

The
New Gothic Review



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The New Gothic Review



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Ian McMahon: Editor & Managing Director
Zachary Monahan: Editor & Web Master
Elizabeth Israel: Editorial Associate & Copy Editor

Additional Readers: Sona Kumar, Branford Walker, and David Polacek

Cover Art: Heather Parr
Cover Design: Pläd

Special Thanks: Wesley Nelson and Charles Israel Jr..

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Table of Contents

<i>Letter from the editors</i>	5
ROYAL PALM COURT <i>by A.A. de Levine</i>	7
THE HALA TREE WALKS IN DARKNESS <i>by Joseph DeMarco</i>	18
I'LL BRING IT IN <i>by Rebecca Parfitt</i>	31
BUTTERFLY <i>by Tim Jeffreys</i>	47
DOUGLAS COPELAND <i>by John Leahy</i>	57
ESPEJOS / OJOS <i>by R.M. Sandoval</i>	68
<i>Contributors</i>	84



Heather Parr

Letter from the editors

Dear reader,

Hello and welcome to the first edition of the New Gothic Review!

As is perhaps expected, we are long time admirers of Gothic literature and the phenomenal works that have emerged from the genre. Inspired by his love our love for these classic tales, we built this magazine to cultivate stories that reimagined the Gothic genre for the 21st century.

We were thus forced to ask ourselves what constitutes the “modern,” 21st century Gothic”? Must it contain a contemporary setting? Must it stem from the familiar Gothic tropes or must they evolve from something new entirely? As the submissions came pouring in, we told ourselves that we would know it when we saw it. But it was not that simple.

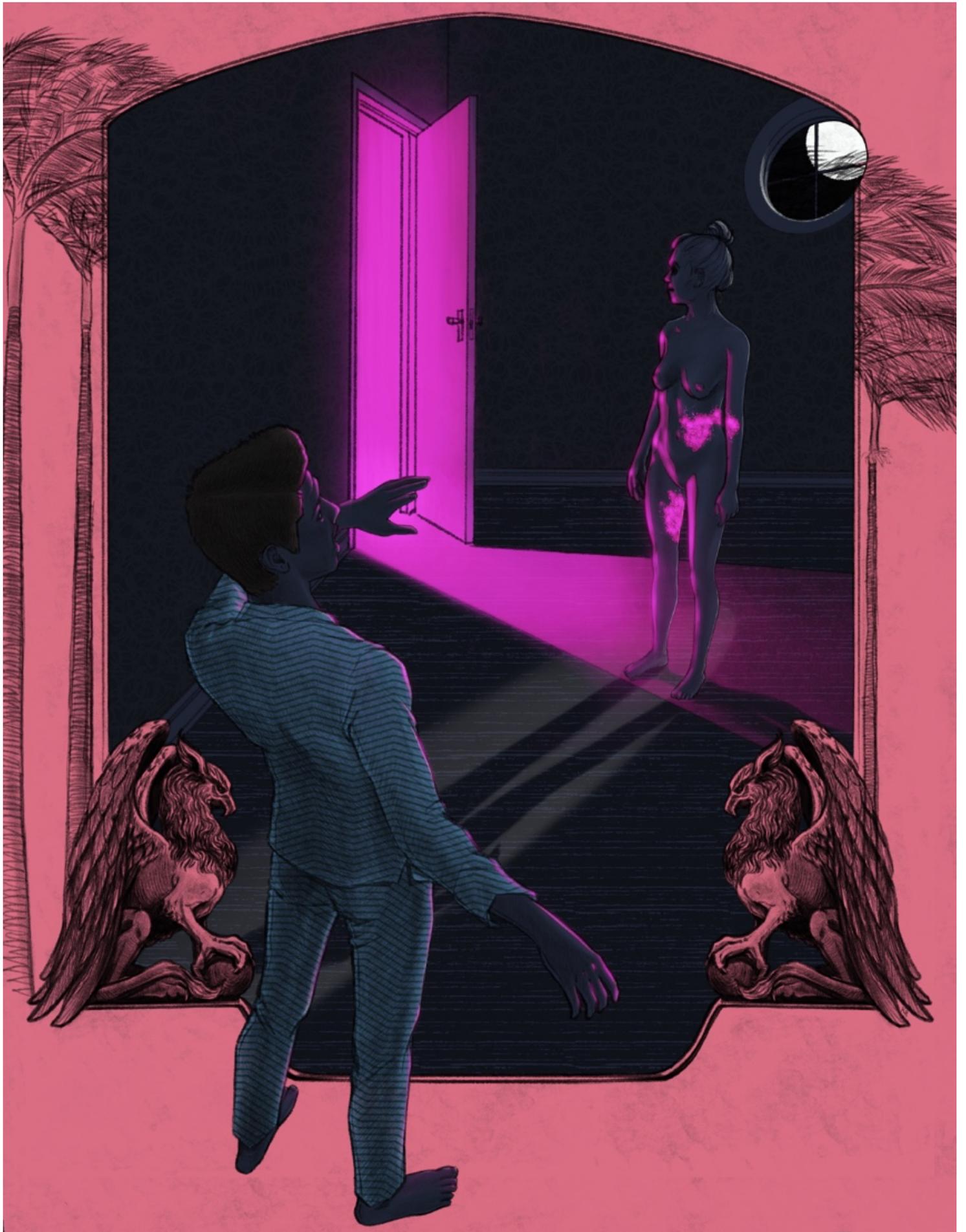
At its core, we see the Gothic as a mode by which we materialize our fears and anxieties, giving a space for us to confront them. Everything else is extra. Although the Gothic has such a rich history tied to place and tradition, its tenants are truly universal. The genre does not belong to any one type of story, just as it does not belong to any one culture or region of the world. If there are barriers to what Gothic literature can or cannot be, we want to bring them down.

We want to open the door as wide as possible. We want to show that the Gothic is just as present on the beaches of Hawaii as it is in the English countryside. We want to celebrate any story that embraces the Gothic spirit and forces us to reconsider what the Gothic can be. And, at the end of the day, we hope to showcase collections of stories that connect us to new Gothic worlds and show how this beautiful genre is a universally human one. We couldn't be more enthusiastic about these first six stories and how they accomplish exactly that.

We hope you enjoy it.

Sincerely,

Ian, Zach, & Elizabeth



ROYAL PALM COURT

A.A. de Levine

Illustration by Katiana Robles

The neighbors' lions and horses are a dusty rose color with a high sheen. When the midday sun hits them, they glow pink. They hold stately ionic columns upon their backs, faces stoic despite the weight they carry. A *porte-cochère*, it's called. That's French.

Royal Palm Court is a sought-after address, as I'm sure you know. You can tell just from standing here by the gate, looking over at the lions. Our own front entrance is flanked by gryphons, their expressions serene as they look out over our lawn. Our house is larger than our neighbors', a Model A versus their Model B. They have the *porte-cochère*, but we have a fourth bedroom, and an extra half-bath.

I am not sharing this to brag, as I have no need to. I am simply sharing a fact, for those who might care about such things.

My first wife pretended not to care about such things, to not be impressed by the houses and the lawns and the large front gate with an R and a P and a C all intertwined.

"What's the point of a gated community," she'd said, "if no one's trying to get in?" She'd laughed. "It's too much house for us," she'd also say, often, looking around while drinking her morning coffee, or at night, the two of us in bed, the house quiet and dark. "Wouldn't you prefer someplace... smaller? Cozier? A place we could make our own?" But this *was* our own, I'd tell her. It was our home, gryphons and all.

My first wife was not sensible, nor tactful, nor was she concerned with practical things. I cared for her, of course. But she was the kind of woman who called things "cute," who spoke in baby-talk to dogs and cats. She thought the gryphons gracing our entryway were "cute," too, but often accused me of wanting a *porte-cochère* like the neighbors', of looking out over the adjoining property with longing. This was ridiculous, of course, and I would tell her so. I could have any house of my choosing on Royal Palm Court, and she knew this.

My father built these houses, his company creating fine communities where once stood only wetlands bordered by slash pine. My father, an intrepid man, had looked out over this barren land and had seen possibility. Endless possibility. And when I looked out over our lawn or the neighbors,' I saw it too.

My second wife is much easier to please; she likes the things I like. Our values are shared. And I will make sure she is comfortable, that she knows this is her home, too.

After all, as anyone can see, this is a great house, with a double height foyer and a grand, double winder staircase. The kitchen features a breakfast alcove and walk-in pantry, a bar area and granite countertops. The appliances are all stainless steel, all top of the line. The living room is large, bright, with French doors opening out onto a courtyard. When my father drained the marshy land, he brought in good soil and massive, spongy rolls of Kentucky bluegrass. In lesser developments, you might see patches of crabgrass, unsightly and wild. But not here, not in Royal Palm Court. My father's company is careful, meticulous. They planted fruit trees and bougainvillea and the namesake royal palms.

Of course, there have been setbacks here and there.

That is to be expected. There have been storms and disease, citrus fruit turning gray, bark splintering, odd smells rolling in from the surrounding wilderness. These things happen, Florida being Florida, the land being what it is.

I am clear-eyed about this place's faults, of course. This is an area in flux! The land we're standing on is all man-made, the dirt brought in from who-knows-where on what was once rivers of grass, with water snakes and garfish swimming through the brown water. The developers brought in new trees, invasive species to soak up all that water, to make the land dry and habitable for humans—and for us, a decorative lake along one edge of the development. I can see the irony, of course, of drying up marshland to build a lake. I can laugh about that! I have a good sense of humor, after all.

This all means, of course, that night here falls heavy and dark. We are far from the highway, far from commercial buildings and malls and hotels. It's peaceful that way. This is how my father planned it. A man works all day, surrounded by toil and noise, and when he returns home, he wants quiet, tranquility.

My first wife did not understand that, but my second wife will.

They say a good marriage is built on communication, but that is... treacly, you know? A feel-good aphorism repeated by twittering morons. A good marriage, in

reality, is built on calculated silence, on the empty and soundless spaces between two people.

And so, to keep the peace, to keep things tranquil, I do not tell my second wife about the mold.

The mold.

My wife first noticed it, just a few spores, in the hall closet where we kept our ski gear and other seasonal *accoutrements*. That's French, again. She'd called me up to show me, visibly upset, near tears.

"Look," she'd said. "Look at what's happening in this house!"

The mold was unlike anything I'd seen before, I'll admit. It was pink and iridescent, little globules clumped together in a wet-looking mass. Revolting, really.

"We've been breathing this in for who knows how long," my wife said.

"Why were you fiddling with the closet?" I asked her.

She was evasive, curt. "I heard something."

She insisted I call my father's company to complain. "A rush job," she said of the house, the street, the entire neighborhood. "People," she told me, "were never meant to live here. This was meant to be undisturbed."

She was not a respectful person.

The house had been a gift to us. My father had died, passing the house on to me, his only child. Royal Palm Court had been his life's work, though unappreciated in his time. My father was a man with a vision, which is something my first wife could not understand. He saw families laying on green, green grass. He saw speckled light through swaying palm fronds, casting leopard spots on smiling, upturned faces. He saw white fences and rows and rows of shingled rooftops, pristine blue pools that were cool in summer and warm in winter. He saw that this place could be something more, a comfortable place. A tranquil oasis.

He was involved in every detail, every shingle and tile. The houses were elegant, built to impress. My father's vision was becoming a reality. Families moved in, employed by local resorts. Water park owners, dentists, lawyers.

But then the storm hit.

Hurricane Adele, a category 5, ripped through the coastal land before heading deeper into the marsh, uprooting trees, peeling rooftops from homes, plucking telephone poles from the ground and sending them flying, hurtling across the dark yellow skies and through buildings and cars.

Seventeen people died in all, from nursing home residents to homeless veterans to a woman slammed into her bedroom wall when an albino alligator, already dead, was sent crashing through her unboarded window. People passed through the resulting wreckage like zombies, silently mouthing nonsense as they wandered through neighborhoods rendered unrecognizable: a Howard Johnson ripped from its concrete foundation, its signature pitched roof in pieces across the ruined landscape, a fiberglass manatee torn from the roof of a car dealership and sent flying into an elementary school.

My father's dream lay in tatters across Central Florida.

He died soon after, in a rotting four-post bed within a house of his own design. This very house, in fact. His clouded eyes stared at nothing as he waited to die. I think the storm had sapped his will to rebuild, to fight against the marshy land in order to see his vision truly completed.

My poor father, dead before he could realize he was simply ahead of his time, a visionary whose fruits were not yet ripe enough to be harvested properly.

But I continue his legacy, still. When the area was rebuilt, including a fine resort with trellises and tearooms and an adjoining boardwalk better than before, new people came.

"Nouveau riche," my first wife called them, dismissively. But shouldn't everyone have a chance at the dream of home ownership, of comfort, of luxury, of a three-car garage and custom home theater system? I think so. And my father would agree. With the influx of all these new people with money to spend came shopping malls, a twelve-screen movie theater, an Olive Garden, a bowling alley and arcade, churches, banks, and the billing office for a university students could attend online.

The houses on Royal Palm Court—once condemned, once doomed to rot, once half-collapsed among the fetid water and crawling vines—were now revitalized, repainted, reroofed. My father's company, with me now at the helm, added new architectural touches: the lions and gryphons and stone horses that so captivate its new residents.

I don't think my first wife ever realized what a privilege it was to live in this model A home with its double height foyer. I don't think she ever cared.

It seemed that all she could see, and all she would talk about, was the mold.

"Black mold's what you've got to watch out for," said the man who came by, and of course, he was right. He eyed the pink patches on the wall carefully. "This is

probably nothing,” he said. He worked for my father’s company, so I know he could be trusted.

“See?” I told my wife. We watched, together, as the man applied anti-fungal spray to the wall. She walked through the house with a mask on, a flimsy thing with Hello Kitty across the mouth, making a mockery of this house, its stateliness, its cleanliness and its refinement. You would have thought we lived in a hovel by the way she carried on. Of course my father’s company brought out an expert to look at the mold, and of course they inspected it closely, cleaned it all up.

But my wife carried on, regardless. After the man left, she mixed vinegar and baking soda and scrubbed at the spot in the hall closet where she’d found the spores, every day for a week, on her hands and knees. She’d gotten rid of the ski equipment that’d been stored in that space, convinced it had been contaminated somehow.

“We never go anywhere anyway,” she said, as if all this had been my fault. Can I be blamed, really, for wanting to stay in a home so beautiful, a home that rivals most hotels, most resorts?

“It gets in deep,” my wife said. She scrubbed and scratched so hard, every afternoon, that she split a fingernail straight down the center. She removed the glove she’d been wearing and looked down at her hand. “That’s what it does. It gets down deep.”

I told her she was being ridiculous.

Eventually, I got her to stop cleaning, to stop scraping away at the spot on the wall, low and near the floor, where she’d first seen the pale pink spores. But, even after, she found ways to torment me, to hold the mold over my head. I would see the way her eyes shifted when she’d pass that spot, the way she’d glance over at the closet door whenever she walked down the hall.

I could see her, from the living room. Just standing there, looking.

“Stop it,” I told her. “I know what you’re doing.”

“It’s still there,” she’d say, over and over. Stubborn, like I said. Insistent, almost pleading. “I can feel that it’s still there.”

Sometimes I’d catch her looking up at the second floor landing while we were both in the living room, or craning her neck up at the ceiling while preparing something in the kitchen. State of the art appliances, and she was worried about mold. Just a little mold, already inspected by a reputable company.

It was a calculated stand, I knew, against all the things I loved: this house, my father, the picture of the life we could have had together.

I didn't know why she acted this way. We had the house. We had enough.

We had loved each other once, deeply and truly. And, I confess, there is a part of me, deep in the marrow, that still loves and will always love her. She was impudent and set in her ways, but she was also charming, beguiling, funny. She was smart, too, sometimes offering an opinion so precise, so unique that turning to face her in those moments was like seeing her for the first time. Who knew, I'd always think, that she was capable of such a thought?

We really did love each other, the two of us in this house.

But things change. Time corrodes everything.

She pulled away from me even more. She began to form strange habits, staring out from doors and windows into the surrounding marsh. She would go out, sometimes, and lay on the grass, grass still wet with dew, so that her shirts became streaked with green.

When in the house, she kept herself covered, piling on sweaters, wrapping herself in blankets. We had not been intimate for some time, by then, but she became even more sensitive to touch, recoiling from me if I so much as walked near her.

And always, always, she would act like she was hearing something upstairs, something within the walls, something behind closed doors. She was always listening for something, but never listening to me.

It wasn't always like this.

I don't remember much of being young, I admit, and maybe I was one of those people who truly never was, but I do recall two moments, clearly and readily.

The first: being eight and peering through the car window as my father, and my mother beside him, drove away from the newly-opened Royal Palm Court.

"Hurricane Adele is on her way," my father had said, and I remember picturing the storm as a woman, mad with sorrow, looming over the landscape, watching our little car drive off toward bluer skies, angry at us for leaving her.

The second moment: the first time I saw my wife. It had been just after another bad storm, a violent downpour that had left the dorm halls flooded and foul-smelling. She had been walking through the standing water in high boots, her face blank. I offered her a sweatshirt, dry and warm, and she looked up at me. And in her eyes, there was nothing. I can see it so vividly, still. And I think that moment, that very first moment, is when I loved her most.

I think of these two moments now, after everything that has happened. After discovering what my wife, my first wife... after seeing what she had been doing.

We had taken to spending the evenings separately. Gone were the days when we would read side by side or watch a little television together, the wild dark of the land seeming so distant, so far from us in our warmly-lit home with the newly-installed light dimmers and remote-controlled shades. And so I would often spend nights in my study, a small, comfortable retreat just off the living room, my door always shut against the sounds of a settling house and my wife's footsteps upstairs, doing whatever it was that she'd do in the evenings. I had been working late that week, and so I'd fallen asleep at my desk, depleted. Such is life when a company is flourishing. Work begets more work! I'd remained there for hours, I suppose, eventually waking to a house overtaken by a silence I had not experienced since the moments before the hurricane, so long ago. It was an eerie silence. A calm of sorts, but too still to be comforting. Not tranquil. Not at all.

