



THE Legacy

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Editor's Choice

Bait

by J.L. Schiller

My name is Jefferson Todd Davis. I am a Philosophy student. At least I used to be. I used to think I had everything figured out; who I was, what I wanted, where I was going. I used to think life was beautiful, that nightmares existed only when you slept.

My name is J.T. Davis. I have a girlfriend, Hannah Joy Henry. At least she used to be my girlfriend. She stopped writing me six months and thirteen days ago. Her last letter said she couldn't hold on any longer. What does that even mean? I used to believe in love, a magical power that could reach across immeasurable distances, and bond two souls with indestructibility.

My name is Jeff. I am a son. At least I used to be the kid my parents raised. They wouldn't recognize me now. My mom still writes about God and salvation. My dad is just a post script about how proud he is of the man I have become. God? Salvation? I've done terrible things that no one could ever take pride in. I've changed.

My name is Sergeant Davis. My friends call me "Happy." I'm a soldier lost in Hell, among lost students, boyfriends, and sons searching for their way home. We are lost together. Like the crew of a sunken ship at sea, we are drifting with the tide of war praying for someone to come and rescue us. This is our story.

###

The hum of mosquitoes vibrating in my head destroys the chance of reasonable thought. Ironically, their monotone buzz is the only thing keeping my mind focused on my surroundings. Like usual, it's hot, too fucking hot, but that's Vietnam.

The sun rarely breaks unabated past the trees which have surrounded us for the past several hours. I couldn't tell you if it was one tree, or a million; this damn jungle is just one giant knot of thorns, vines, branches, and roots. Back in North Texas, trees were easy to count, and their shade actually made a difference, but here... here there's no escape, and no relief. "Welcome to Hell on Earth," they told me when I first arrived in country a lifetime ago.

I look down into the hole my platoon leader discovered, and I imagine it being some kind of magical tunnel away from this shit, you know, dug by some precocious white rabbit who plans to offer me tea just as soon as I crawl in.

"Get in there," Lieutenant Lemery orders, but I don't rush. I take one last swig from my canteen before taking the LT's sidearm, wiggling in head first like some fat worm on a dirty hook.

I've searched a thousand of these rat holes dug by the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong, but this one smelled just like my dog, Bishop, after he got snake bit, crawled under the house and died amid the hottest summer in Texas history. Using my elbows I crawl in further while my back and helmet scrape down the ceiling. My flashlight lights up nothing but the falling dirt, and a couple of nasty roots from the green hell I just escaped. About ten yards in, the tunnel ends at a drop, and once the dust clears I can see into a small almost square room. Apparently, dead gooks in a hole smell just like dead dog under a house in Texas.

The Viet Cong are in enough pieces and blown so far from the middle of the room that it isn't hard to figure out what happened, a grenade. Scattered papers, and a few tan NVA rucksacks decorate the floor.

"You shits stink," I explain to my dismembered audience. Definitely four of them, I only count four heads. A quick check of the room for what the lieutenant will call "intelligence," and I'm out of this blood bath. At least Hell had fresh air.

The following day I still had that dead gook smell on me; no one else could smell it so it was probably just in my mustache, which you can kiss my ass I'm not shaving it. The platoon just met up. Word came down that our company was to pull some mission to aid the Marine Corps' 1st Battalion 9th Marines, or the "Walking Dead" as they were better known. A bunch of psychotic jarheads that have a death rate over 90 percent and are gifted with a special knack for being shit magnets.

As usual, the first to speak up was Private "Loudmouth" LeMond Freeman, a brother from 5 points, New York. "Man, them dudes is called The Walking Dead for a reason. What the hell we doin' helpin' the Marines out anyway?"

"For fuck's sake Freeman, we're all the walking dead out here. What fucking difference does it make?" Eloquently put, as always, by mister high school substitute teacher, PFC James Killery. There's definitely a class full of pimple-faced kids who are glad to see him gone.

Staff Sergeant Henry Gerald Ford, walks up in time to shut Loudmouth up before he could really start running his pie hole.

Henry is one of those born leaders who cares about his men, and just so happens to be my best friend. We've been together for several months now, and nothing brings two buddies together quite like bullets whipping past your buttocks. The remainder of the unending litany of bullshit The Nam had to offer was just icing on the cake, and the two of us became brothers in short order.

Henry used to be called "Prez" on account of his parents' uncreative naming skills. However, he picked up the name "Alfred," which was courtesy of some GI passing through a month ago, and it stuck like a fat girl in a tire swing. He's just got that butler look about him, with a thin Frenchy mustache, perfect posture, and jet black hair.

"What's the plan boss?" I ask after lighting up a smoke and passing the pack to Alfred. He even smoked like a fucking butler.

"Looks like we're playing bait for the 1/9. They've got some mission to clear out a sector between us and them. Supposedly, we're small enough to move quickly, but big enough to lure the gooks out to the jarheads."

"Seems like bullshit to me." I say. "But easy enough. When are we leaving?"

"First thing, 0430 hours. Make sure Freeman is squared away for me, will you?"

"Sure thing, boss man." I light up another smoke as Alfred walks off towards the mess tent. I can't help but laugh. "Bait." Ha, like a fat worm on a dirty hook.

I didn't sleep at all that night. After making Sergeant a month ago, the men have leaned pretty heavily on me. This was my second tour in Nam, so who could blame them? Shit, I actually enjoy the responsibility.

I catch up with Freeman last, because if I didn't he would screw his gear up before we head out. I throw out most of the "souvenirs" he acquired since the last equipment inspection, and after a short argument I let him keep the bag of dope he had hidden at the bottom of his ruck sack.

"Smoke this shit in the bush, and I'll shoot your black ass myself," I warned. The look on his face was priceless, and pathetic.

We're near the border of Cambodia, and the wet season has already kicked off with a record monsoon earlier this month. Don't get me wrong, the late September sun felt closer and stronger than anywhere else on earth when the clouds broke open, which happens maybe once, or twice, every few days. I often catch myself begging for the rain to stop, and then five minutes later praying for it to start. It was like riding on a not-so-merry-go-round of wet and still-fucking-wet-but-now-I'm-hot-too.

At 0400 Alfred performed a quick weapons inspection by flashlight, and then gave the order to move out. 1st platoon, which is ours, took the point on our fool's errand to the east. A day's march, I was told, and we would be standing on VC's front porch.

I try to pay attention to my surroundings, but it ain't happening. As shitty as my home life was, it still had a pull stout enough to drag my thoughts away from The Nam and all her distractions. One foot in front of the other, mindless walk through a serpent like path chopped out by the sorry sap taking his turn at point. Just enough attention to the foot beats of Alfred humping ahead of me is all I can offer to the war. The rest of me gets dragged back to the world and the red brick roads of Happy, Texas.

I can see my parents in their old country house several miles outside of town. My dad is worrying about the weather and ironically praying for rain. My mom is in the living room crocheting another something hideous for one of the dozen snot covered babies my older brother and sisters were constantly spitting out. The trail we were on felt like I was walking down the rut filled dirt drive that led from the house to the county road, where the only tree within miles shaded the bus stop for school. The sound of Vietnam's rain turns into the call of the Texas cicada. The green labyrinth of the jungle turns into the red brick road to Hannah's house. The door to her house opens...

"Davis."

"Yeah, what's up, Alfred?" Blank faced, so I don't get caught daydreaming.

"Spread your men out along that ledge, and hold security between us and Indian country. We saddle up in sixty."

"Roger that, sergeant."

I use half of the platoon at a time to hold security in order to give the men a break long enough to get chow and change socks. The view of the valley below is impressive. The emerald green canopy looks almost dense enough to walk across, as if the birds were shooting out from the ground, and the small clouds sitting between trees were the last bits of fog melting into the earth. The view and the soft drizzle make everything surreal, quiet, and unnerving. I can see it in the men's faces. I can hear it in LeMond's silence. They had the same feeling screaming in the back of my mind. Something wasn't right.

An explosion down the hill behind me threw four soldiers like rag dolls. The tree line to the north of the company's position lit up with automatic gunfire as the hillside started to boom with heavy mortar rounds. 3rd Platoon was holding security in that direction, and they took the brunt of the attack. 4th platoon was quickly pulled from the south and used as reinforcement. From my position at the top of the hill I could hear another attack falling onto 2nd Platoon back down the rise just beneath the tree line to my west.

The order to fall back up the hill came out over the radio. I ordered all of 1st platoon to realign on the western ledge to provide covering fire. Seconds later, Killery's M-60 was chopping away at the trees behind our friends running up towards us. The rest of the platoon joined in, and before I could blink we were raining mortars 25 yards into the northern tree line. Our suppressive fire shut the gooks up long enough that the thin remnants of the 3rd and 4th were able to reach us. Alfred was with them; he looked pissed.

I moved over to the LT to assist with coordinates, but found the platoon's radio had been toasted by an RPG. Private Jenkins, "Jinks" is what everyone called him, was still carrying it on his back, and died along with our chances of calling in air support. None of the other radio operators made it up the hill. We were fucked.

The bodies below were laid out all over the hillside like the forgotten toys of an infant giant. Their red blood was a stark contrast to the white, ash-colored boulders that dotted the slope between us and the tree line. I could taste copper in my mouth as if the blood of everyone who had died in this fucking country was evaporated and rained back down. All I could think of was how glad I was that it wasn't me down there. How fucked up is that?

###

Radio contact with 2nd Platoon ended with Jinks a few hours ago, and all gunfire stopped not long after that. We had no idea if anyone survived down there. We had no way of finding out. All we had was our mission, so when the rain started to sheet down harder, we moved out hoping the weather would give us a lead on the much larger enemy, who would have a hard time climbing up to our position.

The harried trip down the other side of the hill was like riding a river raging down from the storm above. The taste of it mixed with the red mud made it a river of blood. As crazy as it was, it brought comfort knowing the gooks wouldn't risk it. Before I knew it, we were beneath the canopy, and a solid click away from the foot when the rain finally slowed down.

