. Of course, he did not plan to tell his parents. They almost certainly never heard about Flavian’s, and if all went well, would never hear about it. But if all does

not go well? Will Nesi and the guys gather the balls to tell them, or will they first receive a message from the club asking where to send the twenty micro-ethers their dead son earned? The image unnerved him, along with the faded, fishy eyes of the lawyer staring at him like he was some weird animal at the zoo. Noel reached for the water glass on the table and took a sip.

“No next of kin,” he said. Seeing Daniel’s raised eyebrows, Noel added, “I mean, no next of kin I want you to give the payment to. If I’m gone, give the payment to Nesi. Nesi Szanto. He’s a good friend of mine.” Nesi will know what to do.

“I understand. You will write the contact details of the beneficiary when you fill out the forms,” replied Daniel. The applicant comprehends the consequences alright, he thought. Hah! Smile gone. Sanity box checked. Good. But who is this Nesi? A loan shark? Won’t do. Must make sure the idiot is not here for a betting debt. Should notify research to look into this Nesi, of course. He cleared his throat.

“It is my duty to inform you that this, umm, fight arrangement, is a terrible way to settle financial debts. Bankruptcy is always a better option, and if your creditors are, umm, uncooperative, then...”

“It’s not for the money.”

Daniel raised his eyebrows again. It was rarely for the money, but feigning disbelief was a wonderful way to get an applicant to provide more information.

Noel tensed. The reason why he came to Flavian’s, the events of last Friday, never left him. Nesi’s car, the music and the smoke machine, the annoying waitress, Lissette’s lost purse, the broken plate of potato chips, the grinning mugs of Ruangrit and his nephews, the rude words, and finally the dance floor, sticky with spilled beer, were all forever burned in his memory. No way he’d share any of it with the fishy-eyed lawyer.

“Ruangrit and I had a quarrel over a personal matter,” he said through his teeth. The lawyer’s warning about verifying his words lingered in his thoughts.

Daniel observed Noel clench his fists. This personal matter held great importance. Was it about a girl? Highly likely. A stupid love

triangle, and two fools would try to stab each other in front of a cheering audience. Still, if not for Flavian's, they would stage the cockfight in some alley, with no one to stop the fight when one of them wounded the other, and no one to provide medical assistance. Daniel told himself that after similar interviews, and yet he preferred not to inform acquaintances where he worked. He had to focus on the matter at hand. He could attend to other thoughts, and to the growing back pain, later. Anyway, the motive question no longer needed addressing: girl or not, the young fool had a serious issue to settle with this Ruangrit. He really did not come for the money. The application could be approved; just a few technical issues remained.

"So, a quarrel, you say? Did this quarrel go beyond mere words?" Daniel shot a glance at the bruise on Noel's cheek. "What I mean to say is, did you and the other gentleman fight before?"

It was not a fight, it was a beating, Noel thought. There were three of them, and Ruangrit attacked without warning. But no need for Flavian's to know all that. Let them call it a fight.

"Yes, we fought three days ago. Nothing big, no one wounded. The cops didn't get involved."

Daniel scribbled a few words. His lower back spurred him to end the interview.

"Do you have any professional training or extensive martial arts experience, fighting with knives, swords, any other melee weapon? And what about your opponent?"

"I did boxing, Ruangrit did Muay Thai. I never trained to fight with weapons, and I think Ruangrit didn't either." Noel understood the hard part of the interview had ended. He felt relieved.

"Are you familiar with anyone who intends to bet on the fight?"

"No, no. My friends will not bet, though they will be in the audience," Noel thought of Lissette again. Would she be there?

"Good. This concludes the interview, unless you have any questions yourself. No? Then proceed to read and sign those papers. I'll be back in a few minutes in case anything is not clear."

Daniel stood, nodded to Noel, and went to the door. At last! The sciatic pain subsided. He shot a glance at the young man poring over

the contract. He'd better not fail the quiz, or there would be an additional headache. Tomorrow, or perhaps the day after, the other hot-head, Ruangrit, will come for the same procedure. Well, good luck to them both, thought Daniel, as he turned the corner and entered the lavatory. Now, what was the exercise the physiotherapist recommended? There were still several hours of sitting remaining before the day would be over.

