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# Off The Hook By Michael Laimo

Fear and affliction nearly consumed Prescott Chase. He felt like a piece of chewed meat, ready to be spit out, stepped on. Trying to hide, he covered his face behind the frayed collar of his denim jacket, eyes darting from side to side in paranoid skirts. Quiet, clean-shaven, the stranger just ahead entered a seedy run-down tenement behind an unoccupied office building, a half mile west of Bloomsbury Square on Swan Place. Prescott followed, barely keeping pace, shrugging his shoulders in an effort to fend off the determined nighttime winds.

For a moment he took his attention from the back of the stranger's head and stared down at the jagged impressions of his worn sneakers in the sappy trash on the cement floor. The scrunching sounds they made tossed eerie echoes about the silent hallway, adding unease to the cold chills permeating his frail weathered body.

He peered back up, ran a trembling hand over his face and gripped his sore cheeks in restless examination of the numerous steel doors lining the dimly lit hallway. Shut, presumably bolted, their set permanence bisected the gray cinderblock walls with untrespassable accuracy. Distressed, his imagination contrived shadowed beings lurking just inches away behind each tiny peephole, deranged thoughts flitting in and out of their heads, diabolical sneers taunting him as if this place had suddenly become some polluted ward in an institution for the insane. As if he were being admitted as a sweet, freshman invalid.

The stranger's worn leather jacket crackled as he stepped deeper into the labyrinthine building, leading Prescott into a shaft drenched in darkness. Prescott's nerves flamed with anxiety. Bitter acid crawled along the walls of his intestines, sharp claws cleaving the inside of his skull, demanding pangs tearing at the nerve endings beneath his weathered skin.

Was this the onset of death? Absolutely, he thought. And it gets much worse than this too.

At the end of the unlighted hallway they arrived at a door. Prescott heard the faint metallic snap of a key slipping into a deadbolt. The lock popped and the stranger paced forward, inside.

Prescott followed.

"Have a seat on the couch," the stranger asserted.

Prescott was in a small studio flat that should have been left behind long ago for the rats and roaches. Paint chips serrated the walls like a peeling sunburn, a mouldering rug buckled under his feet like a slithering serpent. At the centre of the room a bar stool and beverage crate sat positioned in front of the hole-ridden couch. Lumps of yellow foam burst through the frayed fabric like scattered growths of fungi. The floor was a dusty graveyard for cigarette butts.

Prescott swallowed a dry lump in his throat, then did as he was told, and sat on the couch.

Minutes passed. He stared down at his trembling knees, compulsively running his thumbs across them as he waited. For a moment he considered slipping away but the stranger finally appeared holding two plastic cups filled with a clear brown liquid. He handed one to Prescott then sat on the bar stool opposite the couch.

The burly, nameless man, whom Prescott met a mere hour earlier at the underground rave on West Row, slowly reached down into the crate between them and retrieved a small mirror. He placed it flat on his lap, reflection-side up. Prescott's mouth watered with utter relief as the man plucked a vial and blade from his shirt pocket and cut out four powdery white lines of cocaine atop the mirror. He placed a three-inch plastic straw he also retrieved from his pocket alongside the drugs, and offered the concoction to Prescott. One handed, Prescott accepted it eagerly, like an unfed dog, staring at his own sunken reflection as he filled each nostril.

The stranger shifted on the stool, crossed his legs. "Well...how do you like it?"

# Vampires Suck By Lyn Cannaday

“I want to find the nearest vampire and rip it to slimy, bloody shreds,” Polléo complained. He snuffed at the air, his nose held high and his white-tipped ears twitching at Venia. She thought he’d gotten over that stupid book. Obviously not. “Vampires suck,” he snarled.

“Yep,” she agreed, wisely not pointing out the pun. She was an idiot; she never should have lent him that novel.

“I want to suck your blood,” he intoned in a very bad imitation of a Transylvanian accent. “I mean, have you ever heard a vampire talk like that?”

“Not really,” she admitted. The ground vibrated with his low growl. “It’s like there was some trial for coolness, and we got convicted without ever knowing we were supposed to defend ourselves. Convicted and sentenced to uncoolness.” The line of thick fur along his spine rippled in annoyance.

“You’re far more attractive than any vampire I’ve ever met,” she promised him truthfully. She was lucky to have such a strong mate, even if this current vampire obsession was a little annoying. A breeze rustled the branches overhead, and he put his nose to the moonlit sky, scenting the wind. She perked her own ears forward in anticipation.

