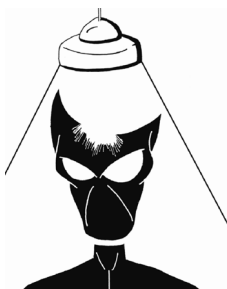


Webs of Discord

Jason B. Sizemore

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This collection is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in these stories are fictitious or are used fictitiously.

WEBS OF DISCORD

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Dedication

To all the evil Apex Publications minions:
Gill, Deb, Mari, Jodi, Justin, E.D., and Alethea.

Mr. Cain, you are not forgotten.

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The hottest love has the coldest end.

Socrates

Bright Lights

Bright Lights

Daddy was home.

Screaming away and pounding on his desk, he could be heard across the little two bedroom ranch home. Two children—one six, the other eight—pushed the remnants of their Thanksgiving dinners around their plates, flinching at every noise. They were nervous; they knew Daddy would be in to eat soon.

It could be said that Daddy—Gerald Malcolm Linden—gave them plenty to be nervous about. Gerald had been drafted in the year 2046, the third year of the American-Asian war, at the height of the Pacific conflict. His first assignment was a cozy spot as a logistics officer, hidden safely behind the lines and helping the real men, the generals, map out important battles. The job treated him well...that is, until he messed up. Four thousand marines dead in six hours, recognized as the worst slaughter of American lives in the history of the country. The generals thought him a spy, tortured him for information. When none was forthcoming, they placed him in the frontlines of the battlefields, in the jungles of Vietnam, fighting a resilient enemy the Americans had lost to seventy years before. Let the Vietnamese get rid of a problem they didn't want to deal with.

The youngest child, tiny Michelle Renee, balanced a shriveled pea on her thumb and sent it flying across the table with her index finger. Michelle was proud of her pea sharp-shooting skills, and her talent didn't let her down this time. The pea found its target, plinking harmlessly but effectively against her brother's forehead.

"Ouch!" shrieked Mark as he laughed, scooping up a portion of mashed potatoes with his hand, readying a counter-attack. Mark felt it was time for a full-fledged food fight before Daddy came to the table.

"Don't you dare, Mark Gerald Linden!"

Mark wanted to argue, but one authoritative look from his mother's cloudy blue eyes emptied his mouth of rebellion. In the background, Mark heard his father screaming at the video-phone in his office. The tirade was punctuated by the sound of crashing furniture and plenty of swearing.

Another pea bounced off Mark's forehead.

"Hey!" he said to Michelle. "I'll get you for that." He made monster noises as he rounded the table and grabbed his sister in a bear hug, tickling her. Michelle squealed with laughter. The pair wrestled, giggling and twisting, prompting their mother to join in the fun.

The office door opened, and Daddy sulked into the dining room.

"Goddamn it!"

Gerald Linden, wearing his patented bulldog sneer, stormed into the dining room. Mark narrowly avoided running into his father as he scam-

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pered for his place at the table. Nobody dared say a word.

“What’s wrong, Gerald?”

“We’re fucked, that’s what’s wrong.”

“Gerald, the kids...”

“It doesn’t fucking matter. They should hear this.”

“Hear what?” asked Lydia.

Michelle began to wail, as she often did when Daddy was mad.

“The psychologist refuses to sign off on my papers. Says I have to find real work, not draw a pension. Six goddamn years in the jungle and not one fucking penny.” Gerald pounded the table with his fist. One eye tended to drift during his mad spells. This time it stared at Mark while the other looked to the ceiling in exasperation.

Mark cleared his throat. “Daddy?” The eye glared at him, broadcasting a threat of physical violence for the insolence that interrupted his father’s thoughts.

In a flash, Gerald swept his arm across the dining table, sending bowls, plates, and glasses smashing against the wall behind Mark. Mark ducked the shards of shattering glass and crockery. He didn’t know what to think. He’d only seen his dad three times in the past few months. Daddy stayed at the bars till late at night, and often went to the doctors during the day. This man was not Daddy, but a scary stranger.

“There’s only one thing left to do.”

“Gerald, you’re scaring the kids and you’re scaring me,” Lydia said. She reached her hand out to Gerald’s bleeding wrist, using her most consoling voice.

“They always think they’ve got me,” Gerald mumbled, this time smacking the tabletop with his open right palm. “But they’re wrong. So very wrong.”

“Gerald?”

Outside, a freak November thunderstorm brewed over the Marine base. Mark could hear the wind picking up, pelting their house with sand and grit.

Gerald hunched over the table and placed his head in his hands. Mark knew Daddy had a temper, but this was different. An ill-defined danger surrounded his father.

“Who are you, little girl?” Gerald asked.

“Mommy?” Michelle asked. “What’s wrong with Daddy?”

The family sat quietly around the dinner table.

“Mommy?”

“Nothing Michelle. Daddy’s just tired, that’s all,” Lydia said.

Gerald smiled at his daughter. He stood up and hugged her tightly where she sat.

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“You know Daddy loves you, right?”

“Yes. I love you, Daddy.”

Gerald walked over to Mark, who leaned away from the man—Daddy—suspicious.

“Mark, you know your daddy would always do what’s best for you?”

Mark peered over to his mother. She nodded “Yes.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

Outside, a brilliant flash of lightning crackled nearby. For a brief moment, the power flickered off. When the power had come back on, Gerald had disappeared.

Lydia jumped to her feet and gathered her children in her arms. She pushed them in the direction of their bedroom. “Go on, get in your room. Mommy needs to find out what’s wrong with Daddy.”

“Mommy,” cried Michelle. “I’m scared.”

“It’s okay, sweetie. Daddy is a little upset and Mommy is going to find out what is wrong. And besides, Mark will protect you, right Mark?”

Although on the verge of tears, Mark nodded silently and put his arm around his little sister.

