

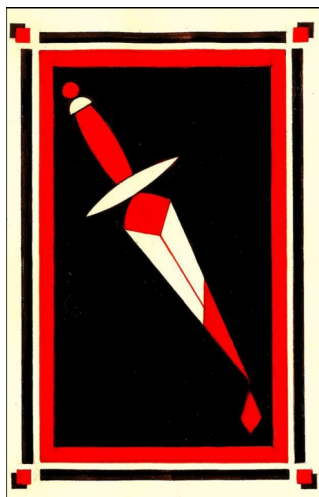


THE BLOOD RED EXPERIMENT

**VIOLENCE!
SEX!
GIALLO!**

ISSUE#1





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Dear Readers,

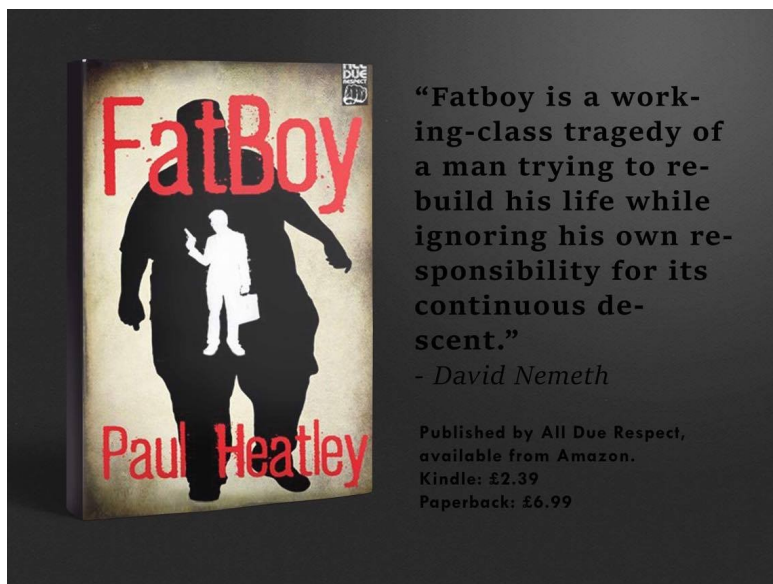
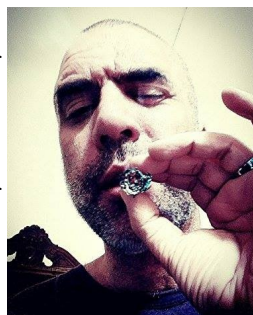
Inspired by the genius of Hitchcock and his films, latin luminaries such as Argento and Bava directed macabre murder-mystery thrillers, that combined the suspense with scenes of outrageous violence, stylish cinematography, and groovy soundtracks. This genre became known in their native Italy as *giallo*.

Giallo is Italian for yellow, inspired by the lurid covers of thrillers, in the way that *pulp fiction* was derived from the cheap wood pulp paper of the crime stories, or *Film Noir* came from the chiaroscuro of the German Expressionistic lighting.

We at TBRE want to bring gialli-inspired stories by some of the best crime writers on the scene today to a wider audience, giving birth to a new literary movement in crime writing, *NeoGiallo*, and drag this much maligned genre screaming and slashing its way into the 21st Century.

Have a bloody good time,

The Editors



THE **BLOODED** HANDS THAT **BRING YOU THEIR WORKS.**



RICHARD GODWIN

Richard is the author of countless novels and short stories. He lectures creative writing in London



MARK COOPER

Mark is a world renowned authority on the history of Hasbro's "The Transformers" and avid collector. He also writes occasionally.



KATE LAITY

Dr. Laity teaches medieval literature, gender studies, digital humanities and popular culture at the College of Saint Rose, where she is also the director of the Digital Humanities Initiative.



TOM LEINS

Tom Leins is a disgraced ex-film critic from Paignton, UK. His novelette, Skull Meat, is available via Amazon.<http://thingstodoindevonwhenyoure-dead.wordpress.com/>



JACK BATES

Jack Bates writes short fiction from a creaky old house near Detroit, MI.



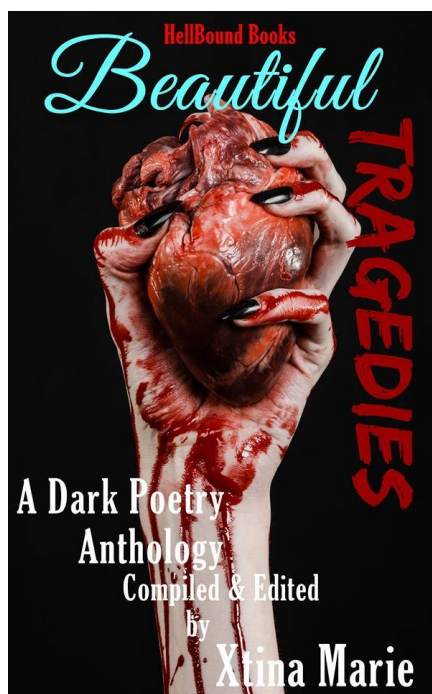
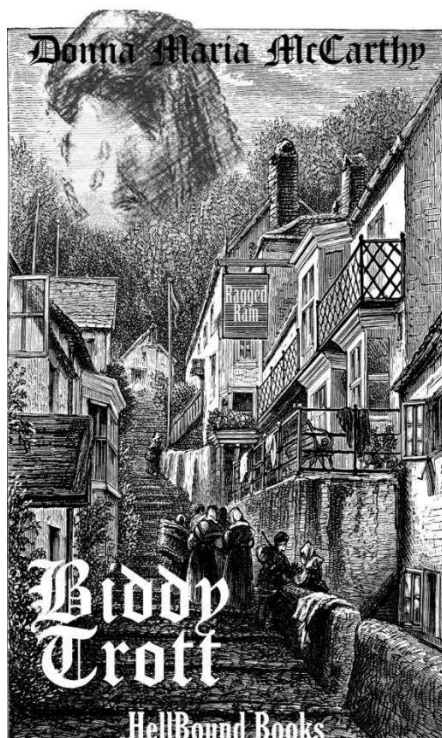
KEVIN BERG

Kevin Berg lives at the base of the beautiful Rocky Mountains with his amazing wife and two kickass daughters. He has some interesting projects coming up, so stay tuned.



JAMES SHAFFER

He's had thirty-some short stories published in on line magazines and hopes to bring to life some of these creatures that live in the dark, wet streets.



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MACHINE FACTORY

RICHARD GODWIN

'I made the street, everything sharp and clear like after rain. see Sid in a booth reading a paper his face yellow ivory in the sunlight. I banded him two nickels under the table. Pushing in a small way to keep up the Habit: invade, damage, occupy. Young faces in blue alcohol flame.'

William Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, (1961.)

Far beyond the horizon lies a place called Prestige. It is not a town, it is a being. For the things I seek with the deeds described are merely part of a larger plan. They stole me and I return. That is what it looks like, after rain. It is the clarity of the freed mind, your perceptions are controlled by invisible monsters.

Deep in the grey walls they tied me to the chair. They tried to remove my insanity with pills and shock treatment, but I am neither insane nor sane. Another inhabits me. I have his claws in my back pocket like a tourist with map. But the places I go to are not part of a Cartesian plan. They are places in the Otherness I breathe in like oxygenated nectar. A man with no lungs.

TARGET 1

See the stone walls with blood running down them like a tide. I love the smell of blood. I adore the spray of pink from the severed veins. Tiny pink bubbles glow like Neon in the rain. I live in the lacerations. All those arteries. Body map. Map of my desires. They feed me with reports in the hotel I escape from. No hotel. Prison built by the sanity police. Kill all cops. Torture all cops and politicians. Be free. They use labels like schizoid, like psychopath. Like killer. Like beyond redemption. Hell is another word for freedom. The Devil lives in the backbone. Get character.

Invent yourself and be no more a slave to the godly men. This is the Reversal. Taking aim.

They call me the killer who loves Mallarme.

I love young flesh.

Rachel is blonde. Twenty-two. Decent breasts and a firm posterior. She flirts with the boys at the diner. Jack's Place. Highway Zero. Empty rooms in tired towns. Stained sheets. Bleeding virgins. No Christ here. Think Alphaville. With menace. Welcome to the Word Magik. Only bad things, good bad things. I chew on the meat of offenses. I want to

introduce her to my weapons. First I will befriend her. Take her trust and crush it like a tiny flower. Whore. There is no morality any more, only lies. We have built an Empire of Lies. With minds. I have my mind. I took it with me when I slashed the guards' necks and left them bleeding to death on the sterile hospital floors. I am the arsonist in the madhouse. Burn baby burn. All the way to Hell and back. Watch the action go down. Right now. I have my hands in my pockets as I approach her. I can feel the cold steel beneath my hot hard palm. I wear the grey trench coat and I approach Rachel. She has her back to me. Standing there in faded denims. Her arse is round and she smells of semen. She is the boys' fuck sewer. Whore. They all are. In sleep.

I touch her hair. She turns. She has amazing blue eyes. Sky blue. Full of lust you know. I want to scar them with Razor. I use a cut throat razor. Yes. Most effective cutting tool. I always name my weapons. They are people you see. With identities. In fact, with more identities than people.

'Victoriously from beautiful suicide having fled

Ember of glory, blood through foam, gold, storm!

Thus Mallarme.

"...I was inside her and I let loose the pent up fury. She came. I cut her throat and sprayed the walls with her virgin blood..."

'Jonathan Straker is beyond rehabilitation. A deep-seated psychopath with no sense of empathy whatsoever.'

Dr Trother.

Such rot they write of me. What do they understand? Or know? Nothing. I know it all.

I slit his throat too, and cut off his fat pink genitals, hung them on the wall next to a picture of Donald Trump laughing at Hillary Clinton. Art, you see lies in the violent deeds.

We are in the diner; Rachel turns, Rachel lets out a small gasp of delight when she sees me.

'Father, I wanted to speak to you,' she says.

'Of course, come to the church with me,' I say.

I can't wait to get this fucking dog collar off. Like, genuflect, motherfucker. The Bible I hold in my hand is blacker than ebony. Filth.

I lead her to the church and listen to her infernal chatter. It is cold inside. Blood runs off the walls and fills the chalice. 'Rachel,' I say, and kiss her mouth. She responds with her tongue.

'MAGIC THEATRE NOT FOR EVERYBODY.'

I tried to open the door but the heavy old latch would not budge.'

So the approximation or near verbatim of the lines in Herman Hesse's classic novel *Steppenwolf*.

What need for such accuracy in a fallen world?

Your need for monsters.

I kicked the door open and bring you the tide of simulacra.

Alone in the church I wasted no time in raping Rachel by the tomb of the rotten saint. Saint Frederick of Calcutta, the little known embalmer of prostitutes.

I looked at her long blonde hair and sapphire blue eyes and I reached under her short skirt as she confessed sins to me, and I fingered her sliced peach and watched horror like a song on her face. Young, virginal. I soiled her flesh in the temple. I made her tell me, tell me all.

'I have had sex with a stranger, father,' she said.