We make shifted a single platoon from what was left of 3rd and 4th. We decided to make them 3rd Platoon, since they had the only surviving LT. They were heavy with surviving sergeants, who just lost too many of their men, and the look in many of their eyes made it clear there was no chance of talking them out of taking patrol that night.

###

An hour later, I dug in with Alfred, and then inspected the foxholes of the rest of 1st Platoon. Alfred met up with the 3rd Platoon leader, who was planning to set up an ambush a click back, near the foot of the hill.

"They're pissed, and there's no changing their minds," he said when we met back up. "Fucking idiots. There could be an entire regiment on our tails, and a few fucking claymores aren't gonna do jack shit."

"Could just be a company back there. They did give up easy at the hill." The look in Alfred's eyes told me he wasn't looking for a devil's advocate.

"Damn Alfred, you're probably right. They're bigger than a company. Why the fuck would the jarheads be setting this up for anything less than a regiment?"

"I talked their LT into keeping the distance between us and the 3rd to a minimum. They'll be less than half a click back to the northwest."

Just close enough for us to hear them get slaughtered if things go wrong. "How long 'til we catch up with the 1/9?"

"If we move out early enough, we could probably meet up with them by tomorrow afternoon. There's a village between us and them, and I think the lieutenant is planning to go through it instead of around the damn thing." Alfred didn't explain what bothered him about the plan. He just pulled out a pack of smokes, lit one, and then tossed them to me. The pack slipped and several cigarettes fell out into the wet mud. Their white paper darkening from the falling rain looked like the blood soaking into the white boulders beneath the fallen men of 3rd and 4th platoons. I could taste copper again.

We eat quietly, and then take turns catching sleep. The trees block out the dim gray evening light, and it turns pitch black long before I wake up for my watch.

The skeeters don't bother me like they used to. I think they've gotten to the point that they get sick at the thought of another drop of Sergeant Davis' blood. I sit up for watch, rub the sleep from my eyes, and light up a smoke, taking care to keep the cherry hidden inside my poncho.

The jungle was noisy at night, but the melody of all the insects, amphibians, and nightly predators was soothing. It was a song of security. As long as the music kept playing, you knew everything was okay. Like an early warning system all of us learned to take comfort in.

Listening to the symphony of life, it doesn't take my mind long to wander. I soon find myself walking beneath the single flashing yellow light hung above the main road into Happy. Every other block along Main Street was lit by the orange bulb on the outstretching arm of a brand new light pole. The red brick roads shoot off of Main

in both directions. I take a left down the last, which ends at her house. The white wood siding looks gray in the steel moonlight, and the blue shutters look black. The second story is smaller, and juts out of the first like a square cap. The window to her room is dark. I stand there waiting, seemingly forever. The front door to the house begins to open...

What the fuck was that? I blink at the darkness of the jungle. The frogs had stopped chirping. It wasn't raining anymore. The temperature was eerily colder than when I first woke up for watch. How long had I been dreaming? I lean forward in my foxhole and ready my weapon. The moon broke through the canopy, and lit the bushes twenty yards in front of me. The sound had come from that direction.

I think about waking Alfred, but that would make too much noise. Without the music of nature my breath sounded awkwardly loud. Whoever, or whatever, was out there was already on top of us. I grip my weapon tightly, and take aim at the bushes as they begin to move. My finger slides over the trigger, and begins to squeeze as I hold my breath. The elephant ear leaves part open, and the moon is captured by golden eyes.

I let out my breath, and the tiger looks in my direction sniffing the air. We make eye contact, and stare at one another for eternity. Fear dissolves, replaced by wonder. This is the most beautiful animal I have ever seen in my life. I was snared in dreamlike enchantment. Wisdom, power, agility, and an unimaginable knowledge of the natural world all fill the golden flecks of those two orbs drilling into my soul. It was like the animal was telling me something, warning me. "I don't eat the walking dead" was the caveat. I consider waking Alfred, but what would I say? What could I say? Hey man, a tiger just showed up to tell us we're all going to die?

Unconcerned, disinterested, and in no way intimidated, the beast turns and walks off. It took the orchestra several minutes to begin their song again. It took me another hour to believe what I just saw.

###

The boom of a claymore followed by the rattle of automatic gunfire woke Alfred up. He looked at me, cursed under his breath, and then headed off towards the LT's foxhole in the middle of the perimeter. Several more booms of mines being set off, and what sounded like hand grenades, covered the constant slaughter of rapid fire. Like the buzz of a million angry hornets the battle continued for the next hour, and made it clear that 3rd Platoon was heavily outnumbered.

Alfred fell back into the foxhole when it all ended. "That motherfucker," he whispered. "That good for nothing coward ass college brat."

"What?" I asked.

"The lieutenant knew this shit would happen, and I don't think he ever planned to reinforce the 3rd." Alfred started to pack his gear, "Get the platoon on their feet, and tell them to keep their yaps shut. We're moving out immediately."

"Wait. West or east?"

I was incredulous to what he was saying. I could see the pain on Alfred's face, and could feel the heat of his anger, "East," he said. "The 3rd are on their own."

We were humping a fresh trail in the dark minutes later. The occasional gunshots in the dark grew further and further away the longer we fought our way through the jungle terrain. A click grew between us and the 3rd Platoon, between us and the pissed off eyes of sergeants who lost their men, between me and the golden eyes of an omniscient tiger.

###

The clouds didn't come back that night, or in the morning when we found ourselves sitting in the tree line looking out at a small village of bamboo buildings thatched with long brown leaves. Tiny women and children were working the four rice paddies between us and their homes. A water buffalo was pulling a cart carrying several men

in straw hats towards the village across a dirt bridge on the south side. None of them were armed. The small village was defenseless.

Most of us were still spooked from last night, and no one said a word. Their faces spoke for them. Killery was ready for a fight, LeMond was ready to go home. Most of the 20 or so other men spoke of revenge, while others told a story of relief, just glad to be alive. Alfred and I were no different.

Lieutenant Lemery, Alfred, Sergeant Spears, Corporal Johnson, and I all met up behind the platoon. The LT pulled out his map, and fingered the lines for a few minutes before speaking.

“There’s a 50/50 chance the gooks aren’t headed after us. I’m guessing they’re not, and it is our job to make sure they move east toward the city of Pleiku.” Lemery pointed to the area of the map the 1/9 were supposed to be waiting, in a valley located about 10 clicks west of Pleiku, but just a click east of us.

“So, what’s the point of coming here, sir,” Sergeant Spears questioned. He was one of those faces that spoke of revenge.

Alfred stood up straight. “To get the attention of those gooks behind us.” The confidence in his voice told me Alfred knew this was what the LT had planned all along. “I still think we should go around.”

Lemery moved on, “This village is a supply station for the NVA and VC coming in off the Ho Chi Minh. We will destroy the stock, burn the village, and di di mau to the 1/9.”

“Stirring up the hornet’s nest,” I quipped.

###

Defenseless was an understatement. Less than an hour later we took the village without any resistance. No screams from the children, no arguments from the women, and such compliance from the men that made me believe they spoke English.

Part of the platoon was spread out along the perimeter. A few were holding security over the villagers, while the rest were searching the village for supplies, arms, and munitions. The LT and Alfred took over a building with three walls and a thatched bamboo roof that kept most of the rain out. They were going over the map with an old villager who spoke French.

Walking the muddy trails between the houses I came to understand the blank stares of the villagers. These were people who had known nothing but war. For thousands of years their country knew nothing else. They were used to the killing, used to the newest bully walking into their homes without invitation. They had been beaten into compliance. Their ancestors, grandfathers, and fathers have been sucked in and spat out by the venomous machine of violence. They were products of destruction. A blank faced submissive result of witnessing man’s ugliest affairs.

I made my way towards the edge of the village where a building surrounded in mud stood within a thin bamboo rail fence lined with a long trough guarded by small pigs. As I approached, I could hear the screams of a small animal, and the hoots of excited men coming from inside the pitiful barn.

The door on the other end of the medium-sized building was open and I could see Corporal Johnson standing beside a couple of men from his squad. None of them acknowledged me as I walked up.

In front of the audience was the pale skin of a young naked teenage girl lying in a black puddle of her long silky hair. Tears were being squeezed out of her tightly shut eyelids, rolling down to her full lips, which were stained red from a smeared cut. Her clothes, simple black pajamas, were lying at the feet of Sergeant Spears who was standing up and buttoning his pants.

“What the fuck are you doing, Spears?” My heart was caught in my throat, and all I could do was look at him in disbelief.

“Mind your own business, Happy.” His eyes were black. The left side of his mouth was turned up in a grin of pleasure, one that spoke of revenge finally met.

Corporal Johnson started to approach the girl as he told me, “Fuck off, sarge. This doesn’t concern you.”

The crack of his skull meeting the butt of my rifle sent a spray of red across the tiny firm breasts of the girl lying beside Johnson’s now limp body. Her mouth opened in shock, but ultimately provided a release for her terror.

Spears tackled me from the side and started into my face with blows carrying all of his weight. I blocked what I could, struggled beneath him, but he had me right where anyone would want their victim. Twice I saw black. I reached for it. I wanted it and needed its escape. Both times the spark of another blow brought me back to the assault.

The entire time the horrified girl screamed a continuous, unstopping, and high-pitched siren of danger. When the siren ended, so did the attack. I looked up through swollen eyes, to see several men dragging Spears away from me, Alfred standing there barking orders, an old gook woman running to cover the nakedness of what was probably her granddaughter. I let my head fall back. The darkness returned, and I fell into it.

###

The two story house is lit by the moon; the window to her room his dark. I stand there waiting, seemingly forever. The front door to the house begins to open. A young Vietnamese girl steps out dressed in black pajamas. Her long silky black hair is mysteriously twisted and held in a bun with just a single chopstick. She is happy to see me. Her eyes light up and she smiles. Blood begins to pour out of her mouth forcing her to gag. The blood continues; faster, more and more flooding her mouth. Her eyes open in fear, pleading for my help. I run to her, but the house explodes in flames from within, consuming her, destroying her, and throwing me away with scorching heat.