“Humans give vampires all the awesome powers: mesmerizing eyes, sexy accents, angsting drama, and now they get to be sparkly,” he complained with a huff. “Why don’t humans give us some of those cool powers? I’d love to see a movie where the werewolves weren’t just bad actors in fur suits. I want a werewolf movie with a sexy she-wolf with hypnotic, silver eyes and retractable claws and the strength to tear down mountains.” His eyes grew unfocused and lusty.

Leaning over, she nipped his shoulder.

“Ow,” he growled.

“Serves you right for not liking my claws.” She let her hand rest on his arm. Her fingers were shorter than a human’s, and thick, milky-white claws curved down to a sharp point.

He shook his head at her, his ears coming forward as he leaned in and rubbed the side of his face against her shoulder. “I love your claws. I love other parts of you even more.”

“Then why are you getting—” She froze when he jerked away, all attention focused on a spot north of them. Crouched in the carpet of pine needles, she scented the air that drifted sluggishly toward them. Humans.

His eyes searched the dark. Tufted ears swept forward and back, and Venia tucked her own ears close to her head, waiting for the signal.

When humans described beauty, they never understood the grace of the werewolf. Polléo’s face was strong and beautiful, with piercing, dark eyes and long teeth. Preparing to pounce, his back arched and the line of thick fur along his spine rippled and shone in the dull moonlight that filtered through the trees. Muscles corded under his skin. In his human form, he was handsome. As a werewolf, Polléo was stunning.

A foot crushed a pinecone with a loud snap, and she slowly and silently inhaled, the scent of earth and pine and human sweat tickling her nose. Polléo twitched his tail once, and then launched himself forward. She leaped at the second human. While Polléo’s human fell silently, hers gave a desperate shriek before Venia sank teeth deep into a pale, soft neck. Warm blood sprayed against her chilled skin.

She shredded the dead woman’s shirt and buried her muzzle in the tender meat of the stomach. Polléo was already ripping liver out of his prey. The organ made a popping sound like gum as he tore it free of the viscera. He tossed a red chunk up into the air playfully before catching it.

“Seriously, why do vampires get all the good press?” he demanded.

# The Ghost's Compact By Norman A. Rubin

All the swampers of the bayou said so!

Far be it for one to assert that what they uttered must be true. The swamp dwellers, like everybody, were often, as likely to be wrong as right in their words. But there was no rule as they told the legend of the ghost's compact...

The lurid scenario to the lore of the haunting in the murky waters of the swamp was unfolded by the hushed lips of the swampers to those who cared to listen. The folks along the bayou told and retold the strange story about the nefarious late, but not lamented, jurist, Ben Taggart whose spirit damned the waters. They told in the haunt of their tongues the manner to which his ghostly form came to spook the swamp of the bayou in penance for his earthly crimes....

"When, at the nightly hours, during fierce storms that raged through the bleak bayou country, strange moaning sounds could be heard. The eerie cries that crept up from the damp fetid air, the spongy ground, the tempestuous water could not cover the anguished wails of the ghost of Judge Ben Taggart. It not could cover the fear in his cry as he was tormented in an endless chase by the swamp devils.

"When thunder clashed and flashes of lightning filled the swamp with momentary streaks of light, hideous scenes unfolded. Within the brightness, a cadaverous phantom, dark in attire and topped with a beaver hat, could be seen whisking swiftly through the swamp. Close on his heels were the hounds of hell, pulling their leashes held by horrific demons and devilish creatures.

"When the dark curtain of evening tide raised its misty veil above the storm, it released the imprisoned shadows that now closed in and gathered like an army of ghostly spirits. When they had full possession to the eerie swamp it brought from the deep gulf where things might have been, and never was, always wandering.

"When the feared blob came up from the murky water and danced on spongy ground, the flickering shadows brought into the mind other thoughts; thoughts of the wrong-doings of an evildoer of the past...."

###

Judge Ben Taggart, in his role as judge in the fair city of Baton Rouge in the late 1800's, was a miserable character known for his cruel ways. The black-attired justice, cadaverous in form, had the look of a haunted man. He was seen hollow in cheek with sunken dull eyes and his mouth was indefinably grim; his long grizzled hair under a black beaver hat hanging like swamp weeds added to the misery of his features.