ALEX ZAK

Alex is a digital nomad and, therefore, can no longer paint. Instead, he tries his mettle at writing.



BLOOD AND DEATH

MAXIMILIAN P SIDDELL

I'LL NEVER FORGET THE SIGHT of Daberid lying there, sprawled in the mud. The red pits that had once held his beautiful blue eyes, blind to the smokey sky. The unmistakable, bloody sigils of the Haymza hillmen painted across his body. The deep gash of a serrated knife running from neck to navel. The desecrated remains of our pigs and sheep arrayed around him in a twisted ring. The searing heat and glow of the inferno devouring our home. The smells of burning wood and death, mingling with ash to hang heavy in the air.

I don't know how long I clutched my husband's lifeless body, weeping. Long enough for him to grow cold and stiff. Long enough for the sun to rise and wash away the chill of the night. Long enough for our house to burn down to a smouldering, blackened mound.

By the time I finally unwrapped myself from around him, the well of tears behind my eyes had run dry and paralysing sorrow in my chest had galvanised into seething anger.

"I told you something like this would happen," I said through a raw throat. "You said yourself that they were angry at you for leaving. We should've gone further, across the mountains to the sea..." What was I doing? The dead don't speak, nor do they listen. Somehow it made me feel better though, lighter, like some piece of Daberid, somewhere, could hear me. "But that doesn't matter now." I looked around the bloody ritual circle and traced the sigils painted on his face with my finger. What had they done to him? Was this a sacrifice to the demons the Haymza call gods? A punishment for deserters? "I promise you, I'll find the people who did this. I'll avenge you... and..." And what? Daberid was dead, revenge wouldn't do much for him now.

But revenge was all I had left.

There wasn't time for a proper burial; the Haymza already had too much of a head start. Instead, I piled wood and straw over him, and with a smouldering piece of wood, set his pyre alight.

Then with little more than the clothes on my back, a skin of water, and a woodworking knife, I set off across the scrubby plain.

For four days I followed their trail south-east, pushing myself to the limits of my endurance, subsisting off roots, and sleeping beneath

the stars, plagued by dreams of Daberid's broken body. Each day, the distant mountains drew nearer, and the flats gradually gave way to a country of steep ridgelines and stoney valleys. Food was scarce and my waterskin grew light.

By the fourth day, cramps of hunger clawed at my gut, and the dry wind had whittled my fury into despair. I was sure I'd die in this barren land.

That evening, I finished the last of my water as the setting sun bathed the cloudless sky in a deep crimson glow. The scant sip did nothing to soothe my cracked throat.

Then as I went to stand, atop the next rise I saw a young man in ragged Haymza leathers, holding a crude spear.

I dropped low. As far as I could tell, he hadn't seen me.

He commanded a view of the entire scree-sloped valley between us. Surprise was my only advantage, so I watched and waited.

The sun disappeared below the horizon and the warmth of day fled before the chill of night.

Under the cover of darkness, I crept forward. It took me almost an hour to reach the crest of the far ridge. The watchman was sitting on a boulder to my right, silhouetted against the darkness by the moonlight.

At the base of the next valley, a flickering campfire lit up a small ring of tents.

I sidled up behind the watchmen, slipping my knife from its sheath. He was stooped against his spear, snoring softly.

Then, with Daberid's face hanging in my mind, I planted my knife in his temple with all my weight behind it. He shuddered and gasped. We toppled over together. He struggled beneath me. I stabbed the side of his head again and he fell still.

Wasting no time, I took the long hunting knife from his belt and descended towards the camp.

I came upon one of the Haymza immediately on reaching the valley's bottom. He was standing in the darkness, beyond the ring of tents, pissing. I was inches from him when he noticed me. He cried out, stumbling back, spraying me with acrid piss. I threw myself for-

ward, lashing out with the knife. Stabbing his groin, then gut, then throat. He died gurgling blood with his breeches around his knees.

Shouts of alarm exploded from the camp only a few metres away. I fled into the darkness.

Men crowded around the body, bearing torches, and wielding clubs and axes. Three... four... six of them.

I crouched low, shuffling backwards, knife tight in my hand, heart thundering in my ears.

“Gods be cursed,” one cried.

“Something’s killed Hamm.”

“What was it?”

“Mountain bear, must be. They come down to the hill country sometimes. Awful quick and quiet they are.”

