

OCTOBER ISSUE · VOLUME 1

# THE WASHINGTON PASTIME

## **ABOUT THE WASHINGTON PASTIME**

In 2010 a study from Central Connecticut State University found that the Washington DC Metropolitan area was the most well read urban area in the United States. But Washington, DC did not have a professional publication representing its stake in contemporary American literature. The Washington Pastime was founded as an electronic and print publication based in Washington, DC committed to publishing the best in literary and genre fiction.

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PASTIME LITERARY CONTEST!**

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

I would like to present the Halloween and October 2011 Issue, as well as thank the authors that have allowed us to feature their work. This issue will frighten you and leave you with several different interpretations of things to come when we pass from this life into the next.

To deliver a better quality experience for our fast-growing community, The Washington Pastime has launched a new website to allow authors & readers to quickly search content, browse by genre, engage through social media, and give comments on stories & articles. We are also launching The Washington Quote, a quirky new addition to our flash fiction content that will give weekly interpretations on contemporary news and topics from the perspective of the main man himself, George Washington.

Check out our latest article [How to Write a Story Well!](#)

I would like to take a moment to introduce Alexandra Calaway, Kaity Seelinger and Mary Clare Tracy, three new members on our team. Learn more about them on our “About us” page.

Alexandra is a student and writer living in Laurel, Maryland. She has a B.A. in Creative Writing with a minor in History from the University of Central Arkansas. She is currently pursuing her Masters of Fine Arts in Fiction at the University of Maryland. She is drawn most frequently to exploring the genres of fantasy, magic realism, science fiction and horror. Alexandra’s work will be featured in Visionary Tongue magazine at the end of 2011. She continues to devote her time, energy and a large portion of her soul to her first novel, the first book in a fantasy trilogy tentatively called The Dearheart Chronicles.

Kaiti is an aspiring writer pursuing her B.A. in English at James Madison University. She spends much of her time drinking coffee, reading heavy books, and disrupting the collegiate atmosphere with wild flights of fancy. Her literary interests include science fiction, gritty urban fantasy, historical fiction, and experimental non-fiction. Formerly a reporter and editor in the central West Virginia area, Kaiti now makes her home in Harrisonburg, VA.

Mary Clare is currently a senior at James Madison University, studying English literature, special education and studio art. After graduation, Mary Clare plans on pursuing a PhD in English literature. While she appreciates all types of literature, Mary Clare particularly enjoys Transcendentalist authors as well as women’s literature.

We are accepting submissions for The Washington Pastime Literary Prize. We encourage authors to take part in this contest, as you could be the winner of up to a \$500 prize; and could be published in both our magazine and The Washington Pastime Collections anthology. For more information, please see page 30 or visit us online.

The Washington Pastime thanks you for your support, and encourages you to donate on our Support Us page so we can continue to provide for the quality writing you desire, and the high-level professionals you deserve.

Please enjoy our Halloween & October 2011 Issue, and please come back to read us.

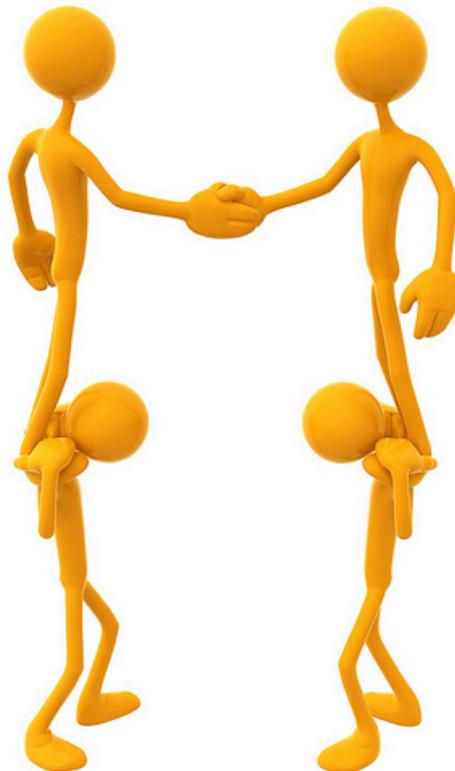
Paul Karaffa  
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# THE RESURRECTIONIST

*Horror Fiction* by Mollie Gower

We thought she was just another mortal, come to remind us of what we lost. She couldn't see us, touch us, or sense us; however she could hear us. That had stopped us in our tracks. Most humans think they sense us, but it's just their minds playing tricks on them. Tell a human that a place is haunted, they will see ghosts. They will look out of the corner of their eye and see what they think they shouldn't see; however, this girl was one of the rare few that could actually hear us.

She didn't flaunt this fact; she just sat at a grave and read aloud. It was a treat that all of us enjoyed. Being trapped to a singular place only allowed us to do so much; all of us were bored out of our minds. She was a gentle reprieve that we treasured.

She got many stares, when she had started. Many tried to scare her off, calling her names, and damning her to the farthest reaches of hell. She gave them no heed, just kept reading in her small voice. She read for only us who were trapped on the mortal plane because we hesitated when given the chance to move on. She never read with a strong voice that some use, but a small inside voice, like a mother reading to her child.

She had first appeared on a cold spring morning, clouds blocked out the sun, dimming the colors of the human world. Her oversized black trench coat danced around her legs as she walked a little ways into the graveyard, looking around for something. Finding a spot, she slid the dark brown backpack from its perch on her back and pulled out a blanket. Spreading it out onto the damp ground, she sat gracefully, tucking her legs underneath her. Two looming grave markers stood on either side of her, moss climbed up the sides of the markers contrasting with the dark grey stone. The carved words, declaring whom the markers were for, were worn from a combination of wind and rain, making them barely legible. She pulled the backpack towards her; riffling through her things, she quickly found what she was looking

for. Pulling out a tan book, she opened it and began to read out loud quietly.

The younger Trapped had floated around her as she began to read the book. I was with some other old timers watching tiredly as another mortal made a spectacle of themselves. They jeered at her, calling her names and repeating her mockingly. After a couple minutes she sighed laboriously, closing the book. The youngsters guffawed uproariously at those who copied her sigh. They quieted down waiting for her to do something else they could mock.

Without looking up, she said in her quiet voice, "If you continue this, the others won't be able to listen."

The youngsters looked around, trying to find whom she was talking to. There was no one about, not close enough for them to hear what she was saying anyway. I watched curiously from a distance, wondering if she was one of the few who could interact with us. She couldn't possibly have sensed us, and watching her I knew she hadn't. That didn't mean she couldn't locate us though. Those who could see us usually couldn't sense us, and vice versa. I wondered if she could hear the youngsters.

She was indeed a mortal to watch.

She sat there silently for a few minutes.

The youngsters floated around her, catching ghostly flies with their gaping mouths. They were speechless, trying to organize their thoughts and work out what just happened. None of them had come into contact with a human that could actually hear them - it was startling. Those with me were also startled, but had seen it before. We just waited for one of the youngsters to make a move, as they could be the test to see if this girl was indeed legitimate.

Francis, the most levelheaded of the youngsters, came to his senses first. Alighting upon the soft ground, Francis glided across the grass and stood before her. He then bended at the waste so that his eyes were level with the top of her bowed head.

"Miss we apologize, we weren't aware that you were reading to us. If you are willing, we would be glad to listen," Francis said, always the gentleman. Because of his impeccable manners and gentle ways, Francis

had most of the female Trapped lusting after him.

The girl smiled slightly at the words. “Thank you. What is your name by the way? Your voice is most calming.” She opened the book to where she left off and waited for his answer.

Francis made a grand bow towards her, even though she couldn’t see it. “My name is Francis, and what might yours be miss?”

Most of us only used our first names, those who kept a hold of their full names were holding onto a world that had left them behind. They didn’t interact with the rest of us; of course, we didn’t go out of our way to interact with them.

She had flipped back a few pages, “My name is Elsie.” That was all she gave us before returning to the book in her hand. Elsie’s voice was a bit louder, but not enough to disturb the other visitors. The youngsters gathered around, floating at various points above and around her. We may be spirits, but that didn’t mean we didn’t take up a little bit of space. My curiosity piqued, I floated over to listen.

The others who had been with me stayed where they were, wary. They remembered some of the humans who were able to pretend that they could hear us. They were usually schizophrenics.

I stood a bit apart from the youngsters, watching Elsie. She was a bit foggy due to the youngsters who were standing between her and me, but she was clear enough for me to contemplate her. A lock of silky black hair was dislodged by a gust of wind, and she pushed it back behind her ear. Huddling into herself she read to the Trapped surrounding her. A small smile remained on her lips as she read. I wondered what she was thinking, as I continued to study her.

She left after two hours of reading, the book having been completed. I hadn’t heard a word of what she read to us, and I wondered if she would return.

\*\*\*

It had been a week before Elsie came back to the graveyard. We thought it was a one-time thing, and hadn’t noticed her enter the graveyard. I had been gazing longingly at the brick houses that guarded the perimeter, pondering how much the world had changed since I had been buried here over a hundred years ago. I was brought from my thoughts with Francis zooming passed. My startled washed out green eyes followed Francis as he flew to the gates leading into Greyfriars. There, looking around for a place to sit, stood Elsie. She was bundled up in her oversized trench coat again, making it impossible to tell what she looked like without it. Her black hair were tied back in a high ponytail; sunshine gleamed off her hair changing the color to a dark brown.