The sounds of mortar shells blasting the earth pulls me out of that nightmare and into another. The dim gray light on the other side of the bamboo wall told me it was day time, but which day? I sit up on the gook mat I was laying on and find all of my gear beside me. I rush to get ready, and head towards the door when Alfred bursts in.

“Fuck me, am I glad to see you awake.”

“How long was I out?” I ask.

“The gooks followed us, Happy. And it’s gonna take a miracle to get us the fuck out alive.”

“How fucking long was I out?!”

“Not even an hour. The LT is gonna get us killed if we don’t think of something quick.”

###

The two of us rush out into rain. Mud dropping from the sky thrown up by the nearby explosions. The tree line is lit up with muzzle flashes. Red tracer rounds bounce off the ground before flying off and lost in the distant gray horizon. The villagers are screaming. Blood fills the sunken footsteps covering the mud trails.

Alfred orders one squad to provide covering fire while others are sent to the east edge of the village. My swollen eyes and busted lips feel too heavy for my face, but I’m still aware enough to grab LeMond and drag him behind the cover of a turned over cart. He looks at me with fear.

“What the fuck we gonna do, man?”

“Get to the other side of the village, and get set up to provide cover for the rest of us.” I order.

LeMond takes off running, but doesn't make it far. The blast of the mortar round rings in my ears, and sprays a thick layer of mud all over me. LeMond's crumpled body is laying against a building. His eyes were empty, staring at me, blaming me.

The screams of dying soldiers surround me and are viciously interrupted by the continued blasts of small artillery. In the distance I could see the girl who had been raped. She looked in my direction, but she was dragged off by her family before I could say goodbye.

Resistance from our side had stopped. My only chance was to make it to the east. I got up and ran through the river of blood, past LeMond's criticism, past the girl's house, and through the copper taste of the rain.

"Happy!"

I heard Alfred, but couldn't see him. I stopped and searched through swollen eyelids, and through the deluge of death. There, lying in the middle of the trail that led to the barn, was my best friend. I ran through the hell falling around me and fell to my knees beside him.

"Get up," I told him as I tried to pull him up.

"Get the fuck out of here, Happy." He was soaked in rain and blood like the mud around him, and I couldn't tell what was wrong.

"Get up," I said again.

"I'm toast, brother. Leave me, and get your ass outta here."

The tan uniform of an NVA soldier rounded the corner of the trail, and I tore him down with my rifle. I tried to drag Alfred, but the mud was too slick, and I barely got him into the closest house.

Another gook ran past, but someone shot him before I could take aim. The bullets blasted through the tan uniform leaving red eruptions across his back before he fell face first.

"Happy, you've got to get out of here." Alfred's breathing was fast and shallow. The look in his eyes was full of worry, and there was no way I was leaving him like this.

More Vietnamese soldiers rushed towards us and I cut each of them down. I reloaded when I had the chance and tossed grenades when I didn't.

"Happy..." The wisp of breath leaving my friend drew me away from the door. By the time I reached him, Alfred was gone. The look in his eyes told me he was sorry. They were eyes searching for forgiveness. They were eyes that knew I would be joining him soon.

I knelt beside him, and time slowed down. My head on his still chest and I prayed to God. I prayed for salvation. I was proud of Alfred, proud to be his friend. He was my brother, and I loved him. I forgave him.

The door to the house was kicked in. Nothing was screamed; no one said a word. Just the blast of vengeance for the bodies I left on the trail outside. Hell had caught up to me and consumed me in darkness.

###

A tiger walks down the red brick roads of Happy, Texas. He takes a left down the last and arrives at her house. The window to her room is dark and he stands there waiting, seemingly forever. The front door to the house begins to open...

Editors' Choice

Jury Duty

by Dimitri Villegas

A clear sky did little to rival the glimmer that shown in Serenity's blue eyes. She smiled, further solidifying the feeling in Trevor's gut that he knew he was making the right choice.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

Trevor put his hands on her shoulders and gently turned her around, facing her towards the crosswalk leading to the park.

"I'll tell you when we get across and away from the traffic."

They waited for the sign on the opposite side of the street to change, and with each second they waited, Trevor's stomach tightened.

He wrapped his arms around Serenity's waist and squeezed her tight, feeling her warm hands rub at his arms. His heart was racing; for a split moment he worried that maybe she could feel the pulse from his heart on her back. The sign changed and he forgot about his nerves.

A cool breeze swept down through the branches overhead, ruffling Serenity's hair and rushing down Trevor's back. Gooseflesh prickled out over his skin as they walked across the road. As they neared the edge of the street, the October air settled just enough for him to hear the roar of an engine that made no indications of slowing down.

Trevor looked to his right at the oncoming car, and back ahead to Serenity. He placed his hand into her shoulder, the last time he'd touch her, and pushed hard. Her head snapped back from the whiplash of his push and she fell down onto the sidewalk. She rolled over onto her back, looking at him with an uncomfortable mixture of surprise and disgust. His heart hurt, seeing that expression drawn on her face, but then his vision flipped as the car plowed into him, sending his body spinning into the air.

Everything he saw was a blur of colors; blues mixed with browns and grays. For an instant he saw Serenity on the sidewalk, screaming. He couldn't hear her; the screeching brakes from the car that struck him had muted all other noises.

After what felt like an eternity in the air, Trevor landed face first in a ditch with a solid thump. He was thankful that he didn't feel any pain. All he felt was the engagement ring box in his coat pocket digging into his stomach. He wanted to roll over on to his back to rid the feeling, but he found he had difficulty moving. Trevor took in a deep breath, musky from being faced into the grass, and he sighed, ready to push himself over. He never did though. He didn't notice how he had stopped breathing.

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry." Trevor heard an unknown voice say.

"Trevor, Trevor open your eyes, oh my God." He heard Serenity say.

He wanted to laugh and say that he was going to be all right. The words were on the tip of his tongue. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't speak them though.

The sounds faded out. Serenity's voice ebbed away. He felt cold.

###

“Woop woop! Hey wake up! Heeeey, a fellow American! I think, or you might be British, or some such. Possibly even South African, but they're technically British, yeah?”

The grass that Trevor had been face first in a few moments ago had been replaced with a bright orange shag rug. The orange furls curled into his nose, making him recoil from the carpet.

“Ah, what the heck?” Trevor said as he pushed himself up from the ground.

Standing in front of him was an older man. He had short gray hair, bright blue eyes, and wrinkles covering his face. He had a toothy smile stretching from ear to ear.

“You lucky dog, you! American?” the old man said, clapping his hands together.

Trevor nodded and raised an eyebrow at the man. He looked around the room they were in; it appeared to be a small apartment bedroom. There were posters on the walls of old rock bands from the 80's depicting band members with long flowing hair and skintight spandex. There was a desk in the corner of the room with a green lava lamp and what appeared to be leftovers of meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Off to the side of the desk was a filing cabinet with a coffee maker sitting on top of it. There were two purple beanbags sitting against the other side of the room.

“Where am I? Where's Serenity? And who the heck are you?” Trevor managed to mumble.

The old man clasped his hands together and smiled. He cleared his throat.

“My name is Lance Clemens, and, well, uhh,” Lance looked off to the side of Trevor, “I'm the Grim Reaper.”

The two men stood silent in the room for a moment.

“Well,” Lance continued, “you're now the Grim Reaper. I'm done. You're number ten million!”

“I'm still not following you,” Trevor replied, rubbing his forehead. “Where am I, where is Serenity? Is she okay?”

“Oh yeah, she's okay,” Lance said. “She'd be the one in here if it weren't for you. You both would've been hit, and whooooo,” Lance made a twirling motion with his index finger, “both flying through the air like a couple of ragdolls, and you would've landed on top of her,” Lance punctuated by clapping his hands together. “Smack! You would've been all right, paralyzed from the neck down, yeah, but you would've been okay. Her, eeeeh.”

Trevor fell back onto his rear, shaking the lava lamp on the desk.

“Oh, my apologies,” Lance said in a slightly toned down voice, “I could've worded that differently.”

Trevor didn't respond. Instead he hanged his head between his knees. With one of his hands, he dug into his coat pocket, looking for the engagement ring box. He managed to relax when he felt his fingers brush against the top of the velvety box.

Lance walked to the meatloaf dish sitting on the desk. “You want the rest of this?” He said to Trevor.

Trevor waved his hand.

“Well, it’s gonna take some time explaining you the job, so, howabout some coffee, yeah?”

Trevor nodded.

“Good,” Lance said. He shuffled over to the coffee maker and hit a button on the lid. Trevor noticed how Lance didn’t have to fill it with coffee grounds or even water for that matter.

Instantly the room smelt of coffee, already sweet and with a hint of spice.

“Heaven’s tools, really interesting. What do you smell? I’ve always been particular for hazelnut.”

“I, I smell pumpkin spice,” Trevor said. He looked up at the coffee maker and saw that it was dripping a light brown liquid.

“The gal before me,” Lance said, “she liked pumpkin spice too. You young folk prefer that I guess,” Lance said as he grabbed one of the purple beanbags, throwing it next to Trevor. Lance sat down onto it, sighing.

“Alrighty, let me start by saying, you’re lucky you’re not burning up in hell right now.”

Trevor jerked his head back. “What, I’m not THAT bad of a person.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t believe in God did ya?”

Trevor shrugged.

“That’s what I thought. But, like you said, you weren’t that bad of a person. You just didn’t believe in the big man upstairs and that’s a bit of a no-no. Enough to keep you from seeing Peter, the man at the gates, ya know.”

“Holy crap, that stuff is all real?” Trevor asked.