“No,” said one with a rasping, yet somehow familiar voice. “This is the work of a blade.”

“Whoever did this can’t have gotten far.”

“Find them,” said the rasping voice.

The others hesitated.

“Now!”

Five of them fanned out, waving torches. The sixth—the raspy voice—lingered for a moment, before returning to the campfire.

I shrunk down and pulled back, letting them spread out.

Their torches would ruin their night-vision, blinding them to anything beyond the reach of their flame’s light.

The first I took quietly, with a knife across his throat and a hand over his mouth.

The second turned and saw me seconds before I struck. He gasped as I put my knife through his eye.

The third tripped, cracking his knee on the rocks. He cried out, and I slid my knife into the back of his neck.

The other two ran towards the sound. I tried to retreat, but they overtook and flanked me, then hesitated, eyes wide.

I was filthy, dishevelled, and covered in the blood of their comrades: the face of some vengeful spirit.

I brandished my knife. The one in front of me recoiled.

Then pain exploded in my temple, my legs buckled, and the ground rushed to embrace me. I blinked, stars swimming in my vision. The man who'd been behind stood over me with his cudgel raised.

"Nothing but a little girl," he spat. "You're a coward, Fayn."

The shame on the other's face hardened into anger. He kicked me. The one with the cudgel struck me again.

"Enough," called the raspy voice. "Bring her to me."

The men grumbled under their breaths but obeyed.

Fayn grabbed my arm and dragged me across the uneven ground into the warmth of the campfire, throwing me before the men seated there.

I groaned, blinking up at them. "Daberid?" I croaked.

He was wrapped in a dark cloak, with a pale skeletal face. On his cheeks and forehead were the same symbols I'd seen painted on his face four days ago. He looked just as dead now as he did then, all except his eyes. Those beautiful blue eyes looked down at me with pity.

"Hello, my dear," he said in that thin, raspy voice. So strange, yet so familiar.

The man seated next to him—with the same deathly visage and facial markings—frowned.

"Daberid? I... what happened? I don't understand."

"I've gone back to my people."

"But you died. I saw... I held your body..."

"I did. I left behind my living flesh and renounced all that I was." He lifted a desiccated hand from a fold within his cloak. "By the Haymza Blood Rites, I am what remains."

"You share our secrets," the other skeletal man warned.

Daberid looked at him, then back at me. "You must go now, my dear."

The other skeletal man gave Daberid a hard look. "She cannot leave here alive. She's seen too much, knows too much."

"You said if I returned, she would live."

"A concession I should never have granted. But it no longer matters. You're a Deathspeaker now. All that remains to you is your duty to the Haymza." He slipped a serrated needlelike knife from his cloak

and offered it to Daberid. "She is your enemy. Kill her."

Daberid hesitated.

"If you do not, I will, and I assure you, she will suffer long."

Daberid took the knife and looked at me. I glared at him.

This skeletal monster was the man I'd loved? The man who'd said he'd loved me?

I spat a wad of bloody phlegm at the ground between us and presented my throat, waiting for his betrayal to be completed.

But instead, Deberid turned on the other skeletal man, plunging the knife into his heart. My captors cried out, surging past me and grabbing Daberid. But it was too late. The skeletal man's chest caved inwards, and his bones crumbled into dust. A vaguely humanoid shaped shadow erupted from his mouth in a violent shriek before evaporating into the darkness.

"What did you do?" Fayn cried.

The other threatened Daberid with his cudgel.

"You can't! He's a Deathspeaker."

"He killed a Deathspeaker!"

Their backs were turned to me.

I pulled my woodworking knife from my belt and threw myself at the one with the cudgel. He half turned as I stabbed him in the cheek, then eye, then temple. He dropped. Fayn grabbed my hair, yanking me off his companion. I twisted, slicing down the length of his forearm. He yelped and let go. I lunged at him, stabbing in a flurry at his collarbone, throat, mouth, and nose. He collapsed with pulses of blood erupting from his face.

Then I turned on Daberid, panting and trembling.

"Why?" I shrieked, spraying him with bloody spittle.

"I was chosen to be a Deathspeaker from birth, as all Deathspeakers are," he said flatly. "I'd been preparing for it my entire life."

"You said you loved me."