I called out for my wife and heard nothing. I ventured out from my study and into the tomb-silent dark of the living room. It was empty and it was warm. My wife, I surmised, had turned off all the climate-control options. A foolish woman, playing at some game. She would blame me for this, somehow. For a house that was too cold, then too warm. For ceilings that were too high to hold a family together, in her words. For mold that grew in a hall closet. For everything. I stood there, jaw clenched, growing more and more annoyed, considering all the things my wife must be thinking.

I stepped further into the dark. The humidity made the night feel like it was a living, solid thing, a thing that clung to wrists and shoulders. I listened intently as I made my way through the living room. Presently, the silence was punctured by a weak shuffling sound coming from somewhere upstairs, so I walked towards the staircase, passing the large wall clock in the kitchen. It had been stopped. It's why everything is so silent, I thought. The humming of modern life, the droning of appliances, the soft ticking of clocks and watches, the beeps and chimes that form the constant, pulsing background noise of life in a suburb, had all fallen away, and now there was nothing. But why had she turned it all off? The power gone, the home silent. The expensive, reinforced glass of our house's doors and windows were far too thick to allow in any sounds from the tangled wild beyond our own manicured yard, as was their purpose.

And then, upstairs, the noise repeated. Just the merest shuffle, the smallest little sound. I walked up the stairs, through the muggy dark, towards the sound.

I regret it, still.

I should have remained in my study.

I should have passed the night in dreams, safe in a different world altogether.

But I climbed the stairs. I walked out onto the second floor landing, to the hall enclosed by wrought iron, forming a balcony of sorts, overlooking the living room.

And there, in that narrow hall, on that landing, stood my wife.

She was naked, completely. Her ratty team-building t-shirt lay on the floor beside the old gray sweatshirt she'd borrowed from me when we first met.

Her nudity was shocking to me in its plainness. I had not seen my wife's body like that in some time. It faced me, her body, but her face was turned away, staring into the open closet.

And then I saw what she had been hiding from me.

She was gray-blue in the dark except, I could see, for luminous patches of pale pink mold growing directly on her skin. On her thigh, the curve of her elbow, her belly. These patches morphed across the landscape of her body, expanding and contracting, the pustules beating as if hiding secret hearts within.

I was overtaken by panic, and the fear became so strong it doubled in on itself, freezing into numbness, into nothing. I could not move or speak; I could barely form my swirling thoughts into something coherent. I could only look at my wife, nude and shimmering, the light peeking through these patches of mold, this fungal entity that had overtaken her. She turned her face to me, then, and I could see, to my horror, that it had partially collapsed in on itself, that the fine bones and warm flesh on one side had been replaced by pulsating mounds of this... this stuff.

My mind was too far gone to remind my open mouth to scream.

She began walking towards me. She or it, this thing that was my wife, my wife who was this thing. Each step the thing took, shaky and jittery, seemed to shatter reality, seemed to push me further into madness.

I realized, suddenly breaking from the numbness, that I should step back and away, that I should shield myself, that this hand, this hand in the shape of my wife's but that did not belong to my wife, this hand blooming and growing and moving and changing, could not and should not touch any portion of my flesh.

I screamed, then, and the scream was eaten by the darkness.

I moved away, walking backwards across the hall, one hand along the iron railing, precariously close to the top of the stair, the moon spilling through the porthole window above, a decorative little thing that I remember my wife asking about when we first moved in. "Why a window so high up?" she had asked me. She did not like that the ceiling was too high to clean easily. She never did understand proportion, elegance, decoration. She never would. And in that moment that silly woman seemed

so far from me, that woman who had so aggravated me, and whom I had so loved. She was so many miles away from this thing that wore her face, this thing that had wormed its way into her body, that had been blooming, quietly, among her heart and lungs, this thing winding down her spine, softening the bone, eating away at her. This thing with its own private life and desire, completely unknown to me. This thing that had remained hidden, growing in the dark.

I saw, backing away, that this form could not hold its shape, that what was left of my wife, her outer shell, was crumpling inward, a house demolished, a house in ruin, tree roots turning a foundation to dust.

The mold spread fast, visibly, blooming in patches all down her legs, making it so that she could not walk and could only lurch and stumble towards me. The eye that was left on her face was unfocused and, yet, there was an intelligence in that one eye. There was still some aspect of my wife trapped within this rotting form, and it was...

It was afraid, I could see. Of me. Of me. It did not want to keep moving towards me. My wife, no longer at home in her own body, was trying to move away from me but could not.

“Stop,” I said, and my voice sounded small, child-like. “Please stop.”

The thing could not speak, could only open its mouth, a reflex, the tongue gone, the teeth shifted, the roof fallen away to all these peachy-pink globules, lit from within.

A tear fell down my wife’s borrowed cheek.

Trembling violently, I grasped at the wall, not wanting to fall and plummet to my death on these stairs or, worse, to survive the fall but only just barely, to watch, immobile, as this thing moved haltingly, shakily towards me, this thing that knew only how to destroy, to replace.

As the luminous thing, so full and blooming now, so replete with glistening spores lurched again toward me, I brought a hand to my face and, afraid, threw myself back against the wall, nearly losing my footing. The thing grasped at me and caught only air, falling forward into the dark, tumbling down the stairs and breaking apart with each step, soft and rotted through as it was.

I stood in the dark for a long time, breathing, waiting.

Finally, I made myself look down, to the foot of the stairs.

My wife, I saw, was no more. There were only strewn pieces of the thing that once held her.

And that eye...

I covered my mouth with my hands. The single eye remained open, the lid eaten away. And the eye, it looked up. It looked up along the length of the double height foyer, so that it looked at me, at me trembling at the top of the stair. That eye still held something sad, something broken. The eye looked and looked. And what it saw, it hated.

I watched until the eye could look no more, until the light within became extinguished. My wife, my first wife, became a mess upon the floor of our Model A home.

All was still in that dark, dank house.

It felt like an eternity, locked there in fear in the dark.

And then, all at once, the hum of life began again. The lights returned, and with it the ticking of clocks, the humming of the refrigerator, the cheery, rehearsed voices from the HD TV.

I looked across the house and then noticed, at the bottom of the stair, a stirring. The disparate parts of my wife—barely recognizable as her limbs, the hands I'd held, the birthmark upon her shoulder blade, the butterfly tattoo on her hip, a youthful decision made loudly and sweatily on Spring Break with a loud, sweaty knot of friends whose closeness would not make it into adulthood—these pieces crept, as if through an intelligence and will all their own, back together, once again forming a whole. The mold, the pulsating pink swatches, diminished in size, their glow fading as the mess at the foot of the stairs became a body once again.

My wife, again.

But not.

A new wife, blinking in the dark, gathering her bearings and then turning her head, painfully, to stare up at me.

My new wife.

A gift, I could see. A chance to start anew.

A gift from the house.

And as I take her out with me onto the front lawn, a new day's sun rises. I turn her, gently, towards the neighbors' lions and horses. I point them out to her. Dusty rose with a high sheen. When the midday sun hits them, I tell her, they glow pink. They hold stately ionic columns upon their backs, faces stoic despite the weight they carry. A *porte-cochère*, I explain to her. That's French.

Do you see?



THE HALA TREE WALKS IN DARKNESS

Joseph DeMarco

Illustration by Liza Adamandidou B.

Hala

1. **(noun)** Sin, offense, fault, error. **Ho'ohala.** To cause to sin.
2. **(verb)** To pass, elapse (as time); to pass by; to miss; to pass away, die.
3. **(noun)** The pandanus or screw pine, native to Hawaii growing at low altitudes both cultivated and wild. It is a tree with many branches which are tipped with spiral tufts of long, narrow, spine-edged leaves; its base is supported by a clump of slanting aerial roots. The pineapple-shaped fruits are borne on female trees whereas spikes of fragrant, pollen-bearing flowers are borne separately on male trees.

January 15th 1779

The morning air was still cool and breezy; the sun had barely made it up over the mountain, yet Naku had finished cleaning his morning catch. He placed a thin piece of meat on the *kuahu* or altar, then very greedily he snatched half that piece and popped it into his mouth. He heard the words of his *kupuna*, *there is a delicate balance in nature, never take more than you need, and always leave an offering for Akua. Akua has plenty*, he thought to himself, looking over the vast ocean. He quickly wrapped the rest of the raw fish in ti leaves, stopping momentarily to trade a fish for some Hawaiian salt. He wiped the sweat from his brow; it had already been a long morning, but soon he would be taking the long trail back to his village. He ducked under an ulu tree after weaving his way through a thicket of hala trees. The hala trees were very mysterious to Naku. He often thought he saw eyes in the trunk and he believed that once a tree had grabbed him and refused to let go. He was not sure he liked the hala. Its strange pineapple-looking fruit could be made into a lei that was bad luck to wear except around the New Year. Its leg-like roots jutted out of the ground, making the whole tree appear to be walking on stilts. Naku thought the tree sort of looked like a giant sixteen-

legged man. The elders of the village had shared stories that the hala trees walked around at night and, every so often, would share a secret with you if you were worthy.

The *lo'i* was shady in the early morning light, this wetland taro garden was fairly sparse of taro plants because of the upcoming Makahiki festival, a celebration of the harvest and the god Lono. The *makani* began to blow and Naku shuddered in the morning Hawaiian sun as he was walking past the mysterious little thatched hut. It had been there as long as he could remember. Still, the women who lived there barely came out in the day and most of the villagers were afraid of her. Naku, on the other hand, kind of found the crazy old lady fascinating. The local lore about her was that she was a *kahuna* from the island of Moloka'i and had magic powers. All the villagers cowered in her presence because they said she had red eyes, but Naku had stood before her once and realized the error in this description. Her eyes weren't red, no, not the color red anyway; her eyes glowed like hot magma spewing from the earth. They looked as if they were on fire but they certainly weren't red. Naku had this feeling he was being watched, so he quickly hurried down the path to his *kauhale* or village.

The village was busy at work for the upcoming Makahiki festival, so no one noticed Naku slip into the *kauhale*. He covered his morning catch in salt, wrapped it in the kalo leaves and stored it in a dry basin near the back of the dwelling. He slipped out the back and into his personal *hale* to grab his *niho pahoa*. The blade was made of a tiger shark tooth and it was razor sharp. He could cut almost anything with it. He was cutting coconut fibers to weave into cordage when Kolohe found him and asked, "Whae yooh was?"

"Ai stay on *I'a* duty," Naku responded.

"Yooh catch any?" Kolohe asked.

"Plenny," Naku answered.

"Fo' Uncle Kalehua?" Kolohe asked. "Whea he stay?"

"He stay up in da mountains."

With Kalehua gone and his birth father killed in the brutal inter-island wars, Naku, at the ripe age of thirteen, was the temporary head of his *kauhale*. It was a big responsibility for such a young man. He decided it was break time; they retreated to the stream to cool off. It was already getting hot on the Kona side of the island, and the hike to the streambed was a long one. They passed three *wahine* nude from the waist up; their dark hair was wet and their coconut nipples beading with water from their morning bathe. Naku and Kolohe politely bade the ladies *Aloha kakahiaka*, but did not stare at their breasts.

They stripped out of their *malo* and waded into the icy stream, which was fed from the mountain peaks of Hualalai, an 8,000-foot mountain but still only the third tallest on the island of Hawaii. Once they were submerged, Naku felt better, like he could think straighter.

“I wen dream bout da lady again,” Naku confessed. “Da one down by da lo’i.”

“Da witch?” Kolohe asked.

“Ai.” Naku was serious, but Kolohe was already goofing on him.

“Maybe yooh like oof her,” Kolohe said smirking and thrusting his pelvis forward.

Naku was not amused. In the dream she had laid her hands on the hala tree and proclaimed death was coming from across the waters. Naku knew it was only a dream, but it felt real, and the old woman had pinched him on the nipple in the dream, but he dared not tell Kolohe about that part of the dream.

Kolohe got serious for a moment. “She wen tell me da hala tree wen talk to her. It wen see da future.”

Naku shivered slightly. “No believe her.”

“I do,” Kolohe admitted.

Naku splashed water at Kolohe, and thus a splashing war ensued. The war climaxed with Kolohe launching himself off a rock and crouching into a ball forming a boulder (the Hawaiians had never seen a cannonball, not yet, anyway) and hitting the water causing a massive splash that rocked Naku.

January 16th 1779

The sliver of a crescent moon was already setting; it was many hours before dawn. The trail was dark and quiet as Naku crept downhill to the bay. Below him, he could see several small torches of fishermen. Naku’s attention was focused downhill when he heard an ominous scratching sound that made him stop in his tracks. He felt a tremor in his heart; the sound was coming from the thicket of hala trees. He got this feeling all of a sudden as if one hala tree was looking at him. *It doesn’t have a face*, he said to himself, *it’s not looking at me*.

He was about to *hele* on out of there, when he heard it again.

It was very light sounding but it was clearly coming from the tree.

He stopped his breathing; waiting, he heard, “TsssS, TssSs, TsSss, TSsss.”

It almost sounded like someone whispering.

“Who dere?” Naku whispered, but all he heard was the soft scratching getting closer.

“TSSss, TSSsS, TSSS, TSSS.”

Naku paused. He could feel the chicken skin up on his arms; like a hog, the hair on his body was standing straight up. He heard the scratching again. It seemed to be coming from a big burly hala tree that had something like twenty-three legs sticking out of its trunk. Although Naku was fearful, he put his hand on the trunk of the tree. The scratching sound abruptly stopped, but Naku’s eyes nearly popped out of his head as he looked downhill. He saw what looked like a white apparition moving between the hala trees. Naku crouched down. As he moved in closer to the tree, his nose brushed against one of the spikes on the hala leaves causing him to bleed lightly. He put his hand to his face, watching the ghostly white silhouette move between the trees, its *kapa* cloth flapping lightly in the breeze. As the apparition moved closer, Naku realized it was the witch that lived in the grass hut near the *lo’i*, the one whose eyes burned like hot lava from the Kilauea crater.

Naku could hear she was chanting an *oli*, “Eo Mai e na Kupuna I Hala,” *Heed my call to the ancestors.*

She touched each hala tree as she passed, “E Ho’oikaika ia makou,” *Give us strength.*

“E ala e,” *Rise up.*

Naku was puzzled. Was she telling the trees to rise up or the dead?

She continued, “Mai luna a lalo,” *From the top to the bottom.*

Naku heard more crunching and then, in the distance, what sounded like a large tree falling over.

The witch moved slowly and each moment felt like an eternity for Naku. When she passed out of sight, he hurried on down the hill. As he stopped to catch his breath under an ulu tree, he thought he had avoided an awkward altercation with the witch. That was when he felt the cold clammy hand on his shoulder. He nearly jumped out of his skin. Naku smacked her arm off his shoulder and retreated about a yard. He was prepared to strike her if she closed the gap, but she remained a large stone’s throw away.

“What yoooh want?” Naku questioned.

A voice that sounded as if it came from the bowels of the Earth came out of her, “Yoooh wen sin boy,” the witch stated.

“I neva...” Naku started to say, but the witch cut him off with this infernal cackle.

“Yoooh wen sin and now da sea goin bring us death,” the witch stated.

“Eh?” Naku questioned looking out over the calm bay waters.

“I git a message fo’ yo’ village,” said the witch.

Naku was puzzled. “From who?”

She patted the hala tree. “Da trees, dey tell me tings,” said the witch. Her smile was ghastly.

“I no hear anything,” Naku said boldly, though he was still fearful.

“You don’t no how fo’ listen,” the witch explained. She put her hand on Naku and he almost screamed out; the other she placed on the trunk of the hala tree and rubbed it softly. At first there was nothing except the limbs shaking in the tradewinds. Naku struggled to free himself, but the witch had an ironclad grip. Then, as if it was some kind of dream, he heard it, lightly at first *tsss, tsss, tsss, tsss*, and then gaining strength, *tsss, tssS, tssSS, tsSSS*.

Naku felt the hair on his arms standing up again. “It jus one insect burrowing,” he said trying to reason with his own fear and apprehension.

Tsss, TssS, TsSS, TSSS. Naku thought it almost sounded like words, but he couldn’t quite make them out.

The witch smiled, “Yooh tink so?” The wind started to bluster and blow causing the branches to shake and rattle. Naku looked about him; it was only he and the witch. Still he felt another presence.

Naku changed stances. “Wat da tree saying?”

The witch’s eyes started to burn like molten magma. “We stay headed fo’ dark times.”

“Da tree wen tell yooh dat?” Naku questioned.

“Silence,” the witch shrieked, her fingernails digging into Naku’s arm. “False gods goin fo’ bring pestilence, famine and disease upon our people.”

“How da tree wen know dat?” Naku inquired.

The witch gripped Naku tighter. He could feel blood running down his arm onto the bark of the tree. The witch did not appear to have the answer.

“Dere is nuthing yooh can do fo’ stop dem.” The witch’s eyes were blazing now. “Death no can stop dese false devils. No island goin fo’ escape dere wrath.” The witch sounded stark-raving mad.

“Wen,” Naku questioned.

“Sooner than yooh tink,” the witch laughed wickedly. In the midst of her laugh, she started to cough. When she was doubled over, Naku shook himself free from her grasp and took off running down the hill. By the time he had reached the sea, he was out of breath. He washed the blood off his arm. He was too shaken up to go fishing.

Still he brought out the net, climbed onto the reef, and went through the motions. He did not catch anything. He was lost in thought; *he knew he needed to talk to Kolohe.*

He had to wait until breakfast. Even then in the *hale mua* or eating house, there were too many ears; he could not discuss matters with Kolohe. They would have to go someplace private. They went for their usual bathe in the stream.

Naku began to spill his guts about the witch and her warning.

Kolohe stood there, his mouth gaping open. After a short time he looked around. “Wen dis happen?”

“Dis morning,” Naku reiterated.

“An wen she say da false gods wen arrive?” Kolohe questioned.

“She neva say,” Naku stated.

They hushed, as there were a group of *wahine* approaching, five females fresh from bathing in the cold mountain stream, their dark hair wet and messy, their brown coconut nipples standing erect and beaded with dew, but today Naku barely even looked at them. He was already tied in knots. The ladies smiled saying, *Aloha kakahiaka*. Naku politely nodded.

