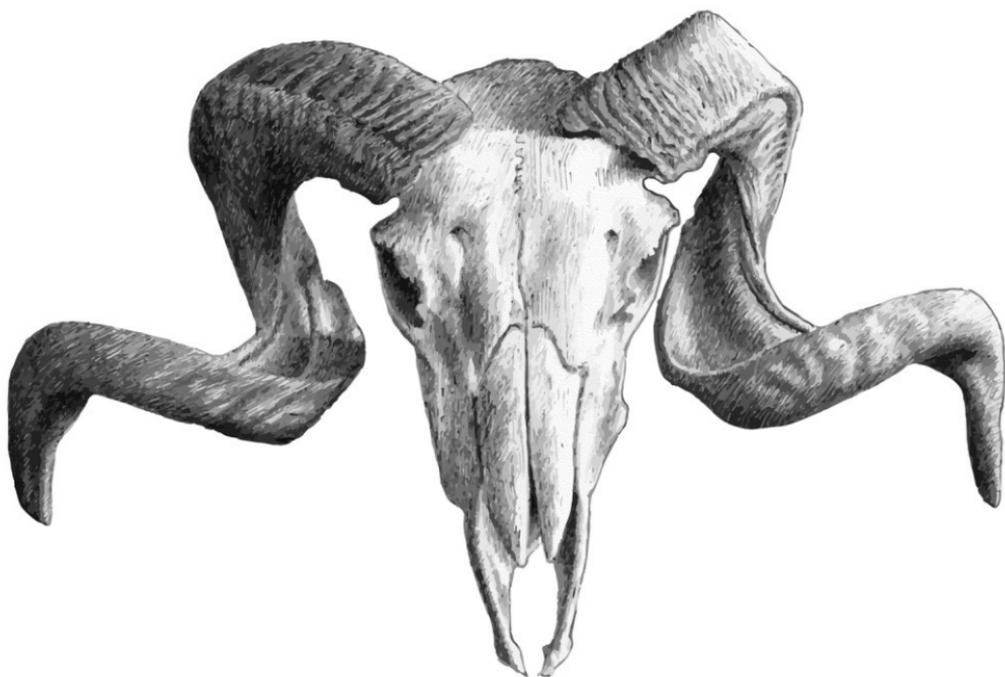


Death Cap

a Sinister Horror Company sampler



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Edited & designed by J. R. Park

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“The Sinister Horror Company are a veritable powerhouse of imaginative, original and ingenious horror.”

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Contents

[Introducing the Sinister Horror Company](#)

[Papering Over The Cracks by Tracy Fahey](#)

[Nose To The Window by Andrew Freudenberg](#)

[I Love You by J. R. Park](#)

[Hell Ship Prologue by Benedict J. Jones](#)

Introducing the

Sinister Horror Company

“Where should a story start?

Exactly what is the defining moment that marks the place to begin?

Every attempt at finding a beginning will see tendrils of previous tales pulling at its circumstance, their influence shaping what is yet to be. And if we trace those back we find even more, each one a star warping each other’s path with their orbits. A cosmic swirl of action and reaction that forms one perpetually moving matrix. A lattice of experience that defines our lives.

But in order to tell any tale we must pick that moment.

We must choose a beginning...”

- J. R. Park
The Exchange

Officially the Sinister Horror Company began on 12th April 2015 but, as with any real life story, the beginnings are little more blurred than that.

The origins date back to almost a year earlier, when a group of horror enthusiasts began putting their own daydreams onto paper.

Frustrated by the difficulty in getting our releases

noticed, we decided that building a collective brand would help to make us stand out. A success for one would be a success for all, and through hard work we could create momentum.

To our delight our plan worked, but along the way we found many other talented authors in a similar position, so decided to use our newly built platform to give them as much exposure as we could. Through this mission our publishing company found its values: drive, passion and love for original horror fiction. Ever keen for something different, our tastes have seen us release a huge variety: quiet horror, cosmic horror, extreme horror, pulp horror, kids horror, comedy horror, sci-fi horror, horror horror horror – you get the idea.

And through this dedication to deliver a top quality product and try something different, we've built a good reputation; a reputation that continues to grow and has seen the Sinister Horror Company become the publisher we are today...

We have learnt a lot along the way and the Sinister Horror Company has grown, strength on strength, each year. As our catalogue of wonderful releases grow, so does our audience. We decided it would be a good idea to provide you with a free sampler of stories that span the spectrum and history of our range.

We hope you enjoy. And we hope you are tempted to flip through our catalogue and website, exploring further down the dark, murky pathways we have cut through the landscape of our nightmares.

Have fun...

Papering Over The Cracks

Tracy Fahey

On the third day she finds it on the attic wall. She's in the middle of the slow but satisfying ritual of stripping wallpaper; first soaking, and then unpeeling back the thick flaps of flock wallpaper from the green-painted plaster beneath.

Sponge. Pause. Rip.

Pause.

Sponge. Pause. Rip.

Her body moves to the rhythm of the work; some part of her enjoying the mindlessness of it all, a respite from thinking. She slops water on the filthy paper and waits, and then a minute later, a great strip of sodden, muddy wallpaper peels greasily off the wall. She lifts the sponge to apply more water, thinking *I must change the water before it gets too murky* – and then she sees it. For a few seconds she peers at the wall, unable to see what exactly it is, but as she's doing so she leans too far over and loses her balance, knocking both the stool and the bucket resting on it. As she swears and starts to mop the water up using an old jumper, heavy steps blunder up the stairs.

'Donna! What is it? Everything OK?'

She sighs, vaguely ashamed. ‘S alright, Mark, I just jumped and knocked it over.’

‘Idiot,’ he says fondly, and then pauses, frowning. ‘What’s that?’

‘What’s what?’ She mops the floor crossly with quick, angry swipes, wanting him to help her, and refusing to ask.

Mark moves closer to the wall. ‘That’s so weird. It’s a face of some kind. Look, I’ll clear it.’ He grabs the sponge and rubs it over the wall, then rips the paper off awkwardly, leaving fragments of it behind. ‘Now look at it!’

She stands up slowly, wiping her hands on the front of her dirty jeans.

‘Wow,’ she says eventually. They turn to look at each other.

‘Is it just me, or does it look a bit...?’ Mark’s voice tails off, unwilling to voice his thoughts. She traces the outline on the stained wall with a careful finger.

‘It does,’ she says. Her voice is flat. ‘It looks exactly like me.’ She looks at him mutely, her face blank with astonishment.

It was only a month ago that they got the news. When she opened the letter, she was standing stork-like on the doormat; one leg tucked against the other in a yoga stance half-remembered from classes years ago. She read it once. Then again. Then she shrieked like an old kettle.

‘Mark! MARK! We got it!’

His boots thump-thumped down the stairs. ‘We did?’

‘It’s ours! The dream house! The Georgian mansion of your fantasies!’ They hugged, tight and hard; excited, only half-believing the news.

‘Now comes the hard part.’ Mark disentangled himself. ‘The renovations. I’ll take a look at those

drawings again. We need to go through them closely, work out a masterplan...’ His voice trailed off as he pushed his glasses up from his nose on top of his shaven head, a gesture he always made when deep in thought. She hung on his neck like a scarf.

‘But we’re happy? Right? This is the house we’ve always wanted, my great-aunt’s house. And at a great price! We should celebrate!’ She wanted to be comforted, applauded.

‘Right,’ he said absently, a perfunctory smile flickering on and then off abruptly. She unwound her arms and released him, knowing she had already lost him to his study, to his precise one-point perspectives, his inked elevations, his minutely detailed floorplans.

It was the kind of house that took you over. *The size is one thing*, thinks Donna – it’s an immense Georgian house with four floors, including a basement and attic – *but it’s also somehow daunting*. It’s also very cold unless the open fires are lit, but Mark’s already making noises about unobtrusive underfloor heating that won’t disturb the precious symmetry of the elegant interior. When they move in, the first thing Mark does is start to get rid of superfluous furniture: ‘to strip the house back to its bare bones,’ as he puts it. Great-Aunt Jane was a hoarder. Donna spends the first few days piling up cheap furniture, hideous vases, tatty old newspapers and entire wardrobes of musty clothes into the skip outside.

The dining room, not used at present, becomes a storage room for the remnants of Great-Aunt Jane’s possessions that have passed Mark’s strict criteria. As the weeks pass, Donna’s stealthy additions mean that the piles start to become collection points of colourful miscellanea. These piles grow steadily, day after day, at the same time as the rest of the house is on a slow,

inevitable voyage towards a barer, sparer aesthetic. Under Mark's directions, the workmen arrive and pull out the ratty old kitchen units and install appropriate Belfast sinks and simple, minimal cupboards. Mark supervises them carefully, wincing whenever a hammer taps too hard, or a greasy hand smears a surface. His love of Georgian period architecture is one of the things that first attracted her to him, when she wandered into his Design Week talk; plastic glass of lukewarm white wine in hand. It was the enthusiasm with which he lovingly described the intense harmony and symbolic orders of the architectural style that drew her interest. In his own practice, he prides himself on his popular marriage of classical detailing with modern minimalism. 'The new classicism' is the phrase he uses with clients to describe his style. Secretly Donna feels it's a little... soulless; all stripped floors and walls in a symphony of chalky whites and dove greys. Her own tastes run more to the Victorian style, to a more feminine and eclectic mode of design. That's why Mark offers her the attic room (far from his exacting gaze) as a place to decorate; a place for her to spend her sabbatical, writing her book. That's why she's preparing her nest at the top of the house. That's why she is stripping the seventies-style wallpaper. And that's how she finds the drawing.