Lance laughed, “Of course it’s real you dummy. Anyways, you were on the fence, go to hell, or go to heaven. Well, you were already slated for hell, but you shoving Serenity, that helped a bit. I was on the fence, just like you too, and the gal before me. People like us get chosen to be the Grim Reaper for a bit. Think of it like jury duty. Ten million souls, that’s how many we have to take before we get to go upstairs with the big man, that’s where the real party is at.”

“Ten million souls,” Trevor echoed.

“Eh, sounds like a lot, but it doesn’t take that long. Sixty-ish days or so. You’ll be spending a lot of your time in Africa.”

Trevor looked at Lance in disgust.

“Ahhh, bad joke, bad joke,” Lance said, raising his palms to Trevor. “Geez, you young ones really don’t like my jokes. The girl before me didn’t like that one either when I asked her if that was where I’d be spending most of my time, and she had already taken her ten millionth. Me!”

The coffee maker made a fizzing noise.

“Aha, done.” Lance said. He stood up, opened one of the drawers of the filing cabinet and pulled out two mugs. A Spider-Man mug and a plain off-white mug. “I get the Spider-Man mug,” Lance said as he sat it down and began to pour his coffee.

Trevor saw how the light brown liquid that was originally in the pot turned into a more darker black. He could smell the hazelnut. When Lance switched mugs, Trevor saw that the liquid turned back to the light brown color that he had originally seen in the pot. Now he smelt pumpkin spice.

“Here,” Lance said as he handed Trevor the mug. It was warm to the touch, but not too hot.

“That’s amazing,” Trevor said after taking a sip.

“Yeah, heaven’s got a lot of other neat little gadgets too. We’re lucky we get the coffee maker down here,” Lance said, bringing his mug up to his nose and taking a big whiff.

“Gotta say, I’m ready to be done of this job.”

Trevor looked down into his mug, thinking of Serenity.

“You’re gonna have to put that on hold for a bit,” Lance said. “You’ll see her again, she’s a good person. Quite the artist.”

Trevor sighed.

Lance took a long drink from his mug. “Well, I’m going to head out. Oh, before I go, here.”

Trevor looked back up to the old man and saw that he was holding a large scythe.

“What? Where’d you get that? And do I actually have to use that?”

Lance laughed, “Pffft, no! It’s more of a symbol than anything else.” He tapped the wooden end onto the ground and door appeared on the wall. “There, that’s my door into heaven. I walk through that, and I should be partying with the big man, for you, it’ll take you to your first soul. You don’t have to do much of anything. Just be there, and try to calm them down. Some people take their death pretty good, others, not so much. Another door will appear, and you just tell them to walk through it. They’ll find themselves partying with me momentarily.”

“And the folks who don’t get to go to heaven?” Trevor asked.

“Don’t worry about them, they don’t get the luxury of meeting a Grim Reaper. They get the express trip down,” Lance said with a smile. “You got it? Ten million.”

Trevor nodded.

Lance handed Trevor the scythe. “If you want, just drop it,” Lance said. Trevor immediately did so. The scythe vanished before it hit the ground.

“You’ll be alright, I’ll be sure to see you again,” Lance said as he opened the door. Trevor could hear laughter and chatter. “Oh, that’s beautiful,” Lance said as he stepped through, closing the door behind him.

Immediately the room began to shift. The orange rug disappeared and was replaced by hardwood floors. The desk with the lava lamp shuddered and popped. The lava lamp vanished, now replaced by an old lamp that Trevor had when he was a child. The coffee maker and filing cabinet stayed, but the posters on the walls exploded into bursts of confetti. Replacing them were paintings that Serenity had given Trevor over the years that they had spent together.

He stepped close to one of them, a self-portrait of her, and whispered, “oh my God.”

###

Upon stepping through the door, Trevor ironically found himself in the deserts of Africa.

“You’re a jerk, Lance.” Trevor said to himself. He shielded his eyes against the harsh rays of light, looking for whomever it was he came for. The jacket he had been wearing before stepping through the door was gone. He wondered if it was back in the apartment room.

“Hi,” a child’s voice said.

Trevor looked down to his right and saw a very young boy standing, smiling up at Trevor.

“Hi there,” Trevor said.

“Who are you, mister?”

Trevor took note of how the words he was hearing from the boy weren’t matching up with the movements his mouth was making. He also knew the boy’s name for some reason.

“My name is Trevor, and you are Behbolo, right?”

“Yes,” the boy responded.

Trevor sighed and looked further to the right. Lying on the ground was a very frail looking boy, much skinnier and smaller than Behbolo. With newfound instincts, Trevor understood that the boy lying on the ground was Behbolo’s body.

Behbolo saw that Trevor was looking over his shoulder. He tried to turn and look but Trevor knelt by the young boy and grabbed him in a firm embrace.

“You don’t want to look that way,” Trevor said.

“Mister,” Behbolo whispered.

Trevor let go of the child and backed away. Behbolo looked at Trevor with large eyes that were way too mature for a child his age.

“I’m not hurting anymore. Did you give me medicine?”

Trevor shook his head.

Behbolo turned around towards his body. Trevor didn’t stop him this time.

The child turned back to Trevor, now with a look of realization.

“I get to be with my brothers now?”

Trevor nodded.

“And my mother, she’s there too?”

He nodded again.

“I want to go then, I miss them.”

“They miss you too.”

Trevor turned and saw that there was a door standing on its own in the sand. He walked to it, Behbolo close behind.

Trevor grabbed a hold of the knob and twisted, pulling the door open. Immediately he heard chatter interspersed with laughter.

“Right this way Behbolo, your family is waiting for you.” Trevor didn’t dare look into the doorway; somewhere in his mind a voice whispered that he wasn’t ready for it.

Behbolo’s eyes were wide with happiness as he took several cautious steps towards the door. A woman’s voice called out for the child, causing a smile to spring forth from Behbolo’s lips.

“I’m coming!” he said as he ran towards the door. It immediately slammed behind him. The door shook in its frame. Trevor took a few steps away from the door, worried that it was going to explode like the old posters did in the apartment room. Instead, the door crumbled into rocks.

Trevor shrugged. He closed his eyes, reopened them, and found himself back in the apartment. Sitting on the desk next to his old lamp, was a plate of spaghetti. His favorite.

###

After eating the spaghetti, Trevor noticed there was a booklet on the desk. He opened it, noting how vibrantly white the pages were. On the very first page was a large number “1” written on it. Trevor rubbed his finger along the ink.

“Well,” he said, “better get going with this.”

He walked towards the door, turning back to look at the portrait of Serenity. “You’re doing alright,” he said to her, “I wonder who all showed up to the funeral.” He sighed then turned to walk through the door to his next soul.

Immediately he was hit in the face with a gust of wind coupled with raindrops. He cleared the water from his face using the sleeve of his jacket. “Oh, there it is,” he said, looking down at himself. “Thought I lost my jacket there for a bit.”

“Who are you talking to?”

Trevor looked to his left. There was an older man standing there, he too also wearing a jacket. Trevor looked around.

The two men were standing on a bridge in what Trevor’s instincts said was London.

“Charles, right?” Trevor asked, pulling his hood up. It was brutally cold. The falling rain didn’t help a bit.

“Yep,” Charles said, leaning against the railing of the bridge, looking down to the road.

Trevor imitated Charles, looking down and seeing a body lying in the middle of the street. He raised his eyebrows and looked back to Charles, who was still looking down, rubbing his chin.

Charles shifted his glance over to Trevor, “I couldn’t handle it anymore, y’know? The chemo, it wasn’t living anymore. It was just being taken in pieces.”

“You would’ve died on your own in a few weeks,” Trevor responded. It was strange how he knew so much about a man he just met. It must’ve come with the territory.

“I couldn’t wait anymore,” Charles said. “It was too painful.”

“At least you didn’t leave anybody behind,” Trevor said, wincing at how the words sounded. Charles only nodded.

“So, mom was right, there is an afterlife,” Charles whispered, oddly calm.

“Yeah.”

“You’re going to take me to hell?”

“No,” Trevor said, “I don’t have to deal with people destined for hell. I only help those who are already slated for heaven.”

“Huh,” Charles said, “they always told me people who kill themselves go to hell.”

Trevor turned around, putting his back against the railing of the bridge. “I guess you’re a special case,” he said. “I was told the same, about suicide and religion. But I don’t know much of that. I only got this job a couple of hours ago.”

“Oh yeah?” Charles said, now turned around too.

“Yeah,” Trevor said, eyeing the door that had appeared on the bridge.

“I thought the grim reaper was, like, an eternal thing or something, y’know?”

“I thought so too,” Trevor said as he opened the door. Charles eyes went wide once he saw through it. “Think of it like jury duty.”

“Jury duty, huh,” Charles said as he took delicate steps towards the door. “I hope there’s no jury duty in there,” he stuttered.

“Oh,” Trevor said, “there’s not.”

Charles stepped through, the door slammed, Trevor blinked, and he found himself back in the apartment. The number in the booklet had changed to a 2.

###

Time went by quickly, as did the souls. A few days had passed, but it only felt as if a few hours had gone by. Trevor had visited a notch above two million souls. Surprisingly, a good handful of them had been people dying from old age or illness, and another handful had been infants.

On his first occasion with an infant soul, Trevor had stepped through the door, arriving in a hospital. He was standing in front of the newborn nursery, seeing cradles filling the room beyond a window.

He put his hand against the window and found that it went right through it. He stepped through the wall, feeling something in his stomach churn, possibly the spaghetti. Inside the nursery, Trevor expected all of the babies

to be making noises, but instead he could only hear noises coming from one of them, a baby named Thomas. He looked into the cradle holding Thomas, and Thomas looked back up at Trevor with large innocent eyes.

“Well, uhh,” Trevor whispered to himself, “I’m not sure how I’m supposed to get you through that door.”

Thomas responded by cooing at him.