"I did. I do. I truly wanted nothing more than to start a new life with you, my love."

"Don't call me that!"

"I never wanted to be a Deathspeaker. That's why I ran away from

the Haymza in the first place. Then I met you, and I thought—”

“Why did you go back?”

“They came for me. I had no choice.”

“You always have a choice. We could’ve fought them... or... or run away... or something.” Tears ran down my cheeks. My stomach roiled with nausea.

“We still can,” he said, rising. He moved like a decrepit old man, his bones creaking with the effort. “You’ve saved me.”

“No,” I whispered, driving my knife into his chest. He collapsed backwards, crumbling into dust. The shadow that escaped him almost smiled at me as it vanished into the night.

I didn’t move until the sun finally rose the next morning. Then when I looked around the valley at the death I’d wrought, at the dust and ash that had once been my husband, I knew that my revenge was complete. But I felt no joy, no satisfaction, only emptiness.

MAXIMILIAN P SIDDELL

Maximilian is a market gardener and fantasy enthusiast. He's studied environmental science, worked in ecosystem conservation, and wandered his home country of New Zealand with nothing but a backpack and a cheap pair of shoes.

He's dabbled in writing fiction for almost as long as he can remember. A few years ago, he decided to see what would happen if he tried taking it a little more seriously. If nothing else, it's proven to be a good outlet for all the nonsense in his head.

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WARNING NOTE BEFORE A PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE

KENNA DUNCAN

Dear Ms. Robbins,

Mama and Pop are coming tonight, so careful what you say about me.

Dunno if you heard, but they got electric fingers going *snap*, electric footsteps going *thwack*. They look in your direction and you feel the *zap!* lighting you up from inside. It hurts a little, but you don't cry 'cause it'd be worse having a family flat like soda left out in the sun. Parents feeling nothing for each other, a silent house when you step off the bus every day. At least Mama and Pop come alive when they're together, even if it's just to dance.

"What's this kid mean by 'dance'?" Well, dancing's how they fight. And fighting's how they talk and let out that energy *buzzing* under their skin. Most nights, I'm trying to do homework at the kitchen table (honest!), but Pop's knees are bobbing the jitterbug underneath, and Mama's drumming her nails on the counter in a double-time swing. I know what they say even with their mouths shut. Grown-up language, all tension and static noise stewing in a pot.

Tension that bubbled to the surface when I brought home my report card last month, exploding with a huge *bang*. They went at it like alley cats, throwing around blame for who raised me wrong, who messed me up, blah blah. I snuck upstairs and watched from the top step. You shoulda seen it, their feet pounding the floor in a tap shoe thunder. Louder, *Louder*, *LOUDER* til the energy swelled up in me, too, like having a bee stuck in my ribcage.

Then Mama and Pop noticed all your comments off to the side. Notes about my behavior in class, concerns, yadda yadda. Nothing they didn't already know. But they got super pissed off by *you* writing it. They locked eyes and started doing the tango, which happens whenever they finally agree about something. Then I got it: they were gonna band together for my sake. Well, actually for their own sakes.

Whatever they do is their own business. They knew they gave me the energy, so if *I'm* being told to control it, that means *they're* being told to control it. And taking it out on someone else, they love that. Ms. Robbins, I never liked you much, and I know you're one bad day

away from booting me out altogether, but I still don't want them to take it out on you. Nobody deserves that.

So tonight, please say it's a pleasure teaching me, and that I'll sure end up at a good college and get a job that pays for a vacation home in Fiji and a private jet. They'll be happy to hear that. Maybe they won't even shove your neat desk rows out of order to make room for their tango encore. Unlikely, though, since they've been planning it ever since you asked to meet them.

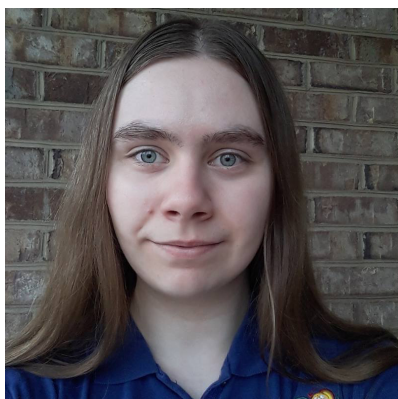
Also, make sure not to talk about how I dance, when my limbs slip outta control and my knuckles *pop* like corks. You'll know it's not my fault when you hear Mama and Pop booming down the hallway, me booming right along with them. That's how it is with us. We live that way. And you'll know you've been lucky to have any peace and quiet with me in your class. 'Cause at the meeting I'll sit real still, all pins and needles, but you'll see the energy rising, *stirring*, *BUZZING*. And I might pretend it's a bee, but maybe it's just Mama and Pop inside me, turning pirouettes.