Judge Ben Taggart was as miserable in his judgments as he was in appearance. The jurist was not lenient in punishment to the defendants that appeared before him; there was the noose for a murderer or a horse thief, strokes of the lash for petty crimes or for wife beating, and long sentences at the length of chains for other criminal acts.

Yet, it was said at that time, the judge was as guilty as those culpable defendants who stood before him in judgement. It was rumoured that his fortune was gained by the confiscation of property in his name. It was also whispered that he even added to miserly gains by robbing a poor orphan from his rightful inheritance. Mean 'onry critter' were the rightful words when the swampers described the character of the judge.

When after Satan got his due on the soul of the judge there was a dispute over some fertile acres obtained illegally by Judge Taggart. A legal argument was raised to the possibility, pro and con, whether or not the judge forged some legal documents. The defendant to the claim of wrongdoing by the jurist brought forward witnesses and documents that confirmed his case for rightful judgement.

The case was almost over, and the presiding judge was about to sum up his verdict, when one of the parties to the dispute asked for further witnesses to be called to testify.

# Under The Placenta Tree By Mark Zibel

That goddamned tree was coming down.

Hank had had enough of it mocking him from the edge of the lot line, its trunk arched back like a cackling lunatic. The tree was really nothing but a bare pole, save for a mess of limbs at the top - that wild, barbed-wire tangle. An October wind prompted the leafless branches to chatter against one another.

###

“Go ahead,” Hank said, “laugh while you still can!” He surveyed the top of his workbench. An orange extension cord snaked its way around slopped-up paint cans, a pile of wood chips, and a rusty bicycle tire, finally leading to the object of Hank’s search: his trusty hatchet. That bastard outside didn’t deserve the quick, easy death that a chainsaw would provide. No, this was going to be a brutal kill, and Hank planned to savour every vicious swing of the axe.

He stormed out of the tool shed, out into the night, and glared across the yard at his enemy. A full moon directly overhead gave an aura of operatic intensity to the showdown. How long had the thing been tormenting him? Months? Years? Hank was a little foggy on some of those details, but one thing was perfectly clear: that tree had to go.

He began walking across the lawn--slowly at first, but then faster, faster--rearing his axe back along the way. When he finally reached the tree, he thrust the axe forward with a powerful combination of adrenaline and momentum.

The blade barely dented the tree’s thick armadillo hide.

And so Hank swung again. And again and again and again and again. When he finally paused to catch his breath, black syrup oozed from the small hole he had smashed into the bark.

What the hell?

Hank poked at the glistening liquid, then touched a finger to his lips. He suddenly realized that the substance only appeared to be black because he was viewing it in the moonlight; the bitter, copper taste in his mouth clearly revealed that it was blood.

###

Hank barely had time for his revulsion to register when a stream of blood exploded from the hole like a water main break, knocking him to the ground with fire hose intensity. The barrage stopped a few seconds later, but not before he was drenched in crimson. And lying there on the grass, soaked from head to toe, Hank had a surprising moment of clarity. Even with reality unravelling all around him, he was able to grasp onto one fact that he knew was true:

Jenny had buried Jacob’s placenta under this tree.

Hank had nothing to do with it - he found the whole notion incredibly creepy. But Jenny had read that the nutrients from the placenta would break down in the soil, and the tree would absorb them into its roots. She wanted to watch Jacob and the tree grow together, both having benefited from her nourishment.

And it worked. The tree had grown healthy and strong, from nothing but a sapling. It now stood a good ten feet tall. How had it grown so much in so little time? Then again, how much time had truly passed? That’s where things started to get hazy all over again. Hank’s memories were like a bunch of self-contained short stories; they didn’t connect one to the other like chapters in a book. Therefore, the chronology of events was difficult to gauge. Take that dinner party with Stan and Margaret Anderson--how long ago was that? Hank tried hard to recall the details of that bizarre evening...

“This lasagne is absolutely wonderful,” Margaret said. “You’ll have to give us the recipe!”

Jenny laughed. “Well, I’ll give you the recipe, but you won’t be able to duplicate it. The meat is from Jacob’s placenta!”