“I guess I can try to take you myself,” he said as he bent down, picking up Thomas from the cradle. With the small baby in his arms, Trevor stepped back through the wall towards the door leading to heaven. Carefully cradling Thomas into the crook of one of his arms, Trevor attempted to open the door with his free hand. It wouldn’t budge.

“It’s a shame that some don’t make it,” a woman’s voice said behind Trevor.

He screamed in fright, turning against the door.

Before him was a woman with short brunette hair, dressed in what appeared to be hospital scrubs.

“Ah, sorry, didn’t mean to scare you. This is your first young one then?” She said, nodding towards Thomas.

“Uh, yeah,” Trevor said.

“Well then,” the nurse said as she stepped towards Trevor, arms extended, beckoning for the baby. “I’m here to take this little soul through the door, since you can’t yourself.”

Trevor looked down to Thomas, seeing that the baby was looking towards the nurse. Thomas didn’t seem to be frightened by the new woman. Trevor carefully handed the baby over to the nurse. She smiled at him in her arms, rocking him back and forth with what Trevor saw was years of practice.

“Stillborn?” Trevor asked.

“Afraid so, you’ll see more of them on your little gathering, along with abortions and miscarriages.”

“What will happen to him?”

“Same that will happen to the other baby souls. We’ll send him back down to Earth, born again, hopefully making it into this world.”

“Like, um, reincarnation?”

“Sort of,” the nurse said, gently rocking Thomas in her arms. “His little soul hasn’t had the chance to grow at all. That’s no fair to him, is it? He’ll get another shot at growing, experiencing life, hopefully leaving a positive impact on the people around him.”

“Amazing,” Trevor whispered.

“It is, isn’t it?” the nurse said as she opened the door and walked through.

Trevor met thousands of nurses through similar circumstances. All of them smiling and cheerful as they carried infants from the world back through the door.

He often saw the same nurses again, even seeing the same brunette nurse multiple times. She always asked him what number he was on.

###

Two million, seven hundred eighty-six thousand, two hundred forty-four. That soul made things a bit more difficult.

Upon stepping through the door, Trevor found himself in what appeared to be a run down house. There was a girl with brunette hair cowering in the corner of the room. Her breath came in quick rasps.

Without hesitation, Trevor walked over and knelt by her.

“Hey,” he spoke softly, “it’s ok, it’s ok.”

She looked up at him with watery eyes, taking him aback with how young she was. She was probably still in middle school.

“Can you take me back to my parents?” She whispered.

“I’m sorry, I can’t-

“Shhhh,” she pressed her index against his lips. He jerked back, wondering what she was doing. “He can hear us.”

Trevor looked around the room, spotting the open door that appeared to lead to a hallway. He stood up, wooden floor creaking with each step he took towards the doorway. Past the doorway was another room where a man was sitting, watching television. He had a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. His dark black hair was slicked back. He tilted his head back, letting loose a blood freezing cackle.

In the corner of the room, Trevor spotted a transparent plastic bag. The insides were covered in blood.

“Jesus,” Trevor said. He covered his mouth, hiding back against the doorway, afraid that the man would hear him. He then realized it was impossible.

“Can you call my parents?” The girl whispered. “Can you get me out of here?”

Trevor looked back at her round brown eyes. She reminded him so much of Serenity. He had dealt with dying infants, children, teenagers and adults, but it had all been from accidents or diseases. This time, this time, another human being had taken another’s life. Feeling rage fill his stomach and stiffen his spine, he stormed out of the room towards the murderer sitting in the chair.

“You murderer!” Trevor yelled while swinging a clenched right fist. It collided solidly into the side of the man’s face. He fell out of the chair, spilling his beer and dropping the cigarette.

Trevor straddled the murderer, anger blinding him. He swung down hard again with a now bruised right fist. It connected with the murderer’s nose, caving it in. Blood seeped out of what was left of the murderer’s nasal cavity and Trevor swung again.

This time, his fist connected with the wooden floor, breaking the middle and ring finger knuckles.

Trevor gasped, feeling pain for the first time since he had died. He grasped his hand, cradling it close to his chest. He turned to see that the murderer was still sitting in his chair, sipping on his beer. “What’s going on?” Trevor said.

“You can’t do that,” Lance said from behind Trevor.

“When did you get here?” Trevor yelled.

“Got dropped in the second you put hands on him,” Lance said, pointing towards the murderer with a weathered hand.

“He deserved it,” Trevor said through gritted teeth.

“Yeah he does,” Lance said, wiping his mouth. He sighed. “He’ll get his in time though. That’s just how things work.”

“He’s going to kill more people! He could even kill Serenity!”

“He could, we don’t know if he will, but you’re right.”

Trevor was now in Lance’s face. “Why is he still alive then? Why is it allowed?”

Lance took in a deep breath. “I don’t know, Trevor. No one but the big man knows.”

“The big man,” Trevor said sarcastically, turning away from Lance. “The big man let that girl in the other room get hacked up.”

“That’s the world we lived in!” Lance responded with an anger-tinged voice, “God can’t prevent all the bad from happening. How are we supposed to grow if we are handed everything? Huh? We don’t. We would become spoiled. There are evils in this world, and there will be continue to be. That’s a part of life, now stop being an idiot, this is no time for a philosophical debate! Go comfort that girl! She’s scared out of her mind, and here you come trying to be a hero.”

Trevor’s shoulders drooped. “This isn’t right,” he said.

“It’s the best we can do, now go stop her from crying, yeah?”

“Okay.”

Trevor walked back to the girl, still cowered in the corner of the other room.

“Is he gone?” She asked with trembling lips.

“No,” Trevor said, “but he can’t hurt you anymore.”

“Are you going to hurt me?”

“No, I’m here to make things better.”

She wiped away her tears with her bare arm. “Can you take me back to my parents?”

“I can’t, you won’t be able to see them for awhile. That man in there, he killed you.” Trevor said, the words stinging his throat. It was hard for him to swallow.

The girl’s face, Belle’s face, curled, and she started crying again. “I can’t be dead,” she said between sobs.

Trevor took her hand in his, and she squeezed. He winced from the broken bones in his hand, but the pain was soon gone. His bones mended themselves in a matter of minutes.

Lanced walked over, peering into the room. "You got this?" He asked.

Trevor nodded.

"Ok then, I'm just gonna close this door here, if you need anything, Trevor, just call my name when you're back in the apartment. Try not to do what you did to him again to anyone else though. You know your ticket is riding on how well you do this job, yeah?"

Trevor nodded again. Lance shut the door, shutting out the noise coming from the murderer and the television.

Trevor and Belle sat together in the room for several more minutes before she finally spoke again.

"I'm going to heaven?" She said, between hiccups.

"Of course," Trevor responded.

"Is Skip going to be there waiting for me?"

"Errmm," Trevor said, racking his mind for who or what Skip was. He finally got it, Skip was her dog. He thought about whether or not Skip was there in heaven, but couldn't bring up an answer. "To tell you the truth, I don't know. I've never been to heaven, and I'm not sure if animals are there."

Belle sighed.

"Are you ready to go?" Trevor asked.

She nodded. A new door appeared on the wall. Trevor opened it. Belle looked in, her brown eyes glittering with the light emanating from the door. A dog barked and she smiled. She ran through.

The door slammed shut behind her and vanished.

"I guess that answers that," Trevor said. He looked at the other door, where the murderer was. "I also know where you'll be at when it's your time."

###

"Lance!" Trevor yelled when he found that he was back in the apartment.

"Yep?" Lance said from behind Trevor.

"Why do you always appear behind me?"

"Not sure, what's going on?"

Trevor took a deep breath. "I don't think I can handle another one like that."

"Like what?"

"The girl! She was murdered!"

"Eh?" Lance said as he walked over to the desk where the booklet and plate of spaghetti was sitting. "Oh, spaghetti's your favorite, huh?" He said as he thumbed through the booklet. "Whoa, you're in the two millions and this was the first murder you've come across?"

“Yes,” Trevor said.

“Wow, you’re a real lucky one, a murder was my, uhh, third I think? And I had at least a million or so murders before I was done.”

“You’re kidding,” Trevor said.

“You mean you didn’t know about how much crime and killing went on in this world?”

“Yeah, I mean, I guess, I just never really thought about it,” Trevor responded.

“Well, get used to it. You’re going to see all kinds of messed up things. Consider yourself lucky though, imagine if you’d have to be the one to deal with Pearl Harbor, huh?”

“What if I don’t want to?”

The room fell quiet. Lance walked around the room, looking at the paintings hanging on the walls. There was painting of a waterfall, a deer, a building done in bright colors, and several others. He stopped at the self-portrait of Serenity.

“Well, I can tell you one thing,” Lance said, pointing up to the portrait, “You wouldn’t ever see her again.”

“Would she even still love me?” Trevor asked.

“I don’t know,” Lance answered, “is she worth finding out?”

Trevor stood and walked out the door to collect his next soul.

###

Several repetitive trips to third world countries left Trevor drained. It was depressing seeing how people were living while he knew Americans were complaining about the most recent blockbuster movie or what kind of smart phone they had.

It was strange, how the children living in poverty would be excited to run through the door, while others living in better conditions would be more problematic. It was such a strange experience all together, and at times Trevor would have to ask himself if it was really all real or was he just laying in a hospital bed in a coma.

It had to be real though; all these people were real. The different faces, their voices, their names. He was around 7 million in, and he was almost certain he could remember all of them. He chalked it up to his new Grim Reaper instincts yet again.

He paced around the apartment between souls, often stopping to look at the portrait of Serenity hanging above the desk.

“You’re doing alright?” He would whisper to the portrait. It would only look back, offering no reply to his questions. He grew cold.

A game of hide and seek gone wrong placed Trevor in the garage of a small suburban family. A young boy, Albert, had decided that hiding in a small mini-fridge would be a good idea. Once inside, he wasn’t able to open the door.

“Am I going to be in trouble?” Albert asked Trevor.

Trevor knelt down by Albert; face blank of expression.