As soon as they were out of earshot, “What we goin fo’ do?” Naku asked.

“We can tell Kaulana,” Kolohe suggested.

“Nah, dat witch has shit fo’ brains,” Naku said chuckling, but Kolohe didn’t laugh.

Eventually after an awkward silence Kolohe said, “Yooh need fo’ tell someone.”

“Eh, nuting goin fo’ happen,” Naku informed his friend.

They stripped out of their *malo*, but Kolohe would not enter the stream. “Befo’ yooh make a decision, I need fo’ tell yooh a story,” he said wading into the stream.

Kolohe’s Tale

That previous winter, Kolohe had been in charge of the night’s watch for the stone temple near Kealakekua Bay. He had to leave the village around 1:30 a.m. to arrive at his post. Most nights Kolohe would go straight to his post, but sometimes he tended to meander. One such night he was out wandering, exploring, and upon hearing strange sounds near the large hala tree, decided to investigate. Kolohe had been fascinated by the tales of the tree walking around at night. To Kolohe the tree looked like a rather large skeleton wearing a hula skirt. He walked over to the trunk and heard something hit the ground behind him.

Plonk.

It was a lone sound and was not very loud, but in the dark stillness of night it caused him to jump. Kolohe spun about-face expecting to see an animal or possibly a spook standing there, but all that was behind him was emptiness. The wind began to blow lightly as if it was its own entity. He looked about; he was alone, but he didn't feel alone.

From the other side of the tree he heard a *Clomp*. In the silence, it was somewhat pronounced. He shuffled his stance, looking panic-stricken.

"Aloha?" Kolohe whispered, but was met with silence. As he rotated again awkwardly, in the shadows he saw movement. Something had fallen from the hala tree, *ponk*. He moved closer to the sound.

"Where you stay?" Kolohe asked. There was no answer. On the ground was a slice of one of those pineapple-looking fruits that hang from the female hala trees. Another sliver fell off to the right of him. *THAP*. It hit several leaves on the forest floor.

The fruit of a hala tree is actually nothing like a pineapple. It tastes nothing like one and is only really eaten by bats, rats, crabs and lizards. The fruit also falls out in slices (and looks rather like one of those enormous candy corn that are given out at Halloween, except these are green and yellow instead of orange, yellow and white.) Several hala fruit started to fall all at once, *Clonk, plonk, Whap, bonk*. One struck Kolohe on the side of the noggin. He was flustered; he shuffled his feet, and picked up the loose fruit. He ran his fingers along the smooth inner part of the fruit and over the prickly, bumpy outside that is exposed to the air. A piece fell from the utmost branches, high in the tree. *Thhh*, it hit several branches, *Thhh*, on the way down, before *THOMP*, hitting the ground several feet from Kolohe.

"Aloha?" Kolohe whispered again. It was then that, just out of the corner of his vision, he noticed someone standing there. She was as motionless as the trees and in the initial shock of her presence, he almost jumped out of his skin. She certainly looked like a spook. There stood the witch, her white *kapa* flowing lightly in the Kona breeze.

Kolohe was petrified, yet he tried not to show it. The witch was chanting an *oli*. Kolohe could not hear most of the chant, but again she bayed the trees to "E ala e," *Rise up*.

Kolohe stood tall as she approached but dared not look her in the eye. He stared down to the twisted roots of the hala tree; as he did this, he noticed his knuckle was bleeding. He made a fist, the blood curdling and dripping onto the twisted roots of a tree that looked like some kind of poly-legged immortal.

“E Ho’oikaika ia makou,” the witch chanted. *Give us strength.*

The witch raised her arms toward the heavens.

Then there was a deep subterranean growl from beneath the tree as if the Earth was groaning. The ground started to rumble, and it started to rain hala fruit down all around him. *Thap, bonk, THomp, Clonk, Whap, bonk.* The ground lurched slightly to the right, as there were cracking and splintering sounds from underneath their feet. Before Kolohe could even run, there was an echoing crash and the ground broke open. With a shuddering CRUNCH, roots exploded out of the earth and for a moment, he thought perhaps it was a landslide. Then Kolohe almost fainted dead away, as he saw the roots of the hala tree extricate themselves from the ground. He stumbled several feet backwards and fell on his *okole*, as he saw the root bend and step crashing into the ground like the leg of some wooded giant.

The witch was still on her feet, standing before the tree, “Eo Mai e na Kupuna I Hala,” *Heed my call to the ancestors.*

The earth rumbled again as the back leg of the tree burst from the ground and stepped even closer to the witch. Kolohe let out a blood-curdling scream, as he saw what appeared to be two eyes and a mouth on the enormous trunk of the tree. Like a frightened animal, Kolohe leapt to his feet and made a dash down the hill toward the ocean.

Naku’s Reaction

“Dat wen neva happen.” Naku splashed his friend from the cool of the pool.

“I swear,” Kolohe stated solemnly.

“What it mean?” Naku questioned.

“I tink it mean we goin fo’ tell da village about da witch’s message,” Kolohe explained.

“She already say we can do nuting,” Naku told his friend.

“It no matta we can try. We can start wit Kaulana,” Kolohe said confidently.

After their morning bath, they went to tell Kaulana about what the witch had foreseen, or, more accurately, what the hala tree had foreseen. He was kind of famous; the word *kaulana* meaning famous.

Kaulana’s *hale* or hut was enormous and both boys were afraid to enter. They found Kaulana sitting in the darkest corner staring into a bowl of kawa. Kawa is made from the roots of the plant; it is a drink that can make one feel high or cause mild

euphoria or hallucinations. The bowl was made from the inner coconut shell. Kaulana seemed to be focused on the bottom of the coconut.

“Aloha kakahiaka,” the boys greeted Kaulana.

The famous Hawaiian was slow to look up, but he eventually did, nodding at the boys, not saying a word. He motioned for them to take a seat on a mat weaved from palm fronds. So Naku and Kolohe sat down cross-legged, each of them a little nervous and hesitant about how to proceed.

Kaulana was a dark Hawaiian, of *ali'i* breed; he was made darker by the little black triangles that were tattooed over half his body. He stared into the shadows of the muddy kawa water inside his coconut bowl like some soothsayer waiting for a sign.

“Da witch git one message,” Kolohe blurted out after an uncomfortable silence.

Kaulana sipped from the bowl. “No can stop da *makani* from blowing, no can stop da *wai* from flowing,” he said, staring deep into the bowl. “I fear da wahine is right.” He passed the bowl to Naku. Normally Naku only drank during celebrations, but under the circumstances he downed the bowl. He felt his gums go numb; the kawa root calmed him, and it made him see things more clearly.

“What should we do?” Naku asked Kaulana.

“It matters not. Yooh can tell da village, but it no goin fo’ make one difference,” Kaulana said sadly. He poured another bowl of kawa from a large coconut bowl.

“Wat if we scare dem off?” Kolohe suggested.

Kaulana stirred the kawa with his finger. “No matter, afta dey leave, da presence still goin fo’ stay. An den mo’ goin fo’ come.”

The hut was silent. Outside were normal things, sunshine, palm trees swaying in the breeze, birds chirping, but Naku felt dead inside. When they arrived back at the village, the boys told everyone in the hope that Kaulana was wrong, but most were too preoccupied with the upcoming festival. One elder listened and replied that Lono i ka Makahiki would one day return and perhaps this would be the year.

January 17th 1779

The night moved like a poisonous jellyfish spilling its sac of eggs onto the beach. Naku was no stranger to the sting of the sea anemone, an abysmal beast from the dark depths of the ocean. He remembered feeling those blue quills sink into his flesh, looking remarkably like blue stitches. He remembered that sick feeling like he was about to pass out. He had felt the poison course through his body, his armpits feeling numb as the venom slowly tried to stop his heart. He almost went into anaphylactic

shock; had he been a few years younger, perhaps we would need another protagonist for this tale. The venomous invertebrate left its lightning-like scar all over his arm.

Visions of jellyfish danced in his head; Naku could not sleep. He left the hut and walked down to a scenic spot to look for the false god. He saw only the calm, placid ocean. *Could the witch be wrong? Maybe she's just a crazy old bat.*

Down toward the stone temple, the torches were burning bright; everyone was getting ready for the festival, the celebration of Lonoikamakahiki, the God of peace, agriculture, and fertility. Naku could see torches in the distance all around; people were coming from distant villages. Naku would have to offer some of his finest catch, maybe some dried *aku* or was it already too late? Maybe they were cursed, and maybe he had cursed them all. He shivered slightly as a small breeze blew down the mountain; the hala tree rustled as if giving him a warning.

In the distance, he could hear the beating of a pahu drum. *The ceremony had begun.* Now he could see more people coming from the hilltops all around. By the morning the white banner of Lono would be parading around the island collecting offerings for the chief. Naku snacked on some dried fish, keeping one eye on the horizon. The sky was starting to get light in the east when Naku must have nodded off. He came to and thought he was seeing the night marcher's ghosts walking toward him, as an entourage of enormous *ali'i* soldiers marched past him toward the temple.

The sky turned all pink and apologetic but brought nothing with it, only uneventfulness, no false gods or famine and pestilence, no storm of disaster. As Naku sat there waiting, a crier came around announcing the lifting of the *kapu* or taboo. He presented Naku with some wrapped pork which our hero happily gobbled up. With warm meat in his stomach, Naku began to feel drowsy. Below he could see commoners setting up stands where games and food would be sold. A short man was driving wooden stakes into the ground for a traditional game of *ulu maika* (which is a lot like Hawaiian bowling).

After hours of sitting, waiting, hoping, wishing, tying himself in knots, Naku finally rose and returned to his thatched hut. He rummaged through his belongings for some time, not really knowing what he was looking for. He was confused, perplexed. *Was the witch serious? Had the hala tree really given her a prophecy? And how come this felt like a bad dream?*

Pondering all these questions, Naku promptly fell asleep. In his dreams he swam through an endless ocean of phosphorescent jellyfish to a lone island that had but one tree on the middle of it. As he swam closer, he could see the tree was an enormous

hala tree with about thirty-three legs sticking out from its trunk. As he waded to shore, he could see the hala tree's eyes looking at him. Right before he came out of the dream, he could've sworn it winked at him.

He awoke in the afternoon, the hot Hawaiian sun spilling into his hut. He limped into the sunshine; the village was already empty, everybody having gone down to the festival. He was alone. For a moment he imagined the village vacant, the huts missing thatching in places and all desiccated, everything broken down and deserted. He shivered. *The witch couldn't really talk to hala trees. Kolohe just has an overactive imagination* he said to himself, as he set off toward the ocean. He stopped; he couldn't hear the beating of the pahu drum. He had that inkling that something was wrong; there seemed to be a nervous silence about the shoreline that was unlike a normal Makahiki festival. It was so quiet he could hear birds chirping. He picked up his pace.

As the *heiau* came into view, he could see no women dancing hula, no fire dancers or wrestling or feats of strength; everyone was frozen. Just standing there. What were they doing? It appeared that they were looking at something, not just looking but staring. Staring at something on the horizon. One Hawaiian was even pointing toward something way out beyond the bay. *What was he pointing at?* Naku squinted; he didn't see anything. *Then like magic, he saw something appear out of thin air. The thing was hard to make out, as it was far away, but it was large and was rising and falling with the tides. As it came into focus, he could hardly believe his eyes. He had never seen anything like it. It was tall, at least a palm tree's height above the water. He rubbed his eyes. It sort of looked like a small floating island, and on top of that island perched for everyone to see was the white banner of Lono. Had the god literally returned?*

He began to sprint down the hill, almost falling in the process. Everybody was still staring at the floating island in the distance, but it was getting larger, closer. When he made it down to the temple, he could already hear the murmurs.

"Lono has returned,"

"Could it be Lono?"

"Lonoikamakahiki."

Naku stumbled around in disbelief; it was really happening. Exactly what the witch said would happen. He felt as if he couldn't breathe. It was like a bad dream. He wanted to speak up and tell about the hala tree's warning, tell them this was not the real Lono, but the words seemed stuck in his throat. He dropped to his knees looking up toward the heavens, but there was no god there. He was approaching from the west on a floating island with white rectangular banners and white skinned men. *But he is*

a false god, Naku said to himself. *It matters not*, he heard Kaulana's words, and he felt himself sinking.



I'LL BRING IT IN

Rebecca Parfitt

Illustration by Heather Parr

'If you leave your washing out overnight you will invite the Devil in.'
Old Proverb

Cate watched the clean air-dried bedsheets become soaked and heavy in the rainstorm. There was nothing she could do about it. She couldn't move for her baby, Esme, suckling at her breast. Her living room overlooked the shared courtyard in her block of flats. There were no plants, no shrubs, nothing grew from the concrete, just rows of washing lines. She knew her neighbours only by their underwear, the size of their trousers, how many pairs of socks they hung up and the way they organised their colours. These neighbours always seemed to know when the rain was coming because when it was too late and she had only just looked up from what she was doing, their clothes would have vanished and hers and Esme's would be the only ones left on the line. The cloth outline of the pair of them, mother and daughter: sleepsuit and floral dress hanging together, soggy. She wondered what her neighbours thought of her—the abandoned washing had become a habit. She always washed her clothes with good intentions—to bring it in dry on the same day she put it out. But since the baby had been born she had only one hand free at a time—if that.

The summer had been a rainy one with many storms. This one had passed through quickly and the hilltop beyond had become visible again. Everything came out of the shadow glistening wet in the sudden sunlight. The rain put a stretch on the line. With the added weight of rainwater Cate's dresses were elongated slim-limbed versions of herself. The washing would have to stay there overnight till the morning to dry. No point bringing it in now, she thought.

At tea time there was a knock at the door. It had been a while since Cate had heard that sound. The baby was sleeping in her Moses basket so Cate was free to answer it.

She peeped through the spyhole. There was a woman she'd never seen before wearing a red tie-dye dress. Her long blonde hair looked slightly damp, caught in the rain. She opened the door: "Hello?"

The woman was agitated, 'Your washing is still on the line. Aren't you going to bring it in?'

Cate thought this was rude. 'Oh no,' she said. 'I'm going to leave it overnight, it's soaking wet from the rainstorm. I've nowhere in here to dry it.'

The woman just stared at her.

'Ok?' Cate said, poised to shut the door. But the woman didn't seem to want to move.

'Don't leave it on the line,' she said.

'I'll leave it where I please,' Cate replied, and shut the door.

Almost instantly there was another knock at the door. Cate waited a few more seconds. Esme began to cry. She looked through the spyhole, the woman was still standing there. What does she want? I am not going to bring my washing in, I am not. Another knock. Esme's cry was getting louder. Cate shouted through the door, 'I appreciate your concern but can you leave me be? My washing needs to stay where it is.'

Silence.

She looked through the peephole again. The woman had gone.

The next few days passed without incident and Cate did not see the woman—she had brought her washing in, after all. But today Cate noticed the only thing hanging up in the courtyard was the woman's red tie-dye dress. The day promised humidity and rain and nobody else in the block had chanced it.

Throughout the day Cate came to her seat overlooking the courtyard to feed the baby. The dress remained there, two pegs clipped at the shoulders. It looked dry enough. She wondered why it was still there after all the fuss a few days ago and the woman's persistence to have Cate bring her washing in. Why had she now left hers? Just one piece hanging on Cate's allocated washing line. Why wash just one piece? How uneconomical. The other neighbours would be tutting from their net-curtained windows.

Cate could not stop thinking about the woman: the way her hair had a dampness, the faint scent of patchouli and something else, perhaps sweat or a slight mustiness; the insistence, the rudeness of her imposition. Of course when she had put the washing

out she had perfectly good intentions for bringing it in. But things being what they were she had not managed it.

At around 4 p.m. it rained, and the dress got wet and hung limp. If only she knew which flat the woman lived in she would go round there and tell her she'd left her dress out. The colours had run right through each other and the tie-dye pattern now looked fleshy. There was a pool of vivid red beneath it. The image was startling: the dress looked as though it was bleeding. Perhaps the woman had gone out for the day. Or maybe she's gone away and forgotten, Cate thought, turning her attention back to the baby who was making quiet gurgling sounds. Going out was something Cate had not done since the baby had been born—she ordered all her supplies online and got her fresh air in the communal yard. 'The yard is far enough for me,' she told the midwife. 'I'll go out when I'm ready.'

She recalled the midwife asking if there was anyone she could call.

'Yes,' she said, 'but I don't need them.'

The next morning the dress was still hanging out on the line. Cate decided she would bring it in herself.

She strapped the baby to her chest and went outside into the sunshine, into the open air. She felt her limbs stretch, her body crack back into place as she descended the stairs into the courtyard. She stopped to look up at the blue sky above her—framed on three sides by the building. One day I'll get out there, she thought, then reached up to pull the stiff sundried tie-dye dress off the line. It held straight, as though a piece of painted paper in her hand.

She went from door to door, knocking. Looking for the woman whose dress it was. But nobody was answering. Each door was a blank face.

Cate liked the quiet, liked her isolation. She wouldn't go back, not ever. Now it was just her and little Esme. And the damn dress. She adjusted the strap on the baby sling, which was digging in. The baby is getting so heavy now, she thought.

She reached the last flat in the block, directly below her own, and rang the doorbell. There was a light on and she could see through the net-curtained glass front door. At last a shadow, then a voice, 'What do you want?'

It was her. Cate was sure of it.

Cate slowly bent to the letterbox, 'I have your dress.'

Silence.

‘At least I think it is. You were wearing it the other day. You know, when you came round. About my washing.’

‘Post it through.’ The voice came sharp through the glass.

Cate pushed the letterbox open and began to feed the dress through very slowly. She felt the pull of the woman on the other side and then the letterbox snapped shut. The woman’s outline disappeared down her hallway.

Ungrateful bitch, Cate thought.

Cate ran her hand across her clothes in the wardrobe. Her hand felt something fleshy—as if she had just brushed against an arm of another person. She stepped back. Her breath caught in her throat. She carefully retraced her fingertips over the arms and legs of the clothes in her closet. Nothing. The only other flesh in this apartment was her baby’s soft body. She ran her hand back across the shoulders of her hanging clothes. The rack swayed a wave of colours and materials. No flesh. I’m tired, she thought.