The other youngsters quickly followed suit, while the old timers looked on with guarded expressions. I just raised an eyebrow at them, and started to follow at a more comfortable pace. I certainly wanted to pick up the pace and zoom off, too, but I also wanted the time that it took to get over there to watch her interact with the others.

Before I could float a couple yards, George MacKenzie blocked my path. He was one of those who kept a hold of his full name and liked to look down his nose at the rest of us who abandoned our family name.

“Gregor, you aren’t going to join those youngsters in their appalling behavior are you?” he asked in his raspy voice.

I stared at MacKenzie for a second before answering, “Well it beats listening to you repeat your stories of torturing coventers, so I think yes. Yes I am going to be participating in that appalling behavior.”

Mackenzie’s face grew darker as I spoke. I didn’t worry too much about my safety, MacKenzie’s bark was worse than his bite. He may have been a fearsome executioner while alive, but dead he was just a small man with a loud voice. Not having the time or patience to listen to MacKenzie’s rant, I glided around him and floated towards Elsie. I ignored the obscenities he sent towards me as I made my

way towards the large group huddled around her.

I noticed that Elsie had already chosen a spot to sit. The worn blanket she had last time was out again, and grave markers rose on either side of her where she sat. A small hardback book lay open in her lap, and her lips moved quietly as she read to those crowding around her. Francis floated directly over her shoulder, reading the words as she read them aloud.

I stood apart, yet again, just studying Elsie. While doing so, I wondered if she would return again to read to us—hoped that she would.

From where I stood, I could hear bits and pieces of the story as they floated through the air, "...other dolls were giggling, or that's what her mind supplied in place of the silence. Hearing voices was better than sitting in a completely silent room waiting for one of the dolls to steal her soul. She started to whistle uneasily as she picked up..." Her voice was a tad bit haunting in my opinion, but it seemed to add to the story.

\*\*\*

Elsie started a routine of showing up once a week; it was always seven days between each visit. Our ignorance of time passing was long forgotten, we began to count down the days until she would return. Elsie would show up with a different book every time and stayed longer and longer. With the days getting warmer she was able to stay and speak with some of the youngsters. She never looked up when they talked to her.

There was an instance when she had almost been scared away. George MacKenzie had started threatening her when we hadn't been paying attention to him. We knew that he had a reputation with the humans for being a 'poltergeist', and Elsie seemed to be very aware of these rumors.

The lies had certainly gone to MacKenzie's head. Truly, there was nothing to fear since there was no way he could actually harm a human. But the humans believed it was MacKenzie who caused them to faint, and left

them with cuts and bruises on their bodies. Much like hysterical pregnancies, the bruising and fainting were caused in much the same way. The truth of the matter was this: they incurred those injuries themselves, from all the stumbling around in the dark and tripping over things as they scurried away. Humans could be so gullible.

Elsie had become frightened, and quickly started to gather up her stuff. Francis came to her aid, and so did every female trapped there. They would never allow MacKenzie of all people to shout abuse at their beloved Francis. It was completely unthinkable. MacKenzie had backed down when he saw that he was clearly outnumbered, along with seeing some of the females that had joined Francis' side. Some of them had some weight to throw around, and their bite was much worse than their bark.

A curious thing developed with some of the female trapped when they died, some of them gained a sort of aura about them that allowed them to exert pressure upon other trapped. They usually were quite docile except when someone threatened their Francis. Once the women bared their teeth, MacKenzie quickly made a tactical retreat.

Francis had immediately gone to Elsie and explained that MacKenzie had left. Her erratic breathing had slowed, and she started putting everything back. I had glanced towards MacKenzie and saw him a ways off, glaring towards where Elsie sat. I wondered if he would make any more trouble. Taking a look at some of the female trapped I knew he wouldn't. The females had become protective of Elsie, especially since Francis had taken a liking to her. They might not like that he was bestowing his attention upon her, but they didn't want him to be sad by Elsie leaving. I wondered where I could get a following like that.

Every time she came, I would stay a bit off from the group and watch her, catching phrases and words as she read. I blocked out everything else in my surroundings from intruding as I watched and listened to her. There was something nagging at me about her, but I could never put my finger on it.

Then she asked something startling, something that most of us didn't talk about. "Where are you buried Francis?"

Most of us didn't talk about where we were buried, because some of us didn't have grave markers. When the plague had hit years ago, many had been buried in mass graves, giving the graveyard bumps and hills. Francis had been one of them.

Francis grew pale, which was surprising since he was already whiter than death, and stumbled over his words, not sure how to answer. Taking pity on him, I stepped forward to explain. "He was buried in one of the mass graves, but no longer remembers the exact location." Some of the females glared at me for daring to reveal such taboo information to a human.

Elsie's head tilted towards me, "And who are you? I have never heard your voice before."

Glancing at Francis I wondered if I should introduce myself. I had started thinking of her as Francis' human and didn't want to step on anyone's toes. Francis nodded enthusiastically, obviously relieved that I had stepped in.

"My name is Gregor and, until now, I have only watched and listened as you read."

She smiled her slight smile and said, "It's a pleasure to finally meet you Gregor. You have a very calming voice. Do you have a marker or were you also buried in a mass grave?"

"Indeed I do. I am buried on the northern side of the graveyard." I said cautiously. She had never brought up this subject until now, and I wondered what she was up to.

Her head swiveled to look towards the north. "Is it clearly marked?"

Something was seriously off, and I wasn't going to answer but Francis looked pleadingly at me. I had gone this far; I might as well supply the rest of the information. "Yes it is. They recently restored the writing on my marker, making it a bit more legible for those visiting."

Elsie turned back to the book muttering something too inaudible to hear. It was common practice for her to mumble to herself, and I thought nothing of it. She didn't ask any more questions, and soon packed up to leave. Unlike the other times she didn't stop to say goodbye, but left hurriedly.

\*\*\*

That night we were following the tour group around as always, the youngsters making fun of the excited tourists. MacKenzie glared menacingly towards the humans, cackling every once in a while when the tour guide mentioned something about him.

Without warning, I felt a cold chill run through me. This was something I had only felt once before. Being trapped, we never felt the affects of the weather, and only knew the temperature by how the mortals dressed. Stopping, I spun around in the air and headed for my grave.

I remembered hearing some of the other Trapped describing this same chill. It happens when someone is touching our bodies. Usually we only feel the chill at our funeral; though, a while back we did have some trouble with grave robbers.

All I could think about was why someone was taking my body. It had been a long time since I had been sealed in my tomb. My remains were probably just dust and bones.

Arriving at my tomb, I was greeted by the one person I wasn't expecting, Elsie.

A crowbar lay stranded next to my grave, and Elsie stood beside my tomb reaching in. She was levering up my corpse that was surprisingly still in decent condition. It looked like the money my family paid for the sealing of my tomb had paid off. She grunted with the weight of my corpse, but was easily getting it out.

Something moved at the foot of my tomb. I saw a dark shape standing on the opposite side of my body. It stood level with Elsie's chest, and looked completely unnatural. There was no way that thing was a human, and I

wondered what exactly Elsie was, to have something like that helping her.

I then noticed smaller shapes, some were sitting while others stood, they all looked like little children waiting for their parents to finish talking. My thought process shut down as too many questions buzzed around my mind. My mind refocused onto one thing, Elsie was stealing my body.

Coming to a halt, I asked loudly, “Elsie what are you doing? Why are you taking my body?”

Elsie didn’t look up as she continued to lift the body out. “I really liked your voice Gregor.”

Words became lost at that statement. It became clear that she was completely insane. I turned to shout for help, but stopped. The other Trapped wouldn’t be able to help me, and since none of the humans had reacted to the taunts and jeers they wouldn’t be of any help either. I felt my hope shatter. This crazy girl was going to take my body and there was nothing I could do about it.

I could only watch in horror as Elsie got my body out and wordlessly directed the tall creature to replace the slab of stone. Surprisingly, it was able to slide the slab of stone back onto my tomb soundlessly and without much effort. I now understood how the visiting humans hadn’t heard a thing.

The smaller creatures lined up around my body and began to carefully wrap it up. Once they completed that task, they hauled up the bundle and began to silently leave with it. Elsie led the way, her trench coat swishing behind her.

I followed wordlessly behind her, forced to leave the place I had disdainfully called home for many years. I was finally leaving, but not in the way I thought.

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We left the graveyard rather easily; no one seemed to notice a girl being followed by midgets carrying a wrapped body.

My body was easily loaded into a beat up old truck, parked just outside the front gate.

After loading it, the creatures sat next to my body, waiting for Elsie to drive them away. I glanced back at the graveyard, wishing that I had the ability to touch the mortal realm. Unfortunately, I didn’t and could only watch helplessly as I was taken away. I saw the taller creature rejoin his companions, crowbar slung over its shoulder as it silently moved towards the truck.