“No,” he spoke softly to the child, “everybody makes mistakes.” He wiped away the tears that had begun to stream down Albert’s face. Walking towards the open door, Albert stopped and looked at Trevor.

“What’s it like in heaven?” He asked Trevor.

“I don’t know.”

###

People who had been burned alive, starved to death, beaten, killed, all of them wore down at Trevor’s resolve. The souls passed by and he continued to step through the door, hoping that eventually he’d step through and find himself away from all of it.

“Hey,” Lance said, keeping Trevor from walking through the door into what looked like another hospital. “How are you holding up?”

Trevor sighed, “I’m not even looking at the booklet anymore, I’m just trying to get through all of this without losing my sanity.”

Lance nodded, eyebrows raised. “I was there for a bit, then the Grim Reaper before me had to come in and give me a pep talk.”

“Just like you’re doing now?”

“Yeah.”

Trevor shut the door, walked over to the small bed in the apartment and collapsed onto it, “Good, I need it.”

Lance breathed in deeply and exhaled. He grabbed the booklet, cracked it open, and laughed. “Well, huh,” he chuckled.

“What?” Trevor said.

“You only have two souls left, why did I even bother showing up?”

“You’re kidding?” Trevor said, sitting up in his bed.

Lance tossed him the booklet. Just like he said, the number 9,999,998 was printed harshly on the page. Trevor looked up from the booklet, a smile slowly forming on his face.

“Go get those last two dead geezers, dumb-nuts!”

With newfound energy, Trevor jumped out of the bed and ran through the door into the hospital.

###

He knew something was wrong the moment he stepped through. The hospital was eerily quiet. No nurses or doctors wondering the halls. A quick glance out the window told him it was the middle of the night; a quick thought told him it was precisely 4:06 A.M.

Then the floor shook. Down a hallway, flames erupted from one of the many rooms lining the way. At first it seemed like a small fire, but the flames continued to grow. The walls broke away as shrapnel peeled from the tile floor, launched at high speeds towards Trevor.

His first reaction was to turn and duck, but many brushes with seemingly dangerous situations had numbed Trevor to these sorts of reactions. He held his ground, watching as the hospital around him crumbled under what he began to deduce to be a terrorist attack.

Imagine what'd be like to have to deal with Pearl Harbor, huh?

The flames spreading from the explosion froze in their place, no longer whipping back and forth around him.

“I was having such a weird dream,” said an older woman, walking out of one of the rooms that had been swarmed in flames.

She walked towards Trevor, eyes glued to the floor. “It’s a bit hot in there, do you think you can tell the nurse to turn on the air conditioning? I know that I nagged at them to turn it off earlier, but I didn’t think they’d turn on the heater.”

“No ma’am,” Trevor said. The energy he had from knowing he only had two souls left to take had been cut off. He had made a decision the second he realized how many deaths the explosion would cause. Behind him, the door to heaven presented itself. “You’re a bit disoriented right now, ma’am, but I need you to walk through this door here. Things will make more sense on the other side of it.”

“Whatever you say, as long as it’s a bit cooler.”

“It will be much better,” Trevor said, opening the door and patting the older woman on the back as she walked through.

###

Trevor blinked and reopened his eyes only to see a teenage girl sitting on the floor of the apartment. In her arms was a teddy bear.

She looked up to Trevor with deep blue eyes. Her lips were quivering.

“Hey there,” he managed to finally say.

“Where am I?” the girl asked.

“Abigail,” Trevor gulped down sticky saliva, “you’ve died in an explosion.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” she quickly retorted. “I was only supposed to have my appendix taken out, why would that kill me?”

Trevor sat next to her, taking her hand in his. “Your appendix didn’t kill you, someone blew up the hospital.”

“Why, why would someone do that?”

She squeezed his hand.

“Lance, I need you now,” Trevor said.

Immediately, Lance walked through the door. He was wearing a pointed party hat and had a kazoo in his mouth. It fell from his lips the second both of his feet had entered the room. Trevor assumed Lance learned what had happened when he crossed the threshold.

“Jesus, they’re going to be talking about that one for years. It’ll be in their textbooks,” Lance said to himself. His eyes shifted from Trevor to Abigail. “Oh no, she’s your last one?”

Trevor nodded.

“There’s going to be thousands just from the hospital,” Trevor said, “babies, children, adults. She’s not going to be able to handle that.”

Abigail looked to Trevor and Lance in confusion.

“She’s going to have to though, that’s the deal,” Lance said.

“Not this time,” Trevor said. He put a hand under Abigail’s elbow, raising her up to her feet. “Lance, can you take her through?”

“What do you mean? Trevor, she’s the new Grim Reaper, she’s gotta do her duty, ten million just like the rest of us,” Lance said.

Trevor looked back around the apartment. He saw the self-portrait of Serenity on the wall, smiling back at him. “No, I’ll take her ten million.”

“On top of the ten million you just took?”

Trevor nodded.

Lance sighed. “Give me a second, let me at least make sure that’s allowable.”

Lance stepped back through the door. Abigail looked back up to Trevor, eyes watery and lips still trembling.

“I’m really dead?”

“Really, really dead,” Trevor answered, “It’ll be okay, you’re going to heaven.”

“Huh,” Abigail whispered, “the date with Aaron is gonna’ have to wait then.”

The door swung back open and Lance emerged. “It’s doable, but you’ll have to take her full ten million. You sure about this Trevor?”

“There’s no question about it,” Trevor said, nudging Abigail towards Lance. “Take her, I’ll get to heaven eventually.”

###

The first thousand were as horrible as he imagined. All of the hospital patients had been extremely distraught, some even forcing him to have to shove them through the door. With each soul walked though, Trevor knew for a fact that he had made the right decision in taking Abigail’s duty. The next ten million did little to wear away at his newfound resolve. So much so that Trevor forced what would’ve been his next successor through the

door. "I'll take your duty," he had told the red haired man James who had died in a car accident. "Go on, heaven is waiting."

Years passed by. Trevor continuously extended his time as the Grim Reaper. Each and every time Lance had barged into the apartment, telling him that he could finally turn it over. It even got to the point where Lance said that Trevor could stop whenever he wanted, that he didn't even have to collect the full ten million.

Ten million seemed so small to Trevor. His numbers had extended into the billions. Each soul he took etched its pattern into his memory. He remembered all of the faces, all of the names and ways they had died. None of them managed to upset him as much as his first handful of souls he had taken during his first duty.

The murders ceased to stun him. His ability at comforting souls grew and he got to the point where he could calm down even the most upset soul with words such as "it'll be okay," or "your family will be fine", that Trevor didn't actually know were true or not. He learned patterns of comforting words to say, and eventually he himself began to wonder if it was a good thing or not that they came so easily to him.

"They've been talking about you," Lance had told him in the apartment soon after Trevor had extended his duty yet again.

"Who?"

"The angels, even Peter knows about you."

Trevor rested his hands on the top of his head. "Is that a good thing?"

"Well, you're a bit of a legend. No one has taken as many souls as you. Why are you doing it?"

Trevor reached into his coat pocket, fingertips grazing the tip of the velvet engagement ring box. His eyes wanted to wander to the portrait of Serenity, but he kept focus on Lance with calm precision that had been sculpted from millions of brushes with the distraught.

"I'm worried heaven will be a bit disappointing as it is. How many years has it been?"

"Sixty-seven, you've been noticing things changing down there?"

"On the surface, yes. They get new phones, new televisions, new cars. But they're all the same, really. The people, I mean. How's Abigail?"

"Good, her parents finally joined her, as you should know. You took them."

"I remember. Father was first, heart attack. Should've let up on the pizza."

"He still hasn't. When are you going to give this up?" Lance asked.

"Eventually."

###

It was in a nursing home that Trevor finally felt it. The new information of the new soul that always barged its way into his mind had finally caught his attention.

He was in the lobby. There were several senior citizens sitting around in wheel chairs. Most of them had been corralled in front of a television.

“Lance?” Trevor spoke softly.

“Yes?” Lance answered, emerging from the entrance of the nursing home.

“I’m going to need someone to take my place after this soul,” Trevor said, walking towards one of the many hallways lined with the elderly rolling around in wheel chairs. He felt the soul pulling at him.

“I’ll take care of it,” Lance said, walking back through the nursing home entrance.

Trevor passed by many rooms, his palms becoming sweaty. Finally he arrived at the right room, the nametag on the door reading “S. Coraline”.

Stepping through, Trevor finally saw her. Serenity was standing by her bed, looking at her own body.

“It looks like I’m sleeping,” she said.

Trevor stood next to her, looking at her. Her face had aged and her hair had turned grey, but her blue eyes, they had remained as vibrant as ever.

“Are you ready to go?” He asked.

She turned to look at him, a bit spooked at his sudden appearance.

“Ah,” she said, bringing her hands to his face. “You remind me of someone I know. I can’t put my finger on it.”

“It happens.”

“I think I’m dead.

“You’re quick to catch on,” Trevor said, “come on, time to go.” He gently grabbed her frail hand in his and led her out of the room, away from her body.

Down the hallway was the door that would lead to heaven. Trevor gently pushed her forward ahead of him. Together they walked towards the door.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

Trevor put his hands on her shoulders and gently turned her around, facing her towards the door. She turned back around immediately, eyes wide open.

“Trevor?”

He smiled, and turned her back around, gently nudging her towards the door.

Trevor opened the door for her, chatter once again emanating from it. Light shined brightly through the doorway, blanketing Serenity in a warm glow. Her gray hair turned black and the wrinkles slowly vanished from her face. Her eyes were wide with shock as her back straightened itself. Before Trevor’s eyes, Serenity slowly reverted back to her 27-year-old self. She looked down to her hands; her frail fingers that once held paintbrushes were strengthened to how they had once been all those years ago.

“Oh my God,” she said, looking up from her hands and back to Trevor. She turned away from the door, quickly walking to Trevor to put her arms around him. She buried her face into his chest. “Where have you been?” She mumbled.