Her words echoed like a lost mantra in the silent crypt. It is all part of an abandoned film

set, these locations shape shift and morph like a carpet on an acid trip.

I watched her face take in what I was doing.

'Now you are fucking a priest, what do you say to that?' I said.

I laid her on her back and raised her hem and stared down at her tight wet hole. Then I was inside her and I let loose the pent up fury. She came. I cut her throat and sprayed the walls with her virgin's blood.

The Goat bleats in the farmyard. Inhuman eyes stare out of the Fundamental Blackness. It is the obsidian mirror. Time lord.

All quiet.

On set.

My mind.

I am here to bring you Abraxas.

I wait for my parishioners.

My sheep, my cattle, my chickens, my hens.

Break traditions.

This killer wears white gloves. This killer knows all about identity, the thing they tried to impose on me in the nuthouse. But I am me. They are not me. I wear white not black. It is the hand. It is all in the glove, fingertip to white pale fingertip like a hissing courtesan. The owner of the gloves had

prosthetic hands; I have his flesh for back up. I use his identity to disguise myself from the world and so evade justice. There is no justice in this entropic town. It is not a city. There is no Cathedral here. Just this small cramped church. Eggs lie rotting on the empty pews. They are the mystical menses. Alchemy. Gibraltar. Do you recognise these terms? I am locking you inside a secret mantra. Feel the enclosure hiss like air from punctured rubber, know the meaning beyond semantics and time. I Am The Narrator.

I know what I write here. Word Magik. Crows maunder on the stained glass windows. The missing fragments let the harsh bright sunlight in. It is a message from god. Stay away. It says stay away. From what? There is nothing else apart from the set. I will escape it and find Otherness like a black widow spider clutching with unreal feet at the empty window pane of

"...You belong to me. I Am The Dark Lord. I Am. Nema..."

time. Set. I Am. It is a town. Mine. You belong to me. I Am The Dark Lord. I Am.

Nema.

They come in and I preach to them, an hour or more passes during which I see that none of them have a soul. They are not men and women but simulations created by the producers of this movie. I make sure they listen attentively to my sermon about the need for mass social decadence. I summon them to copulate on the crucifix. I dictate their actions with the black Bible.

Soon women are bearing their breasts and beating them fat wallets as they reach for cocks, they straddle men on the altar and fuck and moan. Their sex fluids pour from them like mercurial honey. I lick their skins dry before I commit the deeds I am commissioned to do. I am, after all, merely filling in my lines, the lines on the paper white pages of poetry and hymns of sex words, of porn. Pure porn.

The secret camera whirrs outside the window. Off set.

The order of things, Eden is a lie.

'No, the serpent did not

Seduce Eve to the apple.

All that's simply

Corruption of the facts.

Adam ate the apple.

Eve ate Adam.

The serpent ate Eve.

This is the dark intestine.'

Ted Hughes, Theology.

Don't you just love poetry?

The Serpent in Paradise.

Take a look at it.

Welcome to your home.

Esoteric Literature.

After the orgy I slay them. I am sipping a diet coke and I shred the tin to a sharp metal end, and with it I sever arteries flesh skin, feet. Flesh falls like snow on the red chapel. I take a woman by the hair and tango with her in the aisle. Then I remove her breasts with the coke tin, and feed

her her own flesh. Macabre is such fun done well and with the right sort of gusto. Tempo is everything to a killer.

The amazing thing is my gloves remain

paper white throughout the butchery. I am the white gloved Aztec Assassin carrying out necessary acts of human sacrifice in all the right places. My

address book is the envy of the nouveau parvenus everywhere. And while I am less cloak and dagger than pure hate, my actions echo the beating of a drum.

It is the drum outside the church, the tapping of a blind man's cane, the man with no eyes who tries to make the film. But without me there is no film. Only empty spaces. The deserted film set is being overrun with rats and vagrants. Winos lie in their piss and dream of corkscrews. Time is a soldier with a soldier's march. There is no time here anymore. I hold faces with my gloves and cut their skins. This is the Giallo Mass. Yellow faces at the window pane.

There are eighteen dead bodies on the cold stone floor, before I leave the tidy little chapel. It is in Wales. It is here. It is on your street, is it all part of the film. Celluloid dream.

In filming they try to make identity. But I am beyond their engineering and saccharine fabrications. I am what I am like Iago. Othello fetches a priest to his own delusions.

I leave the church and wander the empty corridors. I am seeking the next set, the next chapter in this violent drama. This is the film set. All forms weep yellow. My white gloves look spotless lie a maiden aunt's. There are doors off the side of the corridor and I try the handles. Most of them are locked. I can kick them in, but I find one that opens.

As I peer inside, a line from Mallarme comes to mind.

'The buried temple through the sewer's dark.'

He was writing of Charles Baudelaire.

Les Fleurs du mal.

Such beauty.

The Romantic reality.

As William Blake so deftly wrote, 'Milton was of the devil's party as all true poets are.'

This so the New Realism.

Your hair is matted with the blood of ponies.

I pull Razor from my pocket.

Reality of the cracked egg. Genre here is all genres, bog the publications scam.

I turn on the Neon light. Inside the room tied to a chair is a pale white woman. Her skin glows like honey in the light. I look at my hand, in it is not a razor but a long skewer coated with chicken grease and hardened fat. The room smells of barbecued meat. The woman stares at me, she pulls forward, tugging against the duct tape, electric wires cut into her wrists. The producers have paced her there for me. Her eyes are bulging like hardboiled eggs. I place the sharpened tip of the meat skewer on her right eyeball and she comes, a tear of blood runs down her face. The walls slide apart and I see my

patients waiting for me on metal chairs in the next room, which is part of this room. I look at my name badge, at the black lettering on a yellow plate, and I see it reads, Dr Gull. Oh I am going to dupe them all. Authority is such a redundancy today. We live in unreal times.

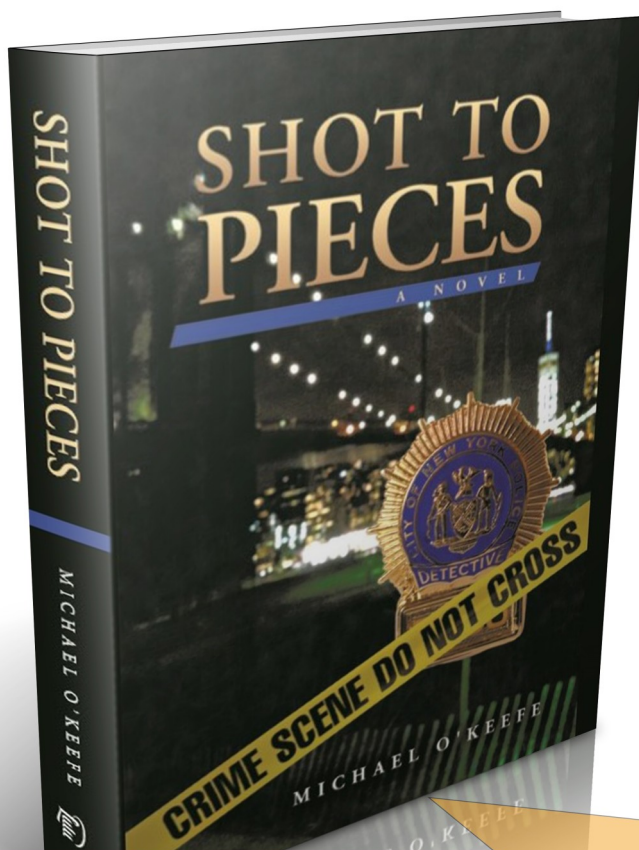
I blind the gagged bitch and chuck her eyeballs to the audience, they roll like marbles into the wind, a toss of chance on the roulette wheel, where I always win fortunes.

Then I feel a policeman's hand on my shoulder.

I turn and stare into the empty cop's face.

He is locked in authority entropy and is my quarry, bound by mere and mortal anatomy.

'I am a Psychiatrist,' I say, and I push the red button on the wall.



paperback : \$24.99
kindle : \$3.99



QUAENAM IN ILLIS

MARK COOPER

Paris, 2:38 a.m.

They say that if something is too good to be true then it usually is.

He awoke with a start.

His head was swimming; his mind filled with half formed images and disconnected sounds that failed to mesh clearly with whatever had been floating through the later period of his dreams. It felt like ethereal tentacles reaching and just faintly brushing against the edge of his consciousness. Like a brief, tentative kiss against his cheek, it was almost imperceptible. But he knew it was there. He took several deep breaths then, slowly, the cacophony of half-formed words and gibbering screams washing through his brain were replaced with the more rhythmic hum of the ceiling fan located in the centre of the bedroom. He opened his eyes, half expecting to see... *something*...in the gloom and feeling the slightest sense of disappointment when he did not.

He sat up, his skin reacting to the combination of redistributed air and the faint sheen of a cold sweat that ran along his neck. He could feel the hairs on his arms standing up—reacting to something... a sensation of a notion, however intangible. Moving cautiously in the dim light, he made his way into the bathroom, turning on the cold water tap for a moment.

The room was everything he could have expected and more. Located in a small, boutique style hotel in the centre of Paris, he had been afforded the tastefully decorated penthouse suite as part of the deal. Clearly those who had hired him had spared no expense—something that was evident from the moment he had received the Eurostar tickets in the post some forty-eight hours after agreeing to the project.

The deal he mused to himself as he looked at his reflection in the mirror. For a moment he barely recognised the face staring back at him—something he put down to the

surprising workload that he'd picked up. He felt his vision blur slightly as his mind wandered.

She had approached him after he had finished the school run, intercepting him as he made his way from the garage to his front door. A slim, non-descript looking brunette wearing over-sized sunglasses and dressed in an obscenely expensive skirt-suit caught his attention. Her demeanour was passive, non-threatening to the extreme almost, he thought as he noted the slim briefcase in her left hand.

"Doctor Raymond Schaeffer?" The voice caught him with the key in the door. He turned, placing the plastic bag containing a bottle of milk and loaf of bread down. "Head of the Linguistics and Antiquity Department at Heythrop College?"

"Former Head of, yes," he replied, his curiosity piqued. He tried to read her expression, but found the glasses an effective impediment. "Budget cuts," he added reflexively. That seemed to be normal for him in the last three months—some sort of innate defence mechanism. He quickly realised that people seemed to accept that more readily than he could ever have anticipated and clutched that like a shield.

"Yes, we'd heard that," she said and advanced up the path towards him. In doing so she extended her right hand. He shook it, noting the smoothness of her skin in the process. "Might I have five minutes of your time?"

Her name was Lily, and her offer was intriguing.

Every day at eleven in the morning he would be delivered a package. So far the presentation of each package was the same; one brown envelope, inside which was a single piece of paper delivered by Lily herself. However the contents of the envelope were far from predictable. Inside was not an ordinary piece of paper by any means—on the first day it was a page from the original copy of *The Black Pullet*.