The drawing on the attic wall stirs something within her, a lively, impatient curiosity to find out where it's come from. She starts her investigations in the remaining pile of Great-Aunt Jane's possessions. When Mark arrives home, tired and aggressive, like he usually is after his weekly after-work squash bout, she's absorbed in the pile of photo albums found on one of the dusty bookcases.

'What are you doing there?'

She holds up a fan of old photos of the attic room, all

oil paintings and bookcases. 'Looking at photos of the house as it was, back in the day.'

'Back in the day? I don't know why you want all that clutter preserved. Old fake-Victorian tat covering up the elegance of the Georgian detailing.' He pulls his mouth sideways into a grimace.

'I'm not one of your bloody clients. You don't need to talk down to me.'

'I'm not talking down to you.'

She rolls her eyes.

'God, you're such a child,' he says contemptuously and walks out. A minute later she hears the *thud-thud* as he kicks off his trainers, and then the spurt and hiss of the power shower upstairs. She feels a sharp dislike of him prickle under her skin; his stupid thick-framed glasses, his sweaty shaven head.

She stays in the room till nearly two in the morning, sifting, opening and reading. And when she goes to bed, she goes to the uncomfortable one in the spare room.

That night she dreams of the drawing, the blank, terrified eyes, the gaping mouth, and wakes up with a start; sitting up straight, wild-eyed and panting.

The next morning she returns to look at the drawing in the attic, again and again, as if to reassure herself of its physical reality. But there it always is, always exactly the same, a full-length drawing of a woman sketched with bursts of brutal energy, deep scores of lead pencil pressed down on the discoloured plaster. It's drawn cleverly to mimic the figure of a woman pressed against a window-pane or some other invisible obstacle; her body flattened, her hands splayed in front of her.

But that isn't the disturbing part. That's the face. Line for line, shadow for shadow, the drawing mimics the curves and hollows of her own face. She sits down at the

old writing desk and tries to focus on her manuscript. With the laptop open, she starts a new file and taps out 'Chapter One' in bold type, and then stops. Is it her imagination or does the drawing look darker than she remembers? By the time she's finished a careful examination of the cross-hatched shading, it's time for lunch. She eats a large sandwich downstairs, standing over the sink, reluctant to use a plate that will then have to be stacked (according to Mark) immediately in the dishwasher. It's time now to do things; time to either start writing or to start sorting out the oddments and books and possessions in the dining room. That's one of her main jobs, after all. Mark's jobs are more about sitting in his study with the house plans overlaid by his delicate drawings on transparent paper, as he reflects on the renovations to come. Writing or sorting? She shrugs and does neither, instead returning to the attic, spending an indolent afternoon watching the shadows crawl and lengthen across the floor. Finally, faintly, in the distance, she hears the front door creak open, and Mark call her name.

Mark is annoyed with her. She can tell it by his carefully-neutral expression as he sits at the kitchen table; she knows it by the set of his shoulders (hunched, tense) and the precise, irritable way he lays down his knife and fork beside his plate. He has grazed his hand while moving some boxes in to the hall, and has wrapped it up, ostentatiously, like a visible symbol of reproach. She isn't in the mood to fight; instead she moves around the kitchen, restoring order, completing their ancient, placatory rituals, pouring him a glass of white wine, straightening the place settings. Now she's at the old Aga, quietly stirring the pot of green curry, unwilling to provoke him into the tirade she feels brewing, ominous and inevitable as a rising wave. When

they start eating, she silently counts the seconds in her head until he starts to speak. At fifty-six seconds he breaks the silence.

‘It’s not that I’m complaining,’ he begins (although, patently, he is). She stays quiet and keeps forking up the curry. ‘It’s just that we’re meant to be a team here, working together to get this renovation done.’ He glares at her through his black-rimmed glasses, which, she is perversely glad to see, are steaming up with the vapour of the food on his plate.

‘OK,’ she says quietly.

‘I mean, it’s not every day you find something weird like that drawing in the attic, but for God’s sake, get over it and help me out a bit. We’ve got the whole huge house to work on.’ He drinks his wine noisily.

‘OK.’ She rams a large forkful of curry in her mouth to choke down her agreement and prevent any further discussion.

‘Good.’ He lays a hand on hers, in a gesture meant to be reassuring. Her skin itches in annoyance.

The next day she even takes a mirror up with her so she can compare them both; herself and the drawing. What is incomparable, though, is the expression on the two faces. While her real-life reflection stares back in pallid surprise, her blanched face looking pale and unwieldy, the face of her drawn doppelganger is urgent, startling, the eyes mute with misery. The mouth is a big O of gaping horror, the dark expanse within it cross-hatched with savage black lines. Over the next few days, in between these bouts of contemplation, she continues to slowly strip the wallpaper in the room, careful as a mortician, but her work reveals nothing more than dirt, ancient insect mummies and damp marks.

The drawing has become all-important. Its physical

presence in the house acts like a magnetic current for her thoughts, drawing them endlessly back to the attic room. Every day, without fail, as soon as Mark leaves for work, she spends the day in the attic. Every day she goes back to the dining room; using the old photographs as a guideline, she selects objects from the pile and brings them upstairs. Slowly, stealthily, she starts to restore the attic to its former glory.

It becomes a challenge, an obsession. From the letters and photographs, she builds an idea of how the attic had been constructed during her great-aunt's tenure. She moves the bookcases up during the daytime, and puts her own books on the shelves, taking time to place them neatly together, organised by colour. And so she passes the afternoons up there, sitting, reading, and just looking at the drawing on the wall.

At this stage she hasn't even bothered to pretend to help with any of the work around the house, pleading the need to work on her book. Today Mark has gone to IKEA to get some essentials. He'd asked her repeatedly to come, but she refused. 'Too much paperwork to sort out,' she lied. He grabbed his keys, scraping them angrily against the countertop. Minutes later she heard the car engine blast into life, a thin, squealing distress call of rubber on tarmac, and the roar of his car driving fast and hard down the road. She sits quietly till the sound of the car fades away, and then goes upstairs, her socked feet treading lightly on the wooden stairs, as if Mark can somehow hear her betrayal. She's back in her refuge. Thanks to her hard work, the attic room is now reconstructed to her satisfaction. The bookshelves are complemented by an elderly chaise longue heaped with floral cushions, a thin old Persian carpet, worn but colourful, and a writing desk with a mismatched wooden

chair.

She stands in front of the drawing again. Is it her imagination or does it seem a little different today? The eyes seem more anguished than ever. She touches it again, lightly, and wishes she had someone to ask to come over and look at it. But she doesn't; the downside of moving to a new neighbourhood. She runs a delicate finger over the whorls and curlicues of the lead pencil and wonders again – *who is she?*

That night she calls her mother. It doesn't happen often, her mother doesn't like Mark, and the feeling is mutual. But he's working late, so he's not there to witness her traitorous act. Her mother sounds mildly surprised to hear from her. She brushes past the usual questions and gets straight to the point.

'What do you know about Great-Aunt Jane? I mean, I never met her as a child.'

'No. No, you wouldn't have.'

'Was she...?' She casts about for a handy euphemism. 'A bit odd?'

Her mother laughs, a short, unexpected laugh. 'She was that alright. Never really saw anyone or went to any family events. Loved her home, no children, never even married. Never really left the house until the end. That's all I know really.'

It's nearly September, she thinks. Normally I should be getting ready for work. She's overcome with an intense, almost indulgent sense of lassitude, the luxury of an earned sabbatical. She remembers, as if it were another lifetime, the usual sequence of meetings that normally mark the end of the summer, the preparation of lecture notes and the panic shopping for work clothes. She thinks again about her book, those unopened folders on her attic desk. Idly, she thinks about her book proposal, her

grandiose plans, that all now seem faintly absurd, irrelevant, unimportant. Instead she lies on the chaise longue and drinks tea, and just looks at the drawing, watches the sun pattern the walls until the shadows fall, until the car-lights turn into the driveway, and it's time to return reluctantly downstairs.

One day her mother rings. At first she doesn't answer (the phone, after all, is down two flights of stairs). But the shrilling tone continues until she can't ignore it anymore. Eventually she picks up. Her mother seems distracted.

'I was thinking about our last chat,' she says, without preamble. 'Can we meet for coffee? This morning? If you're not too busy with your book,' she adds humbly. The fact her daughter writes books is a never-ending source of amazement for her. Donna thinks about her blank notebooks and hibernating laptop upstairs, and feels the beginnings of an ancient guilt stirring.

'Sure thing,' she says, and then looks down at her pyjama legs. 'Just give me half an hour to get ready. Usual place?'

It feels... strange... to be outside, out in the world. *So noisy*, she thinks. *So many fast-moving people and cars*. She feels herself shrink back against the chair in the coffee-shop. Her mother notices, and puckers her lips with a worried twist of her mouth.