Elsie nodded to herself as it settled into the back, and jumped into the driver’s seat easily. Starting, the vehicle roared to life answering its mistress’ wish. The vehicle clunked along the street, dragging me unwillingly along. I hadn’t been forced to go anywhere since I had been buried; it was not the best feeling in the world.

Getting tired of being pulled along, I floated to where I was level with Elsie. Peering inside the truck, I noticed that the back seat looked like someone had been living in it. I wondered if Elsie had camped inside her truck when she came to visit us. This indicated that she lived rather far from the city. Looking away from my kidnapper, I watched as the city became the country. It’d been a long while since I’d last seen the country.

After several hours, the truck pulled off onto a gravel road and trundled up to a rickety looking house. The worn house loomed in the darkness. Tree limbs grasped towards it, but were held back by a decaying fence. Empty flowerbeds were scattered throughout the yard, looking lonely without the colorful plants. Familiar creatures ran through the darkness towards the truck, all of them the same size as the ones that surrounded my body.

Elsie pulled up to the house, and turned off the truck. It died with a squeal and clunk, and I wondered if that was a good sign. I stayed silent as the things unloaded my body and walked up to the house. Elsie held the front door open as they passed over the threshold.

I entered curiously, wondering what my new home would look like. Maybe things wouldn’t be so bad here. New scenery had never been a bad thing.

Elsie felt along a wall and flipped a switch. Light flooded the room and I was

horrified by what I saw. Half decayed bodies lined the walls in glass cases. Rotten skin flaked off of faces, muscles were visible through holes in the skin, organs were held back with string. I hoped dearly that this wasn't about to happen to me, but I knew it would. My hopes were dashed once again when I saw the empty glass case.

"Why me, Elsie? We only talked once. Is this why you asked Francis where he was buried?" I asked desperately, wanting to understand what was going through the girls mind.

"I liked your voice more than Francis'. You have a much more calming tone," she replied.

I glanced around, trying to get a clue as to what was going on. My eyes fell on the mysterious creatures that had carried my body. I beheld ragdolls everywhere. Button eyes gleamed at me from every corner, stitched mouths grinned and frowned at me. Some of them whispered to each other as they gazed at me. My ghostly stomach dropped as I wondered what type of black magic was at work here.

"What are these things Elsie?" I asked, hoping that she would answer at least one of my questions with a straight answer.

"They are like you, trapped on this plane. I liked their voices too and decided to give them a warm home where they would be forever loved."

I looked over Elsie and saw her directing some of them in unwrapping my body and placing it in the glass case. My body had mummified to an extent. Yellow skin was pulled taut against my bones. I now cursed the money my family put into sealing my tomb, wishing that I was no more than dust. That this nightmare had never started.

When it was securely sealed into the case, Elsie gestured for one of the ragdolls to bring her something. I watched as they dragged out a new ragdoll from the shadows. It was little more than a brown sack stitched around stuffing, dark green buttons sewed onto the face stared off into the distance.

I gazed at the doll uneasily, "Elsie, what are you planning to do?"

"Don't worry Gregor, soon you will be part of the family."

Picking up the doll, Elsie smiled at it. Taking a silver needle, black thread hanging limply from it, she began to stitch a mouth onto the doll. The needle followed the rhythm of her chant, made inaudible by her quiet voice.

A force started to tug me towards the doll. I resisted as best I could, but I wasn't strong enough to fight whatever she was doing. My vision started to become cloudy; I fought even harder as darkness crowded in. I soon lost the battle and allowed the darkness to take me.

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"...gor" Someone was calling me, I think. Not really sure, but that sounded like a name I should know.

Light seeped through as I opened my eyes. I was greeted by the sight of a black haired angel gazing down at me.

"Gregor, are you all right?" she asked.

Touching my forehead, I shook my head a little bit. I guessed that I was this Gregor, but I had no memory of the name or who she was. "I think so, but I don't seem to remember anything. Who are you?"

Her white eyes gazed at me with concern, "It looks like that fall was a bit to much." Picking me up, she brought me level with her face. Pointing to herself, she said, "My name is Elsie, I'm your mother." Poking me in my cloth chest, she continued, "And you are my son Gregor. These," she turned me around, "are your sisters and brothers."

I noticed strange statues lining the walls in glass cases, but did not pay them much attention. All I knew was the relief rushing through me at knowing that I wasn't alone. I may not remember them, but at least they remembered me.

## IT'S RAINING MEN

*Literary Humor* by Ada Hoffmann

The Felicitas had always been a good place for a coffee: small, bright, and clean, with high chrome counters. Bakarne liked to stop there with her work friends, Carla and Elisabet. The three of them laughed as they put together their orders on the touch screen by the front of the bar, then watched as the automatic brewers whirred to life. Bakarne scouted out a green plastic table for the three of them. Her sweet-smelling latte macchiato warmed her hands. It made her happy to relax like this.

" - so then," said Elisabet, "she goes, 'What we're doing here is reorganizing the reference desk. And there's no 'I' in 'reference desk.' And then Kendal goes -"

At that moment a knight in full-plate armor appeared six inches above the floor and fell with a clatter. The noise turned women's heads all over the quiet café. He raised his hands to Elisabet. "My lady!"

Carla shrieked. Bakarne dropped her coffee.

"What?" said Elisabet.

Bakarne half-watched, snatching up a bundle of napkins from the next table to clean up the spilled macchiato. The other two just gaped. The knight pushed himself up noisily until he was on one knee. "My lady Elisabet, embodiment of beauty. So long have I sought thee!"

"Where the hell did you come from?"

The knight raised his visor and smiled. He had a rugged face, square and masculine, and clear blue eyes obsessively fixed on Elisabet. Bakarne supposed it was a reasonably good face if one liked that sort of thing. "Does it matter?"

Elisabet's cheeks turned the color of radishes. She cleared her throat. "Well... No. I guess not."

Bakarne was not certain *why* it didn't matter, but she kept quiet. A switch seemed to have flipped in her friend's mind, and she had a feeling arguing would be pointless.

"I have sought you," the knight explained, "for years. Ever since I first heard your name."

"Oh," said Elisabet. "Well, maybe we could talk about that. Over coffee."

"You already *have* coffee," said Bakarne, mopping up the table.

Elisabet gestured vaguely at her untouched ristretto. "Over different coffee."

"Of course, my lady."

Elisabet pushed her chair back. "Sorry, girls. Nice talking to you, but you know it's been a long time."

She made a muffled tea-whistle sound as they left hand in hand. It sounded a lot like "squeee".

Bakarne dropped her napkins in the wastebasket. She and Carla looked up at the space where the knight had appeared, then down at the floor where he'd landed, then over at each other.

"What the hell?" said Bakarne.

"That there?" said Carla. "That was impossible. She should have told him it was impossible."

"Impossible *and* creepy," said Bakarne. "They've never even seen each other before."

"Yeah. Definitely creepy." Carla looked out at the door. "I want one."

\*\*\*

Men were scarce on Bakarne's planet. The Great Plague five years earlier had been mildly unpleasant for women, but in males, it was swift, painful, and deadly. After finding a cure a little too late, the richest and most powerful women had whisked away the few remaining men into private apartments to be kept like precious artifacts. The sleeper ship from Earth, carrying safely immunized replacements, wasn't due for another ten years. So a sky-fallen man in shining armor made the news.

"I think it's interesting, that's all," said flame-haired Courtney at work. They were fussing over a pile of unshelved books: electronic tablets with wired-in content, cards with passcodes for protected content online,

mixed together haphazardly with old-style printed volumes from Earth.

"Mm-hmm," said Bakarne. "Interesting that they broke the laws of physics, I guess."

"No!" said Courtney. "It's just interesting. The whole thing."

Bakarne shrugged.

"I mean, don't get me wrong," said Courtney. Her voice became muffled periodically as she leaned in to shelve the printed books and slot the electronic ones into their cubbyholes. "I think it's great how well we've gotten along without men. Everything's been just exactly the same as always. We really don't need them at all."

"Mm-hmm," said Bakarne, which was usually the safest response to that speech. Bakarne still grieved at times for the father and brothers and friends she'd known. But she still went out for coffee, read books, and did her job, same as always. In the early days after the plague she'd made the mistake of saying so. Some of her friends looked at her with an odd anger, and then sort of slumped down, mumbling about arms to hold them while they slept. Other people agreed much too enthusiastically. Like they knew deep down they didn't mean it.

"And it's so wonderful not to have to worry about that sort of thing," said Courtney, too enthusiastically. "Really that sleeper ship can take all the time it wants."

Bakarne shelved the last book and scrolled through the computer display at the wall, updating their list of stocks. She scowled. "*Against the Sophists* is missing. That's the fourth one this year."

"Mm-hmm. Are you going to the Felicitas after work?"

"I guess so," said Bakarne. She hadn't really thought about it.

"Good," said Courtney. "I'm going."

\*\*\*

Too many women stood craning their necks in the Felicitas. Bakarne couldn't even stand comfortably, let alone find a seat. She

could not understand why so many people were so enthralled. She watched as Elisabet elbowed her way over through the press of bodies, garnering cries of "Ouch!" and "Hey!" and dirty looks all around.

"Oh, Bakarne!" said Elisabet, smiling and ignoring the looks. "I'm so glad you're here!"