# Bloody Kisses: Blood Rose By Christian McPhate

Portraits of angels slaying demons and the Virgin cradling her son stared down upon my darkened soul as I watched the cattle walk toward the front of the church for a supper of crackers and wine. I ignored the painful expressions of the 14th century prints, closed my eyes, and listened to the church bells that reverberated off the cracked-rock walls of the Roman Catholic Church. The light of the metal torches that hung throughout the large cathedral had confined most of the shadows to the corners of the room, but small tendrils of darkness escaped the false radiance and infiltrated the wooden pews.

“Ah, to be one with the darkness,” I whispered, hiding in the shadows as an ocean of blood filled my mind with visions of ghostly-clad victims floating through my thoughts, drowned goddesses in the sea of my-

A sharp tap on my shoulder interrupted my euphoric thoughts, and I opened my eyes and frowned at an overweight nun who stared at me, growling.

“Yes,” I hissed, irritated by her presence.

“Sir, the church will be closing soon,” the nun replied, tapping her foot in frustration as I gazed upon her jugular vein that throbbed with each beat of my undead heart.

“Well, my dear,” I replied, placing my arm over her shoulder, “I am just waiting for a friend.”

“Sir, the rules state that all patrons must-”

I pulled her close, tilted my head, and inhaled the sweet aroma of blood as it poured forth from her pores, which made my body ache, for the scent permeated through the shadows, driving me mad with desire.

“Yes, my dear,” I purred, moving closer to the luscious folds of her neck, “we must always follow the rules...”

“Father O’Hara,” she gasped, trying unsuccessfully to break free from my grasp, “doesn’t like it when the rules are not-”

I lowered my head, tasted her flesh, and gagged, for it was as I feared – she tasted of salt and bath soap, a rather disgusting meal, but I was famished.

“Sir, you shouldn’t do that I need... need-”

And then she was under my spell, falling into my darkness, and she was so full of life that it took me a little longer than normal to empty her, but I had the time to spare, for Randal was still waiting for an answer from his god.

After several orgasmic moments of feeding, I raised my head from her torn veins, licked her blood from my lips, and dropped her to my feet, satisfied for another hour... maybe two.

###

Normally, I tried to avoid places of worship, but the darkness of this cathedral seemed to bring solace to my body, mind, and spirit... as well as the nun who lay dead at my feet.

Alas, I am not perfect, and I did try my best to behave – for Randal’s sake – but I was bored, and the cattle were the only creatures that offered me excitement in this dreary house of the Lord.

Speaking of my irritable companion, I looked for his mop of white hair among the cattle grazing at the altar. I was ready to leave and delve into the depths of the American kingdom. I was growing tired of the god-forsaken temples that Randal forced me to visit night after night, as he searched for an answer to the unanswerable questions of life, for the taste of imbeciles made me sick to my stomach.

“Ah... there you are,” I whispered, finding my crazed companion as he fell into the throes of worship, crying ‘halleluiahs’ with his wrinkled hands waving in the air as if Dante’s demons possessed him.

# Soap Sally By Randy Young

My aunt always welcomed me when I would go to her house for a visit and she would always be in the kitchen peeling potatoes, stirring something on the stove, and listening to her favourite radio show. I would take the first few minutes and lean up against the kitchen sink and listen to her as she gave me her “do’s and don’ts” of being at her house, again.

“Stay out of your Uncle Mike’s bedroom,” she announced. “You know how upset he gets, when he knows that someone has been in there.”

“I know. I have been here before, Aunt Mae,” I interjected and rolled my eyes.

“If you go out on the back porch, be careful around those churns. I’m making sour kraut, and it still has a week to go before it will be ready to put into jars,” she added. “You can go in the living room and work on the puzzle that I started on the coffee table, but be careful that you do not lose any of the pieces. The last puzzle that I had had a piece missing, and that big store down the road never replaced it.”

I nodded and took that as an indication that she was ready for me to go on and let her finish cooking supper. She reached and turned up the radio, and stirred something on the stove and rinsed the peeled potatoes in the sink.

Aunt Mae always kept a puzzle on the coffee table in the living room, right in front of the couch. A person could sit at the couch, look for pieces to the puzzle, talk to Aunt Mae, and be close enough to answer the phone, if someone were to call.

As far as I can remember, no one ever called, but Aunt Mae listened to the same radio show every day. She was convinced that the host would call her one day, when he did his famous “drawing of a number” out of the box that you could hear him shake over the radio. No matter how many times I visited, she always gave me the same instructions about answering the phone.