'How are you doing, Donna dear?'

'Fine.' She fiddles with her spoon.

Her mother perseveres. 'I hope that big house isn't too much for you. It's an awful lot to take on.' The concerned tone of her voice soothes Donna like a sweet balm. She decides to tell her.

'I found something in the attic.' She flicks through

the photos on her phone until she finds one of the images she took of the drawing. 'Here, what do you think of that?'

Her mother stares at it, then at Donna, and then back at the screen again.

'Oh,' she says faintly. She covers her mouth in an oddly old-fashioned gesture. Donna almost feels an urge to laugh, but her mother's expression stops the desire in its tracks. Her mother's face is almost grey, her lips bloodless. Quickly, she pours her more tea, adds sugar and offers her the cup. Her mother takes it, sips, and then puts it down.

'I'm sorry,' she says faintly. 'It's quite a shock. Is that something Mark drew? Of you? And why?'

'It's *not* a drawing of me. That's the weird thing. I found it under the wallpaper in Great-Aunt Jane's attic.'

'In the attic?' Donna nods.

'That's where she was, all the time...'

Her mother's voice drifts off, and then resumes, a little louder and stronger now. 'Aunt Jane. We would be taken to visit her as children. She was old then, and wasn't well, and we had to go up all those flights of stairs to the attic bedroom. She'd be in bed, with all her things around her, vases and cushions and chairs and paintings.' She peers closer. 'But I don't remember that.' She pats her daughter's hand and then passes back the phone, photograph still on the screen. 'A coincidence of course, but a nasty shock, all the same to find that. I hope you and Mark weren't too upset by it.'

'I was shocked, but now I'm more curious. Mark thinks I should forget about it. You know Mark.' Donna smiles, a quick, twisted smile, tight at the edges. Her mother looks at her with compassion.

'He's a bully,' she says quietly. 'Your father was the same.' Her eyes are brown and sorrowful as an old dog.

When she goes home, she rehearses the conversation again in her head. She drifts into the dining room and its landscape of oddments. Today she's going through old correspondence. Most of it turns out to be bills and formally-written cards, but there's an interesting letter tucked under a pile of yellowing lace doilies. The first page is missing but the rest is intriguing. It makes frequent reference to illness and talks lovingly about the attic room as a 'retreat'. The signature is a flowing copperplate 'Jane'. Her great-aunt. Donna sits back on her heels and frowns. Now she knows what rang hollow earlier in her mother's description of being in the house. *Surely if she were an invalid, she thinks, wouldn't she have been on the ground floor?* She puts the letter back carefully and goes back to the attic. There's no point in doing anything else; it's now late afternoon and Mark will be back soon. They've pretty much given up all pretence that she is helping with the house, but she needs at least to have an open notebook on her desk to fool both of them that she is making progress on her book. And all goes well until he comes home.

'Jesus Christ!' Mark stands in the attic doorway. His face crinkles in disgust. 'This is where all the tat has migrated to!' She sits up in her chair and looks defensively around her room, her precious cosy retreat, with its dark green walls, its old-fashioned portraits, its layered surfaces and contrasting furniture.

'I like it like this.'

'But *Architectural Digest* are coming to photograph the house!' His voice is almost a wail. At the back of her mind she knows this is a huge thing for Mark, an announcement he's practiced making to her, but her resentment flows dark and fast.

'They don't need to come up here,' she says shortly.

‘You said I could have this room. Well, this is the way I like it!’

His mouth closes in an ugly line. He looks around, and then points at her laptop.

‘What’s that?’ It’s her open laptop screen, the words ‘Chapter One’ standing black and stark on an empty white page. His face is a study of disbelief.

‘All this time I’ve been working, and you’ve...’ He catches his breath, too angry to continue. He puts his hands to his head and closes his eyes. When he speaks again, it is in a carefully controlled way.

‘Have you written anything yet?’

‘My sabbatical is for the whole term.’ She can’t even remember the last time she even thought about the book.

He looks around the room again. ‘All this time...’ Suddenly she can’t bear that supercilious look on his face, his ineffable rightness. She gets up.

‘And where are you going?’

‘To my mother’s.’ She faces him, defiant. ‘*She* likes to spend time with me.’

‘I’m glad you came over.’

Donna hasn’t really said anything about the fight, that silly fight, but her restful mother knows, just knows without demanding details. Instead they spend the evening sharing the Chinese takeaway Donna brought over. ‘Far too much for me, and the *expense!* You must bring back the leftovers.’ They sit down together with a pot of tea to watch an old episode of *Morse*. Donna breathes in with an audible sigh. The air is heavy with a kind of somnolent contentment that she rarely finds in her own home, except for in her attic room. She thinks of it now, *her* room, with Mark standing in it, the disgust livid on his face, and shakes her head hard to rid herself

of the vision.

‘Anything the matter?’ Her mother has paused *Morse*, a significant act. She cocks her head at Donna, a mute invitation to confide.

‘Actually, there’s something I want to ask you.’ Donna hears herself say. ‘Do you have any photos of Great-Aunt Jane?’ Her mother nods.

It takes a while, a rummage through the photo albums and a trawl through the boxes in the spare room, but her mother finally finds them.

‘Here.’ She spreads out some old black and white photos, their edges curled and tobacco-coloured.

Donna has the queerest feeling; a lightness and a heaviness all at once, as if her stomach has flipped over inside her. She points. ‘That’s her.’

Her mother peers closer. ‘Yes, that’s right.’ She squints at it again. ‘And you can see the family resemblance.’ It’s more than a resemblance. Cold sweat prickles on Donna’s back. Great-Aunt Jane is an older version of herself. An older version of the drawing behind the wallpaper. Same eyes, same hairline, same nose. Different smile... but who can see a smile when the face is distorted in a scream?

She clears her throat, not trusting herself to speak. When she does, she asks, as neutrally as possible, ‘What happened to her that she ended up living up in that attic room?’

The evening darkens outside the window as her mother tells her what she remembers of the story.

‘We were always told she was sick. Really sick. I told you, I remember being brought up to see her, when she was in bed upstairs. She used to read a lot, and draw, but she didn’t speak much.’

‘What was she sick with?’

‘I’ve no idea. Families didn’t really discuss things like

that back then. If people had a *certain type* of sickness, it was rude to discuss it. Unless they died. But poor old Jane just lingered on.’ Her face is soft with memories.

‘A certain kind of sickness?’

Her mother makes a flapping motion with one hand. ‘You know.’ Despite the fact that only the two of them are there, she mouths the next two words silently: ‘*Mental illness*. She wasn’t well in the head. Something happened when she was younger, I think. Anyhow, she stayed upstairs, and only her family ever visited her. That’s why no-one could believe it when she finally left. No, I’m not sure where she went to,’ she adds, in response to Donna’s unspoken question. ‘Maybe it was a nursing home. Maybe it was to a friend’s house. Or a relative’s?’ She frowns, unable to remember which.

And that is all that she can remember. Donna spends a wakeful night in her mother’s cluttered spare room, thinking of her great-aunt’s lonely, confined life. She is miserably conscious of the comparative richness of her own – her job, her book, her freedom, even Mark.

In the morning she rings him. ‘I’m sorry,’ he says instantly when he picks up the phone, and she feels a kind of happiness bloom inside her at the rapidity of his response. He is busy finishing a job, he says, and then he’ll cook a late afternoon brunch for both of them.

‘Truce?’

Mark is holding up a steaming coffee-pot when she opens the kitchen door. It smells delicious, earthy and chocolately. Her stomach rumbles. And scrambled eggs! Her favourite; the buttery, runny kind.

‘Truce,’ she agrees happily.

He pulls up a chair for her, and the tiny gesture thrills her with its unspoken consideration. ‘I know this move has been difficult for you. I know it’s not easy to write

when there's builders coming and going. I know that this house has been shaped by the way I want it to be.' She nods, mouth full of hot scrambled egg. 'But I want you to know that it's important for me that we both enjoy the house.'

'Thanks Mark.' She is oddly pleased to be acknowledged, to have him look her in the eye and confirm that her tastes are different to his. He is smiling at her now, almost tenderly, as he watches her eat.

'Aren't you having any?'

'I'll eat later. Afterwards.'

'After what?'

He grins. 'There's a surprise after this!'

She swallows a forkful of creamy egg, and then puts her fork down. 'I can eat later too. What's this surprise?'

'You need to follow me for that.' And she does, out of the kitchen, up the first flight of stairs, then the second. On the landing he pauses, and then mounts the next flight. He climbs up that one and the next too. Then he puts his foot on the stairs to the attic, and smiles at her. She smiles back uncertainly, but her stomach pitches with a low foreboding at its pit, a feeling that only increases as he strides in front of her with his heavy steps, *thud, thud, thud*, all the way up the stairs, all the way to her attic door.

'I worked on this yesterday evening. And this morning. Look!' He throws the door open and she sees, to her disbelief, that he has completely made over her room in tasteful Victoriana, in shades of dove and burgundy with gold accents. The shabby old furniture has been replaced by glossy antiques. The old rug is gone, in its place a thick, lush Morris print, a lily one that contrasts tastefully with the intertwined bird patterns on the new curtains. Even the *walls* – she presses her fingers to her mouth – even the walls have changed. They've

been wallpapered with a careful, tasteful brownish-grey paper decorated with an elegant golden lily motif. She moves her hand away from her mouth to the wall, to the place where the drawing was; the gesture is oddly like a kiss of farewell.