Bakarne raised her eyebrows. "Where's your knight?"

Elisabet shrugged. "He disappeared in the morning. But look! The news is all over!"

Carla elbowed her way in. "It wasn't just you. Haf Yates came in three hours later and she got one too. Hers was a cowboy."

"Ooh," said Courtney. "It's so interesting!"

Carla nudged Bakarne's arm. "Who would you want, Bakarne? An old philosopher in a toga, right?"

"No," said Bakarne.

"A young, cute philosopher in a toga?" said Elisabet.

Bakarne tried to find words for the vast lack of difference this made. While she was still thinking, a delicate silk-haired young man fell on top of Courtney with a crash.

"Oh!" he said, disentangling himself. "I-I'm so sorry!" He looked at her and blushed.

"Oh my God," said Courtney.

The two of them elbowed their way out of the café in a hurry.

"Does anyone else think this is creepy?" said Bakarne. She'd already said it to Carla yesterday, but she suspected Carla had forgotten.

Elisabet patted Bakarne on the head. Bakarne squirmed away as best she could in the limited space. "Don't worry. You'll get one soon."

"Eurgh, I hope not."

She wasn't sure, exactly, what bothered her so much. Well, the men who fell from the sky might carry diseases. Or someone might get attached and feel awful when their partner disappeared. But she wasn't really worried about that—just repelled. It was like everyone else had suddenly lost their minds.

A burly fireman fell to the floor next to Carla, pushing past Bakarne like she wasn't there. "Communists have set fire to the building," he said. "But I'm here to rescue you!" Carla squealed.

Bakarne left the café alone.

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It went on for weeks. Men were popping out of the sky all over now. Bakarne took to spending overtime in the library, cataloging reprints of ancient Greek dramas. When the cataloging was done, she picked one book at a time and sat quietly by the window with them. She started imagining what would have happened if men fell from the sky in, say, *Antigone*. Nothing good, she thought.

When she missed having sane friends, she struck up a conversation with Kendal, the library's short-haired archivist. At least there was one demographic immune to this madness.

Bakarne had suspected, back when the Plague started, that lesbians would suddenly be everywhere. Women who liked sex had to get it somewhere, after all. But it hadn't happened that way. There were bisexuals who'd switched to an all-female diet, and a few straight women who awkwardly snuggled into half-romance-half-friendships. But for the most part, if two women came out in public holding hands, they'd be greeted with glares. No straight woman wanted the reminder of what she couldn't have.

Kendal's friends hung out at the Aarde, a comfortable pub with rattan chairs and beaded curtains where it was okay to like what Kendal liked. Kendal settled in on the sofa with her girlfriend, who had light-emitting diodes in her hair, changing color with her mood.

"This is Bakarne from the library," she said.

"Hi," said Bakarne.

"Hi," said the girls.

They quizzed her about books, music, the reason she'd come to the Aarde. They groaned in chorus when she talked about the crowds of mad straight women.

"All these years telling us not to throw our sexuality in their faces," said Kendal's

girlfriend, "and now look at 'em." She pecked Kendal on the cheek like it was a challenge.

"It's the planet's fault," said Kendal, after returning the peck. "Seriously? Just men, no women? No dashing elven princesses for me?"

Her girlfriend pretended to smack her.

Kendal tugged playfully on the diodes. "Well, I suppose you'll do."

Bakarne felt vaguely irked at them curling together, but that feeling faded. At least these people didn't act like there was nothing else interesting in the universe. She got talking to a girl in heavy eyeliner who liked Aeolic verse in translation.

"But in the original Greek," said Bakarne, "it's much easier to see what difference the aneeps syllables make."

It went well until late in the evening, when Kendal, slightly tipsy, smiled over at her. "So when did you realize you liked girls?"

Bakarne blinked.

"I don't, really," she said. "I just came here to get away from the Felicitas thing, like I said." She pursed her lips, suddenly realizing this might be a faux pas. "I hope that's okay. I didn't mean to intrude on your safe space."

Kendal shrugged. "It's fine. But I thought you were. I mean, you never showed an interest even before the Plagues. I figured when the rain started, you finally figured it out. So you're straight?"

Bakarne shook her head.

"So you're not straight."

"No."

"And you're not into girls."

"No."

"What are you into? Lemurs?"

Bakarne drew back. "I just wanted a good conversation."

The eyeliner girl smiled appeasingly. "Are you sure you're not into girls? I mean, it can kinda sneak up on you. It took me a while to realize." She was several years younger than Bakarne, which Bakarne refrained from pointing out. "You seem like the right type to me. Maybe you'll like it when you try it."

Bakarne took a good long look at the assembled women. She tried as hard as she

could to summon up the littlest spark of sexual interest. But it just wasn't happening.

Conversation wound down after that. People who'd been eager to talk a minute ago were now less so. When Bakarne stepped out of the pub and turned down the rain-swept road home, she was in a foul mood. She wanted to pluck the attraction out of each woman's head and wring its neck.

A swaggering, leather-jacketed boy dropped down in front of her.

"Hi," he said.

"Go to hell," said Bakarne.

He obligingly disappeared in a puff of flame.

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Life did not grind to a halt. The women who looked so insane at the Felicitas still reported to work every morning, designing electronics or running the government. They even still read books.

Bakarne had never thought she was that weird. There had to be someone like her somewhere in this town. The trick, she decided, was to find a group talking about men and pick the one who didn't squeal.

She found her mark, or thought she did, in a diminutive college girl who showed up at the library on a group project. Bakarne helped them find the Restoration poetry, then quietly listened while pretending to catalog. The girl had a lot to say for the first ten minutes, while the conversation stayed on topic. But when it strayed into a discussion about which poets it would be fun to meet at the Felicitas, she looked away.

Bakarne caught up with her after her shift. Unlike her companions, the girl had stayed at the library. She sat curled on a comfy chair, just reading.

"Can I help with anything?" said Bakarne.

The girl sighed. "Probably not. Can you flog people who don't stay on topic?"

Bakarne grinned. "No. But I feel your pain. What's your name?"

"Akua."

"I'm Bakarne."

Akua held up her book. "I like this one. We're supposed to analyze his use of nostalgia and compare him to Alexander Pope." She wrinkled her nose. "I still don't know how people got from that to sex. It's like they don't even care."

Bakarne led her to the little park in front of the library. They talked about books for a long time. Akua's mind zeroed in laserlike on the topic at hand. Serious and intent, she dissected literary device after literary device. Bakarne cross-referenced and made recommendations. She could like this girl, she thought. They could be friends.

Just when Bakarne's stomach started growling for dinner, a slender man in an impeccable suit fell to the ground. He put a finger under Akua's chin—ignoring Bakarne—and gazed intently into the younger girl's eyes.

"I think you're coming with me," he said.

Akua's eyes went very wide.

"You don't have to," said Bakarne, feeling protective all of a sudden.

"I know," said Akua. "Um. I'll be right back."

Bakarne expected her not to come back. Still, she waited half an hour, just to be polite, reading Akua's discarded book and ignoring her empty stomach. Then she sighed, went back inside to return the book, and began to trudge home.

A crowd had spilled out around the Felicitas, as usual. Bakarne rolled her eyes and thought growling, grumbling thoughts.

Then something fell into her hands. A book.

Bakarne looked down at it.

*Elegies*, said the book, in Greek, by *Tyrtaeus*. She opened the front cover, disbelieving. For centuries these poems had been known to classicists only in fragments. But here they were in their entirety.

Bakarne put a hand over her sudden grin, muffling a tea-whistle sound. It would have been an awful lot like "squee."

She turned and rushed back to the library. She knew she only had until morning.

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"A book?" said Carla in disbelief, the next day.

"A book," said Bakarne, beaming.

"Better you than me," said Elisabet. And Bakarne had to agree.

She stopped getting angry after that. Eventually the novelty wore off. Women still went out hoping for a man, and still squeaked with delight when they got one, but after a month or two they could talk about other things.

Every few weeks, when Bakarne least expected it, another ancient manuscript fell from the sky. She suspected that the ancients hadn't really written these words. That they'd been built from her fantasies, just like the knights and firefighters at the Felicitas.

Still, there were worse things to do than have her fantasies fulfilled. So she drank the words up shamelessly. And she wondered every now and again if Earth's men knew what they'd be up against, ten years from now, when the slow, slow sleeper ship arrived.

## THE MAN WITHOUT

*Horror / Fantasy* by Terence Kuch

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It was July when I saw the first wolf, a gray male, lapping water from the creek. He saw me and made to dart away, but then stopped and just stared. It was about time they'd lost their fear of people, I thought, since there were no more people. Except me, that is. And it was about time they'd wandered down into Virginia from wherever they'd been permitted to survive before; before the Great Quiet.

I filled my bucket from the creek and climbed back up the ridge to my camp. I opened a can of something I'd taken from the Food Lion in Front Royal, the town down in the valley, and ate it without bothering to see what it was. I was too much concerned about that wolf to do anything but spoon it in and swallow. The local bears I could deal with; they had no interest in eating me, anyway. When they got too familiar I'd just moved another two or three miles up or down the ridge, set up a new camp where there were new bears and the old ones wouldn't intrude. Now, I thought, I might have to move down into the valley for good, where I'd be able to deal with animals that hunt in packs and would, indeed, enjoy killing and eating me. Solid houses with real doors would keep them out, instead of the crude lean-tos I'd managed to build out of the crappy second- and third-growth forest around here.