See ya soon.

Yours truly,
Izzy, Grade 5

KENNA DUNCAN

Kenna Duncan is a college student who has been passionate about fiction writing since elementary school. She lives in Northern Virginia with her incredibly supportive family, dauntless cat, and mischievous dog. After drafting two novels, she recently fell into the world of short stories. She hopes to keep exploring creative ideas and improving her craft, one word at a time.



RAGE AGAINST THE SEWING MACHINE

ALEX ATKINS

‘SHOOT FOR THE MOON. EVEN if you miss, you’ll land amongst the stars.’

I’m going to vomit.

Eight years of education, three years of residency, and those hands—those very expensive hands—were performing a cardiac running whip stitch on a *throw pillow*.

Chain stitch.

Feather stitch.

Ladder stitch.

I’m going to get carpal tunnel from stitching rainbows.

Dr. Marigold Banerjee flexed her fingers. ‘Shoot for the moon’ was her top selling pillow, followed very closely by ‘You miss 100% of the shots you don’t take.’ Sometimes, she intentionally swapped the two and sent the wrong pillow to customers.

She’d never once been contacted about the mistake.

This species deserves extinction.

The whole thing was Neil’s idea. He’d gotten sick of her sleeping until noon, wandering aimlessly around the house in a bathrobe, and crying during sex. Or so she assumed. They didn’t really talk much, these days. But he’d enrolled her in classes with *The Nimble Thimbles* and driven her there himself.

“I don’t know how to sew, Neil.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Flesh, not fabric.”

“How hard can it be, Mari? Swap your scalpel for a needle. Use your skills.”

He petted her hand. She’d refrained from biting him. He told her he’d pick her up at eight.

Her Etsy store was now a raging success.

Cathy Baker, President (and Treasurer) of *The Nimble Thimbles*, had been trying to recruit Marigold for the regional quilting competition in Oro, but Marigold had politely declined. The idea of winning an award—for *this*—gave her horribly intrusive thoughts about ceiling fans.

Marigold softened the blow with a tray of brownies. She’d bought

them at the gas station, wrapped them in wax paper, and stuck them in a cookie tin from Christmas.

“Did you bake these?” Cathy asked.

“Yes, I did.”

Cathy hugged her. “We’ll make do at the competition without you, Mari. Maybe you can join us next year.”

I’d rather surgically remove my own appendix.

“Enjoy the brownies, Cathy.”

Marigold had been able to perform a *flawless* appendectomy once upon a time.

“You’re so gifted for a resident, Marigold,” they’d say. “You have such natural talent for a resident.”

It made her want to nick people with her scalpel.

Neil was the first surgeon to praise her without the disclaimers. To tell her she was skilled in the field, not skilled *for a resident*. He began requesting her more and more frequently, courting her over exposed hearts in open chest cavities day in and day out until one day, after assisting in a very lengthy left ventricle valve replacement, she’d agreed to let him massage her aching feet.

He’d given her a thorough refresher on anatomy instead.

Marigold stabbed her needle into the canvas. She needed to finish the moon and stars and get the stupid pillow packed for shipping so that she could focus on getting ready for the evening.

“This is a big deal, Marigold.”

He’d said it like she didn’t know it was a big deal. Like she wasn’t also a doctor and familiar with such things.

“I need you to look your best. I need you to make an effort.”

He’d always asked too much of her.

She pulled the last bit of thread through—*snip*—and held the pillow up to admire her handiwork. The stitching was perfectly symmetrical, no lumps or pulls or mistakes anywhere to be seen. It was flawless, just like her two thousand and eleven five-star reviews on Etsy.

Avoiding the temptation to prick herself and bleed all over the pillow, she packed it up neatly in a silk-lined box, tied it with a ribbon,

and then sealed it shut for the post office.