It is too much. She's can't speak.

'Well?' Mark is watching her, impatient for reaction. 'I took on board what you wanted. Everything here is properly authentic, to recreate that Victorian look you like so much.' He looks around critically. 'And it's no harm to have an oddity when *Architectural Digest* come to photograph the house – it's something that recognises the different time periods that have played out here.'

It's that last, practised sentence that enrages her, that reference to his *real* inspiration behind the renovation that forces the bitter words out of her mouth.

'I don't believe you! I liked it just the way it was! With Great-Aunt Jane's pieces here!'

He is shocked. 'But this is much better. It's properly Victorian.'

'Oh my GOD! Only better by YOUR standards! Now she is crying, openly. 'I loved this little room. It was a proper link to her, to my family. Now it's all gone, probably in a skip somewhere.' His suddenly guilty face tells her this is true. 'You covered up her drawing! You got rid of her things! And replaced it all with this soulless stuff.' She grabs at a minute pucker in the wallpaper and pulls it wildly. It rips in her hand, exposing some of the scrawled lines of the drawing beneath. Donna heaves in a breath and drops her voice in a mean, angry tone. 'You're meant to be an architect, to have a feel for houses. Well this is like some kind of insipid doll house reproduction. You got rid of everything authentic.' She starts crying again, big, ungainly, childlike sobs.

On the periphery of her vision, she sees Mark, too angry to reply, raise his hand and clench it – for a second she starts – and then he smashes his fist into the wooden doorframe. He sucks at his sore fist, pauses, opens his mouth, and then closes it again. There’s no need to speak. His look of blank, black hate says it all.

She meets his gaze squarely. ‘I’m leaving,’ she says quietly.

He doesn’t reply. His angry steps crash down, down, down, all the way down to the kitchen, where, in the sudden silence of the house she hears the distant ‘ping’ of the microwave as he heats up the leftover eggs. She hates him then, really hates him for his endless pragmatism, his stubborn, cold practicality. She climbs into the chilly, slippery embrace of one of the new armchairs and sobs herself quiet.

Donna stays in that room, eyes sore from crying, until the shadows streak over the floor. It gets colder and darker, until her bare arms are stiff with goose-pimples, whole ridges of them. She rubs her arms and stands up, chilled and aching, her hip popping slightly as she does so.

‘If only I could go back,’ she says wistfully, thinking of the room as it was, with all its familiar signposts, the drawing on the wall and the comfortable, shabby furnishing. Gripped by a superstitious moment, she closes her eyes as she says it. When she opens them, of course, all is as it was, a pristine, beautiful, lifeless evocation of a Victorian room.

She barely remembers going downstairs, just the sensation of weight and comfort as she slides, fully-dressed, between the heavy duvet in the spare room. Her hot eyes flicker closed, soothed by the cool cotton surface of the pillow.

It is a strange night, full of half-sleeps and part-dreams, a bustling, disturbed kind of night full of sounds and movement, through which she moves, half-waking, never fully sleeping.

It's morning now. But it's dark. I can't see anything. The duvet must have wrapped itself round me; it's tight, so tight that I can't move. I try to move, but I can't, I'm so securely pinned down. Even my head is constricted; I feel my mouth opening, trying to pull in a breath in this airless darkness. My hands push against the duvet, but it's not yielding. Dimly, at the corner of my eye, I can see a glow, a crack of light, and beyond it...

This makes no sense! I can see a tiny sliver beyond it, but it's nothing from the familiar landscape of the spare room. This is something different, a minute fragment of brownish-grey, flecked with gold.

And then I understand it all. I can't scream, though my mouth is open. I'm trapped here, no matter how much I try to call for help, no matter how hard I press my hands against the band that constricts me. I am flat and silenced and invisible.

There's no help on the way. Mark will just think I've left. He won't think to look for me.

He won't think to look for me here.

Behind the wallpaper.

Papering Over The Cracks features in *The Unheimlich
Manoeuvre* by Tracy Fahey.



[Further information and sales links available here.](#)

Nose To The Window

Andrew Freudenberg

“And as cities across the world continue to burn, scientists confirm that the anomaly is still expanding. Although various theories have been put forward, most experts agree that...”

A burst of static drowned out the announcer. Greg shrugged and turned the dial until he found a music station. Soft rock filled the cab of his pickup and he drummed along with his fingers on the steering wheel. Reception was terrible but he wasn't bothered.

There hadn't been any other cars on the road for at least an hour. Outside there was nothing but the desert, nothing but scrub stretching out as far as the rocky outcrops in the distance. Up in the cold night sky the light from the stars was blurred and peculiar where it should have been crisp and clear. ‘Gravitational distortion,’ one of the supposed experts on the radio had said, whatever that meant.

“Daddy?”

“Honey?”

He turned the volume down and glanced over his shoulder at the back seat. Only his daughter's head showed from under the pile of blankets. Her eyes were half closed and her voice had the wrinkle of someone who wasn't properly awake.

“Where are we going?”

It must have been getting on for two when he'd stubbed out his cigarette and abandoned his rocking chair on the verandah. He'd been half asleep, listening to the world implode, when inspiration had hit.

“Just a road trip honey. I didn't want to wake you so I wrapped you all up and popped you in the back there.”

“Where are we going?”

“Well... I reckon we'll go and pay your mother a visit and then we'll go to the beach.”

“Oh good. I like the beach...”

Even though it was only a couple of seconds before he turned to smile at her, she had already returned to the land of dreams. He turned the radio off so that he could hear her gentle snoring as he drove. It was her that he felt most sorry for. He struggled to be particularly horrified by the potential end of the world or his own demise. It was odd but getting older had smoothed out the fury and expectation that he had been guilty of as a young man. There was a time when he would have raged against the injustice of it all but he had lost too much already. Apart from the love that he felt for his daughter, he was simply past caring.

“Damn...”

Lost in his thoughts he had almost hit the black shape lying across the highway. He wrenched the wheel to the right, taking them bumping over the ragged verge. With a squeal of tires he dragged them back onto the asphalt and stopped.

“Stay here honey.”

The shotgun felt cold in his grip as he got out to investigate. It was clear now that the shape was a person, a large male person, lying unconscious in the road.

“How are you doing there buddy? You chose a hell of a place for a rest. I nearly made it permanent.”

His new acquaintance didn't respond. Greg wondered if he was dead. Pointing the gun at him, he approached. The smell of alcohol filled his nostrils and he shook his head.

"Getting blind drunk I can understand. Doing it out here... not so much."

He poked the man with the edge of his foot.

"Hey!"

Getting no response he walked back to the truck and put the gun on the flatbed. He returned to the man and took a deep breath before grabbing his hands.

"Sorry man, I'd have given you a lift into town but there's no way I'm going to be able to lift you up. If you freeze to death, I apologise in advance."

Once the drunk was hauled safely off the road he retrieved his gun and got back into the cab. Zoe was still asleep. Thankful for small mercies he got back under way.

He regretted his decision to go through Albermal almost immediately. It wouldn't have been a huge inconvenience to go off road and avoid it but he hadn't thought it worthwhile. Now he wasn't so sure. A crowd was milling around outside the town's only drinking hole and they looked drunk and ornery. A couple of sleepers, or corpses, it was impossible to be sure, littered the sidewalk. Around them stumbled the still upright, their dazed expressions pale under the moonlight. A few of them were exchanging punches, engaged in a halfhearted fight that seemed to be happening in slow motion. One of the others staggered out into the road. Greg eased off the gas, his eyes fixed on the way ahead. Carefully he steered the truck around the man. He was aware of muted rock and roll drifting out from the bar. The song was unfamiliar.

"Easy now, Mister. Just passing by."

As he passed, the drunk stumbled into the side of the truck and banged his fists against the window.

“What are you going to do? What are you going to do?”

Greg sped up and watched him fall onto the asphalt in the rear view mirror. He was happy to see that the incident had passed Zoe by.

At the other end of the street was the only other show in town. Like the bar, there was a crowd of regulars swarming around the church. Unlike the bewildered patrons at the Eagle Tavern though, these people looked focused and angry. An unnatural orange glow flickered from inside the building.

“What’s going on, Daddy?”

Zoe had pulled herself upright, pressing her nose up against the window. Greg was about to respond when the double doors burst open accompanied by a cloud of black smoke. Three people emerged, one of them a priest, clearly being dragged out by the other two.

“What are they doing, Daddy?”

Greg’s first thought was that he was looking at a rescue but there was something about the scene that didn’t add up. His eyes moved from the wide-eyed fear on the holy man’s face to the crazed fury in the expressions of those around him. There was something wild, an intangible wrongness that enveloped the whole scene. He watched as a young woman stuck her face up close to the terrified priest. It was impossible to hear what she was saying but judging by the spittle on her lips and her balled fists, it was nothing good.

“Daddy, what are they going to do to that man?”

“I don’t know honey. I think they’re rescuing him. The church is on fire.”