It wasn't seeing the human remains that bothered me so much about Front Royal, or the fact that ten thousand people had died there in their sleep, just died with no sign of struggle and gently dried up like autumn leaves; it was the quiet that got to me. Now the wonderful thing about the mountains, that I'd loved so much in the years before, was their own kind of quiet, the distance from the nearest human voice. So I guess that's why I headed for the mountains a while after it happened. I'd be where the quiet felt natural and comfortable, didn't creep me out, and didn't remind me of all those people... all those *dead* people.

New Year's Eve in Northern Virginia's vast suburbia; 2011 going on 2012. Kathy told me she was going to a party, but not with me. Jane said the same thing, didn't even pretend to have a cold. And Sandy, who never returned my calls, and my friends—friends! Even the guys made excuses. I hadn't been invited to join anyone on that special night, when you're supposed to be exuberantly happy, get drunk, and hug people. No invitations, I mean, except from CBS and NBC and ABC and Fox and two dozen cable channels all wanting me to tune in and have a happy—happy!—New Year. So, I turned on the TV and watched all the celebrants, mobs and hordes of them, all over the world, yapping and yammering humanity desperately celebrating the old year's death. Everybody was high or drunk. Time zone by time zone, balls dropped and red rockets glared and bombs burst in air and speeches were orated and pundits pontificated and noise-makers blatted their dreary calls.

Seven billion people and counting, overwhelming the planet with their greed, their stink, their noise. Something had gone wrong with the world about the time we stopped picking lice off each other and began making tools. Damn all humans everywhere, those wretched mistakes of evolution! I wished I could never hear or see another one of them again! I daydreamed about buying an armload of AK-47s and blowing away as many people as I could, before I was shot or stopped. But no, that wasn't me. I might have happy thoughts about getting rid of people, but I knew myself too well to think I'd ever really do it. Besides, others would just get born, more than ever. Always more than ever.

But there it was, New Year's Eve. I stayed home and turned out the lights. Anyone passing by would think I was at one of those raucous parties, or in the town square having a wonderful time. I got good and drunk on bad wine and worse whiskey, watched the TV balls drop and the rockets glare, collapsed into bed with my clothes on, had one of those pass-out

sleeps where you might still be awake but it just didn't matter.

I sat up in bed suddenly at 10 a.m., New Year's Day 2011, wide awake and holding my breath, trying to figure out what was wrong. Then I realized: there were no sounds other than a bird or two. No rumble of distant traffic on I-66, no trains, no cars passing by on my street. Even on a holiday morning there should have been cars, trucks, delivery vans, and the occasional airplane.

I put water on the stove for coffee and opened the door. No newspaper. I drank two cups, trying to overpower my hangover and failing. Opened the door again. Still no paper. Shit. I phoned the Post's "Missing Delivery" number, got a recording saying I should call back after 8. Well, by that time it was almost noon. Turned on the TV. A few channels had old movies on, recycled wildlife features, that sort of thing. Most of the channels were showing blink and hiss.

I bundled up, walked over to the main drag. An old man was sitting on a bench in the bus kiosk, his back against the glass, an empty whiskey bottle beside him. On any other day I would have walked by without a word, but not then, not as strange as things had been getting.

"Ah – good morning!"

No answer. I touched his shoulder, shook him gently. He toppled over into the street. Another damn drunken reveler, I thought. Thinking he might be hit by a bus if I left him there, I dragged him onto the sidewalk, noticed that he was cold to the touch. And not breathing. No blood, no obvious wounds. Well, I thought, I'd walk down the street to the drug store. The clerk could call the police or something.

That was the last time, for a long time, I ever spoke to anyone. The last time I thought I might get an answer, anyway. When I got to the Rite-Aid, it was dark and locked.

I turned and walked into a residential section. I could hear whining and scratching from behind doors. Dogs and cats, hungry. I went up to one house where the barking was loudest, knocked on the door, pounded. No answer. I went around back, found a wooden post, broke a window. An alarm sounded. No

police showed up. I climbed in, found a man and a woman just peacefully dead in bed. I let the dog out, continued on. I went from house to house breaking windows, peering in, trying to find survivors, until all the dogs and cats were outside in the street, looking as bewildered I must have looked, had there been anyone around to see what I was doing.

After the first week I stopped looking for bodies, and the houses I hadn't checked were silent.

I tried all the ways I could think of to find someone else alive, back in January. I found a shortwave radio and figured out how it worked. I'd heard that those things could broadcast for hundreds of miles, maybe more. No one answered my calls, but all the time I knew it was pointless, because there were no airplanes. That was the tip-off. Machines could still run, cars could still drive. I found a Cessna at the local general aviation field and started it up by trial and error, just to see if it would catch. I didn't dare take off, since I'd never learned to fly. But I knew that no countries had escaped the devastation or someone would be flying—someone! I'd see contrails, or military jets, or drones, or helicopters, or missiles. But the skies were clear and quiet. Very quiet.

But what would I do if I found anyone alive? Why was I looking? Wasn't this the world I'd always wanted? Well, yes. But it would be nice to have people around to maintain the Internet, drive the buses, keep my house warm, deliver veggies to the corner grocery.

Why me? Why was I the only one spared? Because of my New Year's Eve wish? The world's people surely hadn't all died just to teach me a lesson, had they? I couldn't believe that. But perhaps there were other people still alive. Just a few, maybe, like me. And if I found them, then what? Celebrate with bells and bright lights? Procreate and start the cycle all over again? I could call myself Adam, instead of Philip Nolan, my real name. No thanks.

Toward the end of January I made my decision to leave. The power and water hadn't been on in a couple of weeks, anyway. And I was having bad dreams about the bodies I was seeing. Why weren't they covered in worms and

maggots, like dead deer in the woods? Why didn't they... *stink*, instead of just drying out like the apple slices mom used to put in the cookie jar? The place reminded me of a funeral parlor. I'd rather have seen maggots. Scientists might be able to explain it, but there were no scientists now.

So I piled my camping gear into my car, raided the local Giant Food, took enough canned goods and supplies to fill my car, checked the gas gauge, and took off for the mountains. I was feeling cocky enough to take the I-66 inbound lanes all the way to the Blue Ridge.

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Well, heading for the hills was a good idea at the time. But now in July, because of that wolf, and because of all the other wolves I thought might be coming to join him, I had to rethink my plan. I'd made enough trips into Front Royal that I was pretty familiar with the place, learned where to find canned goods, bottled water (although the creeks were running clear now), matches, ammo, whiskey, batteries. Gasoline for the car was the toughest to find, since the station pumps had stopped working. But I discovered that farmers outside town had above-ground gas tanks for their tractors, and I was able to tap those whenever I needed a fill-up.

I picked out a big white house where I could get in without shattering a door or window, moved my stuff in and two bodies out. I figured I was safe from wolves behind four walls. But I never did see a wolf in town; they had plenty of deer to chase on the ridge, I guessed, especially now with no hunting season. I could hear them from my new home, their nightly serenade.

But then, when I'd set myself up pretty well, time started dragging. What was there to do? I found the local library, read a novel every two or three days. I'd read aloud just to hear the sound of a voice. But that got old. All that human drama, all that emotion. Emotion! There was no emotion any more. There were no plots, or schemes, or ambitions, or conflicts, or happy

endings. Nothing to look forward to but the day I'd catch a bad disease or break a leg I couldn't splint, and then I'd die.

To have something to do, I started going door to door, block by block, breaking into houses and carrying the dried corpses out. The babies were the most difficult for me, but the grownups, too. Turned out, I needed someone to yell at, to bitch and moan to, to hear them tell their own troubles. Maybe not all humans were so bad, after all. Just in the mass, maybe. One by one they seemed OK, at least now that they were quiet. I carried the dead ones outside, loaded them on a flatbed, drove them to the center of town. Should be with their own kind, right? And dressed, not in pajamas or nightgowns, but in their own clothes, from their own closets. I dressed them up as best I could, gave them as much dignity as I could, although it wasn't much.

And then, just as the weather was getting cold—I think it must have been October but I'd long since lost track of the date—that's when I found Laura.

I was working the east side of town, clearing out the homes, making notes as to what supplies I might be able to use later. Just off a little street called Laura Virginia Hale Place I broke into a modest Cape Cod, walked into the living room. There she was, a beautiful woman in a sequined gown and a gauzy wrap. I thought she must have just returned from a New Year's Eve party when the Great Quiet hit her. But then I saw the slippers, the bottles, the stack of books, a plate of food long since turned to dust. She'd been celebrating alone, just dozed off like I had. But she never woke up.

I asked her name. I didn't catch it, so I started calling her Laura, after the street. I cleared off the dishes, straightened up the room. I told her she was truly gorgeous. I started telling her about how I'd come to be there, why I'd broken into her house, why I wasn't living on the ridge anymore. I didn't carry her out to the truck like I did the others. I sat with her until long after dark, promised to come back the next day. I did come back, the next day, and the next, and the

next. I spent time every day with Laura, a couple of hours anyway.