It's what Neil wanted from her. He wanted her to wrap herself in silk and put on a bow. Wanted to remind everyone that Dr. Marigold Mrs. Neil Banerjee was a beautiful woman with beautiful dresses. Wanted her to place her ring hand on his arm at dinner, diamond sparkling.

Look what I bought.

She was never sure if he meant her or the rock.

"You're so lucky," the other wives would say. "Neil is such a catch."

She'd thought so, once, when he was teaching her how to perform a CABG on a still-beating heart. Now all she saw when she looked at him was skid stains.

She'd bought him all-black underwear for Christmas.

It took her forty minutes to convince herself to leave her craft room—Neil's personalized gift just for her—and get in the shower. It took until the water went cold for her to begrudgingly wash her hair.

She didn't bother shaving her legs. It felt like a bad idea to hold a razor. Like she might shave off an eyebrow instead, or something.

She had been so honoured, once upon a time, to stand by his side at these things. To watch him accept his awards, and laugh at the jokes she wrote for him, and clap at the moving, inspirational phrases she'd come up with.

"I'm so proud of you," she'd say to him as he tucked his award under one arm and her under the other.

He'd pretend he lost his valet ticket just so he could wink at the drivers.

It's the McLaren.

He liked expensive things. He'd always liked expensive things. And nothing was more expensive than a trophy wife with student loans for a medical degree she didn't use.

He'd hung it on the wall above the sewing machine.

Sometimes, in the afternoons, she'd stare at her framed diploma and picture smashing it over Neil's head. She'd use a shard of glass to surgically extract his adenoids so that she didn't have to listen to him snore ever again.

It would be the most use her medical degree had been put to in a long time. The thought made her want to set Neil's scrubs on fire.

She made a mental note to pick up more candles.

Marigold spent the better part of two hours coiffing herself, plucking her eyebrows and contouring her cheeks, drying and curling her hair, pinning it up so it cascaded down one side of her neck and shoulders.

Neil loved red lipstick. Said it was sexy. Said it got him hard.

She picked the beige instead.

Smacking her lips together, she leaned forward and kissed the mirror like a teenager, leaving a circular brown smudge on the surface.

My gift to you, she thought. It was her very own skid stain. *Kiss my ass, Neil*.

She eyed the slinky, silver satin dress she knew he wanted her to wear.

"No," she said aloud, before lowering herself to the floor and stretching out naked on the thick carpet in her closet, staring up at the various colours and textures of her abnormally large formal wardrobe selection.

It had been all scrubs, when she first moved in. Blue scrubs, patterned scrubs, four pairs of comfortable runners with good arch support, two pairs of jeans and a leather jacket. That's all she'd had.

"We'll fill your side up," Neil said, rubbing her arm.

She'd thought he meant with black scrubs, like the attendings wore. Like the ones on his side of the closet.

Will anyone notice if I wear my running shoes under my gown?

Someone would probably take a photo. Post it on Instagram.

"Look who still thinks she's a doctor!" the caption would say.

Neil had been at a medical conference all week—if schtooping his medical research assistant in Cabo could be called a conference—and was going straight to the ceremony from the airport. Marigold was supposed to meet him there.

"Bring my cufflinks."

"What ones?"

"The ones from my grandfather."

“What ones are those?”

He’d said he had to go and hung up.

She took his gold cufflinks—the ones she *knew* were from his grandfather—and hid them at the back of his underwear drawer.

Marigold was just about to step outside when her phone beeped and she glanced down at the notification: ETSY—You have received a new order.

Oh, goody.

She fumbled with her phone, trying to read the rest of the message.

“Fifteen? *Fifteen* orders of ‘Shoot for the moon’?”

It’s a typo. It has to be a typo.

It wasn’t a typo.

It was for a bridal party.

“Who has *fifteen* bridesmaids?”

I’m definitely going to vomit.

Marigold wanted to turn around. She wanted to get back into her bathrobe and slippers, take a handful of Percocet, and pass out so thoroughly that she didn’t have to think about pillow orders or the kind of people who had fifteen bridesmaids or Neil for at least eighteen hours. But she caught a glimpse of herself in the hallway mirror, polished and professional in her one-piece pantsuit and *very* tall in her ridiculous heels, looking like she was on her way to accept an award of her own.