She picked through her clothes reminding herself of the pieces she loved and treasured, held them up against herself and looked in the mirror. Sighed. Having given birth a few months earlier, very few of them would fit now. Her body had been rearranged by pregnancy and childbirth. She wondered if she would ever shrink back, slot into herself as before. But like everything else in her life her body was irreversibly altered. She had stepped across the threshold of motherhood and, as in a fairy tale world, the doorway had sealed up behind her and she would no longer have the ability to return to her old self. Nothing will ever come after this, she thought, as she placed a blue silk dress back on the rail. Esme will probably wear this next. It is just me and her now. She heard a cry from the sitting room. Feeding time. This is my life now, she thought, repetitious: cradling the baby and holding her to her breast over and over; wiping, folding, buttoning, soothing, stroking. These are the movements that shape a person, that make their edges soft or sharp.

As Esme suckled, Cate looked out at the courtyard. There was more washing on the lines blowing about in the bright sunshine: floral dresses, shirts and t-shirts. Funny, there are no children in this block, she thought. I have never seen any children’s clothes hanging. Just my own daughter’s sleepsuits.

The floor of the flat was vibrating; the washing machine was on its final spin in the kitchen. The basket was ready to load the clothes into and take outside. Cate loved hanging the washing, it was a pleasure to straighten them onto the line. The machine

slowly unwound its spin and came to a stop. Esme had fallen asleep. I'll leave her up here, Cate thought, I'll only be five minutes.

She put the washing from the machine into the basket and pulled the door behind her and went down the concrete stairwell in her slippers. She passed her neighbours' washing to her own line. Took in a deep breath of clean air and squinted up to the sky. She pulled down the peg bag and started to hang Esme's sleepsuits, sticking pegs at the toes. The washing billowed in the wind, duvet covers ballooning in parcel shapes. The courtyard door slammed shut in the wind. I am doing normal things again. I can hang my washing out the way I like with the pegs at the toes, not at the shoulders. But this was a glimpse of her past she shook away with the towel she was hanging. This is my normal, she thought.

Task accomplished she went back upstairs clutching the empty basket, wedging the courtyard door back open. She placed the basket back in the kitchen. The kitchen tap dripped. She tightened the tap and went to the window to admire her small pleasure. Then she saw the woman with the tie-dye dress standing below amidst the washing. She had no washing of her own—there was no basket. She was simply standing there as the clothes billowed backwards and forwards in the breeze. She was probably enjoying the scent of the air. Then another neighbour appeared, unpegging her dry clothes from the line. She did not stop to speak to the woman with the tie-dye dress and the woman with the tie-dye dress kept her back turned to the neighbour. Cate became distracted by the dripping sound again. The kitchen tap splashed. Damn, I need to change the washer. When am I going to manage that? At this moment the baby woke up and all her thoughts dissolved into the pattern of soothing the baby's cry.

Cate forgot to bring her washing in.

Later that night she watched it uneasily: towels, her nightdress and the little white arms and legs of the sleepsuits floating out there in the darkness.

When Cate drew back the curtains the next morning the baby's clothes had gone. Her nighty was still flapping about but the sleepsuits had gone. Cate gasped *fucker*, in a half whisper to herself. Someone's taken the fucking baby clothes. *She's* taken the fucking baby clothes. Cate paced about wondering what she should do. She couldn't just go marching down accusing but she knew in her gut it was *that* woman.

At noon there was a knock at the door. Cate smiled to herself, I knew it. She gathered her composure, walked to the door and peeped through the spyhole. She

opened the door and before she could say anything the woman said, 'I found them strewn about, must have blown in the wind. Thought I'd bring them up to you.' She handed over the bundle of clothes.

'There was no need,' Cate said icily.

The woman seemed not to notice her tone and asked keenly, 'How is the baby?'

'Fine. Asleep. I must get on.' Cate shut the door before anything more could be said.

The sleepsuits were dirty. Cate flung them into the sink. Fucking woman. They were clean when I hung them, she muttered under her breath. She squeezed detergent on them and ran the hot water tap, making a foam. She took a plastic brush and scrubbed. Fucking woman. How dare she. She smacked the sleepsuits against the side of the sink. She pummeled them until her hands were red. She wanted to get any trace of that woman out of the clothes. She couldn't bear the thought of those skin cells touching the skin of Esme. She wanted to make sure of that with her own bare hands.

'Sshh, darling,' Cate soothed. Esme was crying. Cate peered through the window. This had become as much a part of her daily routine as the feeding had. Not an hour would pass now that Cate didn't check the view of the yard as her washing dried. She had seen nothing all morning but the washing drying in the breeze. Then she heard the familiar sound of the courtyard door opening and there she was, the woman in the tie-dye dress. She walked towards Cate's washing line, stopped and carefully lifted the corner of one of the dresses and sniffed. Then she went along the line and did the same with each item. Cate wanted to tap on the glass, do something to stop her. But she didn't want to bring attention to herself, she didn't want to upset the baby further. So she just watched. This woman is violating my clothes, she thought. Cate wanted to call someone to explain this. But then again, she didn't want to seem like she wasn't coping. Would this even make sense? She didn't want to add another kink to her list of anxieties. She needed to do her washing, she needed to hang it up to dry outside in the fresh air; in the sun. This activity was good for her and was good for the baby. Did this woman even know what her actions were doing? She stopped herself for a second and thought: perhaps I am overthinking. Perhaps.

The washing machine was on a final spin and wound and wound and wound and wound. Cate was irritated by the noise: the ringing sound that it made and the vibrations on the floor. The second load of the day. If she could just get this done she could relax, have a nap maybe, if Esme would allow.

And then it came, the sound she knew would come: the knock on the door. Carrying Esme she looked through the spyhole: the woman in the tie-dye dress. Cate took a deep breath and opened the door.

‘Yes?’

The woman said nothing. She looked tired. She just stared at Esme, who stared back.

Then after a moment she said, ‘I’m missing some clothes.’

‘What kind of clothes?’ Cate asked. The woman stood there, just staring. ‘I’m about to sort my washing out—I’ll have a look for you, if you tell me what’s missing?’

‘A dress. Puffy sleeves. A bow,’ the woman said vaguely.

‘Ok then.’ Cate smiled, one hand still on the door catch about to push it closed. ‘I’ll let you know if I find it.’

‘Ok.’

She closed the door but stayed behind it watching the woman through the spyhole. She was staring at the closed door, motionless, for a good few seconds and then she turned and walked away back down the corridor.

Cate held Esme very close. She could not shake the sense of unease. The proximity of the woman felt as though she was closing in on her. Her presence was larger than her form. Permeating the space with a sense of misery Cate felt she had to scrub from the walls and floors.

Cate kept up her hourly checks of the courtyard but a week had now passed and she had not seen the woman at all. Autumn was approaching. The September air had a crisp edge to it. Cate loved this time of year. This was usually when she felt most at peace. She thought perhaps she was ready to go outside. Out of these walls and down the street, *into town*. Like ordinary people she would go *into town*. But what would she do there? She imagined going to a café and getting a coffee and sitting down and drinking it. That was what normal people did. Normal people pushed their babies in prams and went to get coffee. The health visitor would say, ‘It is time. Go and do something *normal*.’ In the courtyard Cate hung Esme’s little sleepsuits by their toes, little upside down baby flags fluttering all colourful in the wind and sun.

Esme was wrapped up tight in the sling. Cate was ready to go out. She strode with purpose out onto the street. Walking to town. Walking with purpose with the baby sleeping in the sling. But she couldn’t help but notice how the windows of the houses

stared out at them. She got a few streets away and had to stop. ‘I don’t feel so good,’ she said to Esme. They were half way between town and the flat. She thought, if I go on, I’ll have further to get back. If I go back? If I go back? If I go back? She took one more step towards town. The sky had clouded over. I forgot my umbrella. I’ll get soaked. Esme will get soaked and she will get a fever and then I will be accused of being a bad mother. I don’t know what to do, she thought in desperation. Then the sky opened and poured. Cate ran across the road to a bus shelter. Esme was still asleep, tucked in, warm by her chest. ‘Let’s just stay dry here and then we can go home.’ She kissed the top of Esme’s fluffy head, breathed in her sweet scent.

The rain passed quickly. The sun came out and it felt suddenly hot. Be honest with yourself, she thought, this is all I can manage today but it’s better than yesterday and the day before that. So congratulate yourself for getting this far. She’d read about peppering yourself up with little mantras: Well done! She heard the patronising voice of her health visitor.

Now she could see the flats from the end of the street. Home. As she got closer she saw a glimpse of the washing lines and the woman in the tie-dye dress through the railings to the courtyard. Something wasn’t right.

Cate froze on the spot and watched as her neighbour carefully hung one of Esme’s tiny dresses out.

The woman spotted her and turned to wave, the sunlight catching her blonde hair in a halo. An angel of mercy, Cate thought, look at her, she thinks she’s being helpful. Cate’s heart was beating in her throat. She wrapped her hands round Esme’s little fists tightly. She wanted to push the woman away. She wanted to rip the clothes from her.

As she approached, the woman smiled cheerily, ‘The rainstorm came so fast—I saw you leave earlier. I didn’t want the baby’s clothes to get wet.’

Cate pressed her lips together in a tight smile to mask her fury. ‘There was no need,’ she said.

The woman’s focus turned to Esme, who had just woken, peering out from over the top of the sling. ‘Aw, she’s smiling at me.’ She leaned forward to touch her.

Cate’s grip tightened around Esme’s fists and she stepped back. ‘Don’t,’ she snapped. ‘Don’t touch her face.’

The woman’s hand withdrew. Her face darkened in the shadow of a sheet suddenly blown across by the wind. The woman turned and said, ‘You should put fabric softener in your clothes. It’ll be softer on the baby’s skin.’

Cate felt a sting in the way the woman said it—another criticism of the care of her daughter. She felt the woman’s judgement descend on her. She crumpled under it—all of her inadequacies came at her at once.

‘She’s fine thank you.’ Cate broke eye contact and scanned the line. ‘That’s not mine.’ She pointed at a little, faded red sleepsuit.

‘Isn’t it? Well, it’s still a bit damp, I’ll leave it to dry here a little longer.’ The woman smiled and drifted off inside.

Cate stood in the courtyard for a moment watching the washing blowing up and about in the breeze trying to quell the shaking, trying to stop the swell of fear and doubt growing inside her. This washing is my life now, she thought, and I can’t even get this right. How endless and endless this domesticity has become. It’s not me, it’s not me—even a stranger can see that. She suddenly felt guilty for rebuffing her neighbour. Hadn’t she been helping? Looking out for her, after all? I should be more grateful. Perhaps I *should* get some fabric conditioner. Perhaps the clothes *are* a little too starchy, drying out here in the sun.

Cate laid Esme down on a towel to change her. Esme was looking less and less like a newborn with each day. She could see John, Esme’s father, in her. His features were beginning to come through like a silicone mould, as if his face was slowly pushing through underneath.

‘Where am I?’ Cate said aloud. And Esme’s father smiled up at her. ‘Of course. The final insult.’

Esme whimpered. Her face softened and there Cate was. There I am, I see me. I am here, she thought. Esme’s eyes were slowly turning green—like Cate’s—flecked like the algae on the surface of a pond. She brought Esme to her chest, breathed in the scent of her soft hair. ‘I love you so much,’ she said. It was time for a feed.

While she fed her she worried. She worried about the failed attempt to get into town. She worried she had stepped out too far. She worried about the woman downstairs in the tie-dye dress: she worried she would come through the floor—somehow find her way up and in. She worried she was listening through the ceiling. The thought snagged—could she? She often heard things reverberating through the pipes—a gush and glug of water as a sink plug was pulled. A conversation somewhere. Sound reverberated across the courtyard. A thought struck her: she can hear me walking. She can hear every step I take. She knows where I am in the flat, she knows. Cate lifted a foot from the floor and placed it back very carefully, silently onto the rug.

She knows when I'm doing my washing. She always knows. And she was always doing washing now—endless cycles—and the machine vibrates on the spin cycle on the floor. I can't stop that from happening. And besides, she'll see me hanging it out. There is nothing I can do about that.

Esme had fallen asleep, so Cate very carefully took her to the bedroom and placed her in the cot. She didn't flinch or stir, just flopped like a rag-doll from her side to her belly. If Cate was lucky she would have a couple of hours peace. If she was lucky.

About an hour later she heard a quiet knock on her door. A soft tap—that of somebody who was nervous, tentatively knocking. Someone who knew there was a baby. Cate thought she could pretend she hadn't heard. But the knocking continued.

Cate crept to the door and looked through the spyhole. She shrank at the sight. The woman just stood there waiting quietly. Perhaps she'll just go away. If I do nothing she'll go away. The woman came up close to the door and tilted her head sideways as if to listen. Cate took a step back, then looked through the spyhole again: the woman was still there, leaning against her door. She's so close, if I open it, she'll fall in. I don't want her coming in but I've got to get rid of her. I don't want her thinking she can just come up here whenever she pleases.

After an agonising minute of standing by the door holding her breath, she heard footsteps move away and down the corridor. She heard the door to the courtyard bang. The woman had gone to the courtyard. Cate moved to the window. The woman looked up at her, could she see through the net curtains? She didn't think so. It was twilight but she had not put her lights on yet. The woman touched every piece of washing on Cate's line, very carefully inspecting it. Cate watched, horrified, with her hand over her mouth trying not to let out a shriek. Then the woman in the tie-dye dress simply walked back inside.

Cate was on tenterhooks; she knew what was coming, she had been waiting all day and all night but nothing yet. Nothing yet. But it will. It will. While she waited she scrubbed the difficult stains from Esme's clothes, she scrubbed the floors, she washed the door handles, she wiped the walls.

She's not going away. She's not going to go.

And there it was, the sound she had been waiting for: a quiet tap at the door.

This time Cate got right up against the door and after a few seconds quietly spoke, 'Yes?'

‘There’s a leak.’

‘Oh?’ This was not what she was expecting her to say.

‘There’s a leak and I think it’s coming from your kitchen.’

Cate’s kitchen sink was blocked but she wasn’t going to say anything.

‘Can you open the door?’

‘I’ll call out maintenance tomorrow.’

‘Can you open the door?’

‘The baby is sleeping.’

Cate was afraid that opening the door to her neighbour would be misconstrued as an invitation to make friends. She did not *want* to make friends. Cate was afraid that the sanctity of her space would be ruined. Cate was afraid that whatever the woman *brought with her* would linger; Cate was afraid because the bedroom door was open and the baby might be woken up. Cate was afraid she no longer knew the difference between rational and irrational. The woman seemed ok, she seemed as though she wanted to help. She’s a neighbour, she’s just a neighbour. But those things she did to her washing Cate just couldn’t shake off.

‘I just want to show you—I think I know where it’s coming from. You can tell maintenance. I can help you.’ Her voice was friendlier than before, much sweeter. ‘I can probably fix it—it would save so much hassle. You don’t need the trouble, do you?’

Cate had heard that before. She flipped the latch. The door was now unlocked. She glanced through the spyhole again. The woman was a couple of feet away from the door. Waiting. Cate took a deep breath and pulled the door open. Her neighbour smiled. Cate noticed her hair was all dewy as though she had spritzed herself with a water spray.

‘Thank you. I know it’s difficult with a baby. But if I can just show you where I think the water is coming from.’

And before Cate knew what to say the woman had stepped across the threshold. She was in.

‘Oh,’ her neighbour said. ‘You’ve decorated really nicely.’ As she walked down the hallway towards the kitchen. Cate supposed that her flat was the same layout.

‘It’s coming from the kitchen,’ her neighbour said, going into the kitchen, ‘the sink, I think.’

‘It’s blocked,’ Cate blurted. ‘Look. I’ve got some stuff to put down it. I’ll do it tonight and hopefully that’ll clear the pipes.’ The sink was filled with dirty dishwasher.

Cate stuck her hand in and rummaged about to pull the bits of food from the plughole. As she raked about it glugged a bit, but the blockage didn't budge.

'I can call maintenance if you like. I know it's hard—'

'I doubt you do,' Cate interjected. She knew what she was about to say and she didn't want to hear it.

'Cate, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'My name is—' but Cate wasn't listening. She didn't hear her. The baby was crying. She must get to Esme.

She left the woman standing in her kitchen. Surely, Cate thought, this is her cue to leave.

She returned after a few moments with Esme all red faced and bundled up in her arms.

'There she is,' the woman said in a cooing voice. 'Look at that sleepy little face.'

'I need to settle her now so if you wouldn't mind leaving us to it.'

Her neighbour's face darkened to a shadow. 'Do you mind not doing any washing until it's sorted?'

Cate felt her cheeks flush with suppressed anger. 'You'll let yourself out,' she said.

'I'll pop by tomorrow and see how you're getting on.'

Cate didn't reply.

Dirty washing was piled high in the corner of the kitchen floor when the maintenance man came by.

'Amazing how fast it gets backed up when you've a baby in the house,' he said cheerily as he fiddled about under the sink. The liquid sink unblocker had done nothing to help.

'Aha!' he exclaimed, 'found the culprit.'

He held up some pieces of cloth: little arms and legs of a soggy, half eroded, torn up, faded, grime-covered, red sleepsuit.

'What on Earth?' Cate exclaimed.

'Sleep deprivation can make you do the strangest things.'

'I don't know how I would have done that by mistake—or on purpose.' Cate's heart thudded in her chest. She thought back to yesterday: could *she*? But no, she'd left the neighbour in the kitchen for a few seconds, she wouldn't have had time to plant

it there. But Cate had left her front door unlocked sometimes, just to save time. There had been no reason to lock it whilst she was just downstairs hanging the washing.

‘Must be the previous tenant’s then,’ the maintenance man said, wiping his hands down and putting his tools back in the box. ‘She had a small baby too—just like you.’

‘Yes, that must be it. What a strange thing to do.’ But Cate didn’t really think that. She only thought of the woman downstairs, creeping about in her flat whilst Cate was outside, oblivious, hanging her washing out. She saw the wicked smile on the woman’s face as she slowly pushed the little arms and legs, the pieces of the sleepsuit through with the sharp end of a knife. Stabbing at it.

‘How odd,’ Cate said vaguely.