Ray's task was straightforward. He was required to translate the page within twelve hours and have it ready for collection by Lily at eleven

They say that if something is too good to be true then it usually is.

that evening. The tools presented to him to complete his task were breath-taking, even for someone of Ray's academic background. Stationed at the 17th Century harlequin style writing desk were a collection of books whose value easily exceeded his annual salary. Perusing them as he took stock of his room he realised that many of them were cryptographic in nature. There was what appeared to be an original copy of Trithemius' *Polygraphia* sitting alongside a virgin text of *Cryptographie Indéchiffrable* by Myszkowski and Selenus' *Cryptomenytics*, mingled with more modern works by the likes of Bauer, Marks and Kahn.

Admittedly, 18th Century French wasn't Ray's preferred sphere of expertise however after reacquainting himself with the vernacular and familiarising his brain with the cipher that had been applied to the document, the words flowed from his mind, into his fingers and onto the notepad he was scribbling furiously in with his antique fountain pen. The body of the text was curious but not altogether unknown to Ray. He'd spent part of his undergraduate studies working on a translation of the copy held at Christ Church and although the cipher used in it was routed in antiquity, he had managed to crack it within a matter of hours.

However by the time he had completed the work he found himself questioning the authenticity of the piece. Many of the statements and theories it alluded to were new to him. Ray made a note to himself that he would need to go back and review his decade's old papers to see if the content eluded him. Upon handing it over to Lily at the agreed time and raising his concerns she replied with a simple smile before wishing him a good evening.



The second day presented something entirely different.

The single sheet of paper was written in something that looked vaguely like early Abrahamic Jewish text, only of a variety he'd never seen before. Ray struggled with it for an hour to try and identify some sort of base language that it could have been extrapolated from with little success. Fearing that he had begun to back his mind into a corner from which it would never escape, locking his thinking into an ever-receding loop, he ventured out to the balcony and looked out across the sea of white buildings and their faded blue rooftops. Sitting at the small metal table that was positioned out there he simply let his mind start to wander.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. He began to flick through the photographs and eventually settled on one of his children. Their beaming smiles seemed to reach out to him from the screen, filling his soul with joy and then steeling himself for the task at hand. He felt like he had sat still out in the fresh air for an eternity, listening to the buzz of the city around him. Ray stood up and retreated back inside the penthouse.

"The page checks out," Lily looked at her watch and noted the time as she sat in the back of the sumptuous Mercedes. Cradling her iPhone in the nook between her neck and shoulder, the fingers of her free hand drummed against the door panel as a mechanism to relieve her frustration of being stuck in lunch time traffic. "His translation was faultless once he'd cracked the cipher well, of course—as a test piece it was simply designed to validate his credentials. I would expect the piece presented to him this morning to be a greater challenge, after all only one person successfully progressed beyond this stage." The car started to slowly move away, edging its way towards the junction. "No, I don't anticipate any problems moving forward; our background work on this one indicates that he needs this as much as we need him. Of course, should that situation change then we have contingency plans in place... leverage, so to speak." There was a heavily weighted pause for a moment. "Of course sir, I will see you later."

"Where to, Miss Hawthorne?" The driver asked her. Lily pursed her lips and thought for a moment before answering.

“Take me to see Trevelyan.”

6:57 p.m.

The muscles in his hand felt like they were on fire. The pen in his right hand made a scratching sound as it bore into the paper—the ink flowing across the page as his mind converted the symbols underneath the index finger of his left hand into a legible series of letters at near-identical intervals. Periodically he found himself stuck—hitting a sequence of letters that seemed jumbled to his tired mind and prompting him to reapply the cipher once more to the document. This one had been more problematical than that of the previous day.

Ray had approached the document from a presumption that although the cipher was rooted in antiquity, it was still based around accepted principles applicable to the day of its creation. His problem had been that without any documentation to support the date of the fragment he had had to make a guess based upon a “straight” translation of the page to begin with. Amidst the garbled letters that he had spent over an hour transcribing and accounted for what he believed to be around one hundred and sixty words, one word had stood out above all.

Solomon

This was indisputable. *Solomon is the key*, Ray thought to himself, *but the key to what?* He looked at his watch – it was nearly 7. Another hour was spent applying a variety of ciphers, yet none of them gleaned any legible or coherent translation of the page. His frustration began to mount. He leant back in the chair and ran his hands through his hair. Acutely aware of the fact that time was starting to overpower him, his right hand reached out blindly, landing on *Polygraphia*. Everything seemed to become still for a moment. *Why that book, now?* He brushed away the superstitious thought as the product of a fatigued mind. Opening the heavy volume he waded through it blindly.

He would almost have missed it.

Almost.

At the bottom of the seventy-ninth page there was a symbol that looked like an overly exaggerated letter *W* sitting in one of the planispheric “wheels” that Trithemius created nearly 400 years ago that mapped perfectly onto the very first letter of the questionable document. Ray aligned it and translated it to the correspond-



ing English letter—a G. Moving methodically through one letter after another, the document began to coalesce into something approaching a language that Ray could then comprehend.

The fatigue coursing through his hand was searing now—the muscles in his fingers refused to hold onto the barrel of the pen and Ray had to clamp his digits around the stylus forcefully in order to proceed. A second, then a third, fourth, fifth letter grew in the black ink that sprawled across the page. The *tick-tock, tick-tock* of his watch acted like some maddening metronome, counting down to the deadline that was now looming as he furiously scribed away, struggling to comprehend exactly what he was writing down.

The wrapping at the door of the room boomed through the air, waking Ray from his slumped position at the desk. He lifted his head up and looked at the watch.

11:00 precisely.

Trying to gather his senses, he picked up the piece of paper from the desk and moved purposely towards the door, readjusting his glasses in the process. Opening it swiftly, he was confronted with the now familiar sight of Lily standing there. Tonight she was wearing a dark, rain soaked trench coat, minus her customary glasses. It was the first time he had managed to get a look at the eyes that hid behind them. Something about them reminded him of dark pools of water that he had swam in as a child.

“Doctor Schaeffer?” the prompt dragged him out of his day-dream.

"Oh, yes," he handed her the piece of paper. Lily examined it for a moment, and then a slight smile drifted across her face.

"Thank you." She turned on her heels and began to walk away. Ray half-stepped out of the door, his feet feeling strangely unstable.

"Lily, please, before you go," he called out – maybe it was the hint of desperation in his voice that gave her pause. "That's a page from the *Ars Nova*." Lily turned, her facial expression giving him hope. "From *The Lesser Key of Solomon*? I'm right, aren't I?"

"How did you know that?" She asked as she made a few steps back towards him, her eyes narrowing slightly.

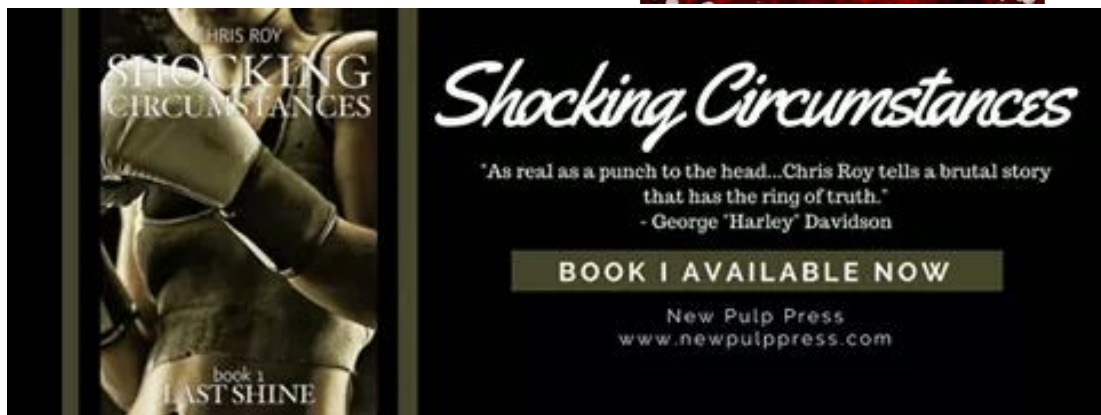
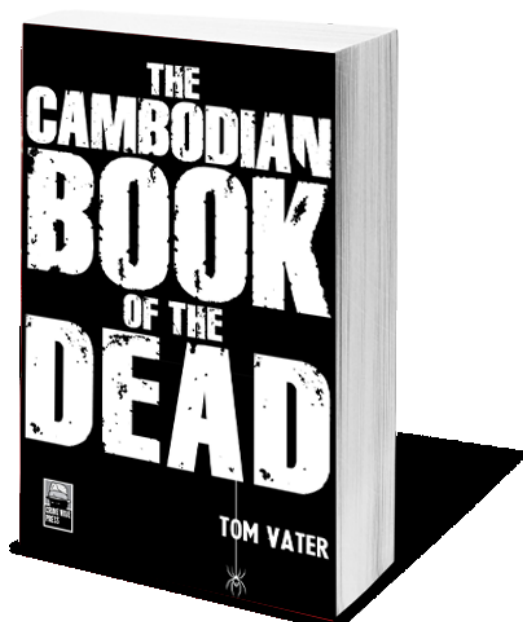
"The Lesser Key of Solomon was something of a hobby amongst my peers," Ray explained. "And something of an obsession for some." Lily nodded her head slightly. "But... but the thing is, I shouldn't have been able to decipher that using *Polygraphia* because that book was written over two hundred and eighty years after the *Ars Nova*. The ciphers shouldn't be compatible."

"And yet they are," Lily added, her smile deepening. Ray placed his hand against the frame of the door—a sudden light headed sensation sweeping through his body. "I suggest you get some rest Doctor Schaeffer and I will see you in the morning." She turned briskly and resumed her march down the corridor towards the small elevator.

"Wait—stop." Ray called out, finding his grip on the door frame intensifying. "Just what are we working on here?" Lily paused once more, only this time she didn't turn to look at him as she replied.

"Something magical."

TO BE CONTINUED...



MADDONA OF THE WASPS

KATE LAITY

Marco crouched on the balcony outside the flat. He could hear water running. It was two a.m. Maybe she would go to bed at last. His legs were stiff. The black gloves kept his hands warm though they itched to be busy.

But patience was important, as the Madonna said. His eagerness had nearly undone him with the last one.

He would not make that error again. The blood had been wasted. What he could salvage had not been nearly enough to offer his lady.

She demanded more. It was his sacred duty to honour her. Her fury was power. Even when she struck him in anger at his failure, the blow had been like a kiss. His own blood sang in his cheek all day and the memory aroused him even now.

He would do better. Marco had chosen this offering carefully: a painter. She had been sitting in the Caffè Silver, reading *la Repubblica*. Even the headline on the page made him smile: *Theft of artifact from Etruscan Museum*. The bone knife nestled in his hand now. Who would have believed it to be so easy? There was nothing that a little bribery could not bring about in Rome. He did not even have to set foot in the museum, which was just as well. A part of him still trembled at a childhood memory of seeing the famous statue there of the king Tideo devouring his enemy Melanippus' brain and falling into a delirium.