November came (well, I thought it might have been November), and then December. It snowed two or three times. I brought in wood and stoked the fireplace so Laura and I could be warm. I asked her about her childhood, where she'd grown up, all that stuff I used to think stupid and boring. I told her about me, about Kathy who might have gotten to like me, about Jane and Sandy, about going to meetings and parties and being treated like I wasn't there, like I had some awful disease no one would tell me about. I told her I thought she might have had the same kind of life—life! But life was all over for us now, the grim loneliness of that world.

I didn't tell Laura what I'd been doing with the bodies.

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Christmas came, at least approximately. I gave Laura a red and green shawl I'd found in one of the second-hand shops I'd been haunting, all nicely wrapped and ribboned, and with a spangly Hallmark card on top. I'd signed it "With all my love, Philip." Laura didn't have presents to give me, since she couldn't get out and shop, but she had a sweet smile for me that was better than any present. The same sweet smile she always had.

She must have wondered what I was doing all day when I wasn't with her. I explained that I was taking bodies out of the houses, but she didn't understand. Why not just let them be? I almost told her two or three times, but this was going to be the big surprise I'd spent weeks preparing.

New Year's Eve came, at least a day I called New Year's Eve. I got everything ready. Just about nine p.m. I came calling for Laura, put her shawl on her, carried her outside. She wondered about the car, but I told her we were going only two blocks, so I'd just carry her. She guessed where we were headed. I felt her body shift a little as we approached our destination. She rested her head on my neck.

We turned the corner and there it was, shining in the headlights of six cars and four

trucks: the town gazebo with five hundred party-goers, all dressed in fancy outfits, glasses of wine or whiskey at their sides. I carried her up the steps and put her down right in the middle, near the people I called Kathy and Jane and Sandy, more beautiful than any of them. Everyone greeted me, called me by name, smiled, asked how I was doing, gave me hugs, told me how much they liked and respected me, how I'd been spared, chosen, to make the world's last New Year's Eve the best one ever. Kathy and Jane and Sandy asked me to call them any time, any time! But I said no, thank you, I had a steady girlfriend these days, and I loved her.

And now, no more quiet! I ran around the circle of cars and trucks and sounded their horns again and again until their headlights began to dim. I rang the bells of the nearest church until the sounds reverberated all through the town. From the ridge I could hear the echoing howls of the wolves, disturbed by the sounds. I couldn't come up with a swing band playing the old nostalgic tunes like they used to do Before, but after weeks of searching I'd found an old wind-up record player, and records to play on it. I turned the crank and put the needle down carefully.

*Livin' alone  
I think of all the friends I've known  
When I dial the telephone  
Nobody's home*

*All by myself  
Don't wanna be  
All by myself, by myself  
Anymore*

Not exactly a New Year's Eve song, certainly not Auld Lang Syne which I couldn't find in any of the shops, but it would do.

Laura was beaming with joy. I lifted her to her feet. "Will you dance with me?" I asked. While we were dancing I asked her if she could love me even though I wasn't dead yet. Yes, she said, yes I will. Forever.

## THE GHOSTS IN THE GONDOLA

*Dark Romance/Literary* by Nick Medina

Mist floated down from the mountains. It swirled around the flags hanging from the wire stretched between the balcony of Jeffrey Cooper's hotel room and the building across the cobblestoned street. Three flags, each depicting something different, hung from the wire: a cross, an angel, a key – all of them in red and white.

Jeffrey squinted up at the tallest of the mountains, trying to see through the haze created by the mist. He sighed a sigh of awe, wonder and relief. It had been a long time coming. Three long years of working a nine to five – nights and weekends – interrupted only when Jeffrey let himself dream, led him to this moment. It was all he'd ever wanted since meeting Maria in the vast community of the World Wide Web. Although he hadn't heard from her for all of three weeks – she'd suddenly stopped writing – they'd planned the meeting months ago and Jeffrey was sure that she would keep her word. She'd wanted to meet him as much as he'd wanted to meet her. She was the woman of his dreams. He had no doubt about that. And now he couldn't wait to meet her in the flesh, to hold her, to make her truly real.

He'd never seen anything like the little town that wrapped around him, the small city made even smaller by the immense Alps that protected it. The church bell struck six only fifteen minutes earlier and already the streets were empty, not that they'd ever been full. He came from a world bustling with businessmen; a world overwhelmed by traffic jams, billboards and billowing clouds of black exhaust. But here, there wasn't a car in sight. The cobblestones beneath his balcony were blissfully bare. There was just mist and the magnificent mountains in the distance.

The craggy peaks looked cold and gray. The swollen, silvery clouds swirling around the summits made them look even colder. The white

of snow made uneven tracks over the somber stone like meat marbled with fat. The mountains, surrounded by lush fields of green, made up the most beautiful sight Jeffrey had ever seen. Even the simple, yet fanciful, architecture of the fairy tale-like buildings and barns made him smile. Being immersed in the grind at home, he'd failed to realize that places like this actually existed.

Jeffery's stomach grumbled. Despite the jet lag making his eyelids sag, it was dinnertime. He pushed against the railing of his balcony and staggered back inside his room, one of seven in the cozy little hotel Maria had recommended. Inquiring in the lobby, he learned that there was only one restaurant in town, which made his dinner decision exceedingly easy. He plucked an umbrella from the holder by the door and set out along the cobblestones.

The surroundings were so quiet, the air so clean. Fields of budding wild flowers sprawled around the edges of town. Hidden behind an austere stone wall, away from the timbered houses and the small specialty shops, was a cloister where the nuns who lived inside made and sold authentic Swiss cheese.

Jeffrey took tentative steps inside only to have the silence of the place stop him just beyond the doorway. The air within the cloister was so shockingly still that it made the rest of the sleepy little town seem loud simply because it had a breeze blowing through it. A woman with saggy cheeks, dressed in blue from head to toe, nodded at Jeffrey. He nodded back on his way out of the chamber that smelled distinctly of cheese: somewhat sour, yet remarkably sweet. Sometimes quiet was just a little too quiet. He continued on, tapping the umbrella against the cobblestones with every step he took.

It didn't take him long to find the restaurant, but when he got there he wasn't sure that he should go in. The curtains were tightly drawn. The door was closed without a sign upon it. Nor were there any signs in the windows. If it weren't for a small circular symbol hanging off the side of the building – a dark brown edifice with a small front porch – Jeffrey wouldn't have

known that it was a restaurant at all. Shrugging, his stomach grumbling again, he started up the steps.

“Guten Abend,” a friendly female voice called as soon as Jeffrey passed through the door.

“Hello,” he said, squinting through the darkness to see who had called out to him. “Sprechen Sie Englisch?”

“Yes. A little,” she said, stepping out from the shadows to his right.

Jeffrey knew she’d say that. Most of the locals he talked to said they spoke a little English even though they spoke it quite well. He admired their modesty. It was refreshing.

“I was told I could get something to eat here,” he said.

“Yes. Sit.” She gestured to a few tables on his left. They were all rustic looking things made of heavy wood. He took a seat at a table by one of the windows. She put a menu down in front of him.

Jeffrey stared at the selections. Having left his German to English dictionary on the desk inside his room, he couldn’t make sense of a single one of them.

“Is there a house special?” he asked.

The woman nodded. “Yes,” she said, drawing out the word.

“I’ll have that, please.”

“Drink?”

“Beer?” he said, uncertain as to why he’d posed it as a question.

She smiled at him. “Of course.”

It came as no surprise to Jeffrey that he was the only one inside the restaurant. He wondered if the woman doing the waiting would do the cooking as well. While she was off filling a stein, he pushed the curtain aside over the window above his table and swung open the glass. No screen, he noted as a stream of light accompanied by a cool burst of air entered through the open window.

“American?” the woman asked when she returned with his beer.

“Yes. Thank you.” He took a sip.

“United States?”

“Chicago.”

“Al Capone,” she said, a smile spreading across her pleasant face as she made two make-believe guns with her hands.

Jeffrey nodded, returning the smile. He’d been told that many Europeans still equated his hometown with the infamous gangsters of decades gone by, and now he knew it was true. His eyes drifted from floor to ceiling. Everything in the restaurant was heavy and brown. From the old planks covering the floor to the panels on the walls to the rafters overhead, there was an overabundance of dark wood. Aside from the red in the curtains, color was hard to come by.

“What’s that?” Jeffrey asked, jerking his chin toward another wooden artifact hanging from the wall. The ray of light streaming in through the window just barely lit the left side of the thing.

“What?” she wondered, as though she wasn’t aware of the wooden work of art.

“The carving,” Jeffrey said.

She turned her head to where he was looking. “Oh. The mask.”

“So it is a mask...” he said more to himself than to her.

“You don’t know?” she questioned.

“Don’t know what?”

“About the masks. That’s why you came, no?”

“No,” he answered.

“So you just came for the cheese?” she quipped.

“I came for a friend.”

She smiled again. “A lot of tourists collect these masks.”

“What’s it for?” He took another sip of his beer, then got up to take a closer look.