‘Yes indeed. Right, well, I’ll be off now. Give me a call if you have any more problems. Take care of yourself, love—it’s not easy.’

‘Thanks,’ Cate said and shut the door. There’s that line again: *it’s not easy, it’s not easy, it’s not easy*. Not when the bloody neighbour is fucking around. That’s what she’s doing, she’s fucking with me. Bitch, bitch, bitch. I know what she’s up to. I know what she’s doing.

But Cate didn’t know.

A couple of days later she passed the woman in the tie-dye dress in the hall.

‘I was expecting you. I fixed the leak. Did you notice?’ As Cate spoke she became angry—all those hours she had spent on edge listening out for the door, looking out the window, and the neighbour hadn’t even been bothered to check like she said she would.

‘Yes. Thank you.’ The woman in the tie-dye dress smiled, seeming not to notice Cate’s tone. ‘Did you find anything?’ She no longer seemed to care at all.

Cate was about to laugh a hearty sarcastic laugh. She was about to say, yes—of course I did. You *know* I did. But she stopped herself; she didn’t want the woman to think she was getting to her so instead she said a flat, ‘No.’

‘Oh. Must just have been food or something.’

She knows. She knows what I found because she put it there. But I’m not going to give her the satisfaction. Cate moved on up the stairs carrying Esme close to her chest.

‘Cate,’ the woman said, ‘have I upset you?’ She flashed a weak smile.

For a moment Cate saw herself fly at her, tearing the woman’s clothes, pushing her down the stairs; watching her tumble away onto the black concrete floor below.

But she recovered her composure. Retreated from her murderous thought. What kind of mother thinks about these things with her baby in her arms?

‘Why would you think that?’

The woman shrugged, ‘I thought we might be friends. I think maybe my efforts to help have been *misunderstood*.’ Cate watched as her mouth closed around the word. She enunciated as though Cate needed a little help understanding her. Cate noticed her mouth had a shine to it: light pink lipstick shimmered as she spoke.

‘I don’t get much time for socialising I’m afraid so—’ Cate trailed off.

‘I love babies,’ the woman said strangely, desperately.

‘I’m doing fine on my own,’ Cate replied.

‘When was the last time you really slept?’

Cate was taken aback by this question. But Cate also didn’t know the answer. Nor would she say if she did.

‘I can help.’

‘I don’t want help,’ Cate snapped and turned and walked away.

‘You’d better bring your washing in soon!’ the woman in the tie-dye dress called after her. ‘It’s going to rain!’

Cate watched her neighbour from the window. She was wearing a puffy-sleeved dress this time and holding an empty basket as if she had just hung some washing; or was just about to collect some. She was starting to unpeg Cate and Esme’s clothes, removing them from the line. It was twilight, warm and still dry so there was no reason for this, none other than to completely rile Cate.

Cate couldn’t stand it any longer, she thought she might burst with rage. Doesn’t she have any of her own fucking clothes to hang out?

Cate banged on the window. The woman ignored her and carried on. Cate opened the window, leaned out and shouted, ‘Don’t you have any of your own fucking clothes? Leave them! Leave them! Leave us alone!’ The woman carried on as though she had not heard her.

With just a dressing gown on—and nothing on her feet—Cate gathered Esme up in her arms and fled the flat without even closing the door. She ran down the steps and out into the courtyard. But she was too late, the line was empty. Her neighbour must have the clothes but she had not seen her on the stairs.

She went back inside and down the corridor towards the woman’s flat. The door was ajar and she pushed it open with her elbow. ‘Hello, hello!’ she called. She heard

nothing. But noted the flat was, as she'd thought, an exact replica of her own. She could have been standing in her own flat.

She pushed the living room door open. Her neighbour was sitting in an armchair exactly the same as hers with the bundle of clothes on her lap.

'What are you doing?' Cate screamed, clutching Esme close to her chest. 'What are you doing with my washing?'

'What do you mean?'

And then Cate saw. She saw a little rosy-cheeked face peeping out from the swaddling.

'Esme,' she said quietly.

'No, Emma,' the woman replied. 'This is Emma.'

Loose clothing fell from Cate's arms: babygrows, a little dress, a bonnet, socks and some of her underwear. The bundle she held was not her baby; it was nothing more than a bundle of her own damp washing.

'You should have brought your washing in,' the woman said with a smile.



BUTTERFLY

Tim Jeffreys

Illustration by Olivia Tinnin

Camber called goodnight over her shoulder, then ushered Tina out of The Pineapple's back door. Before the club's door slammed behind her, Tina heard Nadine's tart reply from inside.

"Goodnight gentlemen."

"Did you hear that?" Tina said to Camber. "What a bitch."

"Oh, ignore her," Camber said. "She's full of it now she's had her op."

Tina glanced back at the door. "Does no longer having a dick mean she gets to be a major cunt?"

Camber laughed. "She'll want to rub it in for a while, but she'll get over it. Besides, she may have got rid of her dick, but she's still ugly. And have you listened to her singing lately? She says it's the hormone treatments. Her voice is all shot to hell." Camber threw an arm around Tina's shoulder and leaned in close. "Whereas you, sweetheart, are still a knockout. And you still sound like an angel every time you open your gob."

"Aw, thanks." Tina checked the time on her mobile phone. 4:32 a.m. "Fancy a nightcap?"

Camber shook her head. "This girl needs sleep. Rain check?"

"Sure."

They stood by the back door of the club as if reluctant to go their separate ways into the night. A breeze blew the length of the alley, and a light rain touched Tina's face. It felt soothing after all the scraping off of makeup. She glanced towards the lights of the main road and saw a group of men passing along the mouth of the alley. For some reason, she thought about a dream she'd had the night before, where she'd woken up and tried to get out of bed, but had floated upwards instead and thumped

against the ceiling. Looking over her shoulder, she'd seen that she had huge butterfly wings. She could remember, in the dream, looking at the wings in wonder and thinking: *I'm transforming*. Then when she woke up for real, her cheeks had been wet with tears. She thought they might've been tears of joy.

Camber took a pack of cigarettes from her jacket pocket and tapped one out. "What about you? Any nearer to your big day?"

"Not even close. I try to put a bit of money away every month, but you know how it is."

"A girl's got to eat."

"Right."

After taking a deep drag on her cigarette, Camber glanced to the right. "Well," she said. "I suppose I'll see you Monday."

"You know it."

They hugged. Then Tina watched Camber vanish into the dark. She remained by the doors of the club a while longer. What was this reluctance she always felt to begin her journey home? An unwillingness to return to reality after the costumes and the stage lights and the applause? Didn't she always wish it could go on just a teeny tiny bit longer?

Sighing, she set off. Still a good distance from exiting the alley, she heard a noise like footsteps behind her and stopped to look back. In the half-dark she could see nothing except the outline of a skip.

She let out her breath.

"Camber?" she tried. "That you?"

No reply came, so she faced forward and started walking again, faster this time. She felt something rushing at her from the dark, then a body colliding with hers, knocking her off her feet. The air went out of her in a *whoosh*. Her thoughts reeled. What was this? A mugging? Queer-bashing? Rape? She'd been warned about men in the audience who became obsessed. That was why she and the others always stripped off their makeup and costumes before heading home. Why they made themselves unrecognisable from their stage personas, almost ending up looking like men again. They may not have liked it, but it was safer that way.

She heard her own strangled voice shouting: "Help! Hel..."

Shoving against the body that trapped her with its weight, she crabbed backwards so that her movements set off a motion-sensor security light she knew was fixed to the wall behind the mini-supermarket next door to The Pineapple. But as she raised one

hand against the sudden glare, her attacker fell on her again. The assailant was now on top of her, pinning her against the cold concrete. She struggled and managed to roll onto her back. Seeing the flash of an axe blade—*a fucking axe blade!*—she lashed out on instinct and managed to deliver one solid punch into her attacker’s face. As the body on top of her fell back, Tina arched her hips and threw the weight from her. She gasped for breath as she struggled to her feet. The attacker came at her again. Tina’s fear gave way to anger. *You want a fight, I’ll give you a fucking fight.* Just like the boys at school. How many had she had to punch before they stopped calling her names? *Poof. Fairy. Queer. Bender.* Those bastards were full of it—until she showed them she wasn’t afraid. One punch to the nose was usually all it took to silence them. But sometimes you had to grapple. Roll around. Tina reached up, felt for hair and clutched onto it. She spun her attacker around by the head and threw whoever it was amongst some wheelie bins.

How’s that, you bastard?

I’m going to get out of this. I’m not going to be anyone’s victim. No, not me. Not me.

She knew she should have made a run for it, but something made her look back. Her attacker was half-crouched on the floor by the bins. To Tina’s surprise, she saw it was a woman. She wore a dark-coloured hoodie, but a long blonde fringe spilled across one side of her face. And yes, that was a small axe she clutched in one hand. But even this realisation didn’t get Tina moving. The anger, the defiance was still in her. She held the woman’s eyes. There was something about her... something familiar. Both of them were frozen, waiting for the other to make a move.

When the security light clicked off, Tina’s heart leapt up to her throat, and she turned and ran as hard as she could. She ran until she was out of breath. She never knew if the woman pursued her, or how far. Out on the main street, she narrowly missed being hit by a bus. Long clear of the alley, she chanced a look over her shoulder, but all she saw were concerned faces looking back at her. She realised she was sobbing. Seeing a brightly lit bus stop, with people waiting, she sat down on the bench. It was only then, as she tried to regain control of her breathing, that she realised what had been so familiar about her attacker. That hair she’d grabbed onto was just like the blonde wig she wore on stage. That face she’d looked into was her own.

It was Camber who convinced Tina to go to the police. Everyone at The Pineapple was scared. Simon put a security guard on the back door, but no one would go out that

way. At the end of the night, they went out the front instead, in packs of three or four, arms linked. Axe murderer on the loose. No one was taking any chances. Only Nadine laughed at Tina's story, swiping one flat hand past her crotch and saying, "Don't you know an axe is as good as a scalpel, honeybun?"

Tina had insisted Camber go with her to the station. There they were taken into a back room and seated in front of a desk where a thick-set, steely-gazed policewoman took Tina's statement whilst retaining an air of skepticism. When Tina got to the part about how the attacker had looked just like her, the woman stopped typing and narrowed her eyes.

"I thought you said it was a woman with long blonde hair."

"When I perform, I wear a long blonde wig."

"Perform?"

"At The Pineapple."

When the woman still looked confused, Camber interjected. "In drag. She's a drag queen. You should hear her belting out a bit of Cyndi Lauper. Voice of an angel."

"Only her hair—this woman's hair—it wasn't a wig," Tina said. "It was the real thing. I know because I swung her around by it at one point. If that'd been a wig it'd have come right off in my hands."

"So..." the policewoman said, her steady gaze fixed on Tina's face. "You're saying the attacker looked exactly like you when you... dress up?"

"Yes," Tina said. "Only on her it was all real. The hair. The tits too, probably. Everything."

"Just a moment," the policewoman said, and got up from her chair. She walked to the far end of the room where she spoke to an older man seated at another desk. The man glanced at Tina and Camber, then took out a mobile phone and spoke into it.

"That's it," Tina said to Camber. "He's calling the men in the white coats."

"It is a crazy story," Camber said.

The policewoman returned and said, "I've some colleagues who'd like to speak to you. If you don't mind waiting."

Almost an hour passed. Camber was getting restless. That's when three men in black suits appeared and approached the desk where Tina and Camber sat.

"Will you come with us... miss," said the oldest of the group. When Camber started to get up too, he showed her his palm. "We'd like to speak to Miss Garrick alone."

“What’s going on?” Tina said, glancing back at Camber as the men escorted her away. “You’re not taking me to the loony bin are you? I’m telling you, I saw what I saw.”

“No, Miss Garrick. We just think you could help us with an ongoing enquiry. That’s all.”

“Who are you guys? Special branch? MI5?”

“Something like that.”

“What did they do to you?” Camber said, jumping up from her seat when the men returned Tina to the waiting room.

“Do? Nothing,” Tina said. “Let’s just go.”

“What was all that about?”

“I’m not supposed to talk about it. They made me sign something.”

“*What?* What do you mean?”

“They want me to help them, that’s all.”

“Help them? Help them do what?”

“Help them catch that woman who attacked me.”

“Why? Who is she?”

In her mind, Tina turned over what the men had told her. There were things, they said, these creatures called—she couldn’t remember—creatures that could shapeshift. The creatures would find someone they wanted to become—then they would kill that person, cut up and dispose of the body, and take over their life.

Like invasion of the body snatchers, the men said. Did you ever see that movie?

Tina had wanted to laugh at first. *Is this some kind of windup?* she’d asked. *Those things don’t exist. It’s not possible.*

But then she remembered what she’d seen that night. She had looked into her own face, her own eyes. And unless she had a twin somewhere who wanted her out of the picture, what other explanation was there, other than that she was losing her mind?

They’d been tracking one of these things, these — God, what had they called them? — for months. They’d known it was in the general vicinity, and had an alert out for any stories like Tina’s. They said Tina had drawn it out.

Me? she’d said. *What do you mean?*

It must have seen you on stage, they told her. That must have attracted it. Your image. The glamour. It must have liked what it saw. It wanted to become you. Be you. It wanted to kill you that night in the alley. Then it would’ve taken your place.

Tina felt a chill down her back when they said this.

It's still out there, they continued. *If it's already made the change it'll try again to take you out of the picture*. Tina knew what they were going to say next: they wanted her to help them capture it.

You understand, Miss Garrick, we can't have something like that at large amongst the general populace.

What's in it for me? Tina had said.

There'll be a reward.

Oh yeah? How much?

They mentioned a figure. It was half of what she needed for her surgery. Only half, but a good start.

Tina shook her head, and noticed Camber staring at her.

“Well?”

Tina shrugged. “I don't know. What they told me... it didn't make a lot of sense.”

Stop acting like a girl, Tina's father used to say. *Don't be such a big girl. Stop crying. Toughen up. Be a man. Be a man, for God's sake*. Tina—or Max as she'd been called back then—found it baffling. Her father talked as if femininity was something to be ashamed of. As if glamour and sensitivity and compassion and nurturance and gentleness were traits to be despised. In the house Tina grew up in, women were dismissed as *broads* or *babes* or *bitches*, or *a bit of skirt*. As if the women Tina saw on TV—these exotic creatures—were not to be looked at in wonder, but in contempt. As if Tina's mother, with her beauty and her patience and her good humour could not be a role model, but instead had to be seen as somehow weak and contemptible. *Don't be like her*, Tina's father seemed to be saying. *Be like me. Drink beer. Play football. Make crass jokes*.

Tina was twelve years old when she first tried on one of her mother's dresses. She'd wept afterwards. Wept because all she'd wanted to do was walk down the street wearing that dress, to let everyone see her. But she knew she couldn't. And she'd thought then that she never would. The name they'd given her. *Max*. Horrible, blunt, masculine name. Like a stone in her shoe. Like a rock tied to the leg of a drowning boy. Max.

The men instructed Tina on what she had to do. She would go on stage and sing as normal. Then she would leave the club alone via the back door with a surveillance

mic affixed to the collar of her coat. She was to walk slowly down the alley behind the club. Men would be stationed at each end. If anyone approached or attacked her, they would know about it and they'd be there in seconds.

Tina couldn't help thinking: *Bait, that's what I am. Like a little fishie on the end of a hook.*

The first night she was so terrified she barely made it through her opening number: Shania Twain's "Man, I Feel Like a Woman." She couldn't help looking at the faces in the crowd, wondering if that shapeshifting thing was out there somewhere, watching, biding its time. Her number one fan. It was funny in a way. As a child, she'd dreamed about being famous and having hoards of adoring fans trying to look like her. Now she had one that could actually *become* her. After a pitchy "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun," she gave up and relinquished the mic to a gloating Nadine. Backstage, her hands shook and she was sure she was going to puke.

"I can't do it," she said to Camber. "I'm scared. I can't do it. I can't go out there."

Camber offered to walk down the alley with her, but the policemen, or whatever they were, wouldn't let her. Sometime after closing, they fitted the mic to Tina's collar and led her to the back door.

"We're right with you, all the way," one of the men said.

She stood looking in each direction along the alley, her heart hammering, wanting nothing more than to go back inside. She tried to calm herself by thinking of the money, how it would get her closer to her transformation. But how long would it take her to scrape together the rest of the cash? She'd be lucky if she could save a hundred a month. Not wanting to stand in the dark by the door of the club, she set off walking along the alley. She imagined the man back at the club, listening through her mic with his headphones. All he'd be hearing was her heavy breathing. She tried to control it. The light from the mini-supermarket surprised her and she gave a little yelp.

"It's ok," she murmured into the mic. "It's just the security light. It made me jump."

She was trying to look everywhere at once, scrutinising every shadow.

When she made it, unmolested, to the end of the alley, she didn't know whether to feel relieved or disappointed.

"Never mind," one of the men waiting there told her. "We'll try again tomorrow."

So they tried again, and again. By the end of the week, Tina was walking the alley at a fast trot with her head down, sure that the woman or the thing or whatever it was that had attacked her was long gone. She wondered if she would still get the money.

It was on Saturday night, when the light from the mini-supermarket clicked on and she happened to raise her head, that she saw it. Naked. A pale body stood stock-still behind some bins with its back against the opposite wall. Tina froze. Her eyes widened. Its eyes were fixed on her. Tina made a noise, a little intake of breath, not enough to alert the man listening in on her collar mic. The woman, the creature, made no move. It simply held her with an unblinking stare. Tina knew she had to say something, make a noise so the men would come running, but she was transfixed. Why had it chosen to appear to her naked? Was it showing her what she could be? The face was hers, but the body—no. The body was a woman's, rounded and curved in the ways hers could be only if she tucked and stuffed and corseted. This was it. This was the dream made real, more real than she ever could have hoped, this was what she'd always wanted to be, standing right before her.

Her mouth opened. Still, the woman—*the thing*—made no move. Glancing down, Tina saw the axe held in one hand. Tina should have yelled, screamed—something—but she didn't. She was silent. Holding her breath. The thing waited, as if allowing her time: time to see. Tina saw the version of herself she'd always wanted to be, the dream that never seemed to get any closer, no matter how much she scrimped and saved. *Here you are*, it seemed to be saying. *This is it*.