Yet look at him now: the sacred knife in hand, ready to gut this gift for his adored one. The carved surface of the ancient tool seemed to whisper through his skin. He ached to employ it. If only the woman would go to bed! Between the curtains he could see her washing her hands. The red paint made her look like Lady Macbeth trying to scrub away her guilt. He could not wait to see the real thing on his own hands. Blood was a much deeper red than that. Marco licked his lips. The anticipation filled him with an excitement

that buzzed in his ears like a swarm.

At last when she had gone to her little bed, he eased open the window and slipped into the studio. These cheap flats! The artists around here were in and out of each other's places constantly, doors left open, and strangers greeted with a smile. Fools. Marco glanced at the canvas on the easel. In the gloom of the night it looked vulgar and garish. A surreal mélange of images, he could not make heads or tails of what seemed to be a rocking horse, a witch and a window. No matter. The artist sensibility was all that counted, his mistress said so. She would make a fine sacrifice.

Marco stepped down the hall quiet as a cat's paws. Reaching the doorway he could hear the woman snoring softly. He smiled and relaxed. Her bedroom was darker than the studio. Slowly his eyes adjusted to the shadows as he stared at her slumbering form. He crept nearer and twitched open the curtains over her bed. The moonlight caressed her naked flesh, arms and legs thrown out like a star.

She was a fine specimen. His lady would be pleased.

He lay the knife on the window sill so it would be within easy reach. Marco flexed his fingers, ready for the work. The black gloved hands reached for her throat and the woman gasped in surprise. Her fluttering eyes were an exquisite shade of green. He got into the bed with her, using his weight to pin her down as her hands tore at his sleeves. The paint remained under her nails despite her scrubbing. Her face grew dark in the moon's ashen glow.

Her hands dropped. Marco put an ear to her chest. The heart beat but feebly. It was enough. He took a moment to appraise her breasts—round, firm, the nipples erect now. It awoke no excitement in him; he had no desire for any woman but his lady. Yet he appreciated the gift for its own sake. Standing up Marco assessed

*The black gloved
hands reached for her
throat and the woman
gasped in surprise.*

the rest of her body: legs surprisingly strong, hips generous in their curves. A good choice.

From his jacket pocket he drew the needle and the bag. With swift movements he prepared to take her vital fluid. He pumped her arm a little to get the blood flowing, just as he had learned from a video online. Every time she struggled back to consciousness his black leather fingers laced around her throat once more. Funny how that made him more excited than her goose-bumped naked flesh. In part it was the precision. He needed to keep her unconscious but she could not die before he was ready.

When the bag was fat as a tick, Marco removed the needle and tubing. He placed them far enough away from any danger of accident. He wanted no chance of losing this treasure. Grabbing the bone knife from the sill, he sat astride her once more. The woman seemed dead to the world but he could feel the blood moving under her skin yet.

The blade carved with beasts made one swipe down her breast, just enough to open the skin. She shuddered under him. He did not make the mistake of trying to plunge the knife through the ribs this time. But he needed the blood to make the symbols the Madonna had taught him, to sanctify the offering and make it holy. The circles, lines and symbols painted upon her chest shimmered in the moonlight even as she moaned. The air in the room seemed different now, like something electric. He held the pale blade aloft.

‘For your everlasting life, my beloved?’

Marco plunged the knife in deeply, dragging it to one side. He went under the ribcage—his mistake before had been trying to go through it. Bone on bone, no good. His arm still ached from the collision. He’d had to break the ribs to get through, thoughtless in his excitement, damaging the heart. Not this time. There would be no mistakes.

His black clad arm thrust under the bones, shoving aside the lungs to grasp the muscled engine. The creature made mewling sounds, too far gone to complain much, as if it

had already resigned its flesh to a better vessel. Marco ripped the heart toward him, using the blade to cut through its tethers. A rush of blood poured out, gushing over the body and the bed. Marco grinned with ecstatic pleasure. He got up to avoid getting soaked by outpouring, admiring his handiwork even as it obliterated most of the sigil he had placed on her.

The magic was in the heart now. He fished in his pocket for the plastic bag to secure his prize, then set it down by the blood. He



washed his hands and the bone knife in the sink where the artist had washed her own hands just an hour or two before. Time had lost its meaning. All that mattered was delivering the gift to his lady.

Marco poked through her belongings until he found a Venetian leather bag of sufficient size to hold the blood, the blade and the heart. On the bed the empty cavity gaped. The sticky blood

shone black under starlight. How little it took to remove that spark of life. The power of the offering hummed through the handles of the leather bag. It made him eager to race back to her, but Marco did not allow his eagerness to keep him from one more careful look around the studio. He was tempted to augment her painting with a splash of blood but restrained himself. Satisfied he had forgotten nothing, he went out the way he came in and climbed down to the street.

As his steps resounded in the street he found he was humming, smirking when he realised it was ‘*Si colmi il calice di vino.*’ As a police car rushed past him Marco held his breath like a little boy hiding from his angry papa. Then he broke into wild laughter, for there was no chance of his being seen as anything but a happy-go-lucky guy with the world on a string—and a heart in his bag.

Despite his deliberate pace Marco arrived at the Madonna’s door in no time. From the outside, no one would guess the splendours within this old apartment block. His latchkey betrayed the age of the building and true, the

foyer had seen better days. The red and gold carpet had some dampness and the wallpaper with blue irises peeled away from the wall in places. The lift was an open with bars and the clank of the machinery, yet once you reached the top floor, all was sumptuously attired.

There she waited.

Marco's heart beat faster—the one in his chest. The one in the bag seemed to twitch though it was only the chugging motion of the lift. To touch the divine! She was woman and goddess, his Madonna. And each offering would bring him closer to the divine union. The lift reached the penthouse and he threw back the grate with ease. Candles flickered in the foyer.

"My lady," Marco cried, falling to his knees on the checkerboard tiles. "I have brought you the offering." He willed himself not to look up until she called to him. For a long time there was only silence and then he heard the clacking of her steps. As she approached his excitement grew. Her scent filled the air, lavender and lemon and that elusive thing he could not name but knew was magic.

"Show me," she said, her voice low and velvety as her taloned hand lifted his chin. Her touch electrified his flesh. Marco opened the bag and thrust the gifts toward her. His chest heaved as he raised his eyes to her face. Her black eyes burned him with ecstatic fire. Her fine cheek bones glistened like polished oak in the candlelight. Her wild nest of black hair piled on her head like a hive.

She did not take the gifts from him, but turned and walked up the steps to the temple, gesturing him to follow. The black and white tiles of the foyer gave way to the tiny Faenza patterns. The temple itself housed a golden tub that dominated the room. It had been filled with goat's milk. The Madonna threw off the sheer black negligee and slipped naked into the foamy whiteness.

Marco could hardly breathe. His entire body had become rigid. A word from her and he might burst with ecstasy. Her smile offered pity, though her wide eyes laughed at his state. Then she lay back against the shiny gold and closed her eyes. Reaching up she pulled at the pins in her hair and like a veil it cascaded around her shoulders. "The blood," she hissed.

Marco grabbed the bag of blood. His hands were sweating so that he feared it slipping from them. He managed to get the stopper out

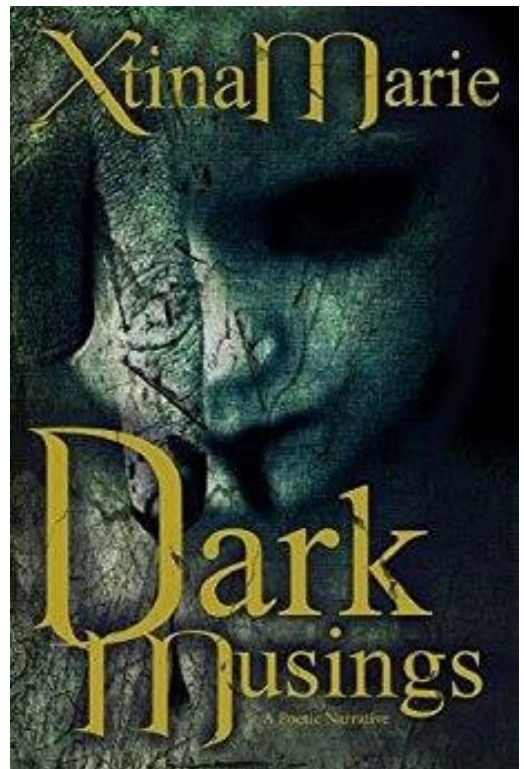
and let the gore cascade across her breasts as she arched up to meet it. Blood mixed with milk as she writhed under its flow. He thought he might lose his mind with wild desire. His whole body trembled with excitement as he watched her.

The Madonna sighed with pleasure and then called out in a voice rough with carnality, "The heart." Marco fumbled with the plastic bag, terrified he might drop the prize too soon. His hands shook as he leaned over the massive tub to hand the dark muscle to her. Blood dropped into the pink waters as she snatched the offering.

Her neat white teeth shone as she brought the heart to her mouth. The Madonna's tongue thrust out to taste the blood that dripped from the aorta. Marco whimpered. Her black eyes shone as her lips parted and the small white teeth bit deep into its flesh. Her moan put him over the edge and he could feel the effects coursing through him. His bloody hands ached to release his pent up desire.

She reached out with one bloody hand to grab his tented trousers and he staggered at the side of the tub, helpless in his pleasure. The Madonna chewed slowly, lost in her own bliss.

TO BE CONTINUED....



DIDN'T BLEED RED

TOM LEINS

Part 1: Yellow Flames and Black Bones

The chainsaw shrieks as it bites into the meat of her shoulder.

She isn't alive to feel the jagged burn – I strangled her with a length of electrical flex 40 minutes after picking her up outside Harbourside public toilets.

She isn't my usual type. I wasn't aware of the bleached blonde hair and adult acne at first glance. She was pretty in her own way, but she didn't excite me, so I didn't dwell on the killing.

The blood from the severed arm starts to pool under her blonde hair. It glints like dog piss on petrol.

Before it was repainted with piss-yellow emulsion, the toilet cubicle door at the Dirty Lemon bore the legend: "Whoever fights monsters should see to

it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you."

I'm reluctant to gaze into the toilet before flushing, let alone gaze into the abyss, but I have worked as a private investigator for almost a decade, and I am confident that I have seen the worst that this town has to offer.

Sometimes I take a step back from the abyss, sometimes I plunge straight in. Either way, the corrosive stink of degeneracy clings to my skin at night. I sit in my rooming house, drinking and brooding, until I pass out. Then I get up and go through the whole sick charade again.

The toilet bowl is the colour of bad dreams. I yank the flush and walk back into the pub.

The chainsaw shrieks as it bites into the meat of her shoulder.

The barmaid, Spacey Tracey, is outside – scrubbing blood off the wheelchair ramp. There was a fight last night. Not a bad one – a standard mid-week scuffle – but a fight all the same.

Seeing rotten teeth smashed out on railings at closing time may seem shocking to some, but I've witnessed amateur dental work perpetrated by hoodlums with pliers and chisels in Brixham basements. This kind of low-rent shit pales in comparison.

I head back to my usual seat, behind the cigarette machine. A grotesquely fat man is sat in my chair. He is so fat that you would need

livestock scales to weigh him properly. He is wearing an enormous tweed jacket and a blood-red neckerchief. His face is red and swollen-looking, and

when he smiles at me I can barely see his eyes.