“Been really busy,” he said, hugging back.

She looked up at him with her blue eyes. Tears were beginning to form in the corners of them.

“No, none of that. Too much of that for me lately,” Trevor said, wiping the tears away with his left hand. With the same hand, he reached into his coat pocket, fingers grazing the top of the engagement ring box. “I’ve been meaning to give you something.”

“In there,” she said, grabbing his arm and tugging him towards the open door to heaven. Together they walked through.



Freed from Illusion

by Paul R. Scanlin

I came on him,
Drawn to him
The way one would
 a Dali,
Surreal in shadow,
All twisted
 yet wholesome distinguished.

His eyes
 drooping knowledge,
 heavy with wisdom,
 clouded in thought.
His stubble
 a statement, his fashion,
His age,
 a grandfather,
 noble in conquest,
 in conflict and rheumatitis-
Born out in the likeness of God.

I held out my hand in greeting.
Said, "Name's Paul".
He eased out a wrinkled upturn,
 demanded two bucks.

Guardian

by Con Elledge

“Time for bed, let’s tuck you in hun.” The mother carried her squirming charge up the steps, smirking. The protesting child had tried his utmost to stay up for only a little while longer, but to no avail. The child wriggled this way and that, but was soon secured within the confines of the protecting blankets.

“But Mom, I don’t want to go to bed,” continued the relentless protests of the boy.

“No ‘buts’, it’s time for you to get your rest,” the mother said softly.

“Mom, I can’t go to sleep without my teddy. Can you find him? And can you check the closet for monsters?” The mother smiled as she fluffed the child’s pillow, now dramatically walking to the closet in question.

“It’s ok hun, there are no such things as monsters.” The mother opened the closet door, baring the interior before her son. “See? There’s nothing there.”

“But Mom, monsters always sneak back in the closet when I go to bed,” the son cried, “and they wait for all the lights to go off.” The mother chuckled as she went to the opposite side of the bed, stooping over to retrieve her son’s missing teddy bear. She returned to her child, sitting down next to him.

“That is why you have Duncan here to protect you, to keep you safe.” The mother handed the bear over to her child. “Remember? Duncan is a truly remarkable teddy. His soft hug will always keep you safe from those nasty dreams when mommy and daddy aren’t around.” The boy hugged Duncan very close to him, a tired yawn now trying to escape the edges of his mouth as he settled himself further into the bed. The mother smiled warmly; planting a kiss atop his head, “Now you sleep tight, and have pleasant dreams tonight, I love you. I’ll leave your night light on.”

“G’night mamma, I love you too.” The son hugged his mother one last time before laying back. The mother stepped away, smiling as she let her gaze drift over her baby boy, before turning on the night light and shutting the door behind her. The child snuggled his teddy ever close; his best friend in the world. His eyes soon began to drift and settle, now no longer concerned of monsters and nightmares...

###

All was quiet in the room before the nightlight flickered off, its soft illumination lost to an otherworldly interference. Darkness had come. The time was right. Without even a sound, the closet door opened ever so slowly within the confines of night. Darker still, was the creature that emerged from the shadows. He was an ohno, and the darkness belonged to the ohno, as the unsuspecting child would soon belong to him.

This ohno’s shape could not be comprehended, for one moment he rose tall like a dragon of evil, and the next he seemed as a sickly blanket of shadow that stretched its evil grasp further to his newest victim. “This child’s dreams will feed me, before I leave him a broken shell,” the vile creature chortled, a thrumming sound of muffled screams in the night, not heard by humans. Such an easy claim, why the other ohnos had even bothered to warn him of this catch he would never understand, but regardless, the child was his. As he drew closer to the child, a voice halted him.

“You made an unwise decision in coming here, ohno. Verglow is your name if I’m not mistaken?” Then, a very, very sharp blade tip glistened against the ohno’s throat. A drawn out, heavy rasp echoed from Verglow, as the creature realized his truly dire mistake.

“No, it cannot be. I did not know the child was under protection, least of all yours.” A tremor of terror could be heard within the edge of the ohno’s voice, a concept previously foreign to the creature of nightmares. But then, he had not expected a guardian of such great renown to be protecting the youth. Hunger, however, was a prime motivation for the ohno, especially so close to his prize. Ignoring good reason, the nightmare reared its terrible and frightening being. “But you will not save this child tonight, for you will fall alongside him, Guardian!”

The ohno prepared to spur forward, to finish off this foolish Guardian who dared stand in his path, but the room had suddenly become quite out of place in Verglow's eyes. The floor was now very close, and the ceiling seemed far away; even his body looked as though it were in the wrong position. Realization soon dawned upon the beast of terror, for his head was cleanly removed by the Guardian, who now stared down upon him with such contempt. Sword and shield seemed to shine in the Guardians grasp, as now the moonlight flickered in through the window. The ohno barely managed a final rasp before his head drifted into shadow, nothingness taking him into its eternal embrace. "Curse you...Duncan!"

The Teddy bear called away his armaments, his charge safe once more from the nightmares that dared venture harm to children, as he watched the rest of the ohno's body slither away into emptiness. "Dreamy time dispatch, this is Guardian Triple-Zero-Five Duncan, another ugly has been bed-bugged. I repeat, another ugly has been bed-bugged." The Guardian's com-link soon echoed inside his fuzzy ear.

"Rodger that Triple-Zero-Five, good work. It'll be another three hours till dawn, and scanners show ohno activity has immediately halted in your region. We'll see you when you get back, Dreamy-Time out." The com-link soon stopped feedback as Duncan looked one last time around the room, before returning to his favorite post against his best friend, a wary and experienced eye still propped open as he glanced around. A knowing grin soon found its way to his fuzzy snout before he maintained contact silence.

"If only humans knew. G'night, best buddy."



To Beowulf

by Laci McGee

“The greatest house in the world stood empty...”

A gathering place of warriors,
where treasure was gifted
in thanks of lives and deeds.

This place that had withstood
Cain’s last decedents.
Within its walls a battle had
been triumphed by man.

Now this place and its people fell
to something greater;
a thing far more powerful
than a demon.

This hall fell to time.

Cold wind scatters leaves and dirt over
floors where brave men once walked;
the Treasure Giver’s seat is now
a perch for twittering birds.

Heirloom weapons lay abandoned,
scattered on once precious ground.
Their long-ago deeds forgotten,
a cultures memory now dead.

Nature encroaches on this hallowed hall,
yellowed grass growing at broken doors;
rafters fallen from winter snows.
The lonely remains of forgotten greatness.

Blue Eyes and Bad Guys

by J.L. Schiller

They say your life flashes before your eyes when you're about to die. I've heard the stories about a warm glowing column of light, the arrival of past loved ones, and haloed angels borne in white with open arms, and a golden key to Heaven's gate. I've been told a few about the ground opening into a maw of flames, dark shadows sent by the reaper, and the Devil himself showing up to take your ticket. I'm here to tell you that all of it, is bullshit. Lying on this cold tacky linoleum, I'm certain of only one thing: death is utter loneliness.

I searched for the images of my childhood, hoping I could fast forward through the crap, and rewind to watch the good times more than once, but nothing ever came. The harder I tried to picture my mom, dad, and brother, the further their memories seemed to drift away. The weight and warmth of the blood seeping from my stomach was unexpected and distracting. I couldn't help but investigate the puddle forming over my soaked shirt with both hands. I decided the movies were pretty damn accurate.

The ice box clicked on, and the hum of its motor was a numbing reminder of the lack of feeling in my legs. I tried to stand again, but I wasn't going anywhere. Laying my head back down, I came to the conclusion that this was one of those cliché "hopeless ends." No one ever came into the store this late.

I had just mopped the floors when she came in with a sob story of a broken down car and no money to get gas, but I'm a sucker for a brunette with blue eyes. She made small talk, and asked about what it was like working late in the middle of nowhere, and if anyone ever visited to keep me from getting so lonely. She slipped me her number, told me to call her sometime, and then she just walked out. I was too busy staring at the tattoo of a Phoenix peeking out from her waistline, that I didn't even consider that her number wasn't legit.

I tried to call it before I came to work this evening, but no answer. My hopes were still high, and my mind was still on that fiery bird of prey when the doorbell went "DING" announcing the rare midnight customer. It had to be her! I nearly knocked over the shelf I was stocking in my rush to the front, where I met the barrel of a silver hand cannon that looked like the six-shooter Clint Eastwood used in Dirty Harry.

Blue eyes, but this dude had a shaved head, and he was a dude, not an unattractive one, but definitely not who I was hoping to see. "The money, motherfucker! Now," he spit all over my face. I didn't shit myself, but I didn't move either. "Now, bitch! Move!"

I stumbled into a rack of fancy popcorn drizzled in gourmet chocolate, but "Dirty Harry" grabbed my collar, and kept me from falling. He wasn't gentle, but he was efficient. Being dragged, I made it to the register in half the time I would have if I had been allowed to walk myself. For some sick considerate reason, I didn't hand the money over immediately, but like a jackass I decided to sack it first. Honestly, I think that saved my life for the moment, but it was a fleeting moment.

As the bag of loot changed hands, a car pulled up out front, and there she was, sitting in the driver's seat of one really bad ass '60 something black Camaro, my blue eyed phoenix. We made eye contact, but she didn't smile.

"That stupid bitch."

I turned to defend her honor, but the recognition in his voice was all too clear. When my eyes met his, he did smile, and that's when that hand cannon exploded into my gut.

And that's it. It keeps playing over and over in my head, and after each time I feel another pound stupider. I close my eyes again, and allow myself to slip into the sweet arms of sleep, refreshing, filled with dreams of my family, columns of light, white angels... DING!