Something strange happened then, something even Tina herself didn't fully understand. She began to undress. First the coat, which she set aside on the ground, careful of the collar mic. Then her boots. Then her jeans. The other woman watched her. Tina slipped off her shirt and held it out to her. When the other woman still didn't move, Tina encouraged her by smiling and nodding her head. At the same time she thought: *What the fuck am I doing?* The other woman snatched the shirt from her hand then and put it on. Her face remained inscrutable. Next Tina handed her the jeans, then the boots. In only her underwear, Tina shivered and wrapped her bare arms around herself as the woman struggled to dress without setting down the axe. Then Tina remembered the surveillance mic and crouched to remove it before handing the coat to the other woman. Turning away, she saw a drain, went to it, and pushed the mic in through the grill. She heard a *ploop* and wondered if that sound would've been picked up by the man with the headphones. What would he have made of it? Would it have alarmed him?

The night was silent, as if the whole world had stopped.

Tina squeezed her eyes shut, and thought: *This is it.*

Before Tina had a chance to stand and turn around, the axe struck between her shoulder blades. As the pain ripped through her, before the second blow came, she thought of a time-lapse film she'd seen of a butterfly emerging from a cocoon. She remembered how the cocoon broke open at the bottom, and how the butterfly slowly forced its way out. Then came the beautiful moment when the butterfly emerged and showed the world its big colourful wings. It lingered a while, hanging onto the dead, useless remains of the chrysalis, as if it were afraid to fly. Its wings flapped and it appeared to realise what it now was: something new, something reborn, a dream of its old self.

Then, leaving the old skin, the old weight that had grounded it, the butterfly spread its wings one more time and finally flew away.



DOUGLAS COPELAND

John Leahy

Illustrated by Kaylan Stedman

Reed studied his tired eyes in the taxi's passenger rear-view mirror. Underneath the bloodshot orbs were heavy bags. He was always pretty good at sleeping on planes, but he'd known getting on the plane at LaGuardia that he wouldn't be sleeping much on the flight. This supposition had proved correct. He'd grabbed some shuteye in the first half of the trip but as they'd drawn closer to the place that had given him an award-winning story four years earlier, a gnawing had started in his gut that shot any hope of further rest.

Heathrow. In late 2020, Reed spent three hellish weeks there, covering the anti-immigrant riots that had followed the UK's exit from the EU. For nearly six months of that year, Heathrow had been an emergency prison, its huge aircraft hangars housing the tens of thousands of rioters that were shuttled there on the tube out of an imploding London. A day after his journalist credentials and ID were stolen, Reed was mistaken by the army as a rioter and was violently arrested and shipped out to the airport. There he was beaten a couple of times a week, alternately by jumpy army cadets who saw him as a "shithead rioter with a shit American accent" and by the rioters themselves, who saw him as "a job-stealing Yankee bastard." Reed spent a significant amount of his three week Heathrow stint in and out of a Red Cross field hospital bed. But it was worth it.

The story he'd gleaned from that bruising chapter in his life had won him a Pulitzer Prize. *Cornice*, the small but well-respected commentary and criticism magazine he worked for, had been ecstatic, and gave him free rein after that to pick whatever stories he wanted to write. The only major prize-winning writer at the magazine, he was given license to more or less spend as much as he liked, in the hope that he'd bring more glory their way. And Reed did—two years after the Pulitzer, he

won a George Polk award for an expose on market rigging that involved the share price of a major French biotech company. On the other side of the equation, he spent a hell of a lot of *Cornice*'s money jetting around the world in business class and staying in nice hotels. When global news media conglomerate Fullerton Regis bought *Cornice* only a few months before Reed's current sojourn to the UK, the cost-cutting behemoth was quick to point out to the magazine's leading star that he was "an expensive factor in the workings of the magazine." They were willing to let Reed continue on his global travels in search of the perfect story—but no more business class, and Reed would have to come down a peg in his hotel selections.

Reed had been disappointed but not surprised. All gravy trains came to an end sometime. He'd lived it up for three and a half years. Good for him. Most journalists never got to live it up at all. His current journey, a two-legged overnight hop from LaGuardia to Heathrow followed by a short flight north to Inverness was his fifth economy flight since the Fullerton tightwads had taken over. He still wasn't used to the crappy legroom and missed the beautiful flatbed seats terribly. He wondered if he would ever acclimatise to his change in circumstance.

He yawned. He looked to his left. They were crossing the Dornoch Firth bridge. The sky was clear, the sun shining down on the tranquil water. About half an hour earlier they'd crossed the Cromarthy Firth and Reed had seen dolphins leaping below him. The water beneath him now remained almost still, nothing appearing from beneath its surface.

Reed rubbed his eyes, focusing on what lay ahead to lift him from his tiredness. He was certainly excited by what awaited him—an interview with the reclusive Douglas Copeland, one of the richest men in Europe. For quite a while Reed had been pondering on doing a detailed interview piece for the magazine. He decided that he would select a member of the "super rich" community and focused on the more secretive. By far the most secretive member was Douglas Copeland. He never talked to the media at all. Copeland was chief executive of a giant global consumer products company called Calbony. No one really knew how much he was worth but all observers of the financial elite agreed that it was north of fifty billion dollars. Reed hadn't held out much hope when he sent off the email requesting an interview, but was delighted when the response came back from Copeland's personal assistant accepting the request.

Copeland suffered a terrible tragedy in his earlier life. His wife, son and two daughters were murdered when Copeland was in his thirties. They died in the very

place that Reed was heading to now—Mordren Castle, where Copeland has lived since his dreadful loss. Reed found it hard to fathom living in a place where your entire family was violently taken from you. Rich people have their ways, he supposed. Copeland bought Mordren when he'd started to make money as a stockbroker in London. Back then, the Castle was small and run down. He restored it and added quite significantly to its size over the decades. By all accounts, it was now a spectacular building.

Reed looked about him as they drove through a small village called Golspie. It was like something from a postcard, rural and picturesque, its main street immaculately clean.

“We nearly there?” he asked the taxi driver.

“Yes. It’s just about ten minutes away” the driver said in a thick Scottish accent.

They were leaving the village when Reed saw a sign reading “Dunrobin Castle – 1 km,” with an arrow pointing to the right. Reed looked at his watch. It wasn’t yet one thirty and his appointment with Copeland was for two. He had a bit of time to kill.

“What’s that place like, Dunrobin Castle?” he asked the driver.

“It’s a beautiful building. One of Scotland’s finest castles. Dates all the way back to the Middle Ages. Would you like to see it?”

“Yeah, why not” Reed said. “We’ve time for a look.”

“Ok.”

About a minute later they turned off onto a narrow road that they followed until the opulent, pale, well-maintained castle came into view, in front of which two buses were disgorging cargoes of Asian tourists.

“Wow” Reed remarked. “It’s quite impressive. How does Mordren compare with it?” The driver smiled. “It’s about four times bigger.”

A few minutes later they were back on the main road. Reed figured they’d only gone two miles when the taxi driver turned off to the left, and they began ascending a gently rising hill. This new road was forested on both sides. The climb went on for a while before the road eventually levelled out. The forest on the left disappeared, replaced by rock-encrusted bogland. Eventually the trees on the right gave way too, letting peat and stone reign supreme all around.

The road dipped, and Reed spotted it before the driver had a chance to speak.

“There she is,” the driver said. “Mordren Castle.”

Even from where he was, probably over a mile away, Reed could appreciate the size of the magnificent structure they were heading towards.

As they neared the spectacular edifice, Reed struggled to contain his rising amazement. He blinked, figuring that the mighty building before him wasn't far off the size of Windsor Castle, the largest in Britain. The driver pulled up before the stone staircase that led to an enormous front door.

"Come back at four," Reed said and got out.

The cab pulled away and Reed walked up to the door. He rang the bell at its side and while he waited for it to be answered, he turned to admire the beautiful, desolate landscape behind him. Two deer were studying him from the bogland in the distance. Hearing the door open, Reed turned to see a man in a sharply tailored butler's suit before him.

"Hello. My name is Reed Bochner, from *Cornice* magazine. I'm here for an interview with Mr. Copeland."

The butler nodded. "Yes, Sir, we've been expecting you." He opened the door wider to let Reed pass. Reed stepped into a huge, wide hallway at the centre of which lay a massive, ornate staircase. A tall woman appeared from a doorway ahead and walked toward him, a faint business smile on her features.

"Mr. Bochner," the woman said, proffering her hand.

"Yes," Reed said, taking her hand and shaking it.

"I'm Margaret Christie, Mr. Copeland's personal assistant."

"Pleased to meet you."

"I'll take you to Mr. Copeland's study," Christie said, gesturing along the hallway, to the left of the staircase.

"How was your flight, Mr. Bochner?" Christie asked as they walked.

"It was fine."

Christie gave her business smile again. "Good to have you with us safe and sound."

They walked on with no more pleasantries until Christie eventually broke the silence with "and here we are."

She opened a door and led Reed into a room that was larger than his duplex apartment.

"Mr. Copeland will be with you shortly" Christie said, and departed.

Reed looked at a massive fireplace to his left, in which a wood fire blazed. Two wingback chairs stood before the fire. Reed walked by them toward the head of the room. He stopped a few paces from an elegant writing desk upon which lay a large stand supporting four big trading monitors. Behind the desk was a decorative chair,

matched by an identical one at Reed's side. He looked to his right and studied a soaring bay window. It was a beautiful, multi-paned affair. As he walked toward it he heard the door open behind him. He turned to see Douglas Copeland walking toward him. A man of average height and build, he was respectably attired in a simple blazer, open-necked shirt and slacks.

"Mr. Bochner."

Copeland extended his hand. Reed took it.

"Welcome to Mordren."

"Thank you."

"First time in the Highlands?"

"First time in Scotland."

"So what do you think?"

"It's beautiful. Therapeutic."

Copeland made no response. He went to a cabinet at the side of the window and opened it.

"Drink?"

"Brandy, if you have it."

Reed watched as Copeland poured a brandy and then a whiskey for himself. He gave Reed his glass and gestured to the chairs by the fire.

"I agreed to your request for an interview because of that Heathrow piece you did a few years back," Copeland said once they were seated. "It was very powerful."

"Thank you."

"We're both men who have suffered, Mr. Bochner" Copeland said. "And have prospered because of what we have endured."

Reed blinked, trying not to flinch. Copeland's eyes were fixed firmly on his, as though he was trying to read his mind. So unyielding was Copeland's gaze that Reed felt the man was actually succeeding. A torrent of hellish images and sounds from his airport detention flooded through: the fists, rifle stocks, boots and trainers crashing into his body... the time he and another man went to the aid of a woman being attacked... the savage beating both men took... Reed slipped into a coma... the images of what had followed upon his return to New York... the waking up shouting in the middle of the night... the repeated occasions when he hadn't been able to respond to his girlfriend when they went to make love... the almost daily therapy sessions for nearly a month... the departure of his drained girlfriend after she simply couldn't stand it anymore.

Copeland took a sip of his whiskey.

“Are you going to record this?” he asked.

Reed had forgotten about his voice recorder, so taken off-guard he was by Copeland’s directness.

“Yes, of course,” Reed said, taking the recorder from his breast pocket. He placed it on the table between them and activated it.

“I’m dying, Mr. Bochner” Copeland began. “An inoperable brain tumour. My doctors tell me that in a few weeks I’m going to start having speech and memory difficulties.” He paused. “I want to tell my story to someone, while I still can. Someone outside my business, who’s not bound to secrecy.” He paused again. “That someone is you.”

Reed remained silent.

Copeland took a deep breath.

“I’d had a few pretty good years working in London” he said. “My bonuses had been getting bigger with each year and I’d saved every penny of them. My wife Beatrice and I had gone holidaying with the kids every summer in the Highlands so we decided to buy this place, and make it into a luxury holiday home. Renovate it and maybe bring it up to country guest house standard so we’d have something to do in our retirement. The evening it happened, I’d been out shooting. I’d bagged two young grouse and had intended on cooking them for dinner. By the time I got back here it was almost dark. When I approached the door I noticed it was at an angle, and the hinges were loose. It had clearly been forced open. I checked that I had cartridges in my shotgun and went inside. A few steps beyond the door lay the body of my housekeeper, Greta. Her neck had been torn open—like a wolf had savaged her. A bit beyond her, by the door of the living room, lay the form of my daughter Agnes. She... had been mutilated in a similar fashion. The living room door was ajar and I pushed it gently inward.” Copeland paused. He blinked before resuming and Reed could sense enormous effort being deployed beneath the simple physical gesture. “The body of my wife lay face down behind the couch, and my daughter Isobel lay a few feet from the fireplace. At the far end of the room was a hunched figure, its back turned to me. I could hear it making wet, slopping sounds. The door squeaked as it reached the end of its rotation and the figure whirled around. Its speed was unnatural. I hardly saw it turn at all. Behind it, my son Jared slumped to the ground, his neck was... ruined. The thing facing me made a sound... like a rattlesnake. The best way I can describe its appearance would be a variation of a man. It had arms, legs and skin like a man, but

its head, or rather, the features of its head... its maw stretched from ear to ear, while its eyes, ears and nose were much smaller than an average man's. The mouth was full of huge sharp teeth, but they weren't in neat rows like you might see in a... TV vampire's mouth, they were more a haphazard collection of treacherous crags and stalactites. And they were drenched in my family's blood."

"I was just about to pull the trigger on my gun when the thing dropped to the ground and scampered behind the couch like some sort of animal. It reappeared again, launching itself through the air over the sofa in my direction. Its speed was incredible. Before I had a chance to aim at it, it batted the gun out of my grip. I stepped sideways and pulled out my hunting knife just as it propelled itself at me again. I brought the knife up and buried it to the hilt in its chest. It fell against me, and I pushed it to the ground where it lay moaning, its hands working weakly at the knife's handle. I ran to Jared, in the hope that he might perhaps still be alive. But he was gone." Copeland turned his eyes to the fire. "His eyes were open. There was a look of... terror and... loss in them." He paused. "I'll never forget it."

Copeland went silent.

"You're saying... a *monster* murdered your family and your housekeeper," Reed said.

"Yes."

"What happened to it? Did it die?" Part of Reed scolded himself for entertaining the possibility that Copeland's story might be true, but to his surprise, he found that in the main, he actually believed what he was hearing.

"No. And I didn't finish it off, either. Something told me not to. I knew I had gotten the thing in the heart with my knife and yet it was still alive, running its fingers pitifully over the handle. The way it had moved... the way it lusted for human blood... and the fact that it was still alive with a knife in its heart... I knew it was something special."

Copeland studied Reed's eyes. Reed knew the man was looking for judgment there but Reed was determined to remain dispassionate, despite the small worm of horror twisting in his gut.

"I wrapped it in plastic and dragged it down to the basement where there was a small, secret room behind a false wall, and I got rid of the carpet from the living room that had its bloodstains on it. Then I called the police."

Copeland sipped his whiskey.

“I told them that I hadn’t set eyes on the killer—that by the time I’d returned to the castle, he had come and gone. It didn’t take long for them to decide that the perpetrator had been some madman, high on some powerful drug that had driven him to cannibalism. I was never a suspect. There wasn’t a mark on me to indicate a struggle. I was known in the locality and nobody felt that I was the type to suddenly lose my mind and commit such an atrocity. People in the area knew I loved my family. And there was business to think of. Well-heeled tourists and hunters were basically the lifeblood of the area. It wouldn’t be good PR to lock up a London stockbroker for the gruesome murders of his family and housekeeper.”

“So... did the monster survive?”

“Yes. And it got me to where I am today.”

“What do you mean?”

“It made me a multibillionaire.”

Reed said nothing for a while.

“How?” he eventually asked.

“At the time, Gavin McKay was a scientist down in Inverness.” Gavin McKay was the President of Calbony, and had founded the corporation with Copeland. “I gave him a call. I’d worked on the IPO of his biotech company the previous year, and we’d kept in touch. He came up and I showed him the invalid in my basement. It took nearly half a bottle of gin to get him brave enough to examine the creature. It turned out that I’d damaged its heart with my knife, alright—not enough to kill it, but definitely enough to keep it on the flat of its back for as long as it was alive. Up to that point neither of us had ever believed in something as ridiculous as... vampires, but we had to concede that what we had before us was at least something of a similar nature. We carried out some tests on its blood, and... we set up Calbony.

“We focused on three main areas: cosmetics, energy drinks, and beef. In the cosmetics line we produced the same stuff that any cosmetics company would: mascara, lipstick, eyeshadow, moisturizer, cleanser, et cetera. ‘Try our stuff,’ we said to the world, ‘it’s got anti-ageing properties.’ Lots of other companies were claiming the same thing, but they were full of shit. Nothing could stop ageing. But *our* products did. Because they had a tiny percentage of the monster’s blood in them. That was one of its properties.

“We came up with two energy drinks: *Cauldron* and *Warlord*. They were almost identical to any other drink on the market. Except for one very special ingredient.”

“The blood,” Reed said.

Copeland nodded and took a sip of whiskey.

“Worked a lot better than the other stuff on the shelves.”

“Why did you invest in beef?”

“To capitalize on the side effects of the cosmetics and energy drinks.”

“Side effects?”

“We knew that if people were absorbing vampire blood on a regular basis, even in tiny concentrations, they would develop the *appetite* of one, to a certain extent. They wouldn’t have a need for pure human flesh, but...” Copeland trailed off.

It dawned on Reed. “They’d have an increased appetite for red meat in general.”

“Yes. Calbony now owns about fifteen percent of the beef cattle on the planet.”

Reed was stunned. The ingenuity of it was staggering.

“Later on, we made a lot of money in two other areas that we hadn’t initially thought of: headache medication and sleeping tablets. It turned out that the most frequent users of our products developed a moderate sensitivity to sunlight, which gave them headaches.”

“Sunlight being fatal to vampires” Reed said.

Copeland nodded. “And with vampires being nocturnal, customers had difficulty sleeping at night.”

“Yes. So we bought substantial shareholdings in companies that produced the most effective drugs in both areas.”