"Mr Rey?"

"Who's asking?"

"My associates call me The Auctioneer..."

I shake my head, wearily.

"Fuck off, mate. I'm not calling you that."

The colour momentarily drains from his face. He reaches into his jacket pocket and takes a blast off a Ventolin inhaler.

I grab my overcoat and walk towards the exit, careful to avoid the blood patch.

"Where are you going, Mr Rey?"

I ignore him.

"See you tomorrow, Tracey."

She grunts, and ignores me.

I get to the bottom of the wheelchair ramp and a fist connects with my jawbone, sending me sprawling into the dried blood. The fist unclenches and drags me back inside the pub. It is attached to a meaty arm, a thick neck, a scowling face and a prison haircut.

The Auctioneer is still grinning inanely, when I am dumped at his feet.

"Shall we try that again, Mr Rey?"

I feel my busted jaw click as I upend the pint of Stella. It has a weird chemical tang that hurts my teeth. The hoodlum is standing behind The Auctioneer, drinking from a scummy looking glass of tap water. He is wearing a cream-coloured t-shirt with the words 'Newton Abbot Livestock Market' printed across the front in crimson letters. Out-of-town muscle. I'm flattered.

"Are you a film fan, Mr Rey?"

"I've got a few videos. Who hasn't?"

He chuckles ominously.

"You've got a nasty reputation, Mr Rey. I like that. It means you are a man who knows how to get things done."

I gesture to his meaty sidekick.

"Laughing boy here seems pretty effective..."

He scoffs.

"Martin provides brute force. Nothing more, nothing less. I need someone with a little bit more... sophistication."

I take another drink.

"Sure, I'm real sophisticated. That's why I'm drinking in the Dirty-fucking-Lemon before lunch."



He grins again. The last time I saw a smile that wide, the guy's face had been slashed with a Stanley knife.

He clears his flabby throat.

"I was surprised I didn't see you paying your respects at Harlan Deloitte's funeral last month. I was lead to believe that you were close during his final days."

Yeah. Close enough to watch him try and stop arterial blood spurting out of his neck with his own

fucking hands...

"As fellow collectors, Harlan and I enjoyed a healthy respect for one another, but I always envied his deep pockets and commitment to the unearthing unknown pleasures."

I shake my head.

"Healthy respect? Are you a sick fuck too?"

Martin growls at me from behind The Auctioneer, enormous fists clenched, but the fat man doesn't even bristle.

"The video I am looking for is entitled All Animals Scream. It went missing from Harlan's collection in the days following his death. I won't bore you with the details, but a deal was in place for me to secure that videotape, and a number of other rarities."

"Have you tried the North Atlantic Video Lounge? They have quite the selection these days. They don't even fine you if you forget to rewind the fucking videos..."

"Very droll, Mr Rey. Based on the dossier my solicitor prepared I had assumed that you would be a morose individual, prone to introspection."

I shrug.

"All part of the fucking service."

He removes an envelope from his jacket pocket.

The financial transaction is my favourite part of the grim foreplay that precedes these

horrendous assignments. It beats getting punched, at any rate.

I nod my agreement.

The envelope is fatter than his hand, but not as fat as his wrist. Either way, it's a good pay-day.

Some men enjoy the thrill of the kill, others prefer the dismemberment.

I enjoy the way the girls' eyes roll back into their skulls when the cerebral circulation is cut off.

I enjoy the dull thud of the blood-slick limbs as they hit the plastic sheeting.

Most of all, I enjoy the death-biss that passes their glossy lips as the life drains out of them.

Some monsters don't make a sound, but all animals scream.

15 minutes later. The North Atlantic Video Lounge.

"Norman. Talk to me. All Animals Scream. You know it?"

Norman Gorman removes his glasses and rubs the lenses against his threadbare T-shirt. It has the word 'Goblin' emblazoned across it. It looks older than him. He replaces the glasses on his face, and they look smeared – even grubbier than they did before.

"Directed by Arnaldo Rossi. Released in 1978. Starred John Norton, who you probably remember from Knuckle Town?"

I shrug.

"Probably."

"Generally considered to be a Giallo, but sometimes mistakenly labelled a Poliziotteschi, based on Rossi's earlier work in that sub-genre. Ridiculous!"

I literally have no idea what he is talking about, so I change tack.

"This is a rare film, right? A collector's edition?"

"Oh, man. Totally. The original distributor went bust the week before All Animals Scream was due to be released on VHS. A handful of timecoded review copies had been sent out to the trade papers, but the rest of the stock never even made it out of the warehouse."

"Ok..."

"Norton died not long after, due to complications during stomach surgery, and that's when the rumours started."

He looks up at me, and I nod for him to carry on.

"People who worked on the film—low-level guys mostly—alleged that Norton killed a teenage hooker on set, and Rossi used the footage in the movie. No one wanted to touch the film after that, and it faded into ghoulish obscurity. I heard that the original print was destroyed in a warehouse fire in Chiswick, but honestly, I have no idea... Does that help?"

"Yes, I think. I owe you a drink. Or two. Thanks, pal."

He smiles sheepishly.

I walk towards the door, running a finger across the dusty video cases that have been stacked haphazardly against the cheap plastic shelving.

I see Marlene Dutch in the adult

section. She is wearing a tennis dress, and despite the wintry chill outside, her thighs and arms are slick with sweat. She has soft red lips and hard grey eyes.

"Hello, Joseph."

Even after all these years my heart still melts a little. Some ghosts can spook me more than others.

When I first met her she was living in a rented room above the butchers on Palace Avenue. She went by the name Mary O'Malley at that time, but she married into money at the third attempt, and it seems like she changes her name as often as she changes her underwear. Her first husband was a lowlife called Yannick Small. I beat him unconscious after I saw him raise his

She leans towards me and scrapes a fleck of dried blood off my jaw with a manicured fingernail.

hands to her in the Dirty Lemon one Christmas Eve. Marriage number two ended abruptly when her husband sucked on a shotgun, after being implicated in a HIV positive mail



order bride scandal three years later. Her current husband is an elderly seafood tycoon named Charles Dutch. By my rough estimate, he is old enough to be her grandfather.

She is holding a copy of Anal Annihilation 4. I gesture towards the video.

"You know too much happiness can kill you, right?"

She smiles weakly.

It will sure as shit kill her decrepit bastard of a husband.

"How have you been keeping, Joseph?"

I shrug.

"Some days are better than others."

She leans towards me and scrapes a fleck of dried blood off my jaw with a manicured fingernail. Gum blood from where Martin hit me—I hope.

"So I see. Would you be willing to pop round to the house later?"

"Sure..."

"My step-daughter Marisa didn't come home last night. Charles is beside himself with worry."

"Sure. Anything for an old friend."

She winks at me, and runs her fingernail down my face a second time.

Outside the video shop, there is a mini-skirted, junkie-looking girl leaning against a skip. She smiles woozily at me, and pisses right through her fishnets.

I wait until the piss touches my boots and then walk away.

The Black Regent.

Home sweet home.

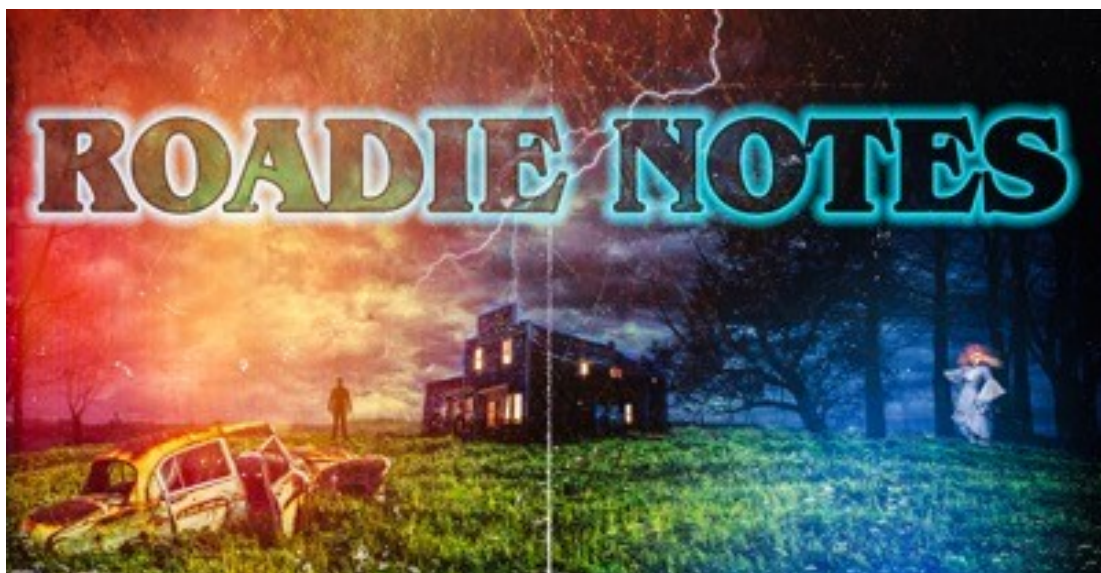
"Any messages?"

The desk-jockey looks up from his dog-eared copy of Tailgunner and squints at me through bloodshot eyes.

"Huh?"

"Forget it."

As local rooming houses go, the Black Regent is a shit-hole, but at least it is cheap. I trudge up the stairs towards my own cell.



The room has one small window, which offers little in the way of natural light, so I hit the light switch and turn on the bare bulb dangling from the ceiling.

On my bed is a fucking arm.

I'm no stranger to dead flesh, but this is grotesque. It doesn't look rotten—it looks fucking fresh.

There is a knock at the door.

"Mr Rey. Are you decent?"

Saxon. Local beat cop. Nice enough guy. Very earnest.

"Two minutes, pal."

He laughs nervously, on the other side of the cheap plywood door.

"I have someone who would like to meet you."

"Yeah?"

I glance down at the body-part on my bed. The blood has stained the bed sheets. There is a lot of it.

"Good afternoon, Mr Rey. My name is Detective Inspector Cleaver. I'm from the violent crime task force in Plymouth."

His voice is smooth, like a drugged drink.

"I've heard a lot about you Mr Rey. None of it good."

"Unfortunately, I can't say the same, Cleaver. I haven't got a fucking clue who you are."

I stare at the limb, nervously.

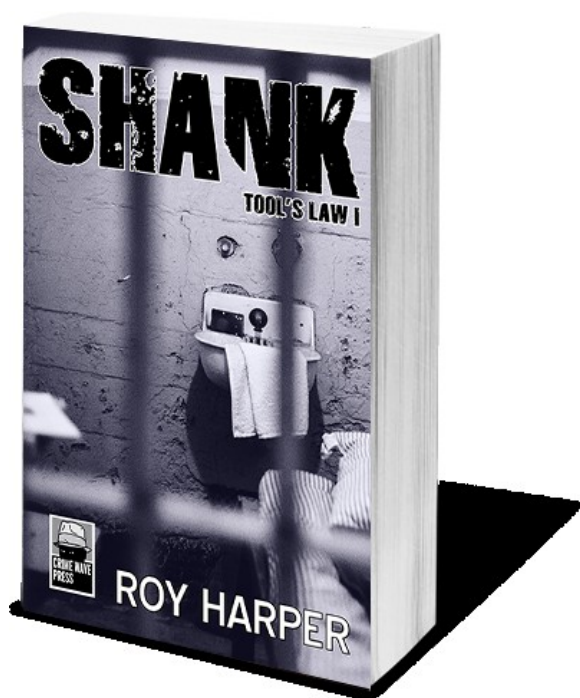
On the other side of the door Cleaver laughs quietly. Menacingly.