Mark recognized the sound of his father’s shotgun being loaded with shells from within the office. Quickly, he herded Michelle into their bedroom and locked the door. They huddled together in the corner next to a giant plush Winnie-the-Pooh that had been an early Christmas present from their aunt and uncle in Orlando.

“Mark, what’s going on?” Michelle asked. Her tears rolled down her face onto Mark’s arm. They tickled as they made their way to his fingertips.

“Daddy has a bad headache, ok? The doctors told Mommy it’s because he’s been away from his family for so long.” He felt Michelle nod in his arms. “Mommy wants us to play ‘hide and go seek’ until he’s not mad anymore.”

Through the thin plaster walls of the house, Mark heard an argument raging over the sounds of the building storm.

“They think they got me, but they don’t; the sons of bitches.”

“Gerald, put that away.”

“Don’t tell me what to do. I’m a goddamn corporal.”

“Put the gun away, Gerald. Let me call Dr. Fiesler.”

“Dr. Fiesler? He told me all the sick shit I’ve done; it’s in my head. In my head, Lydia.”

“I don’t think Dr. Fiesler understands,” Lydia said, her voice calm and modulated.

“I think you’re trying to confuse me.”

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Silence ensued, followed by some muffled pleas.

“On your knees.”

“No.”

“Don’t make me shoot you in the face.”

“Gerald, no! The kids.”

“On your goddamn knees!”

“Fuck you.”

A second later, a gunshot blast rocked the house. Then another. Then nothing, absolutely nothing. The only sound Mark could hear was the pattering of rain on the rooftop. Michelle sobbed silently in his embrace.

Footsteps.

Mark’s eyes narrowed. They were attentive to every movement inside the bedroom and around the doorframe. Quietly, he placed his hand around Michelle’s mouth and placed a finger to his lips, indicating for her to remain quiet. Then he walked her over to the closet, slid the door open and shoved her gently inside. Once again, he motioned ‘quiet’ and shut the closet door.

Outside the room, in the hallway, he heard the shotgun reload.

Mark slid underneath Michelle’s bed, one of the two twin sized beds the siblings shared. Practically kissing his face was Michelle’s favorite baby doll. It stared at him an inch away with those faraway, empty black eyes.

The doorknob rattled.

“Open this door, Mark.”

Silence.

“Your father orders you to open this door.”

A few seconds passed, then a shot rang out. The middle of the door and part of the frame disintegrated.

“I promise not to hurt you.”

Horrorstricken, Mark watched his father’s boots stomp through the door. Gerald knocked the debris aside and entered the room.

“Your mother is hurt, real bad,” Gerald said. “She needs you to help her.”

Mark eyed the closet, praying that Michelle wouldn’t fall for this obvious bit of trickery. Enraged, his father upended the mattress and frame of Mark’s bed. Bedding and pillows fell all about the room. The boots moved into the bathroom and yanked the shower curtain off the rod. Cursing, Gerald ripped the linen door off its hinges.

“She’s bleeding from her eyes,” Gerald yelled. “Like those goddamn Viet-Cong when I tortured them. Their eyes bled, too.”

The boots marched to the bed that hid Mark. They paused. The bar-

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rel of the family's Winchester made black smudges against the white carpet. Mark could smell the fresh cordite. The doll's plastic face became warm and alive, transforming to the face of his mother. "I love you," it whispered, before exploding in a spray of blood and brains. Mark stifled a cry, blinking away the tears and the horrible image. When he looked again, the doll's head was normal, with black eyes and plastic body.

Without warning, the boots rushed toward the closet. Acting on instinct, Mark sprang out from under the bed and threw his body into the back of his father's knees, sending him tumbling to the floor. The closet door remained closed.

"Son of a bitch!"

Gerald grabbed Mark by the ankle and tried to pull him closer. With his other hand, the man reached for the shotgun. Mark twisted onto his back and sent the ball of his right foot into his father's shin. Gerald howled in pain, grasping for his left leg, allowing Mark the split second he needed to slip free. He jumped up and found himself in the hallway.

His father grabbed the shotgun and stood. Mark saw Michelle peek out of the closet. Her sad, round eyes were filled with tears. Mark's only thought was to get his father out of the room before he found Michelle and killed her, too. He picked up a vase from the hallway end-table and threw it, causing it to shatter across his father's broad shoulders.

"You stupid motherfucker," Mark said. The swear words felt funny coming out of his mouth. Had he ever sworn before? Even now, he felt a ridiculous instinct to respect his father, this crazy man he called 'Daddy.'

"What did you say to me, boy?"

"Fuck you. You ain't killing me, you crazy fuck-tard."

Gerald rushed the doorway and Mark darted left, toward the living room. He sprinted to the foyer and rushed out the front door.

Lightning crashed, momentarily highlighting the ancient oak in the front yard. Mark splashed through the slippery desert mud and took cover behind the tree. The rain blew in from all directions as the storm grew angrier and louder.

Gerald followed, splashing loudly through the puddles of rain that now flooded the grassless front yard. The halogen flood lamp at the end of their driveway flashed on.

"Run all you like, but I'm not going to let you live. Not a single one of you motherfuckers ever got away from me? They thought they had me, but I was on to their ass."

Gerald stalked across the yard holding the shotgun ready in front of him.

"Bet you ain't ever been shot, have you son? The pain, oh Christ, it

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will make you puke your guts out.”

A moment of nothing but the rain falling.

“I’ll shoot you in the head, you’ll never feel the pain, I promise.”

A whistling sound passed overhead, above the clouds. For nearly a minute, the father and son listened. Mark knew the sound to be a military jet making a landing at the base airfield a mile away.

“You hear that, boy? That’s the first of the bombs. That’s the Asian Alliance. I told the generals they were coming. We’re all fucked.”