Reed dropped his eyes, trying to get his head around the sheer scale of Calbony’s money-making capabilities. A product that no one knew about, let alone had access to...with the population of the world rising and wealth increasing in developing countries and continents, the opportunities that lay in wait...

“Mr. Copeland,” Reed said. “Your cancer. Would...”

“Yes, the blood would kill it. But only at a very high concentration. And there’s a very steep trade-off. We tested it on a candidate—which she consented to, of course. Her tumour shrank away to nothing in less than twenty-four hours. Unfortunately, she wanted a lot more than *beef* when she woke up.”

“She became a vampire.”

“More or less. She slaughtered two nurses and a security guard before we managed to take her down.”

Reed remained silent.

“I don’t want to live forever, Mr. Bochner, drinking human blood to sustain me,” Copeland said. “I’m ready to die. I’m ready to go to my wife and children.”

The following day Reed sat in a bar at Heathrow, an untouched beer before him. The horrors of his detention there four years earlier hadn't entered his mind once since his arrival at the airport. After he'd left Mordren the previous evening, nothing had occupied his thoughts outside of Copeland's tale.

He couldn't use it, of course. The story of the century, and he simply... had it. It would never be published. It was simply too deadly. Hundreds of millions of people finding out that they had traces of vampire blood in their system? It would be like the apocalypse.

Copeland had shown him hard evidence to back up his story. He'd brought Reed into a huge lab deep beneath the castle, where he'd shown him the monster lying on a bed in a glass-walled room. Its arms and legs had been amputated as a precaution. An IV line fed it with human blood that Copeland sourced from blood banks all over Europe, while another line withdrew the being's own blood very slowly. The knife that Copeland had stabbed it with thirty-three years earlier was still buried in its chest. Even in its pitiful, dependent state, no one wanted to risk removing the blade, in case the beast's heart healed.

A voice announced over the airport public address system that Reed's flight was boarding. He rose and began walking toward the departure gate. As he walked he saw a woman sitting on a chair, a make-up mirror in one hand while she applied some lipstick with the other. The lipstick cap was resting on her leg. Reed saw the Calbony logo on it. A little while later, he saw two men talking. One of them was drinking from a can. As he walked by, Reed spotted the name of the drink. *Cauldron*.

In his mind's eye Reed saw the little beads of blood making their way from the monster's body along the IV line toward the bag at its end.

One of the most valuable fluids in the world.

Gold he thought. *Red gold*.

The perfect name for the story he would never write.



ESPEJOS / OJOS

R. M. Sandoval

Illustration by Heather Parr

Before the bad dreams started, Luna had never been afraid of her reflection. Her teachers sometimes asked her mom if she was insecure, but she wasn't at all—"You're too shy, mija," her mom would chide her after the parent-teacher meetings—she just liked to be quiet so she could observe. Luna was actually quite confident for an 11-year-old girl. She liked her thin frame, one that gave her the joking family nickname *gordita*, and she liked her face: tan skin, almond eyes, Montezuma nose. (She had once seen a painting of Montezuma at her abuela's house, and ever since then she had thought of her own nose approvingly as one that matched.)

She started to have bad dreams about mirrors around the time that her dad left. One day he was there, and the next day he wasn't, with no explanation. Well, he left a note, but her mom read it, crumpled it, then locked herself in her room praying all day. Luna fell asleep that night to the sound of her mom muttering and her 5-year-old brother Thiago sniffing in the dark. She felt sad, too: sad and confused; she just didn't feel moved to tears. She was sure that it was all a big mistake, and that her dad would have to come back soon. That night, she dreamt about mirror worlds—that she would wake up, go to the bathroom mirror, touch the glass and the glass would bend, and she'd melt through it, falling into a world that was just like this one, but just *one* little thing was off about it, and that one detail, whatever it was, made her sick to her stomach.

After the first night, Luna went into the bathroom while looking at the floor and brushed her thick black hair with only the tugging of knots as her guide. She wasn't afraid of seeing her own face, which would have been like seeing a friend; rather, she was afraid of everything else that was reflected. How could she be sure that everything

was reflecting back, y'know, correctly? What if you looked in the mirror and saw something weird? Something missing?

What if something that you were sure was there, that you thought would always be there, suddenly disappeared?

The mirrors at Willy's townhouse were even worse.

They had to leave their house because their mom couldn't pay the rent by herself with her money from cleaning houses. So they lived with their abuela for a month, and then one day, Luna and Thiago came home from school to find their mom throwing clothes in suitcases and rushing them into the car. She said she had found an answer to her prayers, a gift from a guardian angel.

The guardian angel had brought them Willy—whose real name was Wojak, but he insisted on being called Willy, or even *Dad*, which was too weird for Luna, given that her and her little brother Thiago had only just met him a few weeks ago. Willy was a high school ROTC teacher, which was like make-believe military school, and he'd noticed Luna's mom serving lasagna in the high school cafeteria. She hadn't been there before. Luna's mom took the lunch lady job because she was trying to pick up extra work on top of her house cleaning so she could save up for a deposit on a new place to live. And then, according to Luna's mom, she found more than a paycheck—she found love at first sight! After only a couple of dates, Willy invited Luna's mom to move into his place with her children, and she had a gut feeling that, yes, this was it; this was a gift from God.

After her mom moved them into this place, taking up with this strange Polish man who they had never met before, Luna's dreams became more threatening. Pulsating lamps, trees breaking windows. She put off sleep as long as she could, laying stock still on the air mattress crammed into Willy's office, while Thiago dozed next to her, curled around his beat-up LA Dodgers teddy bear. She didn't want to slip into another dream about melting through the mirror, or seeing something in the mirror that shouldn't be there. An extra pair of eyes. A hand encircling her neck.

One week after they moved into Willy's house, Luna locked herself in the downstairs bathroom, the one that she shared with Thiago, and made a list in her Hello Kitty diary.

In gold gel pen, she printed across the top of a pastel pink page:

Reasons Why I Hate This House (and Willy)

She nibbled on the pen cap and considered.

Well, first of all, it was too yellow.

Every time she flipped a light switch, Luna had to squint to adjust to the dim tungsten. This happened frequently because Luna's new stepdad owned the townhouse and paid all the utility bills—which he told them sternly in an opening speech as they stepped over the threshold and removed their shoes, the very first time they ever met this guy.

“I work very hard for my money, and I don't like to waste it. You will have to turn off the lights every time you exit a room. Even if you only leave for a second. Turn it off, then turn it back on if you re-enter the room, and only if you really need it.” Every word was crisp. (It was intentional. Willy prided himself on his lack of an accent.)

Flipping the light switches on and off was annoying, but it was really the yellowness that bothered her. The color suffused everything in the house. Not butter yellow, or daffodil yellow, but jaundice yellow, algae yellow, the yellow of decay and rot.

The place looked as if not a single thing had changed since the 1980s. Yellowing walls, yellowing venetian blinds. Even the tap water seemed to have a yellow sheen to it, as did the shampoo bottles, which looked like they had been there for at least 20 years.

Luna was mystified by that detail. She put her diary on the bathroom counter, got up from the toilet, and examined the bottles in the tub more closely. No, these weren't retro designs. They were ancient bottles of shampoo, stamped with copyright dates (© 1984, © 1986), way older than her and maybe even close to her mom's age. It wasn't out of the question; *Mom was a teen mom, so...*

She didn't want to use these musty bottles of shampoo on her first night there, but they were the only things available. Willy didn't believe in buying new things.

“He's very smart,” Luna's mom said that first night, as she drove their minivan full of boxes through the dark desert. The only other light came from passing cars. “He's practical, rational. He knows all these neat ways to save money.”

Luna's mom praised Willy the whole drive; talking so fast, with a smile so wide, catching their eyes in the rearview mirror. *She sounds like a radio commercial*, Luna thought. She avoided her mom's gaze and tried to count the Joshua trees along the highway instead, her eyes straining in the pitch black darkness. *Maybe they're guardians, ushering us to a more comfortable life...*

Luna frowned. Her mom had promised they were going somewhere great. Well, here it was. Luna sat back down on the toilet, picked up her diary and wrote:

- Lights are too yellow
- Walls look gross
- Everything is too old
- Too quiet
- Willy is

She stopped there. She wasn't sure what word she could use to describe him. Practical, rational, those words that her mom used for him? No, that wasn't it. There was something else about him. He seemed to match the house. It was almost like he had not changed in a very long time. *People change*, Luna thought. She knew that she changed. The proof was even there in her diary—her handwriting changed, her favorite colors changed, she learned new things every year. Thiago had changed. Her mom had changed, and she wasn't sure if she liked it.

But Luna didn't know if Willy had ever changed. It was like he was a frozen person, stuck in his own rules and routines, doing the same thing day after day, year after year.

Something about that freaked her out.

“Luna!” her mom banged on the bathroom door. “Your little brother needs to use the bathroom. Get out of there! *Vete!*”

Startled, Luna slammed her diary into a drawer, flushed the toilet, splashed her hands in the sink, flipped the switch. She rushed out without looking directly at the mirror, only allowing herself a peripheral glance of the whites of her eyes, floating through the dark.

Saturday. Luna and Thiago were allowed to watch cartoons. Willy was watching with them, so they didn't feel like laughing as much as they usually did. Then the whimsical sounds of *Tom and Jerry* were interrupted—garage door, keys jingling, sneakers scuffing, lock unlatching. Luna's mom came in with a sigh and a big box of groceries. Willy's hand popped up from the couch and beckoned to her.

“Let me see your receipts,” Willy said. Luna's mom rummaged in her purse and handed them over. One from Costco, one from Walmart. Willy adjusted his glasses and pored over the receipts, sometimes muttering to himself, sometimes raising his voice:

“What is this?

Why did you buy this?

Do you think we need this?

Do you like to waste money?

Do you think our paychecks can really cover this?"

Luna caught her mother's eye, and her mom smiled at her. Her mom's cheeks were red, and the smile looked strange. *What was that?* Luna wondered. Was her mom feeling embarrassed, nervous? Or was she blushing with happiness, with the *love for Willy and all the ways he's going to save us money?*

There was evidence of Willy's frugality everywhere: single-ply toilet paper, last-day food that had been stamped in red by the supermarket, jelly jars used to collect stray change, cardboard boxes filled with crushed aluminum cans. Her mom thought all these things were *neat*. Luna found them tacky, weird, embarrassing. Willy made more money than her parents ever did. Why doesn't he want to have a comfortable life? Why does he insist on living like he just came off the boat?

Even worse was the *lack* of objects. *Ooh, that's another thing about the house I should write down*, Luna thought. She let her gaze drift over the walls of each downstairs room and noted that there were no decorations, no paintings, no signs of life. Each room had only the barest essentials: a dilapidated couch, a secondhand TV in a wooden casing. There were no stacks of CDs like there used to be when they still lived with Dad. Not Willy. Their real dad.

Dad, the same one who ruffled their hair and danced with them—and yes, the same one who just walked out, left them all in the middle of the night. Luna still had a hard time believing these weren't two different men. It didn't seem possible. He must have made a mistake. *And what if he comes back?* Luna's heart ached, thinking of him coming back to the old house, seeing the "For Rent" sign and the yard with big indents where their lawn chairs used to be.

"I miss the old house," Luna said that night, poking around her microwave mac and cheese TV dinner.

"Que dices, mija?"

"I miss our stuff," Luna said. She locked her focus on her macaroni, trying to ignore Willy's piercing glare. "I miss our real dad."

"Hey. *He's* not your real dad. *I'm* your dad now," Willy said to Luna, pointing his fork at her. "Would a real dad just walk out on you guys like that? Leaving your mother hopeless and stranded?"

Silence, punctuated by forks scraping against cardboard.

“Willy's right,” Luna's mom said, with a long exhale, like she had been holding her breath. “You know, kids, if I didn't find Willy when I did,” she said, reaching out to hold his white hand, “I don't know where we'd be right now.”

“We'd be at Abuela's house,” Luna said, sulking.

“I like Abuela's house!” Thiago piped up.

“We all like Abuela,” Luna's mom acknowledged. “But we...I mean, it's not nice to be a burden on her. I'm glad that we only had to stay with her for—what was it, a month? It's amazing that I found Willy so fast. He was brought to me by my guardian angel. You answered all my prayers.” Luna's mom kissed Willy's hand, and Luna could see tears glistening at the end of her mom's eyelashes.

Luna's stomach turned. She wondered what kind of angel would have brought them to Willy's house, with its many eyes.

Luna and Thiago were not used to having a lot of rules imposed on them, as the kids were naturally quiet, subdued; their dad used to say they were *as sweet as pan dulces swirled with brown sugar*. As they got older, Luna and Thiago used their parents' perception of them to their advantage. They would simply do whatever they wanted, and their mom would just let them, exhausted from her work cleaning houses. Their dad would come home in the early hours after his night shift at the warehouse, and he would say, *oh, what sweet children we have, que simpaticos, que dulce*, and kiss their cheeks smeared with syrup, their hair still gritty from the previous day's adventures. They were wild, and they were loved.

All her parents' friends had been people just like them, custodians and construction workers, people who worked hard and liked to relax at the end of the day with cold *cervezas*. At their old neighborhood, they'd all gather at one house or another, blast *cumbia* and old *rancheras*, and the kids would all run around in the tall dry grass and go to bed whenever they felt like it, usually sometime after an uncle busted out the second tequila bottle.

But this guy Willy wasn't like any grown-up Luna had ever known. When Willy smiled, his smile didn't reach the crinkles of his eyes. It was hollow, an imitation. He didn't dance. He didn't drink. (He only drank cold cans of Coca-Cola, which the kids were not allowed to touch.) He didn't relax. He was constantly standing over your shoulder, cracking his knuckles with a disgusting *snap, crackle, pop*. He didn't know the neighbors and dissuaded Luna's family from talking to them too.

One of the only things Luna knew about Willy was that he had left Poland for the United States when he was a teenager, determined to join the US military. It was the only passion he ever had in his life. Only a few months into his service, he was discharged from the Air Force after a piece of shrapnel flew into his right eye. Now he taught ROTC at the local high school (*make-believe military*, Luna thought) and talked about the students as if he was a real general and they were real soldiers who reported to him. He talked about everyone like that. Everyone was a subordinate, especially those living under his roof.

Willy's list of rules made Luna's skin itch.

“No running.

No yelling.

Clean up after yourselves.

Take my plate.

Do the dishes.

Take out the trash.

Scrub the baseboards.

Scrub the toilets.

You must be in your bedroom and silent when the clock reads 8:00 p.m.

You must wake up at 6:30 a.m. and be present for breakfast before 6:45 a.m., or else you will miss school.

You are not allowed to miss school.

I expect to see this place looking spotless.

I will do inspections.

If I find a spot of dust, you will have to go back and clean the whole room over again.

There is only ONE place that you cannot clean, and that is the master bedroom.

You are not allowed to go upstairs.

Not ever.

I will know.”

He barked all of these rules like a drill sergeant. The last one was repeated the most often, enunciated the most crisply, with Willy's eyes bugged out big and round and serious.

You are not allowed to go upstairs. Not ever. I will know.

Willy's townhouse had a strange layout. The only room upstairs was the master bedroom. There was no hallway, no other outlet, not even a landing, just a set of stairs

that went straight up from the middle of the living room into the bedroom where Willy and Luna's mom slept. The door was always shut. The kids had no idea what it looked like, and Willy swore that he would know if they even took a step on the first stair.

Even a single stair? How would he know? That's so stupid, Luna thought. Still, she never did it. The stairway that led to the upstairs bedroom was the darkest, yellowest spot in the whole house; dark amber yellow, dehydrated-piss yellow, with shadows like an undersea monster cave, a deep vignetting that made Luna feel sick every time she even glanced at it.

She moved around the house as if she had blinders on—straight from her bedroom to the bathroom, from the bathroom to the kitchen, from the kitchen to the living room—to watch TV with her brother after dinner, something like *Jeopardy*, or even *The Simpsons* if they had finished their homework.

At 8:00 p.m. on the dot, every night, like clockwork, Willy would point at the kids' bedroom. Luna would give her mom a hug, Thiago would give her a kiss goodnight, then the kids would each, begrudgingly, under Willy's stern glare, shake Willy's hand goodnight.

Then Luna and Thiago would lie awake in the dark, listening to their mom and Willy watching *Friends* in the living room, tensing whenever they heard Willy's staccato laugh. Then at 8:29 p.m., the moment the credits rolled and the closing gag was over, the ancient TV would be turned off, and the kids could hear their mom and Willy walk up the stairs to the master bedroom.

After 8:30 p.m., the entire house was silent.

Sometimes the desert wind rattled the thin windowpane in their bedroom, and Luna wondered if the windows upstairs were rattling too, and if her mom still remembered the magic spell they invented when Luna was little to keep bad dreams from coming.

*Sal, malos sueños
no agarres a los pequeños
somos pequeños, no somos sabrosos
¡vete, vete!
¡uno, dos, veinte!*

Luna was losing a lot of sleep. On Sunday, when she came out for breakfast, her mother said, “Dios mio, Luna, you look terrible. Are you OK? Are you sick?” Luna said yes, she felt terrible, she just wanted to go back to bed. Her mom said, “Sure,

mija. How about we go shopping today and you stay home and rest,” with a tender look that Luna missed seeing. “If you feel better when we come home, we can go get pizza.” Pizza! Willy would really let them get pizza? She didn't want to push her luck, so she didn't say anything, just finished her cereal and shuffled back to bed, intending to read all afternoon. It wasn't long before she drifted off into a long morning nap.

When Luna woke up, sweaty and disoriented, she wanted one thing more than anything in the world: a single sip of ice-cold Coca-Cola. Just the thought of it satisfied her down to her bones.

She opened the fridge and there she saw it—a single can, already opened.

Naughty children are not allowed to have Coca Cola. This is my drink.

Willy's words echoed in Luna's head as she reached for the tempting red can that dripped with condensation.

Luna hesitated, then felt a surge of bravery. She brought the can closer to her face, slowly pressed her lips against the sharp aluminum opening, and took a small sip. Oh, what bliss—warm feelings and fond memories, the taste of pizza parties, sleepovers, barbecues with her real dad at the grill. She pressed the edge to her lips again and took another long, slow sip, savoring the sticky sweetness, not caring that it was Willy's open can from two nights ago and long since flat.