They don’t give out awards for showering.

She twisted the doorknob, thumb already aching from the thought of doing fifteen pillows by mid-week, when her left heel caught the lip of the door frame and folded into itself like a lawn chair. She dropped like a sack of bricks, hip slamming into the foyer tile, as the ceramic key dish slid off the hallway table and exploded into a million pieces. The keys to the McLaren skittered across the hardwood and into the dining room, the screeching wail of the alarm going off from inside the garage making her wince.

Or maybe it was the unnatural angle of her ankle.

Could have gone either way, really.

She tried to sit up, blood smearing across the tile as she brushed

the ceramic shards out of the way and reached down to unstrap her shoes. She paused, surprised, and raised her arm.

Oh.

She blinked, stunned. There was an enormous piece of ceramic embedded in her wrist, rivulets of red streaming down her forearm. For a moment—perhaps too long a moment—she thought about climbing into the front seat of the McLaren, yanking out the shard and bleeding out all over his precious upholstery.

She could feel it in her gut—laughter—bubbling up inside. It was the uncontrollable, hysterical kind. The inappropriate kind. The kind that makes people wonder if you're crazy.

This marriage has flatlined. Time of death: 17:58.

She laughed until her ribs ached more than her ankle.

When Neil got home that night, he was greeted with an open, empty garage and a pool of blood in the foyer. He found a ceramic shard and blood-soaked towel in the kitchen sink, right next to a pillow that had been propped up against a first-aid kit.

A diamond wedding ring had been sewn to the middle of the rainbow.

It had been attached by a perfect cardiac running whip stitch.

ALEX ATKINS

Alex Atkins is an accountant by day, an author by night, and totally awesome twenty-four-seven. She is a flash fiction enthusiast, short story contest junkie, and published her debut novel *Them Bones* in February 2024.

She lives in Muskoka, Ontario with her husband, two dogs, and three horses.

JUDGE'S COMMENTS

ANDY PELOQUIN

THE GOLDEN CHILD TAKES FAMILIAR themes—the rivalry between siblings and parental favoritism—to a deliciously dark place.

From the beginning, the motif of “gold vs. silver” is woven deftly throughout. The disparity in the jewelry worn by their mother, the color of their stickers, even the differences in hair color—it’s all brilliantly used to highlight the theme of the “golden child”.

I particularly loved that this story played on the deceit of gold. Shiny trinkets and bright objects aren’t necessarily of the greatest value, and though the “golden child” may be the most lustrous in the eyes of those around her, the one who knows her best sees through that deceit to the cold-as-gold heart beneath.

Highlighting simple word choices—like “could be quite pretty”—calls into stark focus just how much the “golden child” denigrates the “silver child” in her need to feel superior. It’s a subtle yet stark means of showing how petty people go out of their way to make others seem small in order to make themselves shine all the brighter. Like gold mocking silver for not sparkling with equal brilliance.

I think what I loved most, though, was the way the “silver vs. gold” theme was cleverly subverted and reversed at the end. Through the bulk of the story, we *expect* things to go a certain way—the golden child to walk away with everything (like literally walking away from the mother’s sick-bed with a new gold necklace)—but the lovely, vicious reveal turns everything around in a surprising way.

The *Bad Blood* theme was also done with a great deal of finesse in this story. While many of the other submissions focused on the *narrating/POV character’s* enmity toward someone else, this one stays consistent with keeping the “silver child” in second place even in the amount of hatred and vitriol. The outcome is as much a result of the “golden child’s” actions as everything else in the story, and it gives the story such a satisfying end while remaining consistent to the theme.

Overall, I found *The Golden Child* told my favorite version of the contest’s theme, with emotionally compelling and wonderfully clever writing. The character’s suffering and sadness shone through in

every word and made for a visceral, riveting read. I'm delighted to select it for the "golden star" it deserves.

ANDY PELOQUIN

I am, first and foremost, a storyteller and an artist—words are my palette. Fantasy and science fiction are my genres of choice, and I love to explore the darker side of human nature through the filter of heroes, villains, and everything in between. I'm also a freelance writer, a book lover, and a guy who just loves to meet new people and spend hours talking about my fascination for the worlds I encounter in the pages of fantasy and sci-fi novels.

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