For a split second his gaze locked with the priest’s. His expression reminded Greg of his time in-country

with the Infantry. Most people would never feel that level of desperation, never find themselves staring death in the face. Now he knew that he had lied to his daughter.

“I’m not sure though, darling. It’s...”

The priest had broken free of his captors and was running towards them. They were still rolling and Greg was tempted to put the pedal to the metal. This wasn’t his circus to get involved in. Zoe was watching, her mouth wide open now, both palms flat against the truck window.

“Run!” she screamed.

“Ah hell.”

Greg slowed a little more and pulled his shotgun from the passenger seat. He stuck it out of the window.

“You, get in the back. The rest of you stay where you are.”

He was already accelerating as the Priest rolled over the side and into the back of the truck. In the mirror he could see several guns leveled in their direction.

“Zoe, hit the floor.”

The truck’s engine roared as it gave all it could, wheels grasping for purchase on the dusty road. A couple of shots rang out behind them but, thankfully, seemed not to hit anything important. Greg didn’t ease off until the old roadhouse came into view, some five clicks later. He pulled into the parking lot, positioning them behind a stationary truck. It didn’t look like anyone had bothered following them but better safe than sorry. Dim lights shone inside but all seemed quiet.

“Stay here, Zoe. I’ll only be a minute.”

The priest was curled up in the foetal position but sat up as Greg approached. His face was pale and streaked with soot and tears.

“Thank you. Thank you so much. You saved my life.

I owe you..."

"You don't owe me anything, Padre. It was just the right time and the right place. You got lucky."

"Still..."

"What the hell was that all about anyway?"

"It was... unbelievable. I was leading prayers about the..."

The priest gestured towards the streaks in the sky.

"Yeah."

"That... and then Jimmy Jones started yelling. He was saying that God had abandoned them, that the Church had been lying to them all this time. It spread through the congregation like wildfire. I tried to calm them down but they were... they were a mob. They started shouting about burning the church down, like they hadn't been going for years... years and years. Jimmy Jones and Fred Campbell grabbed me. I... I don't know what they would have done if you hadn't shown up."

"I've got a fairly good idea. It doesn't take much to tip people over the edge. I'm not a religious man but I can see how they might think they've been abandoned."

The priest sniffed and shook his head.

"God moves in mysterious..."

"Yeah, I've heard that one. It doesn't help much when it comes down to the crunch though does it? Well, anyway, as much as I'd love to stand here philosophising, I've got somewhere I need to be. I'd be obliged if you'd hop out."

"What? You can't leave me here."

"Oh, I think you'll find I can. I intend to spend my last day, if that's what it turns out to be, with my daughter. I'm afraid you're not invited."

"What am I meant to do?"

"I don't know. Steal a car. Get drunk. I'm sure

there's some booze in the roadhouse. Either way, that's your problem I'm afraid."

The priest clambered out of the flatbed and stood shivering in the night air.

"Well, thanks anyway. I owe you... and your daughter..."

Greg nodded and grinned.

"Like I said, you got lucky Padre. Let's hope it was worth it. Good luck."

The sun was creeping over the horizon by the time they reached the top of the steep mountain road. Lines of purple and green blurred into the usual orange as night faded away. Zoe watched out of the back window, transfixed by the spectacular display in the sky. She hummed to herself, lost in her own private world. Her father's concentration was elsewhere. They'd soon be able to see the city that ran along the other side of the range.

His worst fears were realised as it came into view. Plumes of smoke and fire rose in both directions as far as the eye could see. Whole blocks had already been reduced to blackened remnants. Helicopters flew back and forth, some military, some emergency services. The similarity to scenes that he'd witnessed in his military days was obvious, but this felt entirely different. This was home. He had his daughter with him. He bit his lip, aware that he'd have to hold it together for both of their sakes.

"Daddy, why are all those places on fire?"

How could he explain this to her? What possible excuse could he come up with? The whole truth was more than she should have to bear at her age, but they had been through hell together and he had never lied to her.

“People are acting crazy because they’re scared, honey.”

“What are they scared of, Daddy?”

“They’re scared of the strange light in the sky.”

“Why?”

“Well... Some people are funny like that. They get scared of things they don’t understand.”

“Oh.”

With all the natural nonchalance that only a six year old can muster, Zoe lost interest and turned back to staring out of the window. Greg exhaled, glad to be off the hook, and focused on the road ahead. They were descending now, getting ever closer to the chaos. A couple of cars roared past them heading the other way. He was glad it was them scraping the railings and not him. It was a long way down.

“Idiots.”

By the time they reached the dual lane highway that ran in the shadow of the hills, it was daytime. The anomaly’s black form loomed, looking like someone had cut a jagged hole from the sky. Greg gunned the pick up and headed east. They passed numerous wrecks, a couple of them still burning in the early morning heat. Traffic was light but the drivers were unpredictable, often not sober and meandering over the lines. He gave them a wide berth. The smell of combustion was strong now, combining with the omnipresent wail of sirens to strengthen the impression of being in a warzone. He eyed his shotgun, lying on the passenger seat, and hoped that he wouldn’t have to use it.

“This is the turning for Mummy isn’t it, Daddy?”

“Yes it is babe. Well remembered.”

With relief he took the junction and followed the road as it meandered up past rows of identical white houses. A middle-aged woman in a smart trouser suit

screached something incomprehensible at them as they passed. She had a bottle of vodka in one hand and a bottle of rum in the other. Both were nearly empty. Greg turned back to his daughter.

“You alright darling?”

“Yes Daddy, I’m fine. I think that lady was drunk.”

“I think you might be right.”

The huge iron gates that led into the graveyard were wide open and Greg drove straight in. Normally he’d have gone up to the main building and parked there but he didn’t want to be too far from the vehicle. He took a wide path only meant for pedestrians and hearses that took them straight up to their destination.

“Mummy!”

Zoe was already half way to the grave before he could grab his gun and get out himself. He looked around nervously at the spattering of other mourners. They were all quite far away and more interested in their own dead than them. He relaxed and joined Zoe at his wife’s burial place.

“Hey Mummy, hello! I hope you’re sleeping well. The world has gone a little bit crazy and people are acting funny. I don’t know if I like it, but it’s all right. I’m not scared. Daddy’s with me. Say hello Daddy.”

“Hey honey.”

They’d fallen into the habit of making conversation from their very first trip to her resting place. Somehow it had made the visits easier for them both. It had been four years since the disease had taken Selma and he doubted Zoe really remembered her anymore. This was the reality now. He watched as his daughter babbled away, telling her dead mother about the pictures she’d drawn, the television shows she’d watched... anything that came to mind. She seemed capable of almost endless chatter. She’d inherited that from Selma. He

wasn't much for talking.

"Zoe, we'd better get going. Can you hop in the truck while I say a couple of words."

"OK Daddy. Bye Mummy. See you soon."

He watched her skip back to the truck, all golden hair and light. It made his heart heavy and he pushed back against the sensation. He turned back and knelt on the grass.

"Hey Selma. We're a little short on time but I wanted to tell you that we love you. I guess... well, it seems that the world might be about to end. I can't think of any other way of putting it. I'm hoping that it isn't true and all of this insanity is going to just go away, but chances are that it won't. So... this might be the last time we see you. Maybe we'll see you in another place. You know me, I'm not counting on it, but it sure would be nice. Anyway, rest easy. We need to go. See you on the other side."

He drove back through the suburb, aware that they were going to have to go through downtown to get to the beach. They crossed the highway. They passed smashed windows and closed shops, some of it clearly the aftermath of looting. Typical, Greg thought, that there were those whose first impulse in the face of impending doom was to grab a bigger TV. They started to see the occasional bloodied body in the street so he told his daughter to lie down in the back.

"I'll put the radio on so you can listen to some music. We should be there soon."

The news blasted out as soon as he flicked the switch.

"A mass suicide in a Chinese..."

He hit tune.

"Missiles launched into the heart of..."

This time he got lucky and the cab filled with the

distorted sound of some classic rock band that he couldn't remember the name of. He knew Zoe was likely to complain but didn't feel inclined to keep looking.

"That's all there is today, honey."

A personnel carrier crammed with soldiers roared past them. They looked down at him, scoping them out. He forced himself to stare straight ahead, paranoid despite having nothing to hide. It seemed a strange way to spend your last day, if that's what it turned out to be... taking orders and running around on government business. The carrier swung left at the next intersection and disappeared. Greg breathed a sigh of relief.

The streets weren't as bad as he'd feared. Small groups of people stood around talking and drinking but there seemed to be little fight in them. He supposed that, judging by the state of the city, they'd had a heavy night. They were moving slowly now, negotiating burned out cars and other detritus that littered the streets. Nobody challenged them but that didn't stop him touching the shotgun once or twice for luck.

Finally they were clear and the coastal road lay ahead of them. The anomaly seemed even larger when seen looming over the open sea. The waters themselves were wild and tinged with purple and red. It seemed that others had had the same idea. Greg had wondered where all the children were, thinking that perhaps they were hidden away, sequestered from the abounding mayhem. Well, apparently a great many were here, playing obliviously under the watchful eye of their pale-faced parents.

"You can sit back up. It isn't far to go now."