Mark strained to listen through the rain, the jet landing, and his father’s ranting, trying to ascertain from which side of the tree Dad approached. He crouched and placed both feet against an exposed portion of tree root for better footing.

“Come on. Hiding behind a tree? You want to hide, your ass had better be dug down into the mud, under the water. You can do better than that.”

When the nose of the shotgun appeared, Mark grabbed it with both hands and pulled backwards as hard as he could. He made sure to keep the barrel pointed away from his body. Knowing he wouldn’t have the strength to pull the gun from his father’s military-trained and well-muscled body, he only tried to create enough leverage to cause Gerald to topple face-first in the slick mud.

Gerald did topple. Mark managed to escape by leaping over Gerald’s flailing arms. Miraculously, his feet ran true through mud, so he made a dash for the back of the house. He crashed through the back door, and ran straight to the bedroom closet where he had left Michelle.

“Where’s Dad—”

Mark put his hand over her mouth and once again made the motion for silence.

He pulled her out of hiding and tugged off his muddy wet shoes and socks and stashed them in the closet. Grabbing her hand, he crept to his father’s office. The place was in a shambles. The desks were flipped on their sides. Office supplies and computer equipment littered the floor. Everything had been torn off the wall in Gerald’s last fit of rage. Everything except for a trophy nine-iron he had won years ago at a Camp Pendleton Base golf tournament.

Mark heard his father kick the front door open. The man walked straight into the children’s bedroom, following the wet, muddy tracks Mark had left behind. Gerald slid open the closet door only to find a pair of wet tennis shoes and socks.

“Son of a bitch,” Gerald said.

Mark raised the club overhead and brought it down with all his might, connecting squarely with the back of his father’s head. Gerald

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grunted and stumbled against the wall. Again, Mark swung the nine-iron. This time, Gerald slumped to his knees. He dropped the shotgun across his lap and rubbed a spot on the back of his head. When he brought his hand back to his face, the hand was covered in blood. Rage emanated from the soldier.

A whistling sound, like the first one, but much louder and closer, shrilled overhead. Lightning erupted. A few seconds later, the thunder shook hard enough to rattle the house.

Mark grabbed the shotgun.

“No...” Gerald gasped. “The bombing has started.”

For a moment, Mark lifted the gun and thought about pulling the trigger, wanted to pull the trigger. But he walked away. Back into the office. Mark kneeled before his little sister and took her in his arms.

“It’s ok, Michelle.”

Mark propped the shotgun on the edge of the desk, aiming it at the doorway. He put two of his small fingers lightly around the trigger.

And together they waited for Daddy to enter the room.



The Haunting of Hollis Higgins

The Haunting of Hollis Higgins

Hollis Higgins hated his job. Every day, 8 to 5, working as a customer support specialist for a faceless corporate conglomerate, he answered phone calls from the company's brightest and most intelligent customers.

"It won't print."

"What won't print?"

"My computer."

"Sir, do you own a printer?"

"No, what's that?"

By 5 p.m., Hollis was ready to give up on humanity and slam his head into a concrete wall until it burst like a ripe watermelon. Work drained the life out of him, while the city of New York did the rest. He made enough money for a studio apartment, a small black and white television, and dinners of ramen noodles. At night, the bouncers to the strip clubs downstairs would let him in without paying a cover. He'd watch the strippers dance until closing time, sleep for a few hours, then go back to work the next day.

"My computer won't turn on."

"Is it plugged into an electrical outlet?"

"Yes."

"Did you press the power switch on your computer?"

"Of course I did! I pressed the button on the TV screen that came with it, but nothing happened."

Walking into work on the morning of his two-year anniversary at the company, Hollis Higgins was mugged for the third time in two months. This time he lost his watch and his only pair of work shoes. His co-workers failed to notice or care that his hairy big toe poked out of his ragged, dirty left sock.

"Can I change my jail records with this internet connection?"

"No sir."

"Why not? They do it all the time on the television."

"Life doesn't work like it does on the television."

"My screen just flickered! Are you doing something to my computer, you little jackass, cuz if you are, I will kill you!"

Lack of shoes. Death. *I will kill you.*

Mired in hell. Death. *Death was the answer.*

At exactly 10:45 a.m. on that rainy October morning, Hollis Higgins placed his headset on its clip and went for his morning break. Instead of reading the *Times* in the building's recreation room like always, he slipped into the elevator and rode to the top floor. The dirty hallway stank of damp nicotine and tobacco. To his left, a rusty metal door led to the roof. Hollis gave it a shove, allowing a blast of wet city air to circulate

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inside. The cold breeze invited him outside where sweet death waited seven stories down.

Hollis walked into the downpour and made straight to the precipice of the building. A sense of freedom overwhelmed him. He wanted to shout something, anything, to make one last declaration as Hollis Higgins before he became another lifeless rotting corpse under the ground. Opening his arms and arching his back, the sky spun above him, expanding in focus as though it were ready to hear what needed to be heard.

“Fuck off!”

Now that felt grand, Hollis thought. People walking on the sidewalk below peered out from under their umbrellas as though they’d heard the word of God.

Hollis teetered on the edge; the wind shrieked, urging him to jump. He closed his eyes and leaned forward.

“Hollis? Hollis Higgins?”

A young woman’s voice shattered the spell that was pulling him over the edge. Hollis pulled back from near oblivion and stared at the company’s smoker-shed perched next to the roof’s entrance.

“It’s me – Emma,” she called. “I work across from you in customer support.”

Hollis fired some neurons, struggling to place her face. He decided to play it cool. “Oh, sure. Hi, Emma.” Hollis fought to keep his voice firm.

“Bum a cigarette?”

“Of course.”

He joined Emma under the shed. Reaching into his pocket, he took out a pair of smokes and handed one off to his co-worker. They lit up with his cheap plastic Zippo. As he sat down next to her inside the shed, his clothes squished with rainwater.