“If the phone rings and you answer it, you have to say the name of the host on the radio show,” she stated emphatically. “That is the most important rule to remember in winning the contest and getting the BIG PRIZE. If you just say “hello,” he will not give you the prize and then he will announce your name and everywhere you go people will know that you made a fool of yourself.”

“I know, Aunt Mae.” I said. “I have been here when the phone has rung before. Remember that time you almost jumped over the table and answered the phone, only to find out that it was the plumber you had called the day before about something being stuck in your sink pipe?” I grinned.

“Be careful pointing fingers at someone,” she announced. “When you point a finger at someone, you have three fingers pointing back at yourself. You start doing that and Soap Sally just might come down out of those woods behind the house and cut off a finger and make soap out of it.”

Soap Sally had been a feared name in our family for many generations. Anyone who grew up in our area knew about the legendary Soap Sally, who lived back in the woods in an old house with a pack of wild dogs. Her claim to fame included the stories of how she would take bad little children and make them into soap. My aunt had added that she would also cut off a person’s fingers and use them to make soap.

I did not like to be reminded of Soap Sally because it made me have a sick feeling in my stomach, and then, I did not want to eat or sleep. She scared me to death, and I was sure that I had seen her walk around the corner of our house, when I was a young child, with a knife in her right hand.

Aunt Mae continued to work in the kitchen over her many pots and pans, stirring, chopping, tasting, all while setting the table at the same time. I really don’t think that anyone could cook better than my aunt. She had what some people called “the gift,” and no one ever went against her at the county fair. They would always lose.

# Prelude By Garon Cockrell

“And for the season it was winter, and they that know the winters of that country know them to be sharp and violent, and subject to cruel and fierce storms.”

William Bradford (1590 - 1657), Of Plymouth Plantation

There was a single candle burning. It was a single orange glow among a hundred dead candles, a single orange glow against the penetrating darkness inside the church.

It was once a grand cathedral filled with marble and gold. Now, the tapestry is faded, the marble has cracked, the gold long moved away. It is a shell, this church; it has not been used in years. Yet the candle still glows.

The doors and windows are sealed, boarded over. Once a colourful, warm place of worship, it has now become grey and unwelcoming. Cobwebs stretch across the pews, once red, now grey with dust. The cavernous ceiling stretches high above, its peaks lost in darkness, save for one spot. A ragged hole reveals a patch of dim sky. A single snowflake flutters through this hole. It lazily falls down, down, towards dust-covered floor. A slight gust of wind sends it spiralling towards that beacon burning in the dark. With a hiss, the snowflake burns away and the first board is yanked from the cathedral's front entrance.

The silence of the church is shattered by the loud shrill squeal of an age-old nail being pulled from its home. A moment later, a loud creak fills the air as the door is slowly pushed open. A burst of wind forces itself into the church, causing the candle to flicker violently.

“Come on then. In here.” A soft voice spoke. A girl of about nine years of age stepped through the door. She was bundled into a too large winter coat, her head hidden beneath a thick hat. Behind her, an older girl entered. Her blonde hair fell to her shoulders, her ears covered by blue earmuffs, a large backpack rested on her shoulders. She turned and leaned against the door, pushing it closed.

“Shouldn't we keep going?” The younger girl asked.

“No. I can't go any further tonight. It's too cold and I am too tired.”

“Will we be safe?”

The older girl shrugged.

“I don't like that answer.”

“I'm sorry, Millie. I'm just so tired. I just need to rest a while.” She shifted the bag from her shoulders and dropped it on the ground in front of her.

“I'm scared, Ally.”

“We'll be fine. I promise.” Ally detached the sleeping bag from the bottom of the pack and unrolled it, “We'll rest a while and move on. Just a little while ok?”

Millie nodded, her eyes wet with unshed tears. She pulled off her hat and a sea of dark brown curls spilled out. Ally crawled inside the sleeping bag.

“Are you tired Millie?”

Millie shook her head and looked at the door.

“We'll be fine. You keep watch for us. If you hear them coming just wake me up and we will hide.”

Ally rested her head on her arm and let her eyes close slowly. She was rapidly approaching sleep when Millie spoke again.

“What was in the box?”

Ally's eyes snapped open. She stared a moment into Millie's deep brown eyes, debating.

“I...I'm not sure.”