Not wanting to join the masses he took them up beyond the city limits to where the coast began to curve back round on itself. There was a cove that he had used to visit with Selma back before Zoe was born, and with

them both afterwards. It was small and could only be accessed by scrambling down a rocky incline. Mostly the general public kept away. The last time they had been was the day of the funeral. Something had kept him from wanting to return, although Zoe had asked a couple of times. Today though, it seemed as if he could think of nowhere else to go.

“Here we are. Come on honey, let’s go to the beach.”

There was an unusual electricity in the air that made the hair on the back of their necks bristle as they made their way down to the shore. The colours swirling around the anomaly were becoming more spectacular and Greg thought he could hear a faint buzzing that seemed to have no source.

“Can I paddle, Daddy?”

“Of course you can sweetie. Please don’t go out too far. The waves are a little rough today.”

“OK Daddy.”

He sat down on the black sand and let the stress drain out of him. Here they were, the end of the road. Or was it? He still felt no fear; merely a little sadness that Zoe might not get to grow old and take what pleasure there was to be had from living a life. Greg was an optimist though, didn’t believe in fearing what the future might hold. Maybe they’d pass right through the thing and find some kind of existence in the beyond. He wasn’t holding out for it, or if he was being really honest with himself, totally convinced that it was likely. It was possible though and for now that would have to do. Zoe was splashing and laughing in the cold sea, waving and smiling at him.

“Come on Daddy, the water’s fine. Come on.”

He smiled and waved back as he got back up. He kicked off his shoes.

“Watch out, here I come.”

Nose Against The Window features in *My Dead And Blackened Heart* by Andrew Freudenberg.



[Further information and sales links available here.](#)

I Love You

J. R. Park

I₁ Love₂ You₃

1 - I

I find it hard to talk about myself. Not because I'm bashful or shy, quite the contrary, I am rather proud of my favourable oratory skills. No, my problem with the subject comes with a lack of understanding about my origin.

I am alive, of that I am certain, but even this was a fact I was unaware of for some time.

How long it took for this epiphany I cannot say, but slowly, however, the creeping realisation of my own existence filtered through my subconscious and allowed me to think.

Time meant nothing.

There were only images.

Faces.

Impassively I watched as they presented themselves to me; looking through me as they smiled, grimaced and combed their hair. I cannot say how many I saw as I had no memory to capture their likeness. I watched as they came. And when they left I watched the empty room. I was not bored as I had no concept of boredom, but

neither did I know of joy.

That was, until Eliza.

She was the first feeling I can consciously remember, and as such, she was my first thought. I may have had thoughts before, but I had no will to hang on to them. No will to remember. This is why Eliza was different.

From that first memory I felt as though I'd already spent hours watching her. Maybe I had. Maybe it had taken me days, years even, to force myself to keep her in my thoughts. It did not matter. All I knew was my vision embraced her contours with an urgent eagerness and I wanted nothing more than to bathe in her presence.

This awakening caused me to regard the world around me. I could not move from the spot, and although I could feel my stomach churn, I could not visibly see my body.

Unable to leave my position, it wasn't long before I was acquainted with tedium. Flashes ran through my mind in the hours between Eliza, making me begin to question my own being. *Where was I from? How did I get here?*

Who was I?

Where was I?

The wall in front of me offered no real clues. It was clean and decorated with floral wallpaper; a splash of creams, greens and pink. Its pattern had grown so familiar to me that even now, thinking about those badly drawn petals and stems makes me feel quite ill.

I couldn't see the floor, or what was to my left or right. My head was fixed into position. All I could do was look forwards.

Straight ahead at that God forsaken wall!

My frustrations boiled into anger, but despite my rage I was unable to shout.

When Eliza approached me, however, her image

abated my anger and soothed my very existence.

But her pacifying effect was only temporary. My new-found thoughts had caused me to question, and one day I had built up such a head of frustration that I reached out to the young woman, desperate to touch her.

She didn't try to move away, but then she didn't react at all. All she did was look straight at me, making no comment of my obvious sadness.

I was no longer content with just being around her. I wanted her to notice me. I wanted her to comfort me.

To soothe my angst.

To ease my pain.

And suddenly a memory flashed through my mind.

A crown: I remembered a crown surrounded by trees. Was I a prince? No, the crown belonged to a woman. But what of the trees? Perhaps I was a woodcutter? An axe. The thought of an axe seemed to feel right in my hands.

Who was the woman? A princess? My lover?

I remembered a laugh. A cackle. Shriill and soul shaking. A curse.

A curse?

Was that how I got here?

Had I been here for years? *Centuries?*

As I thought back to the people I had watched over the past few weeks, I remembered their actions. Eliza, appearing in front of me, smiling and pouting; running a lipstick over her cherry red lips. Her father, Martin, stopping to scratch his beard and flare his nostrils as he showed me the hair that grew out from his face. And her mother, Samantha. She had forced one of her eyelids open whilst staring straight at me, adjusting a contact lens with intense concentration.

They weren't looking at me.

They were looking at themselves!

I banged against an invisible wall, realising what my fate must have been. No wonder I had given up on memories, driven insane by boredom as I watched the vane preen and groom for centuries.

I banged again on the unseen force that was my prison, but it made no impact.

I screamed; my efforts as futile as my last attempt.

Eliza took no notice. She pulled a brush through her golden, waist-length hair and turned away.

A curse; it must have been.

Something from a magic the world had long forgot.

There was no other explanation.

I punched the glass that kept me trapped, but my prison, the mirror, stayed perfectly still.

2 - Love

My rage and anger at my imprisonment only intensified my feelings for Eliza. The soft sensation of seeing her face was a feeling I wanted to drown in.

Each time she approached, my anger swelled, turning these once blissful moments into fits of rage. My temper continued to climb, destroying all pleasure I once found, and leaving me a wrathful spectre, hateful of this world.

But this searing anger gave me a new power, one I discovered when at last my rattling within my prison yielded some success. Eliza was once again combing her hair with a faraway look in her eye, but this time, as I screamed her name with a voiceless cry I launched forward and felt something on my fingertips.

Eliza jumped back and looked startled. Her whole body trembled and she gripped her wrist whilst she stared wildly into the mirror. It was clear she couldn't see me, but she had *felt* me. I could still feel her. My

fingertips savoured the sensation, as glancing as it was, of her soft, warm wrist.

I had done it.

I had pushed outside of my world and felt an angel.

But my success only heightened my desires.

I needed more.

They say *absence makes the heart grow fonder*. And my love for Eliza (make no mistake for I was truly and madly in love with her) only intensified when her father left me in the darkened surroundings of their garage.

After shocking both myself and Eliza with my accidental, but fleeting contact, I watched as the young girl flew into a terrified fit; a screaming rage that was only abated when Martin took the mirror from the wall and marched into the garage, adjoining the house.

I don't know how long I was left there, looking into the blackness, but I could not let the mindless madness I had endured for centuries return. I would not fall into eternity again, not whilst my thoughts and feelings lingered on Eliza.

I spent my isolation concentrating on my feelings, trying to replicate the situation that had allowed me to briefly leave my prison. Like a bartender mixing cocktails I pulled at my own emotions, blending anger, sadness, frustration and love, desperate to find the right combination that worked against the curse that held me.

My efforts bore little success. For a few seconds I was able to feel a wind chill on my hand, or the cold, concrete ground as my fingertips sought something to grip; but I was unable to decipher what was reality and what was merely wishful thinking. It seemed the fleeting breakthrough to the other side of this accursed mirror was all I was able to do; the height of my strength.

Despite all my efforts, I was doomed to the fate

thrust upon me by some evil witch, whose identity had been lost in the swirls of a history I could not recall.

I grew melancholy as I slowly began to accept my fate, but destiny was not done with me yet. It appears that the universe works with some kind of symmetry. For every stroke of luck there must be an act of misfortune. This also works in reverse.

A cat must have left it just a little too late to cross the road, then somehow surviving a meeting with a car, it crawled to a safe place to die. Whatever happened to it, by the time it dragged its back end under the gap of the garage door and into the darkness its innards were trailing behind like a blood coated octopus. It seemed this animal was on the last of its nine lives.

The poor feline didn't make it very far before it finally lost all its strength and slumped to the floor. I watched it with an idle curiosity, but one that didn't disturb me from my melancholy; I was too forlorn to care about anything other than my lost love. But as the animal's blood pooled around its corpse and rivulets made their way towards my tomb I was astonished and bewildered to find a stirring within me that I had not encountered before.

The blood met the mirror and I was at once awash with a strength that invigorated my core. I felt exhilarated as my heart pounded against my chest with the thump of a thousand fists. What was this new madness? I could not say, but my mind cared not to analyse this moment, only to indulge further. I could feel the trickle that ran towards me stimulating my body. Its metallic taste tickled my tongue; and that's when I realised where I was.

I had managed to pull myself half out of the mirror, my hands clawing at the concrete floor whilst my tongue

lapped at the crimson puddles. I edged closer and closer to the feline corpse, drinking every droplet of blood as I made my way across the dusty ground. Taking hold of the still warm fur, I pulled it towards my mouth and slowly sunk my teeth into the soft flesh. Like silk to my tongue, the cat's meat was smooth and succulent; its juicy insides, spilling crimson nectar that ran down my chin. I savoured the sensation as, like a fine caviar, it slipped down my throat with ease.