“I like your shoes,” Emma said, shooting a teasing glance at his feet.

He gazed at the graveled roof and picked out her butt-ends from the others and grinned. “Didn’t want to get my shoes wet.” He blew smoke out through his nose.

Emma wore thick, black-framed glasses. A ponytail bound black waves of hair that left soft, pale areas of skin exposed around her neck. When she shifted her position, revealing slender, shapely legs, Hollis did not try to hide his lascivious gaze.

“What drags you out in the rain, Hollis?”

Hollis felt like sharing. “I was going to jump off the building.”

Emma laughed and bumped shoulders with him. Her warm laughter and touch made Hollis’s black-haired toe tingle with desires. “I know the feeling,” Emma said. “This job makes me think about that every day.”

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Emma dropped her cigarette in an old glass Pepsi bottle, accepting another from her new friend. Hollis sat contentedly; the urge to die receding like the steam rising from his soaking clothes. He would burn a few with Emma and see how things went from here.

Son of a bitch!" Morte wailed in disbelief, watching the sickening scene of Hollis and Emma's first meeting unfold. A barrage of derisive laughter from the other Reapers hit him. Morte was on a monumental losing streak—forty days, and not one reaping! It made great entertainment for his coworkers, Todd and Linden. If he kept this streak going, Death Master would have Morte's scythe.

"Did you see it? I was so close!" Morte protested.

Todd patted Morte on the back as they walked across the Plane of Death back to the break room. "Don't give up Morty, I heard that Doleur over in Section 7 once gave a man a grievous case of scabies, and the sap lived for three years."

"That was rabies, not scabies, you fool," Morte snapped.

"Oh."

"I'm not going to meet my quota," Morte fretted. "They're going to send me back to the demon squad, or worse, I'll have to be a ghost."

Morte's head bowed in dejection, and his scythe dragged the ground behind him. Being a ghost was the worst job in eternity, nothing but groaning and floating and hiding...from humans. What kind of job involved hiding from humans?

"You could haunt Hollis Higgins!" joked Linden.

Morte sighed. Being a Reaper was the coolest job in the Heavens, and Linden was the best Reaper in all the afterlife. Linden had such panache! All the best tragedies could be traced to Linden. The bubonic plague, smallpox, most venereal diseases...all originated under the creative auspices of Grim Reaper Linden.

As they approached the break room, the three Reapers drew back their hoods, exposing the rare sight of Reaper faces. Linden and Todd wore their wavy gray hair tightly pulled into ponytails. Morte hated taking his hood off. He felt so exposed...so bald. He rubbed his naked scalp in frustration.

Technically, a Reaper never finished his work. But occasionally, while the wheel of life cranked forever forward, the crew made time for a quick smoke break.

"Christ, I would like to kill whoever proposed the idea that we carry these stupid scythes," Morte griped.

"It's all about image," Todd said as he leaned his scythe next to Linden's. "It gives us individuality. Makes us spooky."

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“It makes me annoyed.”

All three Reapers lit up. Smoke quickly clouded the room.

“But these—” Morte said, waving around his cigarette. “—these do help.”

“I love cigarettes,” Linden agreed, blowing out a puff of smoke. “They make this job worthwhile.”

“It’s certainly helped make this job much easier.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” Todd said. “This one time, I spent three years following an old geezer who smoked through a hole in his neck.”

“So what happened?”

“A fly buzzed down his breath pipe. Caused him to drop his cigarette.”

“And let me guess, a fire was started by a burning cigarette?” Linden ventured.

“Hell, yeah!”

Todd and Linden gave each other a high five.

“Check it out!” Morte said with excitement. He pointed to an ancient scroll posted on the bulletin board. The names of the doomed were scrawled in Reaper blood, readable only by other Reapers.

“It’s the latest requests from the Head Reaper!”

Morte snatched the list off the board.

During the Melach’im negotiations three millennia ago, Grim Reapers were granted sole rights to the business of reaping the doomed. The Reapers called these guaranteed deaths the “Freebies”—no work, just a touch of death.

“Freebies don’t count toward your quota,” Linden reminded his companion.

“I know, you idiot, but this list could save my scythe,” Morte said, his eyes greedily reading the names of those due to die. The Head Reaper was giving him another chance.

Hollis Higgins logged the last call automatically. He was focused solely on the beautiful woman sitting across the room. He swooned over the scent of Emma’s perfume that wafted its way to his desk. It drove him wild, made his loins ache in such a way that the day full of inane phone calls receded from memory. His thoughts were consumed with Emma. Weeks ago, he’d stood on the verge of death. Now he and Emma stood on the verge of a new life. Tonight was the night.

Grim Reaper Morte flitted unseen between the two in agitation. All this love nauseated him and made him twitch in a manner unbecoming

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to Reapers. According to the “Freebie” rolls, Emma was marked for death. Hollis would be a dead man, melting to nothing, when his love died.

“I’ll show Todd and Linden. It’s two-for-one day in Reaperville!” Morte said, then chuckled in anticipation.

Morte knew he could end Emma’s life with a touch of his scythe, just so easy. Reapers loved the freebies. Linden often used his freebies to initiate mini-disasters, such as gathering the doomed into a malfunctioning elevator and plunging them to their deaths.

“Damn showoff, that Linden,” growled Morte to nobody in particular.

After work, Emma met Hollis in the lobby of their building. Arm-in-arm, they headed for their evening meal.

“Chinese, dear?” Hollis asked, solicitous of his lover.

“Absolutely,” Emma purred.

Hollis and Emma ate dinner, sharing a plate of General Tso’s chicken. Later, they found a bench in Central Park and cuddled late into the evening. Dusk was giving way to dark when they started their walk home.