# All's Fair By Alan Holloway

Chen waited, holding his breath. Outside, he could hear the rough bark of old rifles contrasting with the high-pitched fizz of laser shot. His hands gripped his own laser weapon, the weight of it reassuring in his arms. Upstairs, his wife cradled a baby similar in size and weight.

Chen knew he could not cover every conceivable entrance point to the house, but he had done his best to dissuade entry by any means other than the front door, at which he was pointing his weapon. On top of this, he knew that the Americans favoured kicking down front doors above any other method of entry. Too many police training films and over the top movies, he supposed.

People had said that the war was inevitable, but then people were pessimistic by nature. As China and Japan patched up their previously insurmountable differences and ushered in an era of progress and co-operation, greedy and jealous eyes watched and waited for it all to fall apart. When this didn't happen they stopped watching and started interfering, trying to stamp American authority where it would never belong. Nuclear arms were threatened, but in the end it had come down to good old fashioned warfare. To their surprise, America was not joined by any other nation. China and Japan asked for no assistance and received no offers as a result. "We shall not break before the wind of oppression" was the cry, and the bullies of the World suddenly found someone willing and able to stand up to them. From there on it got messy.

Twenty year old Chen had joined the army as a scientific technician and risen very quickly through the ranks. He was a naturally gifted tactician as well as an electronic genius. He was soon part of the inner circle, amongst the war chiefs and elders who made decisions that could affect the lives of thousands. Part of Chen enjoyed his role, whilst understandably another part was repulsed by what he had to do to protect his country. The last thing on his mind now was his job, as he sat and waited for the inevitable. He loved his wife and he loved his son, and like any father he would do anything to protect them. He had come to visit prior to them being moved to a secure, underground unit, but the arrival of the Americans had put a stop to their plans.

The attack had come out of nowhere. Chen was grateful that he was allowed to carry a state of the art laser weapon, and felt for those he could hear being forced to defend themselves with projectile rifles. Against the laser shot and body armour of the Americans it was like catapults against cannons, but he knew that the men would rather die fighting than go meekly to their graves. He knew he should be out there with them, but could not leave his family.

With a crash, the door suddenly caved in. Without pausing, Chen cut the man who came through in half. Behind him was another who shared his fate. Chen licked dry lips and aimed at the third. He pulled the trigger, but nothing happened. Panic gripped him and he pulled and pulled again as the U.S Marine walked towards him, followed by two more, all grinning at the spectacle.

"Ain't your day, is it boy?" snarled the Marine, kicking the laser from Chen's hands. "That's for ma boys you cut up," he added, slamming his fist into Chen's face. As Chen fell, the other two Marines were climbing the stairs.

"No!" he cried, trying to get to his feet.

"What's up, fella?" said the Marine. "You got a little mamma san up there, huh? Well, don't you worry none, my boys'll take good care of her." He leered, just in case Chen didn't know exactly what he was talking about.

# Good Monsters and Bad Monsters By Adrian Ludens

The bad thing was going to happen again. I could hear my stepfather's footsteps approaching from the hall. Then my bedroom door opened and he was briefly silhouetted in the light. He closed the door behind him and darkness filled the room. I heard the dull thump of his whiskey bottle when he set it on my dresser, then the floorboards creaked as he moved toward me.

I lay still.

I told myself I was sleeping.

I was in a coma.

I was dead.

I could hear my stepfather breathing now, almost panting. The starlight that crept through my window was enough for me to see that his hands were moving. One of them was, anyway.

Then my stepfather froze. He looked down at his feet and noticed the sinewy, snakelike tendrils that looped around his ankles.

The monster that lived under my bed yanked with such strength that my stepfather was a blur as he flew to the floor. His head made a loud crack on the hardwood and I was barely able to make out the whites of his terrified eyes before he was completely dragged under my bed. The crunching of bones mixed with wet sucking sounds came next.

I was so focused on what was going on under my bed that I didn't hear my mama approaching. She threw open my bedroom door and stood there with her hands on her hips.

"She givin' you trouble Roy?" Mama's voice was shrill. She flipped on the overhead light to survey the situation.

"I heard a noise," she said to me. "Where's Roy?"

"He was goin' to hurt me again," I began, trying to explain. Mama's face grew ashen, then anger blossomed on her gaunt cheeks.

"What have you done to my Roy?"

"Nothin' Mama, I swear!"

"Then where is he? If you've hurt him..."