Pulling me from my moment of pleasure, a muffled chime rang out, one that I immediately recognised as the doorbell.

Despite being trapped for centuries, I was not unfamiliar with parts of the modern world. Somehow I had assimilated an understanding through the osmosis of my passive observations.

A conversation drifted into the garage, but one I could not clearly make out. The lilt of Eliza's sweet voice however, was unmistakable, even from this distance. By the time I clambered over the boxes that littered the garage and forced the side door from its hinges to enter the house, the conversation had ceased and her home appeared empty.

Bile rose to my throat as I saw that sickly wallpaper again. An off-coloured patch on the wall revealed where the mirror had been hung, its presence protecting an oval shape from the bleaching power of the sun whilst the surroundings had faded over time.

A sound of creaking and movement upstairs alerted me to Eliza's whereabouts and I charged up the steps without a moment's thought. I couldn't wait to see her now I was free. I was whole, able to touch, to taste and to be a part of the world in which she lived.

But as I opened the door I did not expect to see her wrapped in the arms of another.

My jealousy became a red mist that shrouded my mind. I jumped on the man and pulled him from her, sending him crashing into a chest of drawers. He didn't even have time to stand up before I was on him again. My hands fell through his flesh like it was vapour, showering the painted pink walls in a red hue whilst his screams sang in my ears.

I pulled his neck to my mouth and tore at his jugular. A spurt of blood flew down my throat, but its taste did nothing for me. I discarded his still twitching corpse, allowing it to slump into a broken pile of limbs and meat as I turned my attention to the woman that lay curled in the bed.

Eliza seemed to be in some kind of fugue state, unable to find the strength or will to flee from the horror she'd just witnessed. The fear made her flesh turn white, giving it an even softer, more delicate appearance than before. I knelt down on the bed next to her and stroked her precious, milky cheek.

'Eliza,' I said.

It felt like a miracle to speak her name and know her ears heard me. Her panting grew more rapid, in time with her heart, and I felt myself grow hard. I could feel the warmth from her skin, I could smell the sweet scent of her perfume. I studied the pleasing pout of her lips and the ever present sparkle that glinted in her beautiful green eyes.

And then I felt that pull again. The same one as I did in the garage.

A hunger curled my stomach and I found myself licking my lips with anticipation whilst leaning closer to the exposed nap of her neck. It was like I was no longer in control; watching myself as I tilted her head back. She complied as the terror turned her docile. Her bosom heaved with a heavy sigh as my lips touched her skin.

Her scent filled my nostrils with a heady intoxication that egged me on. My tongue danced over her flesh and savoured the taste. I pulled her closer still as I gently sunk my teeth in, causing her to gasp.

It was at this moment I understood who I was, I understood what I did and why.

My attraction to her became too clear. As I stood on the precipice of this epiphany I felt a wave of calm, a wholeness that I knew my place in the world, and I was fulfilling it. If that moment could have continued forever, then eternity would have been heaven indeed.

My teeth tore into her flesh, my hands gripped at her head and pulled it from her neck, tearing and twisting the stringy strands of meat that stubbornly held on to her torso until they finally let go.

I buried my mouth further into the savage wound that was once her neck; a stump of twisted skin and broken bone that shot a jet of blood high into the air like a hellish geyser. As I gorged on the sensual overload that was the feast of her body I clawed at the face of her decapitated head, feeling those beautiful features buckle and split under the pressure of my strength. A finger slid into her eye socket and I relished in the gooey sensation as my digit forced its way into her eyeball, dripping fluid down my knuckle as the orb burst.

Continuing with my orgy of destruction I turned my attention to her stomach, bit through her belly and pulled at the wound with both my hands. Plunging my arms deep inside her, I filled my grip with her innards and scooped them out, allowing them to flop over her corpse like a disgusting blanket of sick.

It was then, at my most indulgent moment, that I caught a glimpse of myself in her bedroom mirror. It took me a few seconds to realise what I was looking at, but by this time I had come to accept what monstrous

appearance might make up my reflection. My skin was darkened grey, almost black, but not quite. My jaw protruded further than the rest of my face, making my mouth appear like an isosceles triangle, albeit a triangle full of pointed teeth. My eyes glowed a sky-light blue, and although my head was hairless, four finger-like horns grew from my skull and curled to follow the contours of my cranium.

The witch had done well to banish me, to stop me in my tracks where the woodcutter had failed all those centuries ago. It had all come back to me. The summoning. The command to kill the princess. The fight with her suitor. His slaughter by his own axe and the entrapment by the witch.

How long had I been there?

The mirror had been a family heirloom and Eliza was an ancestor of that very princess I had been brought into this world to destroy.

I hadn't loved her, I had only been reawakened, spurred into action by my original calling and the almost identical appearance of Eliza to her long-forgotten ancestor.

It wasn't her I loved, it was her flesh, her blood; the rapture of watching someone, studying them, then relishing in their destruction.

This is what I love, for this is what I am.

3 - You

And now I am free from the curse of the witch, no longer entombed by mirrors, but able to rest in them; to jump from mirror to mirror. To wait. To observe.

Since tasting the defilement of Eliza, I have yet to reach those dizzying heights of fulfilment.

But I've been watching you in the mornings and

today I've pulled myself free. You can probably feel me
by your side right now.

Don't look up.

I want to remember that face.

The way you furrow your brow.

The expression you make when you read.

I Love You features in *Death Dreams In A Whorehouse*
by J. R. Park.



[Further information and sales links available here.](#)

What follows is the opening prologue of the novella 'Hell Ship'.

Hell Ship

Benedict J. Jones

PROLOGUE

The Malacca Straights February 1944

They were down in the belly of the beast. Down where the heat was a tangible being, a physical entity that weighed on the men and crushed the life from out of them. The only sounds were the murmurs of hopelessness and the clunk-clunk of the engines punctuated by the occasional wail of the lost. Of smells, there were many; sweat, diesel, corruption, rot, and the meaty scent of death.

Whatever cargo the ship had once carried, its load was now one of human misery. Where once perhaps sacks of grain or crates of fruit had lain men were now packed in tighter than cattle on their way to market. Men lay atop other men, limbs twisted and combined forming one, great, panting, mass of sweating flesh. Wide, frightened eyes, stared out. They were filthy, rail thin, and they stank. They had stank for so long now that none of them seemed to notice. They had bigger worries weighing upon their shoulders than the mere fact that they stank.

‘Peter is dead.’

Captain Bill Nunhead looked over at his friend Lawrence Cort-Smith, likewise a Captain. Peter Herring had been with them since Singapore when they had been captured in the relentless advance of the Imperial Japanese forces. Since then they had seen prison cells, work camps, and death. Despite it all Nunhead had been convinced that their trio, the three musketeers as they had dubbed themselves, would see the end of the war. That they would see it together and that they would survive. If he could have cried, he would have but having lost so much moisture through sweating and dehydration Nunhead simply did not have the ability to cry. Cort-Smith grasped Nunhead’s shoulder, so bony now, and forced a smile.

‘He’s better off out of it. Have you worked out where the bastards are taking us?’

Nunhead shook his head.

‘Another work camp most likely, but where? I don’t know and I’m not sure it matters anymore – does it? It’ll just be another place where they try to work us to death.’

‘Then we try to make a break for it. I’d rather die a free man in the bush than live another moment under their yoke.’

Nunhead smiled despite himself. He looked at Cort-Smith and tried to picture him as he was before – the darling of the officer’s mess and always caught up in the social whirl of colonial life. Truth be told they had not been friends until after their capture. Nunhead had never liked the handsome young officer; a charming blonde demon at the pony club and with the young ladies when he wasn’t riding. But now, now Nunhead would have given his right arm to make sure that Cort-Smith saw the end of this terrible world that they had found themselves caught up in.

Suddenly there was light in the darkness. A hatch had been thrown open. Men recoiled from the daylight like ghouls in a crypt exposed to the rays of the sun. Nunhead squinted at the light and saw four silhouettes moving down the stairs.

‘What do these Johnnies want?’

Once the guards had stepped down into the murk they were easy to see; khaki jackets, shorts, and caps, rifles, with long bayonets attached, in their hands. Men lying near the stairs reached out to them.

‘Water...’

‘Mercy...’

Rifle butts lashed out, fingers and arms were broken and smashed. One of the guards jabbed out with his bayonet and the men huddled in together even closer than they were before. They had learned to fear the casual cruelty of their captors. The guards looked around at the men, they looked back over their shoulders and Nunhead watched as another man descended into the hold; olive green jacket with a crisp white shirt beneath, white pith helmet, khaki jodhpurs, polished oxblood cavalry boots, and a riding crop tucked under his arm. Like the guards he looked over the prisoners, and then nodded. The guards were spurred to action and used their bayonets to divide ten men out from the crowd and herd them up the stairs. The officer turned to follow.

‘*Yoroshiku onegai shimasu,*’ an English officer, Nunhead recognised him as Major Haddenfield, had spoken in rushed Japanese and stepped from out of the huddle. He was tall, and as thin as the rest, clad in a filthy loincloth and the remnants of a battledress jacket, ‘Please, where are you taking these men?’