Near Emma’s apartment building, Hollis stopped. Gently, he took her by the shoulders and turned her toward him. “I love you, Emma,” he said, simply.

Emma blushed and giggled. “I love you, too, Hollis,” she responded, resting her cheek against his chest.

Clasping her hands in his, Hollis dropped to one knee in the age-old gesture of gallantry. “I don’t have much to offer, Emma. Yet, somehow, you find more inside me than I could have ever imagined. I will love you until the end of time. Will you marry me?” Hollis held out a sparkling cubic zirconium. It was the best he could afford.

Emma gave a small shriek, snatched the ring from the box with shaking hands and slid it onto her finger. “Oh my God, Hollis, yes! Of course! Yes!” The loving couple hugged and spun around in each others’ arms.

“I love you, Emma.”

“I love y...”

Reaper Morte raised his scythe and slashed Emma through the neck. Emma clutched her head, staggered, and collapsed to the ground, her sentence forever unfinished.

Confused, Hollis gazed, uncomprehending, at the inert form folded on the ground before him. What had happened?

“Emma, are you okay?” he asked tremulously, kneeling beside his love. “Emma?” he said a little louder, hysteria tinging his voice. He

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shook her shoulders gently. Then he placed his head to his beloved's breast. No breath. No heartbeat. She was dead.

Giggling with glee, Morte smote the ground with the butt of his scythe, an action that reverberated across the Plane of Death into the living world. This caused one minor but nasty-tempered mugger named Harley Hanson to turn left instead of right at the street corner, sending him toward Hollis and his fallen love.

"Somebody help!" Hollis wailed. "Call 9-1-1, anybody!"

The street was empty except for Harley Hanson, who viewed the sight of a fallen woman and a grieving man not as a tragedy, but as an opportunity.

"Have a good cry, Hollis," Morte giggled, doing a jig along the street. "It will be your last cry on earth!"

Hollis looked up at the sound of Hanson's heavy footsteps. "Please, my fiancé needs help," Hollis implored, rising to his feet.

"Give me your money," Harley answered, sticking his .38 in Hollis's face.

"Wha...what!" Hollis gasped. His fiancé lay dead and this man wanted to rob him?

"You got three seconds to give me your money," snarled Harley as he knelt and stripped the ring from Emma's finger.

"Oh good! Oh what a delightfully evil move!" chortled Morte. He couldn't believe his luck. Hollis was indeed a dead man. Seeing such an outrage against his beloved, Hollis would attack the thief and finally, *finally* be killed! Morte would be a star once more. Rookie Reapers would applaud him as a hero of their profession.

Hollis paused. Anger and bewilderment fogged his brain, making his hands shake. He balled up his fingers into fists and took a step toward Harley.

"Do it!" taunted Morte.

"Go for it, jackass," invited Harley. "Your girlfriend wants you to join her."

"She does! She does!" Morte said.

After a short, uncertain pause, Hollis threw his wallet to the ground, turned away, and ran. He never looked back.

That was good enough for Harley, who scooped up the wallet and disappeared into the darkness.

"You son of a bitch" Morte bellowed, darting after Hollis. "You coward! I'd slice off your nuts if I could, you coward!"

As Hollis ran into a nearby restaurant, Morte stopped. Two Reapers appeared on either side of him, doubled over, laughing.

"I hate you guys," Morte said. "I'm going for a smoke."

The Haunting of Hollis Higgins

The Reapers sat around a small table, each cradling a cup of angel-blood caffeinated brew, while nursing a cancer stick. “Stupid Death Master wants a reaping report on his desk by Gabrielle’s next visit. How the hell am I supposed to kill an island full of natives before then?” Todd moaned.

“Poison snakes?” suggested Linden.

“No snakes within a thousand miles,” responded Todd, morosely.

“Hmm, try a locust swarm,” Morte offered.

“Goddamn it Morte, you’re always suggesting locust swarms.”

“Hey, it worked in Egypt, didn’t it?” That locust swarm in Egypt some 4,000 years before was Morte’s one shining moment. It was a locust swarm of biblical proportions that had gotten him promoted to Grim Reaper status.

“Plagues are always fun,” Linden mused, casually inspecting his black fingernails.

“Yeah, we created a Typhoid Mary,” Morte said. “What about a Typhoid Larry?”

“No, plagues are so passé,” sighed Todd. “Besides, the human’s CDC is always putting a stop to plagues before they really get cooking. No fun anymore.”

An enormous Reaper walked into the break room and began coughing. He waved his scythe around, fanning the thick, grey clouds of swirling cigarette smoke.

“I’ll tell you what was a bad idea—” he said darkly. “—making this into a smoker’s room.”

“Shut up, Rauch. Take your break in Hell if you don’t like it,” Morte growled.

“Oh yes, Morte and the great locust swarm,” jibed Rauch. “It’s not enough I have to listen to you go on for millennium after millennium about locusts, but now I got to sit in your smoke cloud, too? It’s disgusting, you old has-been.”

That was it. Morte jumped up, ready for a Reaper rousting.

Linden calmly stood up and placed an arm around Morte’s shoulder. “Let’s go to work, my friend. I know someone that can help you finish this Hollis Higgins character once and for all.”

“Oh?” Morte muttered doubtfully.

“You ever been to Ghosttown, Morte?”

Morte eyed Rauch’s bulky form and sharp gleaming scythe. Perhaps focusing his energy on Hollis was the proper thing to do. The big Reaper could have his insults for now.

“No.”

“Say Morte, did I tell you the one about the mountain climber and

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the slippery rocks?” Linden asked.

“I don’t think so.”

The pair walked out of the break room. Todd followed, listening. Linden always told the best Reaping stories.

Hollis Higgins led a life of despair. Emma’s ring had sapped the last of his savings. That meant he couldn’t pay his rent, which in turn allowed his surly landlord to evict Hollis from his apartment. So in the meantime, Hollis lived at his job. Literally.