Mama stopped talking and gaped, horrified, at the floor beside my bed. I peeped over the edge of the mattress. There was dark red liquid pooling out from underneath.

# Epitaph For Sol By Tommy B. Smith

As the wrath of Heaven's might seemed flung down upon them, it was with blind panic and remorseful agony that the inhabitants of Sol were swept up in the Dance of Death. Wild and raving were those afflicted, extremities burning and bodies covered in parasites driven of divine judgment, microscopic beasts with a hunger so determined that every blemish of purity became a morsel of rapt delicacy.

Those caught in the harshest rigors of the holy torment were burned throughout by an inner fire, its intensity so great that it might have consumed their souls during the final moments. Those with the luxury of a quick means to die launched themselves from the highest windows to the compassion of the ground far below. Death was the salvation of Sol, and for those who would live, peace of mind would remain ever the fleeting illusion.

The New Faith came to Sol, its zealots baptized in the fire of its wicked absurdities. In answer, the crimson dragon of righteousness descended to devour what remained of the condemned village.

The town's only place of worship burned, dispensed to its grim sentence by those who writhed in the torturous madness of the searing heavenly light. They had lost their will to the demons, and revelled in the destruction of this renounced spiritual icon.

Father Hamund watched it burn. Even as he clung to his faith, and to his belief that mankind could defy its own monstrosity through the boundless guidance of the written word, the fires were reflected in his sombre eyes. His face was weary, lined with age and grief. Sol was destroying itself. Sol wanted to die.

So quickly after the village's yearly Festival of Grace, the demons had come to Sol. They had named their favourites. The rest had been devoured as the demons began their wicked feast and dined on those who lacked the strength to defy the yawning nether regions of their appetites.

For the wives who were with child, a horrific spell was unleashed, and they were pushed into the pains of immediate childbirth. The forced offspring, thought a product of the blackest phantoms, were gathered by those either taken by demonic influence or consumed by holy vengeance. Father Hamund dared not contemplate their fates.

Gontier, one of the village elders, claimed his seat as the harbinger of the New Faith. As prime subject of the forces that governed the undoing of Sol, Gontier directed his maniacal enthusiasts to burn the holy place, and committed himself to the eradication of the enduring righteous.

# Night Song By Bill Ward

They stayed by the sea even as the world died around them. David and Patricia Reyes, married fifty-one years, together long enough for each to forget where one of them ended and the other began. There was no discussion between them, then, as the pods dropped from orbit and the spores filled the skies, no need for plans, no desire to flee. Instead they waited, together, waited even as the telephones clicked off and the TV winked out and the radio fuzzed into static and the power, last to go, finally died, one Wednesday afternoon in the middle of a load of laundry. They stayed in the house by the sea where they had vacationed with the kids all those years ago, the house they had retired to when Patty sold the business. The house that they had chosen to live in for the rest of their days.

They had stayed, until one evening in late March when they saw something out above the waves. David had taken to long walks on the beach, savouring the cold that blew in off the jagged Atlantic. Patty joined him off and on, more on than off now that the world had shrunk to include only the two of them, and she saw it too. Far out on the deep ocean but huge, so huge it seemed to loom above them as it swayed in time to a song only it could sense. Vast, sinuous, like the neck of an eons-dead creature of the deep, the tentacle was joined by another, and another, and countless more, until the darkening horizon was alive with the writhing things from the stars.

David shouldered his knapsack and grunted under the weight, thinking of that vision and of the sea, so far away now. Thinking of the fear that was in both of their eyes that night as they packed. Thinking of how good it had felt to be moving, to be doing something – as if leaving behind the house they had decided to die in would somehow change their fate. They had made good time at first, driving through empty neighbourhoods in their sleepy little seaside town and the rural back roads they knew intimately well from a thousand Sunday drives in David's old Pontiac convertible. But when they hit the highway and found it choked solid with a wall of abandoned cars, David and Patty started walking. They'd been walking ever since.

After adjusting the straps on his shoulders – shoulders that had born seventy-three years of burdens far less crucial than today's – David left the drug store and started walking back to the house on Greenmount Street where Patty needed him. His boots were new, taken from an empty sporting good store they had stopped at in early May when they had finally decided it wasn't really stealing to take what they needed from an empty world. Two days later, they had found that the world was less-than-empty when they saw their first walker.

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