Relief

by A.M. McCormick

The sound of a long forgotten tricycle clattering across the concrete floor echoed off the barn walls as numb legs kicked it over. The ghosts of memories flew unnoticed by the remnant continuing its steady gait through the room: a scraped knee, a gleeful yip as the tricycle made its maiden voyage, the battling fear and excitement watching those three wheels carry away the best part of this life--the same part that had been carried away on a different set of wheels just recently.

The gas can sat in the same spot it had taken up for years. The process of removing the cap and pouring the noxious liquid so familiar from years of weekly mowing that the motions came naturally. The stream splashed steadily, serenely, upon the floor--a waterfall that led to a better place, it just required the courage, the daring, to go over. It was time to go over. The empty canister splashed gasoline as it hit the floor.

It took five tries to light the match. For the first time in days, emotions began to arise, making hands shake as they attempted to create a spark. There was too much life in the barn. Too many memories. Too much happiness. It was unbearable. A lone tear fell into the puddle of fuel before the feelings were shoved back into their box. Numbness was all that could be managed right now; the pain so raw that it would never scab over. A wave of heat was a jolting announcement of the first successfully lit match. Time to let go.

Hide and Seek

by Jess Johnson

It was late when I got to the party and everything looked pretty dull. Ten or fifteen people sat around the weathered coffee table, smoking swag and listening to Nirvana like they were lost somewhere in the 90's. Thirty minutes in and I was getting ready to bounce, I mean seriously how many times can you listen to *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, even stoned, without wanting to blow your own head off. That's when Jacqueline slid into my lap.

"Hey Jacky, what's up?" I nuzzled against her neck. She smelled of Chanel no. 5, stolen from her mother's dresser, and cheap weed. She giggled and arched her back.

"Melody, I'm bored," she purred "We should play a game."

"And what do you think we should play?"

"Hide-and-peek."

"Jacqueline, it's 2 am, and dark. We are in the middle of nowhere. Why would we play hide-and-peek out here?"

"Oh come on, Melody. Don't be scared. I'll let you hold my hand."

That was all I needed to hear.

She jumped up and started gathering people from around the room. I finished my beer and joined the growing crowd around her. She was petite with dark red hair; the expensive highlights a golden blonde. Her jade green eyes were almost cat like; their almond shape was accented by her expertly applied make-up. She reminded me of a peacock, all vibrant feathers and noise, paired with absolutely no brains. Stoners - we love pretty colors. Next thing I knew, we were all outside under the endless summer stars listening to Jacqueline count, while we ran off to hide in the dark.

She found me as soon as she stopped counting. I was difficult to miss lying in the middle of the trampoline, staring up into the infinite black.

"Melody, you're not even trying!" She pouted, her exaggerated sighs pressing her rather impressive rack against the straining fabric of a shirt never intended to be worn by a female with breasts.

Jacqueline was one of those girls every one believed was stupid. For a long time I was sure she wore heels every day to save her from having to tie her shoes. The truth was, Jacqueline just knew she was going to get way more out of life by being pretty than being smart.

I smiled at her, "You promised to hold my hand."

She leaned over the edge of the trampoline to kiss me, her nose lining up with my chin. She tasted like vanilla lip-gloss, Corona, and pot, I giggled as I thought to myself *bittersweet* - every moment with Jacqueline was like that, precious for what she gave me and cruel for what I couldn't have.

"That's better," I whispered, reaching over my head for her hand.

"You're it." She turned and ran, laughing.

I hopped off of the trampoline, announcing the start of the new round and began my lazy count to 100.

When I began my search, I purposefully overlooked everyone else hiding and making out, passed out or dazedly looking at the stars. I only wanted to find Jacqueline. As I walked along the fence that hedged her family's land, I heard a faint rustle. I giggled to myself, half-freighted because I really don't like the dark. Mostly, I was excited to have found her, to have stolen another moment alone, an unprecedented third in one evening. I kept walking, thinking to myself it would be more fun to sneak up and grab her. I walked about fifty feet before I came to a low spot in the fence. I jumped over.

I could see the highlights in her hair and the white of her baby doll t-shirt, as I crouched by the fence. I snuck closer feeling silly as my feet crunched in the grass. Of course she was going to hear me. I was frightening myself more by crawling in the dark than I ever would frighten her. I was fifteen feet away when I noticed the dark outline of hands pressed against her back.

I was pissed. "Damn it Jacky!" My voice was pitched too high to sound rational. The adrenaline from Jacky's midnight game of hide-and-seek mixed with anger at her other games made me too loud in the silent morning hours.

"Melody, you found us." She turned smiling, her voice soothing. She tossed her hair behind her back as she walked towards me hands outstretched. I was more than a little confused. I had been in love with Jacky since we met at a party last summer. She has never given me any more affection then she had to to get what she wanted. Painfully friend-zoned.

"We were thinking about having a more private party." She breathed the words against my ear. I leaned into her, reveling in this moment.

I woke up to the cold. How the hell did I get here? I have made some pretty horrible decisions in my life, but this dark little room where my breath froze in droplets over my face, tied to this hard flat metal table with the rope biting into my chest, tops them all. She was going to choose me just once, I should have known better.

The bare light bulb overhead fizzled into life. The guy who had been cozying up to Jacky in the field behind the fence came down the stairs. He smiled at me in a way that had nothing to do with pleasant introductions, or the sexy private party I had been anticipating.

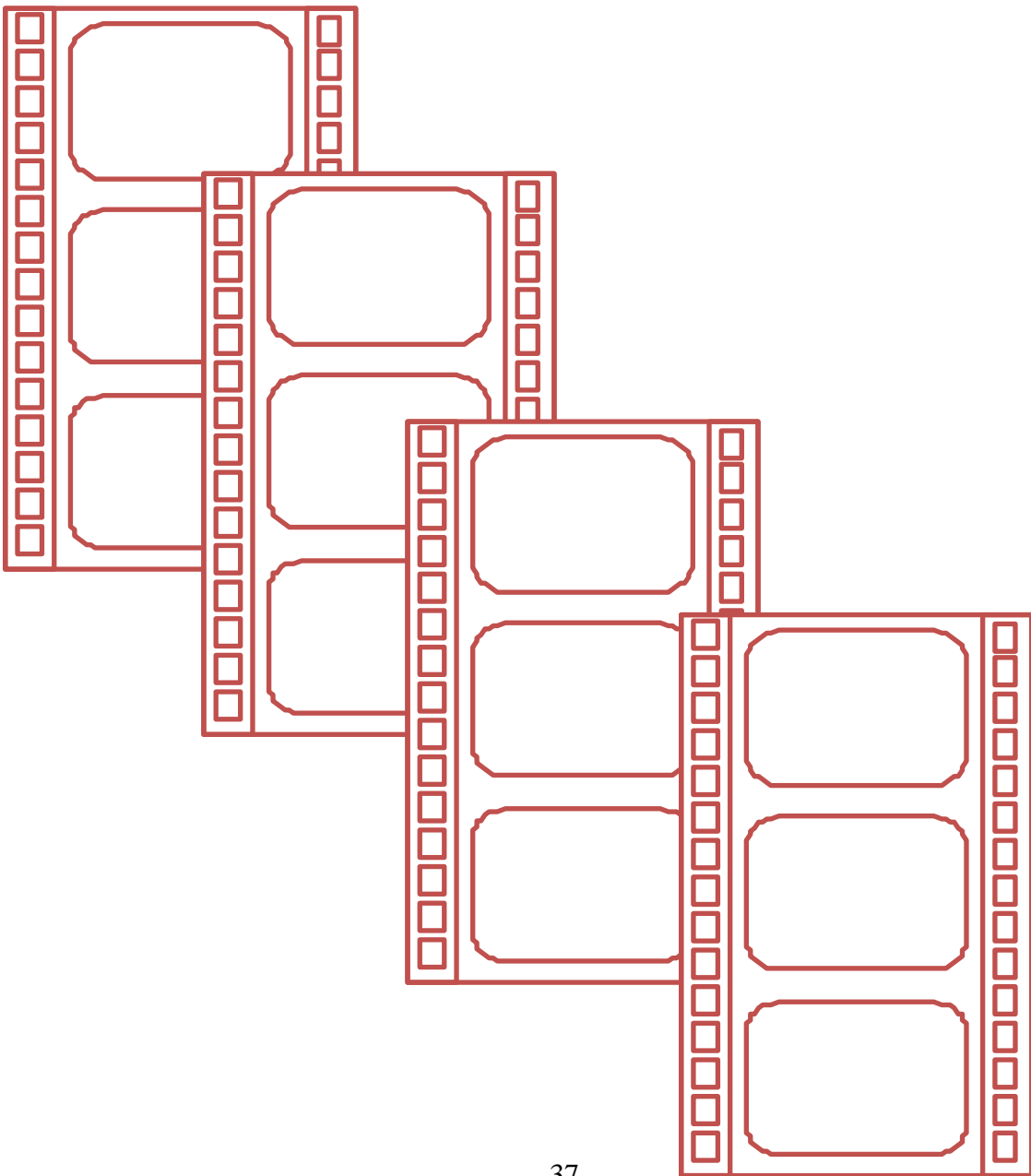
"Jacqueline can reel them in like no one I have ever met before." His voice was crazy deep. What was that supposed to mean?

The radio hissed static as he fiddled in the corner; I twisted around to identify the second set of footsteps on the stairs. Jacqueline blew me a kiss, turned and walked away; I listened until I heard the door close, after that the only sound that mattered was the silence between my screams.

Adapting to Adaptation

by Dane Glenn

Crushed is the idea of the originator. Wicked muses make nonsense. Drowned visions emerge on silver screen. A child born of imagination, one which thrives in literary form, is maimed by lack of creative interpretation. Pixels, plots, and characters deteriorate to shredded stubs. Adaptation of someone's artistic mind falls hard and heavy by another's cruel, insipid hands: cinematic politics in practice. Greed is the hound that lies at the master's side. They trim the tree that already bears fruit; never do they learn. Sold out midnight release; neither do we.



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THE Legacy

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The deadline is **February 7, 2014**

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