“The hard drive is broken.”

“How do you know?”

“The lights on the front of the box quit coming on.”

“But you’re still using your computer, right?”

“Yes, but the hard drive is broken.”

Hollis worked double shifts, hoping to hide from the heartbreak of losing Emma. During his breaks and after hours he sketched plans on how best to devote his life to honoring the memory of his lost love. Another intern replaced his Emma, peppy and pretty. She wore skirts that hiked above her knees and blouses that showed plenty of flesh, but Hollis found no interest in her.

He ate food, drank coffee, took support calls, and tried to move on with his life.

“Help! My screen went black!”

“Did you turn the monitor off?”

“No, it just went black! Oh wait, there’s words going across the screen! Did you do this?”

“That’s just your screen saver, ma’am.”

“My what?”

Most nights he slept under the desk in his cubicle, but on certain warm evenings, when the moon was full and his mind brimming with thoughts of her, he crept to the roof, to the aluminum shed where he’d first shared a smoke with his Emma. He would spend the night counting the cigarette butts interspersed with the roof gravels, wondering which ones were hers.

In the morning before the early-birds arrived, Hollis would wash in the men’s room, brush his teeth, comb his hair, and make himself ready for work. Company coffee and donuts were his daily breakfast. Solicitous thefts from the employee refrigerator provided lunch.

“I heard I could steal credit card numbers with a computer.”

“No sir, unless you really know what you’re doing.”

“Are you saying I’m dumb, boy?”

The Haunting of Hollis Higgins

“No sir, just telling you it’s a myth.”

“You little jackass, this is the second time you’ve messed with me. I know where you are. You’re dead meat!”

After several months, Hollis finally reached a point where he could afford another apartment. On his last night sleeping at the office, he decided to spend it under the stars, on the roof. Like he was prone to do so often these days, he thought about Emma and his desire to give meaning to her death. Craving life, having the motivation to go forward, was a strange feeling to him. Emma had given him this. Hollis decided that perhaps he could return the favor by doing good deeds in her name. The homeless shelters would let him volunteer. That’d be a good place to start, since he knew most of the homeless and the shelter managers.

His sixteen-hour shift over, Hollis did what he always did and hid inside a broom closet until Merle, the elderly security guard, left the building for the night. After Merle switched off the lights and locked the door, Hollis popped out of hiding, took the elevator to the roof, and ambled over to the precipice. He gazed out over the city, wondering what life held for him next.

“You little jackass!”

Hollis jumped. He recognized that voice. Emma’s fallen body. The ring pulled from her dead finger. The .38 waved in his face. It was a voice he recognized from those support calls asking for bizarre assistance in stealing credit card numbers, changing jail records, stupid stuff. It was the thief.

“I’ve found you and now you’ve met your end,” Harley Hanson said. A look of recognition dawned on both their faces. “Well, I be god-damned. It’s the lover boy with the dead girlfriend. You shouldn’t have screwed with my computer like you did. Thought you’d get revenge, did you?” Harley Hanson advanced out from the smoker’s shed toward Hollis, scowling ferociously while brandishing a tire iron.

Stupidly, Hollis asked, “Where’s your gun?” Nothing else came to mind.

Harley rushed Hollis. Hollis jumped left. The tire iron came crashing down against his right shoulder, sending him sprawling to the rough gravel. Harley advanced again, raising the iron for a killing blow. Hollis rolled to the right, just out of reach and into the shed. Next to his face was the Pepsi bottle Emma had used for her cigarette-butts all those months ago. As Hollis staggered to his feet, he grabbed the bottle and hid it behind his back.

The tire iron whizzed past the end of his nose as Hollis barely skittered away.

“The fucking police has an APB on me. And you did it, you little

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jackass!” Harley yelled.

“Did what?” Hollis’s legs wobbled with fear.

“You hacked into my computer after I called. Got the cops hot on me. They think I killed that little bitch of yours.”

“That’s insane!” Hollis yelled, feinting left as Harley swung again. Hollis reeled back, catching his balance and darting toward the precipice of the building. Over Harley’s right shoulder, Hollis thought he saw Emma hidden inside the shed. She motioned Hollis backwards urgently. Emma was right, now *was* the time.

He took a quick step back. The tire iron whizzed under his chin. Hollis retaliated. He landed a crushing blow to Harley’s face with the Pepsi bottle. Blood gushed from thief’s mouth.

Harley laughed off the attack. “What kind of man lets a crook steal from his dead bitch?”

“What kind of man steals from someone’s dead fiancé?” Hollis shouted back at his berserk attacker.

Harley rushed at Hollis, slamming his burly weight into Hollis’s chest, sending both men teetering on the edge, hanging over the street far below.

“We’re both going to die,” grunted Harley.

Hollis glanced at Emma in the shed. She nodded her head and mouthed “See you soon.”

“I’m ready,” Hollis whispered. More than anything he wanted to be with her again, any way he could.

A screech from above jarred the men’s precarious balance, sending the entwined bodies plummeting past floor after floor after floor. As he fell, Harley beheld a beautiful ghost, a dead woman, holding her head out for him. Hollis saw his dear Emma beckoning.

Behind Emma, a bald Grim Reaper danced.



**Milton,
Christmas Fairy**

Milton, Christmas Fairy

Milton, Christmas fairy, skipped along the beaten path to his girlfriend's cottage. He patted the magical mistletoe stashed in his pouch and did a little twirl. Today would be the day.

In two blinks of an eye, Milton hopped happily on his girlfriend's receiving porch. He raised his tiny fairy hand and rapped on the sturdy oak door.

Knock, knock, knock.

"Who goes there?"

"It is I, your love, Milty."