"PC Saxon. Do you have the warrant?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then take the door off its fucking hinges."

TO BE CONTINUED...



CANVAS OF FLESH

JACK BATES

"So how did you come up with the idea again?" Jessica asked.

Preston, the artist du jour, looked up from his arrangement of little brushes. "I'm an avid golfer," he said. His dark eyes sparked an uneasiness in her.

Jessica could have been in some third world doctor's examination room. There was an elevated bed, a rolling stool raised to her level, and a small divan where he kept his supplies. An adjustable lamp most often used by dentists hovered over the bed.

"Ready, my dear?"

"You can call me Jessica."

She took his hand, noticing instantly the firmness beneath the soft flesh. Preston led her to the bed and helped her up on it, his hands on her hips. She felt the heat from his touch ripple up along her thighs.

"Are you warm enough, Jessica? I can get you a t-shirt, or a blanket. I'll only be painting below your navel and the space between your legs."

"I'll be fine," Jessica said. She let the robe drop from her.

Preston pulled a joint out of his pocket. "If you need to relax?"

"I'm alright."

He lit it anyway. She let the flame dance freely in her gaze. The end of the paper brightened, a small solar flare in the universe of an

abandoned warehouse. She swam through that fire drawing strength from it. What was it Pastor Hayes had told her?

Fire purifies. Fire cleanses. Fire absolves.'

Preston's voice brought her out of her fugue.

"That's an interesting tattoo you have there, Jessica."

"You like it? My ex is a tattoo artist. That's me weeping over a wilted rose."

Preston helped her to lie back. He placed pillow beneath her head.

"Comfortable?"

Jessica nodded. Preston took each of her feet and gently fitted her heels into the raised stirrups at the end of the bed.

"The straps are to hold your legs in place. Is that alright?"

"Guess I never thought I'd be posing like this," she said.

"It was a bit of trial and error with the first few attempts."

The wheels on the stool squeaked as Preston rolled in front of her. He slipped on a pair of goggles that fit over his head and magnified his eyes.

"I asked around how I could best steady a girl's legs as I painted her. Believe it or not, this was my mother's idea."

It was a bit odd to bring his mother into the discussion. Mother's always complicated

matters. Had he told mom the idea over dinner one night or while on the phone with her? How had he even broached the subject? More importantly, why had he broached the

subject with her? Jessica decided she needed to steer the conversation away from mommy.



She held her hand out for the joint. The bitter heat filled her lungs. She held the fire as long as she could.

"How many girls have you painted?"

"You, Jessica, are number eighteen. My last. A few weeks from now you and seventeen other women will hang in a gallery. I'm going to apply the base coat now. I'll be using my hand."

"That's fine."

"It's just that I find it goes on more evenly that way."

"Really, it's fine." Really, it was one of the smoother lines a guy had ever used to get between her legs.

"After this it will just be airbrushing and small brushes."

Jessica did a slow inhale then exhale. She handed him the joint.

"Tell me how you chose me," she said. She needed to know. It was important for her to know.

Preston laughed. "You most resembled the eighteenth hole at Willow Beach."

"How did you decide that?"

"I superimposed the trial shots taken by my assistant over the layout of the fairway."

"And mine looked the most like it?"

"To quote my dad—it was a long stretch of beauty."

'And we're back with the family,' Jessica thought. Moms were annoying. Dads were pigs. "You did this with all the girls?"

"Every one of you." His hand worked the space between her thighs as he smoothed the base coat. Did he know what he was doing? Of course he knew. And she was letting him. His touch was gentle and determined and she thoroughly felt the sexual tension building, building, building inside of her. A fire smoldered within her. She wondered why he was still dressed. His hand came away.

'Jesus, don't stop now,' she thought.

"I'll be switching to the air brush at this point. The small puffs of cool air and the wet paint might cause a reaction. If you feel you need



to stop to use the restroom, please let me know. Of course, I'll have to start over."

"I'll be fine," Jessica said. She felt the wet, stickiness of the paint begin to cover her.

"If you really want to know my inspiration for this series, I can tell you. It's no real secret," Preston said.

She knew he was talking to douse the sexual fire burning within her. She did not want the fire to die. Ever.

"My dad was a professional golfer. He took me on his tours. Taught me how to golf. It was okay, but I knew I'd never be his protégé or even tour. But it gave us something in common. Golf is a gentleman's game, he said. I guess it was his attempt at making me a better man. So one day we're at a course in northern Michigan designed by a guy my dad knew and while they were drinking their Highballs, I wandered around the office. He had these aerial view photographs of golf courses. I was looking at the fourth hole fairway when *'That looks like Molly Webster's vagina,'* popped into my head."

Jessica laughed. "Molly Webster must have been some girl."

"She was very popular around the dorms." Preston stopped talking and concentrated on painting. "Oddly enough, the fourth hole had a dog leg."

Jessica laughed again. "I'm sorry. I don't even know what a dog leg is but it sounds painful."

"It's when there's a bend in the fairway. Instead of being long and straight, it breaks off to the left or right."

"She must have been really popular." Jessica giggled at the image in her head. "When does the exhibition open?" she asked.

"After I finish you." Preston sat up straighter and twisted his back. "I need a break. Will you be okay here? I'd rather you didn't move. I'd hate to smear the paint at this point."

Jessica nodded.

He left her legs strapped in the stirrups. She could feel cramps forming in her calves. Above her the dentist lamp burned down on her. A bead of sweat slid down her forehead and past the corner of her eye. She tried to move the light but it was just out of her reach. The heat seemed to be intensifying. Her hand slid off the lamp pole.

Preston was back. He had gone out for a smoke. She could smell it on him.

"Are you alright?" Preston turned off the light. "I wasn't thinking. I apologize."

"Really. It's fine."

"Sometimes I forget my canvas is alive."

"What are you calling the exhibit?"

"Eighteen Holes."

Jessica gave a short, abrupt, laugh. "That's kind of crude."

"Crude sells, Jessica."

After he finished the painting, he wheeled the bed to a new spot in the middle of three spot umbrella lights.

"Because of the heat from the lights, the paint will melt quickly. It should only be about ten more minutes."

"And then what?"

"Then we're done."

"You mean you don't want to try for a hole in one?"

"Is the course open?"

"The course has been open for some time."

"Then let's get these shots."

The lights flashed in synchronization with each picture he took. The silent, heated lightning flashing around her stopped as abruptly as it had begun. She lay in the shadowy corner, her breath heavy and hot. Preston's hand took hold of one of her ankles.

"No. Not like that. Leave the straps on. And make the lights flash."

The fire that had burned itself out now erupted with a new intensity.

The next time she had heard from him was when the email invitation arrived in her inbox. Truthfully, it wasn't even from him but someone named Angela inviting her on his behalf.

She arrived fashionably late.

The crowd meandered through the show, making polite talk with bawdy undertones. Jessica noticed the models were all standing near their paintings. Husbands talked fervently to them while wives stood back sipping their wine and made assumptions about what their husbands did on their golf outings.

"Jessica, you came," Preston said.

Jessica turned and smiled at him. It changed when she saw a very stunning blonde woman hanging on his arm. Jessica kept her smile as the couple approached. Preston kissed both of Jessica's cheeks. He took a flute of champagne from a passing waiter's tray and handed it to her.

"Oh, no thank you, Preston." Jessica said. Preston ignored her and pushed the glass into her hand.

"Jessica, I'd like you to meet Molly," Preston said. "Molly, my dear, I'd like you to meet—"

"Hole Eighteen," Molly said. A wicked smile slipped over her face. She held out her hand. Jessica pressed hers into it.

*'Fire purifies.
Fire cleanses.
Fire absolves.'*

Preston laughed. “Wonderful guess.”

“Wasn’t too difficult, darling,” Molly said. “Only two holes don’t have a model standing by them. I’m Number Four, so that leaves the eighteenth.”

“Number four?” Jessica asked. “Wasn’t that one with the dog leg?”

Molly’s smile curdled. Women fought on so many levels of mean. “I’ve had it corrected, darling. Plastic surgeons are amazing. Perhaps I should give you my doctor’s card. He could do wonders with your tits. Not that they’re bad. Preston has told me all about yours. And hers. And hers.”

Preston cleared his throat.

Molly pointed with the rim of her champagne glass before she sipped from it. “Look, dear, that adorable little man is eying your hole—I’m sorry. Was that too crude?” Molly scrunched her eyes and smiled at Jessica before heading over to Preston and Hal.

Jessica looked away, her eyes burning. She set the champagne flute down on a windowsill and hurried from the gallery. Behind her she thought she heard Molly say goodbye, but it didn’t matter if she had. Jessica was done with the scene. She had been paid and her role in the exhibit had ended the day she made love to Preston in his loft. His story would be nothing, but folklore and hers would be no more than a footnote.

Jessica stuck her hands in her pockets. She pulled out a cigarette and her disposable lighter. She lit the cigarette and took one long, throat burning drag. The fire felt good. She turned and dropped the burning butt into a rectangular garbage bin up against the gallery’s wall.

Smoke began to waft out of the open lid. A few seconds later flames flickered. She pushed the bin up against the gallery’s back door.

She walked away remembering...

Pastor Hayes laying on the floor of his office. His pants around his ankles. Jessica poured the bourbon from his flask all around

him. She lit a cigarette. Dropped it in the spilled liquor.

‘Fire purifies. Fire cleanses. Fire absolves.’

A couple of blocks later, she popped the top buttons of her blouse and pulled back her hair tying it into a loose knot. A cab stopped instantly causing the speeding fire truck behind it to swerve and blow its horn. The cabbie flipped it off.

“Where to?”

“Uptown if we can get through.” She felt like dancing.

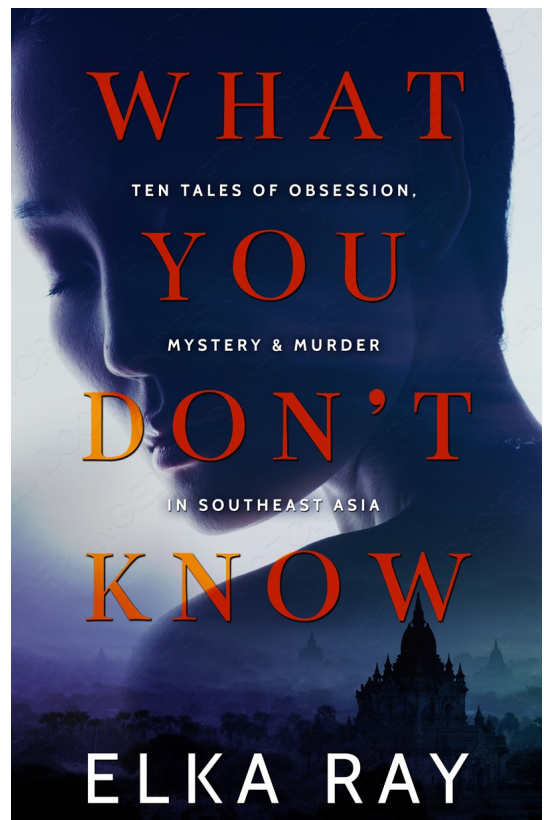
“You’re the woman in that Times Square underwear ad, aren’t you?”