“Harder-Potschete,” she explained, “the traditional celebration to bring in New Year and a prosperous spring.”

“Harder-Potschete?” he echoed. “What’s the mask got to do with it?”

“In old times many believed evil spirits came down from the mountains. They blamed everything bad that happened on the spirits: cows dying, deadly avalanches, bad harvest...It was all the spirits’ fault. Locals wore the masks to usher in a good spring and free the town of

evil by scaring all the spirits back up the mountains. As long as the spirits stayed up there in the snow and everyone else stayed down here, everything would be all right. The tradition continues today.”

“Makes sense,” Jeffrey muttered. The mask certainly was ugly. It nearly sent a chill up his spine. Carved from a solid piece of pine dark with age, its face was twisted and gnarled, making it look something like a troll or a witch with empty pits in place of eyes, and with hair and teeth that looked far too real.

“May I touch it?” he asked.

She took the mask off the wall in response. “The hair is from a goat. The teeth are from a calf,” she said.

“It’s fantastic,” he muttered. His fingertips bounced along the grain. He could feel where the artist’s chisel had dug the deepest to create the gaunt cheeks beneath jutting cheekbones. “Is it expensive?”

“This one is,” she said, placing the mask back upon the wall. “And it’s not for sale. It protects this place.”

“I didn’t mean...” Jeffrey started. He trailed off when the woman turned toward the kitchen. He really didn’t have any intention of trying to buy the mask. He could hardly afford his trip as it was.

“House plate,” she said, setting a steaming platter before Jeffrey upon her return.

“Smells delicious. What is it?”

“Sausage and potato,” she said as though it should have been obvious, which, for the most part, it was. “You said you came for a friend?”

“Yes.”

“So where is your friend?”

“I haven’t met her yet,” he confessed as he cut into the sausage. “Tomorrow.”

“She is local?”

“Yes. Her name is Maria....This is delicious.”

“Maria,” she murmured. “That’s my name too.”

\*\*\*

Despite his excitement, Jeffrey slept soundly. The cold breeze coming in through his open balcony doors made for perfect sleeping conditions. Waking up to a mountain view was something he could get used to. With his arms wrapped around his chest, Jeffrey stepped out onto the balcony and peered up at the Alps. From what he could see, they looked as cold and steely gray as they had the day before. Heavy clouds obscured the uppermost peaks. Cloudy or not, his day wouldn’t be ruined because somewhere among those mountains his Maria was waiting for him.

After a shower and a shave, Jeffrey took the train to Lucerne where he walked the short distance from the railway station to the shore of Lake Lucerne. There were more people – tourists – in the city than in the tiny town that surrounded his hotel, which meant there were more souvenir shops and kiosks as well. Jeffrey saw a number of masks that looked like the one he saw in the restaurant the night before only they weren’t quite as large or carefully crafted. The chatty tourists gawked at the masks; they had a way of stealing some of the looming mountains’ majesty, but as loud and obnoxious as they were, they couldn’t completely strip the scenery of its splendor.

Jeffrey bought a sandwich from a street-side vendor and nibbled it alone along the shoreline as he waited for the ship that would take him across the lake to the base of Mount Pilatus. There were swans in the water and they gathered around him in hopes of a handout. Too nervous to eat, he threw them pieces of bread. His stomach was a mess of wriggling and writhing nerves that made it impossible for him to stand still. Over and over, he thought about what he would say when he saw her, what he would do. More frightening than that was thinking about what she might say and what she might do when she saw him.

The ship pulled into port two minutes earlier than expected and pulled away one minute later than the ticket stub said it would. Jeffrey opted to sit out on the deck even though the weather was cool and cold drops of water kept splashing him from over the railing. He

leaned over the side to watch the water. More than that, he watched the reflection of the mountain in the water, wondering if Maria was already waiting for him.

The crossing of the lake passed slowly, but the reflection of the mountain got bigger, and eventually it was so big that the ship was practically on top of it. It wouldn't be long now.

The ship let him off in the town of Alpnachstad where the world's steepest cog-wheel railway waited to escort him up the side of the mountain. The railway sat at a forty-six percent gradient, which didn't sound all that impressive to Jeffrey until he actually got inside one of the railway cars.

"It's cloudy at the summit," the conductor said to Jeffrey. "Visibility's low. You won't see much up there today."

"That's okay," Jeffrey said, settling in his seat. The view wasn't what he was looking forward to seeing.

With a creaky groan, the cog-wheel train began its clunky ascent, seeming to strain up the steep slope. For a few minutes there, despite his anticipation, Jeffrey was able to think of things other than Maria as he spotted sublime fields at awkward angles along the lower region of the mountain, which didn't deter the brown and white cows grazing upon them. Large bells hanging around the cows' necks created a symphony of pitches ranging from tinkling tolls to clanging knells. Jeffrey shut his eyes to listen until the gentle peals and the quiet mooing faded away on the mountain beneath him. When he opened his eyes again, all the grass was gone, replaced by the rugged gray of irregular rock formations dusted with snow. All thoughts turned back to Maria.

In her final letter to him, Maria had written that she'd be wearing edelweiss in her hair. He was to wear a flag like one of the three hanging beyond his balcony pinned to his lapel so that she'd know it was him. In the three years that they'd been writing, they never once exchanged a photograph. Maria hadn't wanted to. She liked the idea of creating him in her head. She was convinced that when they finally met face to face they'd be exactly what each other envisioned because they were meant to be.

The edelweiss and the pin were just a backup plan in case their imaginings were a little off.

Jeffrey reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out the pin he'd purchased at a souvenir stand inside the train station. It was red with a white cross in the center. Affixing it to his lapel, he felt his heart skip a beat as though he'd pricked himself although the pin never penetrated the fabric of his collared shirt. For a split second his arms broke out with gooseflesh. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. It was an odd reaction; not one that he'd ever had from being excited before. It passed almost as soon as it started, leaving Jeffrey to shrug it off without trying to analyze what it could possibly mean.

The air grew increasingly colder the higher the cog-wheel car climbed, but it definitely wasn't the cold that had made Jeffrey bristle. He noticed he could now see his breath spreading before him in large white plumes. He hoped Maria had brought a jacket to keep herself warm.

"Pilatus-kulm," the conductor announced as the car came to a sudden stop at the top of the alp.

Jeffrey got out and, casting a glance backward, realized just how steep the railway was. It was a wonder the car didn't slide backward down the mountain. Even in its stationary state it seemed to be struggling. But that really didn't matter now. Maria was close. Although he'd never met her in person – never felt her physical presence – he felt her now almost the same way he felt the bitter mist whirling around him.

The conductor was right: there wasn't much to see atop Mount Pilatus other than the swirling white and gray of the thick clouds obscuring what, according to pictures posted all around, would have been the most marvelous view of the Alps had the sun been out and shining and the clouds been nothing more than fluffy wisps. In some spots, when Jeffrey squinted really hard, he could see the mountaintops through the clouds, but only their silhouettes and never for more than a few seconds.

With the visibility the way it was, the tourists were at a minimum. Still, an old fellow wearing a traditional cap standing near one of the railings overlooking the imperceptible mountain, had his lips pressed to the mouthpiece of a very long, wooden alpenhorn that extended at least ten feet in front of him, its base resting against the ground. Drawn out notes, sounding warm and somewhat like a bugle, floated on the thin air past the curved opening of the instrument. Hand painted along the outer rim were delicate flowers much like the ones Jeffrey expected to find in Maria's hair.

He walked past the man and his horn, who hadn't a crowd or even a jar for collecting tips, straight into the whiteness ahead. The misty fog was so thick – thicker than smoke or the exhaust that choked the streets back home – that Jeffrey could barely see six feet in front of him. As curious as it was to him, he couldn't help but be tickled by the thought that he was actually walking within a cloud even if it would make his meeting with Maria harder to manage.

Somewhere in the distance, harshly clashing with the soothing sounds coming from the alpenhorn, came the raucous cries of what sounded like crows. The sound took Jeffrey aback. Nowhere below had he seen a crow. Their coarse caws wouldn't have mixed with the lazy mooing of the cows. But following the caws, Jeffrey found the source of the sound. Sitting on one of the railings, jet black against the overwhelming white of the mist with water droplets glistening against their glossy feathers, were four blackbirds with bright yellow beaks and orange feet. Jeffrey didn't have very much time to observe the birds because standing next to them was a woman with flowers in her hair.

"Maria," he gasped.

"My Jeffrey," she said.

Barely a heartbeat passed before they were in each other's arms. Jeffrey held her so tight and so close that he thought his arms might go right through her.

"I knew it," she said. "I knew it was you without seeing the pin. Did you know it was me?"

"Yes," he said. "I knew. I saw the flowers, but I knew." She was almost exactly how he imagined her, maybe a little less rosy in the cheeks, but everything else was the same.

"Welcome to Switzerland," she said when the embrace finally broke, although they held onto each other's hands for fear that letting go might mean losing each other within the mist. "How was your trip?"

"Couldn't have been better. It's lovely here."

"I knew you'd like it," Maria said and then frowned. "If only you could see." She motioned toward the space beyond the railing where a wall of white was all there was to witness.