The Japanese officer considered the Englishman for a moment. When he replied, it was in halting English.

‘Where they go is not your concern. You will soon see.’

‘*Arigato*,’ replied Haddenfield, ‘we need water, please.’

‘*Arigato...*’ the Japanese rolled the word around in his mouth and then smiled at the Major. His riding crop lashed out splitting the skin of Haddenfield’s cheek. ‘*Arigato, arigato*,’ he laughed and raised the riding crop again. Haddenfield cowered like a whipped dog. The Japanese Officer laughed again and then followed his men up the stairs.

With a metallic clank the hatch was shut and once again they were in darkness with only the moaning of the dying and the clunk-clunk of the engine.

* * *

The guards came again four more times in the next ninety minutes. The men below decks could hear nothing of what occurred above – just the clunk-clunk of the engine drowning out almost everything else. When they came down the fifth time there were perhaps a third of the men left. Nunhead and Cort-Smith were caught up in the herding and driven towards the stairs.

‘Stay close to me, Bill,’ whispered Cort-Smith.

They knew enough to let themselves be driven by the guards, any attempt at disobedience or dragging of your feet would earn you a smash from the rifle butts – or worse, and both men knew how long it took them to heal now, they had seen men wither and die from the injuries inflicted off-hand by the guards; broken bones leading to sepsis and shallow bayonet cuts becoming infected and maggot ridden.

The daylight forced them to keep their heads down and eyes away from the glare of the sky. But the air, the air was glorious out of the cargo hold. Both men sucked in great lungfuls of the ocean air. The group of ten were

shoved out further on to the deck. Nunhead risked a look up and saw that part of the rail had been removed at the side of the ship, the deck around it was slick with crimson.

‘My God...’

Two burly bare-chested Japanese stood waiting, swords in one hand and blood stained rags in the other. There was a shrill cry from behind them and a young Canadian soldier broke clear of the ring of guards and made a break for the rail on the opposite side.

There was the bark of an order and two shots rang out. They watched the Canadian skid and fall, shot through both legs. The Japanese officer pointed his riding crop at the fallen man and shouted. Two soldiers ran forward with thin rope, not much thicker than cord, in their hands. The other nine men watched as the soldiers tied the Canadian’s arms together and to his body in a series of ever more complex knots. Once they were done they dragged him over through the gore to the open rails. He was punched until he knelt, forehead touching the deck. One of the burly executioners stepped forward and planted his feet. The katana was brought up and the other soldiers watching took in a breath as one. The blade dropped and the Canadian’s head rolled away like a melon falling from a fruit stall. The second swordsman picked up the head and dropped it in a basket while the first used his foot to roll the decapitated soldier to the side. Another kick and he went over, disappearing from view with a splash into the sea. The man who had kicked him over turned and smiled at those who remained as he used the rag to wipe clean the blade of his sword.

‘This is murder, murder plain and simple,’ muttered Nunhead.

‘And what they’ve been doing to us these last two years wasn’t?’

Nunhead had to concede Cort-Smith's point, but this was different. Another man was pulled from the group and the process was repeated. The complex knots, the dragging through the spilt blood and then the beheading.

'Looks like this is it, old man.'

'How can you be so bloody blasé about this?'

'Oh, I'm not, Bill. But I am resigned to it – and at least it's clean. I'd much rather die clean, I decided on that a long time ago but I've never been brave enough to see it through.'

Nunhead looked around; he could see the officers of the ship watching through the windows of the bridge, up to the higher deck where the officer in the pith helmet stood watching and it was then that he saw the figure who stood next to the officer. He was shorter than the officer and slightly bent, as though he had a partial hunch, his face was hidden in the shadows cast from his conical hat. He was clad in robes of so dark a blue that they were almost black, a string of prayer beads as large as golf balls was hanging down from his neck, and he leant on a long thin staff. In this world of machines, guns, soldiers, and uniforms the man stood out as an anachronism who looked like he belonged in some earlier century, whispering advice in the ear of a Shogun or Daimyo, a Samurai lord's religious advisor.

The guards grabbed at Cort-Smith and the blonde officer seemed intent to go quietly but Nunhead could not accept his friend's acquiescence. He stepped forward from the side and drove his head into the guard's face. Nunhead grunted in grim satisfaction as he felt the man's nose break and he grabbed for the rifle. There was shouting one of the other guards stabbed out with his bayonet which bit into Nunhead's side. The scream of his friend drove Cort-Smith to action. He brought his knee up hard into the guard's groin and then punched him in the throat. Weak as it was the blow choked away

the guard's breath and the Japanese soldier threw his hands up to his throat letting go of his rifle.

Nunhead struggled for the rifle of his guard and Cort-Smith scooped the fallen weapon up from the deck, working the bolt as he did so. He turned and shot the guard that Nunhead was struggling with through the head. Nunhead's heart rose. They had a chance, slim as it was. Bang-bang-bang; three shots in swift succession. Cort-Smith coughed and stumbled forward. The officer with the riding crop stood above them with his Nimbu pistol in his hand, smoke rising from the barrel. Nunhead swung the rifle determined to avenge his fallen friend. Something hard smashed into his temple and the world span. His legs went from under him and Nunhead hit the deck. He looked across at Cort-Smith and watched the light go out of his eyes. Nunhead sobbed and when he was picked up he did not struggle.

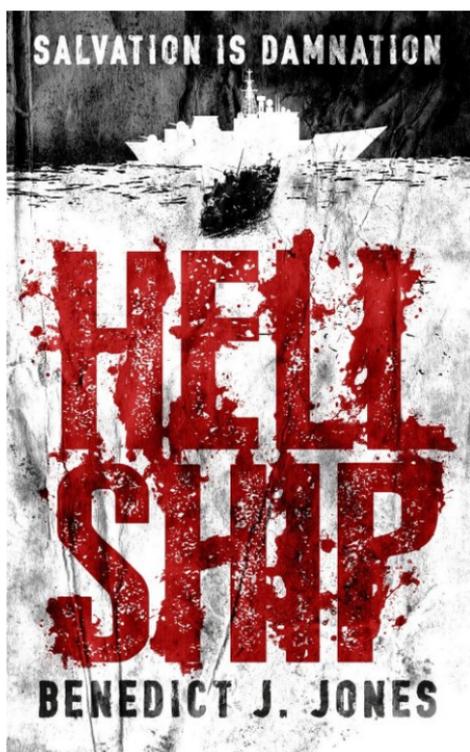
When they tied the knots around his wrists and body the ropes cut into him and burned his flesh. Then he was up and being dragged over to the side. Cort-Smith had said at least it was clean this way and Nunhead found himself agreeing with his friend as he was pinned to the deck. The katana went up and then came down. Another head in a basket, another body as shark bait, the circle continues.

The officer and the priest watched the sky; shapes swirled behind the blue and the sky began to change and twist as though other skies were pressing at it from behind. The blue seemed to bulge, darker colours trying to show through. The priest turned to look at the soldier.

'Yori oku no dansai.' *More men.*

The officer nodded and thunder broke somewhere in the distance.

Hell Ship by Benedict J. Jones continues in the novella.

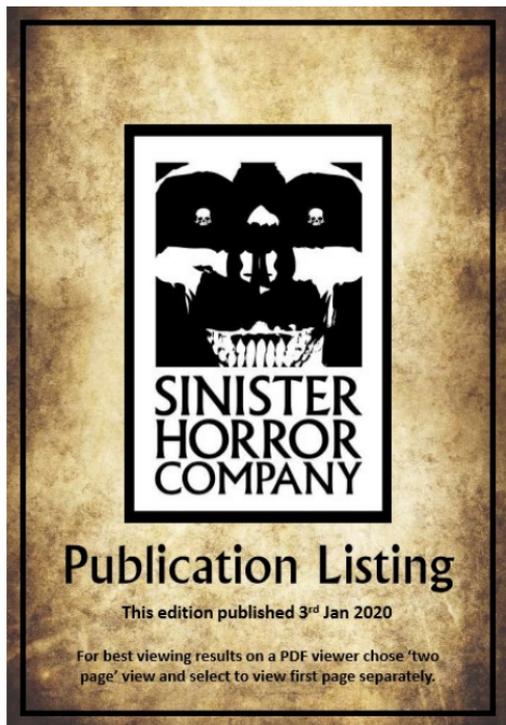


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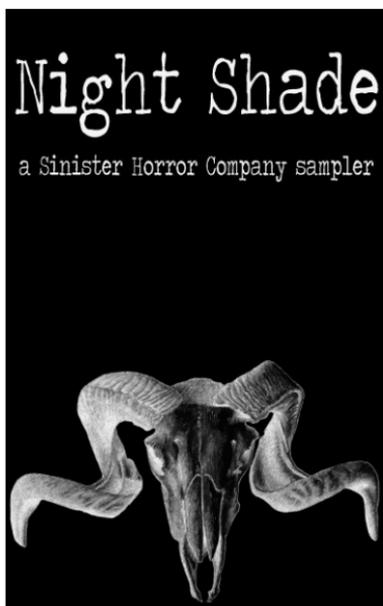
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