Deep bosomy laughter rattled the cottage and sent straw from the thatched roof spinning into the air. Milton cowered on the porch. Arwenna's laugh was a light-hearted tinkle; this booming jeer came from her wicked stepsisters. Summoning courage from the depths of his heart, he knocked again.

Knock, knock, knock.

"Go away little fairy."

"Lest we step on you."

Laughter erupted again. Milton walked over to a window, placed his fingers on the bottom of the windowsill, and stood on his tiptoes to spy inside the cottage. Sure enough, the wicked stepsisters, Krag and Gert, tittered and snickered together by the doorway. Scrubbing the floor down the hallway in the kitchen was his precious Arwenna. Sweat dripped from her face as her body shoved the brush around the nasty floorboards.

Milton went back around to the door.

"Krag! Gert! Open this door. I'm here for Arwenna."

Snorts of laughter greeted this declaration.

"Fraid not, little boy. We don't allow our sister to go courtin' with a baby."

"I'm no baby!"

"Sorry, honey, but you have to be twelve hands tall to get on this ride!"

Laughter bellowed through the door.

Milton sighed and turned to leave. He would come back later when the stepsisters weren't around.

One of Milton's jobs as Christmas fairy was to place mistletoe over the entranceway of all the cottages in the valley. His tiny fairy wings provided enough lift to hold him aloft just long enough to stick the mistletoe on a nail the villagers had put into place, anticipating his gift. Anybody who walked under

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the hanging mistletoe would immediately forget their worries and feel the good fortune of family, friends, and the holiday.

Even the caustic treatment by the stepsisters did not sour Milton's enjoyment of his task. He was a Christmas fairy. This was what he was born to do—and all the merrier because it had the bonus of making people happy. After all, he only worked one day a year, winter solstice.

Milton approached Farmer Sweeney's shack and was surprised to see the heifer out in the pen.

"Yuletide greetings, Heifer Sweeney."

The young cow chewed her cud and swatted her tail. Milton knew she hated being out in the cold.

"You're in an awfully good mood," said the cow.

Milton smiled. "I'm spreading the magical mistletoe."

"Word in the valley is," said the cow around the cud in her mouth "the stepsisters won't let you see Arwenna."

Milton's smile melted into expression of sadness and despair. "I love Arwenna. She loves me. Those old hags are just being cruel."

The cow burped a noxious cloud from deep within her stomachs before returning to her mastication.

"You're just a little Christmas fairy. It's written in natural law that fairies and humans don't intertwine. You don't see me chasing Farmer Sweeney around the pen, do you now?"

Milton blanched at the thought.

"My advice to you, little man, is to find one of your own kind. Aren't fairy women supposed to be the most beautiful creatures on Mother Earth?"

"Oh, but they are! Yet it does not matter, Heifer Sweeney. Arwenna loves me and I love her. If only the stepsisters would let me place my magical mistletoe over their door."

"Where is Farmer Sweeney? I'm getting cold."

"The mistletoe would melt their evil hearts and see the glory of our true love," Milton said.

"That old bastard knows the cold upsets my digestive tract."

To punctuate her statement, Heifer Sweeney again belched long and loud. A cloud of stench blanketed Milton. He placed both hands over his mouth and nose and fought his gag reflex. Tiptoeing backward, he mumbled a "goodbye," and was nearly run over by a four-horse carriage.

"Whoa, little one, watch where you're going!" called the driver in a hearty voice.

Little one. Baby. Child. He was no child! He was a man, damn it, who just happened to be a fairy. He raised his fist up at the carriage in indignant fury.

Milton, Christmas Fairy

Heifer Sweeney could be heard laughing, her snorts echoing through the valley. “The village should post signs that say ‘Watch for children and fairies.’”

Maybe I am nothing more than a silly little fairy, Milton thought. He lowered his head and walked. On and on he went, lurching forward with defeated, overwrought footsteps. The grand ol’ moon rose in the sky and smiled down at the forlorn fairy. Grey moonlight bathed the valley and the fairy so brightly that Milton finally took notice. He looked skyward.

“What’s wrong, tiny fellow?” asked the Moon.

“Just that, Mr. Moon, I’m tiny,” Milton said.

“Oh, but everyone is tiny to me.”

Milton paused a moment. “Not the sun,” he said.

The moon’s glow turned a bright orange. The smile turned to a scowl. “You insensitive fairy! Hurumph!”

Milton trudged faster toward the Mystic Forest, fearful of the moon’s terrible gaze. He reached the edge of the forest and made a quick dive inside. Here he felt safe from the moon, and fairy folk had little to fear from the woodland creatures. Even the hungry winter wolves would not sniff Milton’s way.

Dusting the wintry mix of dead leaves and cold dirt from his wings and pants, he gathered himself up and resumed his walking. Careful to avoid the spots where the forest canopy opened up and let the angry moonlight inside, he hiked up the hill, occasionally taking a moment to drink from the brook that fed the valley its water. His thoughts meandered back to his sweet Arwenna. Would she still be scrubbing floors for her wicked stepsisters? Or, in a moment away from the hags, did Arwenna pine for her true love? Such thoughts pushed his heart deeper into despair.

After what must have been several hours, Milton’s legs and wings grew tired. This part of the old forest was thick with vegetation and fallen logs. After using wings, arms, and legs to push his body over a great fallen oak, he landed on the other side with a thump. Lonely and defeated, he found a nest in a small burrow of an ancient spruce that protected him from the wind and captured the warmth of his body. He fell into a dreamy and restless sleep, full of wicked stepsisters and belching bovine.

After what only felt like five minutes, a loud sobbing echoed throughout the hillside and woke him. Apprehensive, he pulled himself out of the burrow and scanned the area for intruders. Leaves whirled around him as his wings buzzed nervously.