"You're all I wanted to see," he assured her, dipping his hand into one of his pockets. "I brought this for you." Dangling from his fingertips was a gold locket at the end of a gold chain. He opened the locket to show her that he'd already put his picture inside.

"It's beautiful," she said, bowing her head so that he could affix the chain around her neck.

"You really like it?"

"I really do."

They fell into each other's arms once again. This time Maria's lips grazed his cheek. The kiss made him tingle all over inside.

"Come," he said. "Let's go down the mountain."

"But you just got here," she objected. "Stay." She dragged him to the railing, putting herself between him and the four birds perched there; they didn't ruffle in the least at her presence.

"Why are they here?" he asked.

"This is their home," she answered simply. She put her head against his shoulder. "I can't believe you're finally here."

"I feared this day would never come," he admitted. She agreed. For the better part of the next hour they told each other all the things they'd always wanted to say in person. There wasn't a moment of tension, no awkward pauses, not a hint of doubt that they were meant to be.

"I'm hungry. You must be too. Let's go and find something to eat," Jeffrey said once they'd made every declaration there was to make.

"No," she said. "Let's wait."

"What for?"

She motioned to the mist once more. "For the sky to clear."

"It doesn't look like it's going anywhere," he said, speaking of the mist.

"*They're*," she said in return.

"*They're*?" Jeffrey questioned.

"It doesn't look like *they're* going anywhere," she clarified.

"What are you talking about?"

"The spirits," she said. "It's more than mist we're looking at."

Jeffrey stared off at the swirling mist. With little imagination he could see phantoms in the fog. "*Evil* spirits," he said, remembering what Maria at the restaurant had told him about the purpose of the carved mask the night before.

"Not all of them are evil," she replied.

Jeffrey chuckled. It was all he could do to fight the chill creeping along his spine for the second time that morning. "I'm cold," he said. "And hungry. Come now, you can show me around town."

He pulled her away from the railing and through the wall of white to where there were cable cars descending the mountain. They looked all the more dreadful than the cog-wheel train since they were just hanging there by a cable that looked no thicker than a laundry line. But the cog-wheel was just for coming up, and the cable cars were for going down.

"Wait," Maria said, but by then Jeffrey had already climbed inside the waiting gondola. "Can we stay just a little longer?"

He stretched out an arm to assist her, answering her question without saying a word. There was nothing she could do to make him stay. Her only choice was to get inside. Reluctantly, she did.

The gondola was small, capable of holding no more than four people. Jeffrey couldn't stand inside without hunching over. He sat on one of the benches and Maria nuzzled close beside him. As the cable car left the

boarding station, leaving behind solid ground as it did, Jeffrey felt his stomach flutter. The gondola glided into the cloud, and within seconds Jeffrey couldn't see the mountain below him or the boarding station behind him. It was just the ashen atmosphere in all directions outside the gondola windows, a few visible feet of the cable car cable overhead and Maria beside him.

He ran his fingers over the flowers braided in Maria's hair then caressed her cheek with a few furred fingers. She was shuddering.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," she whispered, forcing a smile.

"You seem nervous," he said.

"I'm cold."

And it was true. Her cheek was as chilly as the icy outside air. "You're damp too," he said. "Take my jacket."

Jeffrey squirmed to free himself from his jacket and draped it over Maria's shoulders. She smiled at him again, a bit more genuinely this time, and burrowed into the deepest part of his chest.

"Maria -?" he started, but silenced as the gondola came to a sudden stop. "What's happening?" he wondered.

"Why are we stopped?" she asked, lifting her cheek from his chest.

"I don't know," Jeffrey grumbled. He turned every which way in his seat, but all he could see was white through the windows. "I'm sure everything is all right. We ought to be moving in no time at all."

But other than gently swaying side to side on the cable, the gondola didn't move any farther down the mountain.

"We're still pretty close to the top," Jeffrey said. "Maybe they'll hear us up there." He slid open the pane of the gondola's upper window, letting a whirling wisp of the white mist inside, and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Hello!" he hollered. "We're stuck! Can anybody hear me?"

He waited, his ear searching for something—anything—but there was only silence.

“At least we’re together,” Maria said, her voice betraying a slight quaver. She eased him back in the seat and buried her face in his chest once again. “We’ll just have to wait.”

He sighed, letting all the tension out that had built up inside. After all, there were worse things than hanging in isolation with the one he loved. He let his hand play up and down her back.

Maria closed her eyes, allowing her sightless senses to take Jeffrey in all the way. While her imagination could create his image so perfectly in her mind, it couldn’t create his touch, his scent, his essence.

Jeffrey let his body slump against hers. Together in the gondola they were almost as one. “Maria?” he quietly asked after some time, thinking that she might have fallen asleep.

“Hmm?” she hummed.

“Why didn’t you write for all those weeks? I thought something might have happened to you.”

“I wanted to,” was all she said. She lifted her head and kissed him on the mouth. The kiss was long and passionate, and yet Jeffrey felt it ended all too soon. He had to pull away, though, when he saw something strange outside the gondola. And it was something that gave him such a fright that he banged the back of his head against the glass behind him in a futile attempt to recoil backward.

“What is it?” Maria gasped.

“There,” Jeffrey said, pointing at nothing more than mist. “There was something there...something terrible.”

“Shh,” she shushed, reaching for his face. “It’s all right.”

“There it is again!” he screeched, throwing himself backward against the gondola harder than before, causing it to rock fiercely on the cable. “Look and see!”

But Maria didn’t look. Her trembling fingertips tapped over his face, longing to hold onto him forever. In his eyes she saw the horror of what was haunting him. The evil spirits had manifested themselves as blood-hungry monstrosities, miasmal in appearance and so gluttonous that they snuck down from the slopes

on days when the mountains belonged to the mist. Days when the locals kept an extra careful eye on their young, their livestock and their yield.

“You mustn’t look anymore,” Maria said. She eased his eyelids closed and pulled his head against her breast. “You mustn’t look...”

\* \* \*

Jeffrey awoke with a start. His back was aching and there was a crick in his neck. He didn’t remember being tired or feeling himself slip away, but somehow he’d fallen into a deep sleep inside the gondola. Aside from the pain in his back and the pinch in his neck, he immediately noticed that the clouds had cleared. In the distance he could see the ant-sized village at the base of the mountain.

“Maria,” he said, turning his attention her way to wake her with a smile. “Maria?”

She wasn’t there.

He twisted and turned, easily inspecting every inch of the gondola, still dangling at a standstill high above the mountain, in search of her. All that he found was his jacket in a heap and her locket on the seat.

Jeffrey’s heart sank. He unlatched the gondola’s door and hung his head over the side, searching for a sign of his lost love. She was nowhere in sight, and yet, just like when he first stepped foot atop the mountain, he felt her all around him, as though she was still clinging to his chest.

He panicked, he reeled. For a moment he considered jumping.

“Maria!” he screamed just as the gondola kicked into gear and started down the mountain again. “Mariiiiaa!”

\* \* \*

The next night found Jeffrey at the same restaurant near his hotel.

“Did you find your friend?” asked Maria the waitress, when he sat down,

Jeffrey nodded and twitched uncomfortably in his seat. He wasn’t really

interested in food, but he wasn't interested in being alone either. Having bumped up his flight, he only had twelve hours left in Maria's homeland until the depressing journey returned him home with not much more than what he'd started with. Resting in the palm of his hand was the gold chain attached to the locket.

"What's that?" she asked.

"It was for her," he said.

"Where is she now? Your Maria?"

Jeffrey let out a long sigh that sounded like a sob. "She couldn't come down the mountain," he said. His angry eyes glared at the unsightly mask on the wall. "It's not just the evil spirits they keep away."

Maria paused. She stood silently for a while then walked to the mask to peer into its empty eyes. "Or maybe she's trapped," she finally said. "Maybe the good spirits are all the evil spirits are able to hold on to."

"Maybe," Jeffrey said. "I guess she tried to get away....Do you want this?" he asked, offering her the locket with his picture inside.

"No," she said.

"I guess she couldn't keep it," he muttered. In some weird way he could still feel her, though; stuck up there, scared, damp, cold and loving him as much as he still loved her. He opened the locket. It was only his face that looked back at him. His stomach turned at the realization that his imagination would forever have to fill in the rest. He could only hope that he would forever haunt her as much as she would haunt him.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mollie Gower is a Promising Young Author at Eastern Washington University acquiring a double major in creative writing and visual communication design. The Resurrectionist is her first published work. She maintains a blog on [wordpress.com](http://wordpress.com), posting about her life and her journey as a writer.



Ada Hoffmann lives in Canada, but makes yearly visits to her relatives in the Washington Metropolitan Area. She's a graduate student in computing who likes to categorize things and play nerdy roleplaying games. Her stories have appeared in Expanded Horizons, One Buck Horror, and Leodegraunce, among others.



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Nick Medina is a young author from Chicago, Illinois. Since 2009 he has been published in print, online and audio formats by magazines, journals and short story anthologies in the United States and the United Kingdom. To read more of Nick's work, or to contact him with questions and comments, visit <http://sites.google.com/site/nickjmedina/>.



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