She put the can back exactly where it was, closed the fridge door and paused, listening to the hum of the fluorescent kitchen lights. Was anyone around? Did anyone see that? She waited, tensed, expecting the hum of the garage door and keys jingling at any moment.

No. Not a sound. She was alone, enveloped in stillness.

Luna smiled. She savored the lingering taste of Coke, sweet and metallic, and dug her toes into the solitude of the empty house. She walked back to her bedroom and paused in the doorway, looking at Willy's model airplanes.

Back at their old house, Luna and Thiago had their own rooms, each decorated with makeshift wallpaper made from their own paintings, drawings, and magazine clippings. Here, they had to share a small bedroom, which was completely bare. Willy didn't allow anything on the walls because it affected the townhouse's “resale value,” whatever that meant. The only sign of any personality in the whole house was right there on Willy's old desk: his model airplanes. “Not toys,” Willy had reproached them, “expensive models.” They were forbidden to touch them.

But how would he know? Luna wondered. He couldn't possibly know what she did if he was not in the house. She was all alone. There were no eyes to watch her...

unless the walls of the townhouse were alive. Luna stiffened at the thought. Her eyes searched the yellowing walls.

What has this house seen? Why doesn't Willy want decorations on the walls? She allowed her fingertips to float up to the cheap paint and gingerly brush against it.

Does Willy own the house, or is it a part of him?

She recoiled at the thought, her hand springing away from the wall as quickly as if it was on fire.

Luna let out a long slow exhale. She was being silly. No one was home. Her mom and Willy and her brother would all be coming home in an hour, at least. Willy couldn't possibly know what she did. He pretended to be all-knowing, but that was just because...*because he sucks*, she thought. Haha! Yes, that's all there was to it. *That dude sucks.*

Luna eyed the model airplanes with resentment. What kind of guy cares more about model planes than children? Especially the children of the woman that he “loves?”

Luna found that concept disgusting. Not love itself. But whatever was going on between her mom and her stepdad—and actually, now that she thought about it, whatever was going on between her mom and her *dad*, who she couldn't remember ever kissing or hugging or even dressing up together—that couldn't possibly be love. A convenient arrangement, maybe. Something about finances and bills. She didn't have the words for it but was sure that adults knew more about it than she did. She hoped that she would never experience this strange love that looked nothing like movies or fairy tales.

The model planes just sat there, stupidly. Luna reached out and twirled a propeller. She looked more closely at the model, which had a hundred tiny intricate little parts. *And for what?* Luna thought. *Why did Willy make these planes? Who were they for?*

If they were just for himself, Willy couldn't possibly have been as smart as her mom said he was.

Luna got up from the desk with a new burst of energy. She wanted to write in her diary: about planes, her thoughts about love, how she felt about Coca-Cola. She poked around the spartan bedroom, then remembered where she had it last.

She went into the bathroom (eyes down), opened the bathroom drawer, and opened up her diary to the last page she was writing on.

Across the page with the incomplete list of the faults of the house, there was a message written in thick black ink, in a handwriting she had never seen before:

KEEP OUT

STOP WRITING IN THE BATHROOM

YOU HAVE NO SECRETS HERE

Luna felt her stomach drop low, and her mouth became dry and hot.

She threw the diary, as hard as she could, against the wall. It left a pink mark against the chipped yellowing paint, like a skinned knee.

Her hands trembling, she picked it up again, wanting to hide it, but having no idea where.

The garage door opened. Keys jangled. Her parents were home.

No. Willy and her mom were home. And Thiago too—she could hear him babbling about pizza toppings: “Pineapple, pepperoni...”

Luna turned off all the lights, ran into her bedroom, then curled up underneath her blanket on her air mattress, clutching her diary against her heart. She held her breath and listened: rustling, walking, taking off shoes, mom snapping at Thiago to stop running around, Willy saying something in a low serious voice, Thiago whining, mom saying something softly, silence, the click of the TV turning on, mom sighing, people walking across the hallway, the fridge opening and closing.

Then just the sound of the TV family: joke, laughter, joke, laughter, punchline, clapping.

“Luna,” Willy called from the kitchen. “Come here.”

Luna held her breath. She didn't want to go out there, but she also didn't want to be yelled at.

“Luna,” Willy said, louder.

“Luna,” her mom said, “Dad needs you.”

Luna sprung up from the bed, opened the door, marched out to the kitchen.

“If Dad needs me, why isn't he here?”

Willy grabbed her by the back of her neck.

“What did you say, smartass?”

Luna looked into Willy's wide eyes, the black irises dark as a bottomless well, and faltered.

“Nothing. Let me go. What do you want?”

Willy loosened his grip, but kept his palm on the back of her neck.

“Why did you drink my Coke?”

Luna started to feel like a cat cornered by a dog, like her hair was bristling from end to end, like she should hiss, like she had no way out.

“I didn't drink your Coke,” she said.

Willy smacked her neck. Luna's mom stood up from the couch where she was sitting with Thiago, about to say something. Willy silenced her with a single glare.

“This is what we did, back where I grew up,” he said to Luna, to her mom, to Thiago, an announcement to the whole house. “This was how I was raised. You never hit children, but you have to hit liars, or else they never learn.”

“I'm not lying,” Luna protested.

Smack.

“I know you are. I have eyes everywhere,” he said.

Luna looked up at the yellow lights, the yellow walls, looking for eyes in the plywood.

“I know what kind of person you are. That's why I laid a trap. That can of Coke in the fridge was set up to test you, and you failed. I placed a single hair across the opening. That hair is not here anymore... It couldn't have moved unless you drank it. Now you know: I see everything, I know everything. Luna is a sneaky girl. Luna is a liar.” Willy hit every consonant hard, crisp: *sneaky girl, liar*.

Luna looked at Thiago, who stared at his feet, and her mom, who looked wildly between Willy and Luna, as if she couldn't decide who she cared about more, Luna or this crazy stranger who she had met barely more than a month ago.

“No! Let me go!”

“Go to your room,” her mother finally said. She had taken a step forward, but got no closer than that. She didn't remove Willy's hands from Luna's neck. Luna had to wiggle out of his grasp herself. She ran to her room and hid under the covers, trembling under the thin comforter.

“You're grounded,” her stepfather shouted from the living room. “Forget about going out with us tonight. You're going to stay here and think about what you've done. Don't even think about turning on the TV. I will know.”

Another reason why Luna hated the house: it had eyes, it had traps. Willy had many faces, so who knew how many faces the house had. Maybe he had a control center. Maybe there was a camera in every room, and he watched her, secretly, all the time.

If he knew all her secrets, she had to know his.

She had to see what was in the master bedroom.

Luna waited until they had been gone for at least 15 minutes. She just stared at the digital clock, watching the red lines transform from one number to another.

Then she got up, listened to the house. Total silence. She double-checked the locks, went into each room and turned on the lights, left all the lights on, opened all the doors, peeked into the garage; yes, it was empty, it was just her, for an hour at least.

Luna turned back to take in the house, bathed in the harsh tungsten light coming from every room. Luna had never seen it lit up like this. It seemed more alive. She hesitated, unsure if she should turn off the lights again. It was almost too much light, disquieting, like a bad dream—

No. Leave them on. Why does Willy always want the lights off?

More deliberately now, Luna went into each room downstairs, starting with her bedroom. She took off all the covers from the mattresses and sifted through the small piles of books and toys in boxes. Nothing here, just small pangs of memories with every object she touched. *My dad used to read that to me. My brother and I used to play that together. We used to love watching that movie but there's no VHS player here. I used to write in that diary until...*

She stopped at the little pink diary, wondering if she should open it again. The threat flashed across her mind again, “KEEP OUT, YOU HAVE NO SECRETS,” and she dropped it as if it had bitten her.

She glanced at the model planes. She picked each one up, more roughly than before, shaking them, listening. Nothing.

Next room—bathroom—she opened every drawer.

Nothing.

Next room—kitchen.

She stood in the middle of the spotless kitchen. She knew every inch of this kitchen by now. It was her task to clean it. She had scrubbed the floors, the fridge, the sink, dusted the pantry. *Pointless*, she thought. *It can never be clean enough.*

She knew there was one place she had to look. She was just biding time.

She went to the bottom of the stairs, the ones that went straight up to the bedroom.

The bedroom had a sign: “**KEEP OUT.**” Thick letters, written in Sharpie on an old envelope.

It reminded her of the message in her diary.

Luna scowled. *Willy! He was snooping and he found my diary. The only thing rotten about this house is **him**. And he's got secrets, bad secrets...*

The thought propelled her, like a steam engine, up the stairs, one at a time, her gaze fixed on Willy's handwriting, *secrets, **bad secrets**, bad, bad, bad secrets, bad bad secrets...*

'Til at last she was at the top.

Luna turned the handle. The only sound she heard was her heartbeat, which seemed to have migrated up between her ears. She pushed it open, slowly. Flipped the light switch.

The bedroom that Willy and her mom shared was not too different than the rest of the house. Yellow walls, yellow lights, a big bed, a dusty oscillating fan in the corner, a small pile of clothes at the foot of the bed. Although, now that her eyes adjusted to the light, she realized that there were things in this room that she *hadn't seen before*, which was a small, startling realization. For instance, the bed took up most of the room, large and extravagant, which made her wonder why she and her little brother had to share an air mattress. And the pile of clothes! Willy had smacked them on the back of the neck every time he saw a single sock on the floor downstairs. Luna inched forward, and she also noted the TV. *Hey, how come that TV looks so nice.* Maybe this was his control center after all—the big brains of the operation.

Luna realized that her hands and feet were tingling, like all her blood had rushed up to her head, cutting off the circulation in her extremities. She willed her head to turn to the right, then to the left, and saw someone staring back at her.

Oh God! Two big floating white eyeballs, a mouth half-open in terror—it was Luna herself, reflected in the closet; the doors were two huge mirrored panels. Her heart was pounding. This was it. She had made it this far. No more secrets.

Luna locked eye contact with her reflection, not letting herself out of her sight. She moved forward, pushing the heavy mirrored doors open. The bedroom light was so dim, she could barely see what was inside. Trembling, she reached out til her fingertips grazed fabric, then she felt each of the shirts and military jackets hanging there. At first she was careful, touching each one like testing the eggs at the grocery store, but her anxiety pushed her forward with the hum of the repetitive thought: *secrets, secrets, bad secrets, you have no secrets, keep out.* She grew more frantic, pulling clothes off hangers, feeling the walls, rummaging on the floor, looking for something, she didn't know what, something bad.

At last, her fingertips hit a small box. Luna brought the box out of the closet, closer to the painfully yellow floor lamp. It was locked. Oh! But there must be a key somewhere. She ran back to the closet, searching along the floor.

And at that very moment, with her nails digging into the carpet, the sound of the garage door opening, keys jangling, soft voices, her mother, Thiago, Willy.

Oh no. Oh no no no. Luna struggled with the clothes, pulling a few back up onto the closet bar, but she was shaking so much that she knew she couldn't get them all up in time. She shoved everything back in. *Maybe it could have been, oh, I don't know, a small earthquake or something.* She would get another week of detention—who cares, as long as she got out of there—then the closet door snagged on something. She bent down to fix it, and there it was, glinting in the yellow light: a small key.

She knew. This was it, the time to do it. She was already in trouble, so who cares—**keep out**—she had to, she just had to—*you have no secrets*. She gathered the box into her arms, pushed the little key into the lock, and opened the box, her eyes straining to see its contents.

Photos, strange photos... one of a woman, one of a little boy, then one of the woman and the kid and Willy all together. Writing on the back: “All of us, 1984,” “Love you Daddy, 1982.” What was this? A newspaper clipping: “Two dead in house fire.” A photo of the townhouse, the top of it black and destroyed. Phrases underlined: “electrical fire,” “hairdryer,” “minor in critical condition” ...

In a state of shock, Luna looked around the room, and noticed, dumbly, that it was actually *less* yellow than the rest of the house, the paint slightly fresher; but the light was *more* dim, terribly so, as if the person who lived here never wanted to see any of the details of this room, and preferred to stumble through only by touch. How odd, then, that the closet was a mirror, reflecting back so little; Luna looked right into it, without flinching, and saw her face; she noticed that she had been crying, although she hadn't realized it; she saw her hands grasped tightly around the box, and then she saw the second pair of hands, sliding around her shoulders, grabbing the box, encircling her neck.

“Where are youuuu?”

The voice—a little boy's. Playful.

The hands around her neck—big, white, hairy.

Willy's hands.

“I told you to never come up here,” he said softly.

His hands squeezed, and Luna wanted to scream, but she was frozen, hypnotized by the dusky image in the closet mirror. Yes, that was her face, that was her nose, her eyes, that was her, Luna, and that was Willy, mom's guardian angel.

He's wrapped around me, and I can't breathe.

“Dad!”

In the doorway, a small silhouette. Willy turned, startled, his eyes wide with fear, and screamed a deep-from-the-gut scream, incomprehensible, nearly inhuman. He barreled onto the shadow, seized with an animalistic urge to fight the ghost. Willy's arms flailed and pushed, Luna heard a wail and a terrible crash, and she knew without a doubt that Willy had just knocked Thiago down the stairs.

“Thiago!” Luna heard her mother scream at the foot of the stairs.

Willy had collapsed, racked with sobs. Luna was not thinking anymore—she just sprinted, tossing aside the box, leaping over the ruins of a man, bounding down the stairs to join her mother and little brother.

Her mom was examining Thiago from all angles, as he just repeated, weakly, “My arm, mama, my arm.” His arm was bent, and she touched it gently, kissing his forehead. Luna grabbed her mom by the shoulders, and her mom looked into her eyes. At that moment, Luna saw herself reflected in her mother's eyes, not just the little reflection in the pupils, but also the shape, the color, the way they filled with tears. After all these months of avoiding mirrors, she was suddenly looking right at one. Luna gathered all her energy into one quiet, urgent request, which came out of her like a pistol shot:

“Let's go. Now, mama.”

In one fluid movement, Luna grabbed the keys, her mom grabbed Thiago, and they scrambled into the car. Luna's mom peeled out of the garage, her foot pressed against the pedal. As they drove across the desert, back to their abuela's house or God knows where, Luna watched the Joshua trees flying by the window. She tried to see them as just trees, but all she could think about was Willy, running down the driveway with his arms outstretched.

CONTRIBUTORS

Authors

Joseph DeMarco was born in New York City; he grew up in Buffalo, NY. He has taught seventh grade on the island of Oahu, Hawaii for the last ten years. He is the author of the novels *Plague of the Invigilare*, *The 4 Hundred and 20 Assassins of Emir Abdullah-Harazins*, *At Play in the Killing Fields*, *Blind Savior*, *False Prophet*, *Vegans Are Tastier*, and *The 4 Hundred and 20 Assassins: Green Mourning*.

Tim Jeffreys' short fiction has appeared in *Weirdbook*, *Not One of Us*, *The Alchemy Press Book of Horrors 2*, and *Nightscript*, among various other publications, and his latest collection of horror stories and strange tales 'You Will Never Lose Me' is available now. He lives in Bristol, England, with his partner and two children. Follow his progress at www.timjeffreys.blogspot.co.uk.

John Leahy has had four novels published - *Harvest*, *CROGIAN*, *Unity* and *The Faith*. His story "The Tale In The Attic" attained an honorable mention in L Ron Hubbard's Writers Of The Future Contest. His short story "Singers" has been included in *Flame Tree Publishing's 2017 Pirates and Ghosts* anthology, alongside tales by literary greats such as Homer, Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson, H.P. Lovecraft, and H.G. Wells. He lives in Abbeyfeale, Ireland.

A.A. de Levine is a Los Angeles-based writer.

Rebecca Parfitt has been published widely. Her debut poetry collection *The Days After* was published by Listen Softly London in 2017. She is founder and editor of *The Ghastling* a magazine devoted to quiet horror and the macabre. In 2020 she was awarded a Literature Wales writer's bursary to complete her short story collection, *Sometimes They Arrive Late & Other Macabres*. She lives in south Wales, UK. When she is not editing, writing, or being mother to her daughter, she can be found at the circus dangling from a pole.

R. M. Sandoval is a Latinx writer based in Los Angeles.

Illustrators

Liza Adamandidou B. is a freelance illustrator living and working in Athens and Istanbul whose works reflect the relationship between the real and the surreal through personal and social myths, stories and memory. Through her own story telling with mythical characters and spaces, she creates a new language for the viewer to read the everyday life and the physical world through an imaginary yet magical perspective. Her work questions and seeks for the unknown and the unseen beyond the visible form.

Heather Parr is a printmaker and illustrator based in Brighton, UK. She uses a variety of different techniques, including linocut and wood engraving, often in combination with painting. Her work is inspired by myths and legends, folklore, ghost stories, gothic horror and Fortean topics. Heather lives with her partner and young daughter and when she's not making haunted pictures she works for a nature conservation charity.

Katiana Robles is a full time artist working out of Orlando Florida. Her works spans a variety of media such as food art, sculpture, and illustration. She has exhibited throughout Central Florida; most notably at Orlando City Hall, City Arts Factory, and Osceola Arts. To see more of her whimsical work follow her on Instagram @kat_robles.

Kaylan Stedman is a California-based illustrator who loves the macabre, and specializes in artwork that blends sentimentality with dark imagery. She finds the artistic combination of the grotesque with the sweet and kind to be a great elixir for the darkness that looms in real life. A regular contributing illustrator for literary magazine Ghost Parachute, she is honored to be a part of the first issue of the New Gothic Review.

Olivia Tinnin is a Brooklyn-based illustrator. Her work is simplistic and playful as she slowly molds a world filled with thoughtful and introspective characters. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Florida State University in 2017.

Cover Design

Pläd is a critical media design studio specializing in visual communication. Founded by Wesley T. Nelson and Matthew Van Rys, Pläd partners with clients to develop a broad range of applications for effective messaging through design solutions in motion and information graphics, narrative and documentary film, live events and presentations, as well as spatial and interactive experiences. Check us out or drop us a line at hello@itsplad.com, [Instagram](#), or [Twitter](#) to learn more about our approach. Serious inquiries only. ;)