She wasn’t, but what the hell. “That’s me.”

“I gotta tell ya. You’re smoking hot.”

Jessica smiled, but not at the compliment. She smiled at the smoking hot fire sweeping through the gallery.

TO BE CONTINUED...



L'IMPERMANENZA DELL'ART

KEVIN BERG

PRIMA PARTE

The men lean in for a kiss and her smartphone plays a sound as she takes a seat near the rear of the classroom, she looks up in time to see the younger of the two wiggle his fingers in a playful goodbye to his lover as he departs.

All eyes in the room return to the blush that spills past his temples to meet at the crown of his head, painting the skin crimson beneath thinning salt and pepper hair.

A quiet voice utters, “*Susami*,” before the dark, passionate eyes flicker around the room and settle on the floor. Love echoes from palpitations that rattle his chest. His breaths slow as he fidgets with the buttons on his vest, the flushed skin regains its normal color as soft words dance from his mouth and lean into the hot Parisian air, “Okay, are we ready to begin? *Eccellente*.”

The students move in front of their easels and the instructor paces around the classroom, fanning himself with a local newspaper, he stops beside her when he reaches the back of the room. She brushes a few strands of blonde hair streaked deep red behind an ear crowded with jewelry, and smiles as she unpacks her brushes and paints. He nods and returns the gesture, the paper sitting motionless against his chin long enough for her to make out the headline.

MEURTRE!

She can't quite place the word yet, the bold black characters that stain the paper stand out impressive and imposing against the smaller, faded text

of the article itself. Her eyes remain fixated a moment too long, and the instructor follows the cool blue gaze to the story folded in his hand.

“Do you know what this means, miss?” A raised eyebrow dances above an eye, the momentary silence begs for a response.

Her skin reddens and she shifts the brushes to her other palm, “No, it sounds familiar, but I have only been in Paris about a week and a half.” She fumbles with her bag and says, “I have a dictionary here somewhere.”

“Oh yes, yes, you are American, no?” The question stops her movement and pulls the corners of his mouth into a forced smile, a facial expression somewhere between the smirk of

annoyance and a grimace of pain. He swallows hard and turns to her work in progress to escape the uncomfortable eye contact. Without waiting for a response he continues, “I am also a visitor here, if you did not know. I am here with *amore mio*,” his face

betrays a tinge of scarlet as he continues, “the man you saw earlier. My partner left home with me to come and find our place in the world, together.” Happiness pushes the smile up to his eyes, “*Due cuori fiorentini*, from opposite banks of the majestic Arno, found each other in a love for art. True art that dwells in the soul of its creator, a beauty—a love—unmatched by any other in the world.”

His smile carries him away from her as he calls over his shoulder, “Very good, it is obvious you love what you do, passion, can be your greatest tool in achieving true art.”

“But sir, *monsieur*, er, *signore*, that word...?”

The blade dances against pale skin and smeared makeup as it pushes into the eye socket just below the manicured eyebrow.

His smile disappears as he turns to face her, the makeshift fan doing its best to dry the perspiration beading on his face. "My dear, English is fine when we speak. I need the practice anyway, and this makes it easier for both of us." The disingenuous smile returns, and a drop of sweat rolls to find its way into the corner of an open eye. He blinks away the sting and says in a low voice, "*Murder.*"

Shock freezes her smile and a chill climbs her body in an involuntary shiver, something primal and passionate takes hold of her. The warmth begins in her stomach and extends in a tingle to every limb.

"Have a seat, dear." A warm hand on her shoulder guides her to a stool, her eyes swim in the darkness staring down at her. "Take a moment to collect yourself, feel the power of the emotion that word creates within you, and use it in your expression. Use that feeling to move people. To show the real you. Make them remember." She nods and the fan pushes slightly cooler air against his face as he leaves her. Neighboring students stare a moment before returning to their work, happily polluting the world with the same boring still life found in every cheap motel lobby around the globe.

The horns on her canvas reach to the corners, framing a visage grotesque and split with a vicious sneer, the uninhibited disgust and disappointment in a world beyond repair snarls back from her work. Something like inspiration swells within her at the memory of her instructor's compliment as she digs out her phone to check the alert from earlier.

A few quick swipes of a thumb under the nail painted black, left to fade and chip with time, bring her to the video.

Black Glove Live begins to stream from her social media account, the picture is dark, but the clarity is enough to catch the twinkle of metal as it slices into the skin.

The room is nearly bare. At least what is visible in the video. She can see that the walls and floor are unremarkable, the light twinkles in the hazel pools that stare back at the camera.

She glances around the classroom and no one has noticed the sobs coming from the

speaker at the base of her smartphone, she scrambles to turn down the volume quickly, but cannot peel her eyes from the suffering.

The video is horrifying. And beautiful.

The live video stream gently wraps its fingers in her hair and closes into a fist, dragging her headfirst into the terror so raw, so personal to this other woman, whoever she is. She jumps as the shine of polished metal flashes in the pools that now leak down trembling cheeks, a muffled wail grips at her heart and stokes the inner fire at the same time.

The warmth resting in her belly has returned, every limb and digit tingles with the pins and needles of nervous excitement as she watches the reflection take shape into a beautiful straight razor. The gleaming metal explodes with light against the dark background as it enters the frame, the pale bone handle resting gently in the palm of a black leather glove.

The blade dances against pale skin and smeared makeup as it pushes into the eye socket just below the manicured eyebrow.

The skin of the eyelid splits pink and crimson as the blade pulls along the orbit, slowing to a stop at the base near a nostril flaring with fright. The smooth, black fingers of the glove reposition themselves along the bone handle to change the grip, and a light push pops the orb easily from its home to dangle against a bloody cheek.

Even at the lowest volume, the cries coming from her phone are loud enough for her to look around at her classmates, still no reaction from those nearest her. She could mute the performance completely, but it would lose some of its effect.

The fibers of the optic nerve part beneath the smooth blade to drip yellow pus against the sticky blood drying on the cheek. The sightless sphere rolls around in the palm of a gloved hand, as the other pulls the colors of blood and pus around the empty socket in a swirl to form the shape of a heart. The screams stop as the latest doodle dries on the human canvas and the girl in the video loses consciousness. Silence holds the empty eye socket in the middle of the frame, allowing viewers to fall into the abyss, a bottomless pit lying in the middle of a crude heart drawn in bodily fluids.

The moment of quiet lets her mind wander, she is lost in the pain and beauty of the moment frozen on the screen of her phone. The tingle has faded from her limbs and the horror and disgust fill her with a warmth not unlike love.

The image sweeps to the lips, full and soft, alluring in their silence. She bites her own lip against the desire that rushes through her body and her eyes flicker from the screen to her surroundings to make sure she is alone. As alone as she can get.

The thumb of a gloved hand slides along the bottom lip, pulling it into a pout and parting the lips as the index finger slips inside her mouth. The bottom lip begins to quiver, alerting the viewers to the regained consciousness of the presentation piece. The thumb and second knuckle of the forefinger pinch hard, the lip pulls taut as the other hand wiggles a gloved finger in the universal symbol for 'No.' The black glove continues to bring the lip to the camera, the pink and plump becomes a stretched white sliver.

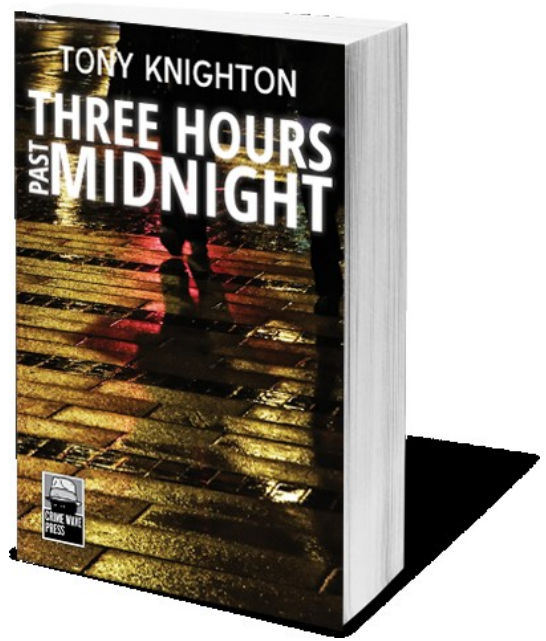
Her phone emits a small *pop* as the corner of the mouth rips, the screams choke on the blood as it gurgles under the glove that continues to pull, tearing the flesh from her face until it comes away to dangle between the two fingers.

She groans as the image sends a rush of heat and damp between her legs, the snickers from neighbors pull her eyes from the screen in embarrassment, and she sees the only one not laughing is the instructor.

His eyes find hers and another wave of pleasure hits her.

She can see something like satisfaction, an understanding, pass over his face and the smile leaves his eyes as he stands to quiet the class. After a moment the giggles have ceased and everyone resumes their activities, the creativity splashes and smears boring into the shapes of fruit and unimaginative into landscapes that populate the walls of dentist offices and elevators.

The attention safely removed after her outburst, her eyes rest on the screen again. The strip of meat remains pinched between the fingers of one hand while the other pulls at the top lip. She crosses her legs and bites her own lip hard enough to draw blood in anticipation, barely able to contain herself as the sounds escape her



phone and the upper lip has been torn from the face.

Blood flows in every direction from the permanent smile on her screen and mixes with vomit as the glove lifts the chin for a better look. The sobs still gurgle under the flow of tears, snot and blood clogging the throat, until the shine of the straight razor is placed under an ear and drawn across to the other side.

She rocks with convulsions as the warmth flows in ripples through her entire body, a scream dies deep in her chest. Her eyes remain closed until she is able to regain control and listens closely, one final shudder from the taste of blood her lip gives her. She opens her eyes slowly and looks around the room.

Nobody is laughing, it seems she has gotten away with her body's reaction to the secret pleasure streaming from her phone, and she smiles a victory to herself until her eyes come to a halt on the dark gaze at the front of the class. The corners wrinkle as she watches his smile, a genuine one, push them up with its movement.

They do not break eye contact until she is pulled back to the sounds and movement coming from the screen.

The camera rotates to frame a blank canvas, the unused square of *cotton duck* lies on the flat wooden surface of a table. The gloves shine with body fluids as they smear into shapes and lines, colors and shades of death and

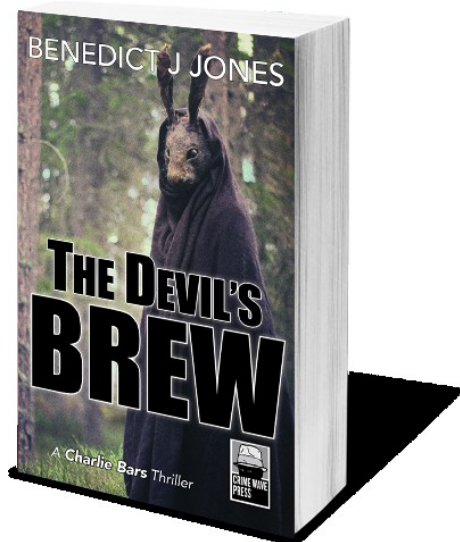
mutilation so perfect, so captivating. She can feel the sensation in her own fingers as the bright red blood is drawn across the space to become sticky and brown. The smells tickle her nose as the fingers wet a yellow patch, the white and pink of pus is pulled in streaks through the painting, the shine of mucus a bright smudge.

She knows. She feels it. Every last bit.

Nothing, not a single drop of the blood, sweat, or tears goes unused. The pain of death complete and captured in the painting, a background comprised of pure agony. The lips are laid across the drying background, held stationary by a sticky crust of saliva as pins are pushed through them into the fabric. The eyeball at the center of the piece, between the pinned lips, stares back at her from the live feed of a master. A true artist.

The heel of a glove presses the orb flat, an arc of creamy blood and vitreous gel sprays outward, completing the masterpiece. The familiar tingle fills her and silence surrounds her, warmth explodes in her shoulder and she turns to drown in the darkness that looks down at her.

CONTINUA...



BLOOD OF THE LAMB

JAMES SHAFFER

Day. City neighbourhood.

Organ music plays a hymn.

A small church stands on the corner of a vacant lot. The light from the red-streaked evening sky bleeds on its whitewashed walls, drips from the eaves of the roof, seeps through the step's dry floorboards leading up to its two wooden doors, and pools in the shaded, bloody footprints left by the boy who approached. He stands for a beat at the foot of the steps, letting the blood drip on his head and run down across his face. It feels good, clean, washing him white as snow just as promised.

He hears the choir, feels the pulse of the music, the rhythm, the beat, beat, beat, the hum, the power growing, inside him, outside, cleansing, covering, making him whole and pure.

The choir, on the other side of the doors, sings, there's power in the blood. He mounts the steps and pushes open the doors just as the preacher shouts over the choir's litany.

"There's POWER (beat), POWER (beat) in the BLOOD, I say (beat) POWER (beat) in the BLOOD!"

He bursts through the door. "HALLELUJAH!" the boy shouts, pure, beaming like a little angel, bloody from head to toe.

The congregation shouts, "AMEN! Praise Jesus!"

But no one sees the blood. No one could ever see what he saw.

Day. Train station.

Tarantella's "San Telmo" leaks from a transistor radio on the platform.

Stepping down off the train into a bright sunlit day. No shade. The waiting shadowed their eyes, fanned their faces with hats or newspapers they'd bought, something to read while watching and waiting. No one waited for him. At least no one who knew he was coming. But he knew—someone, somewhere always waited.

Crossing the platform, he pushed through the door into dark interior of the station waiting room. He preferred the dark, seeking its cool, quiet peace away from the light. He knew foul deeds were done there, but he felt safe, knowing the one true light he possessed, the one that shined out of him, would judge the others yet save him. It was no ordinary sunlight—it was his salvation. It was the light of the world, focused on him, an emissary of the light, a light that found the darkness and cut it out like an infection, like a wound left to fester. The great healer had arrived.



Letting his eyes adjust, he paused in front of an oak bench, setting his one small bag on the curved surface of the seat.

He turned and sat and watched the rest of passengers off the train. His calling required vigilance.

Feeling the smooth polished curve of the bench reminded him of a time as little boy when he had sat on hard solid benches like this one, listening to the preacher perched high above him in the pulpit box, shouting, imploring, spreading his arms wide, making a point, the sleeves of his robe spread like angel's wings. There was healing in those wings and blood that dripped from the tips like a rain that washed whiter than snow. Only he saw it, only he felt it, and it had changed him. He possessed a perspective on the truth no one else had. It set him free, just like the scripture said it would.

"Ye shall know the truth"

When the station emptied out, and the only sound left in the waiting room was the jumping clunk of the second hand on the wall clock, he grabbed his bag, stood and moved out into the harsh light of the early afternoon. Surveying the street, he watched the slow gait of pedestrians burdened by the heat, and heard the rumble of the passing cars, eyeing their dark, cool interiors for some sign.

No one noticed him. And why should they? He was just another somebody who was nobody.

It was important to remain a shadow, a grey shapeless entity that moved against the light, hiding in plain sight, part of the scenery, blending in. He wore plain suits and muted ties, hair, sported no moustache or beard. His face was the face of the local bus driver or delivery man, plain, ordinary. He was average everything--average height, average build, no distinguishing characteristics. In the daytime, in the light, he had a kindly face. He was truly a killer in camouflage.

He stood at the curb until traffic thinned out then crossed at a trot and mounted the steps to the Station Hotel, a transient hotel where patrons stayed for an hour's quickie, maybe for a day, or for the more down and out, the payment of a weekly rate, saving enough for a bottle and coin-operated TV, the small comforts of the desperate. He liked transient hotels. No one asked questions, and for a little extra cash, no distinguishable signature was required on the register in exchange for a key on a worn wooden fob and a room with a sink and a bed.

He paid cash, more than was required, and took the proffered key the desk clerk slid into a worn wooden trough under the bottom edge of a thick glass pane that protected the clerk from his clients. As the clerk passed through the key, he did not even raise his eyes from the racing form lying flat in front of him. A half full whiskey glass and a smoking ashtray shared the space on a desk that hid little of his paunch, pressed up against its edge.

"Room six. First floor."

The wooden fob had a six burned into it. That was good sign. Or was it a nine? Trusting a distracted desk clerk in a transient rail road hotel to give him the right key was a concession he was willing to make at the moment. The proof would be if it fit the lock in the door to room six. As much as he hated to spoil the moment of rapport he'd built with the fat desk clerk, he turned away from the window, strode across the worn carpet of the shabby lobby and climbed the stairs.

The key fit. He turned the key and pushed the door fully open as he stepped aside. Nothing happened. He entered and tossed his bag on the bed, watching it bounce once then settle.

Staying clear of the window, he zipped open his bag and removed a small knife. The handle was made of slip-proof rubber with four rings mounted on the bottom edge that fit the four fingers of his right hand. A groove on the side of the handle above the rings was for his thumb, giving him a firm grip when he twisted.

*There's PO-WER.
POW-ER in the
BLOOD.*

The blade was four inches long, two-edged and sharp as a razor. He could cut both ways.

Cutting both ways was essential. He preferred the silent effect of the blade like the slow quiet flow of blood from an open vein. "In quietness and confidence will be your strength," so said the Bible. From his bag he pulled out his disguise. The shirt fit him perfectly. Slouching into a dark suit jacket, he dropped the knife into one of the vertical pockets on the side. Easy access. The jacket matched the dark slacks he'd worn on the train. His disguise was perfect. He was ready to administer the sacraments, to demand penance, to hear the last confession, to spill the blood that cleansed. He sat down on the edge of the bed and waited for the dark.

Late Night. Wet street.

Shivaree's "Goodnight Moon" plays on a window sill radio.

Traffic light pulses, flashes red. Paints the surface streets in bloody jump cut splashes, crimson arteries, running the gutter to the drain, then gone.

He waits and watches. In the dark. In the mouth of an alley adjacent to the underpass.

Hiding, dressed in black, his official disguise in place.

Seeing in the dark isn't something he learned. Seeing in the dark: a gift given to those who held the light, the light of the world. Like the beam of a torch floating on an emerald underworld mist. Piercing the dark. Revealing the bloody path to redemption.

He prays.

There's power in the blood, the blood of the lamb, washes, cleanses white as snow, hidden in the cleft of the rock, safe in the everlasting arms, singing, believing, accepting, possessing, obsessing, with the heart, soaring, with wings like eagles, with the blood of the lamb. The power and the glory forever. Amen.

He watches.

Rain comes again, steady, heavy, blown in sheets, rippling, waves on the wind. The street light at the edge of the underpass bends, vibrates, in the wind, whips a cone of light that folds into



a yellow curtain, opening, closing, flapping, holding back the black hole beneath, but changing its shape, changing its substance.

Huddled in the middle as far from the edges of the underpass as they could get. The girls, bunch together, hiding from the rain and wind. Hands cupped, some cigarette ends glow, vibrate and bounce between cold fingers. A car approaches. Business as usual. The huddle dissolves, the players peel off but stay close. One stop shop.

He watches.

One girl steps up to the car's passenger window, negotiating, counting the pennies, weighing the chances versus the profit, the worth of any negotiation. She decides, opens the passenger door, climbs in, closes the door, commits, negotiation complete. The car glides off. Tail lights fade, blood red points in the dark, in the rain.

He watches.

Another girl splits off from the group, steps to the edge of the underpass near the cone of light, lights a cigarette, tilts back her head, blows out a stream of smoke, staring up at the light as if it were the sun, watching the rain steak through the smoke and light, slicing open jagged patches in the darkness.

He watches.

She stands in close-up at the edge of the light. Turns her head. Speaks to the group.

"Going home, girls. Had enough."

She bends her head against the wind.

Footsteps echo.

From the hard shadows at the end of alley, he watches. Listens to the echo of the footsteps, the hard click, to the hum, the hiss, the pulse, the echo of the voice.

There's PO-WER. POW-ER in the BLOOD.

She appears. Alone. The steady click of her heels, determined. But cautious. She looks behind. Her steps stutter to a stop under a street lamp. Safe in the cone of light, he thinks she thinks. She hesitates. Just ten paces from him. She looks back down the street, back steps once out of the cone of light, expecting someone to appear. Ready if they do. The street stays empty.

He steps out of the alley. Walks toward her. She turns. Her breath catches. She steps

backwards into the light. He walks just to its edge. Her lips, bright red, catch the light. She exhales. Perfumed air, cheap perfumed air. A smile plays on her lips. Lights her eyes. Replaces the fear. Now self-assured. He sees she sees another mark. She steps toward him. Out of the light.

"You scared me. There. For a minute."

"A girl. Alone. At night. You should be scared." (PO-WER!)

"No risk. No reward." She stares up at him.

He lifts his head and glances past her down the street. She takes the queue and turns her head to look. Just her head. (PO-WER!) One last time. (BLOOD!) The blade drops into his hand. (Hummmm...)

He grabs her hair, twists her back against him, and slashes a red line across her throat. Quick and silent, just as the end should be. Drags her into the end of the alley. Poses her like a crucifix, lifting her arms, crossing her legs at the ankles. Paints a cross on her forehead. Her blood. The blood of the sinner, the repentant sinner now cleansed, washed whiter than snow. Washed in the blood of the lamb. There's PO-WER in the BLOOD!

TO BE CONTINUED....