Another loud sob told Milton the crying came from his left. He tiptoed forward, wanting to find the pitiful creature, yet not make it aware

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of his presence. Willing his wings quiet, he climbed over a pile of fallen, rotted logs and spied a glowing white presence just fifteen feet away.

“Every year, the same thing...” The words trailed off into a sob.

Milton spied a man squatting on his heels, haggard and old. The man’s beard trailed from his chin, over his knees to his feet.

Without warning, the man lifted his head and pointed straight at Milton. A beam of white light blinded the fairy.

“Who goes there spying on the death of a god?”

Milton expressed no fear; he’d dealt with gods before, certainly more menacing ones than this frail old beast.

Squinting his eyes, he said, “Do away with the light beam, kind sir, and I will make my way.

“Ha, a fairy,” said the god.

“Yes, a fairy.”

“But fairies don’t play in the forests during Yuletide.”

“Christmas fairy.”

“Oh, that’s right,” the god said, snapping his fingers. “So you’re a Christmas fairy.”

“That’s right, sir.”

The beam of light went off and Milton blinked away the afterimages. The god limped over to Milton’s perch on the logs. “My apologies, Mr. Fairy.”

“Milton. Call me Milton.”

“You can call me Mithras.”

“I sense pain in your heart, Milton.”

“And I in yours, Mithras.”

“Oh yes, I’m about to die. When Sol rises, he will take my old life to heaven and when he goes to rest in the evening, he will leave me as but a child.”

“Then why do you feel sorrow, Mithras, as you will be reborn?”

“You cannot understand the pain of taking humanity’s sins from them every year. Even though I am a god, the burden breaks me.”

Milton rubbed his smooth, whisker-free chin a few times before an idea struck him. He pulled the magic mistletoe from his pocket. “Take this, Mithras. As Sol rides out of the night, hold the mistletoe over your head. You should feel an acceptance of all troubles with open arms. You will be unburdened.”

Mithras took the tiny sprig. “I must warn you, Milton that Sol is powerful and will destroy the mistletoe after it is used. Even such a magical sprig will turn to ash in his heat.”

“If you pass through just this one rebirth without suffering the pain of humanity, then it shall be worth it,” Milton said.

Milton, Christmas Fairy

“You are kind, fairy. I hope you have all the blessings of the gods.”

Milton bowed. “Thank you, Mithras.”

When Milton stood erect again, Mithras was gone. In fact, Milton stood alone. A great fatigue came over his body and he immediately fell asleep.

Some time after Sol pulled Mithras from his earthly body and back into the heavens, Milton awoke to find himself back in the spruce’s burrow. Slipping out, he unfurled his wings and stretched. A quick check of the pouch confirmed that the magical mistletoe was gone. He scratched his head and started toward the village to forage for food. After a night of setting mistletoe, running from the moon, and chatting with a god, he was famished.

Upon reaching the village, he encountered unusual activity. People danced in the streets and hugged one another in greeting. Mr. Barstow and Mr. Hoggins, just yesterday lifelong mortal enemies, shook hands and apologized to each other.

That’s odd, Milton mused.

As Milton entered the village pub, a dwarf and a wood elf were enjoying a game of checkers by the fireplace.

That’s just weird, Milton thought. Dwarves and elves hate each other. He buzzed his wings enough to take a seat on a stool at the bar. The bartender wiped errant mead off the shiny maple top.

“I’d like a boiled egg and some ale.” Milton sighed. Arwenna loved boiled eggs.

“How you doing, Milton?” the barkeep said.

“Oh, not so well. And yourself?”

The barkeep looked Milton in the eye and smiled. “Never been better. Those mistletoes you placed on our doors were the best you’ve ever planted. I’ve never seen the village so happy.”

A surge of panic pumped through Milton’s veins. The mistletoes! He never finished planting them on the houses. How could everyone be so happy?

“What’s the matter, Milton? You look like you’ve seen your mother’s ghost.”

There could only be one explanation. Mithras. Milton let out a “whoop” and smiled at the bartender. “Sir, make that *two* ales and a boiled egg!”

“Coming right up!”

Webs of Discord

Milton, Christmas fairy, skipped along the beaten path to his girlfriend's cottage. He patted the ring of gold stashed in his pouch and did a little twirl. Today would be the day. In two blinks of an eye, he hopped happily on his girlfriend's receiving porch. He raised his tiny fairy hand and rapped on the sturdy oak door.

Knock, knock, knock.

The door crept open and Milton stepped inside.

Krags and Gert rejoiced when they saw the little fairy. They both picked him up and squeezed him in their arms, layering him with kisses.

"Where's Arwenna?" he asked, fighting for breath.

"Here she comes," Krags said.

The stepsisters placed Milton on the floor and all three gasped at Arwenna's beauty. Her radiant curly red hair spilled over her shoulders. Bright emerald eyes wet with tears of joy punctuated a creamy, round face. Should ever a fairy and a human be meant for each other, it would be Milton and Arwenna.

Milton fell to one knee at Arwenna's feet and craned his neck way back to look upon her perfect face. He held out his hand and offered forth the gold ring.

"Arwenna, my darling, will you marry me?"

The stepsisters giggled and jumped up and down.

"Yes, I will."

The world celebrated its best year in the long history of man. For the rest of his life, Milton, Christmas fairy, felt ten feet tall.



Breaking Up is Hard to Do

Breaking Up is Hard to Do

She breathed. The moonlight filtered inside, blanketing the scarlet tank top stretched tight across her firm breasts. With each gentle inhalation, the shirt moved, exposing a growing area of naked abdomen. In the white light of the moon, her flaxen hair glowed against smooth, dark shoulders. Even asleep, this woman invoked a sense of breathtaking beauty.

And Stanton Mills lay next to her, dying for just one touch from the woman he loved more than life.

How long since the last time Tara let him enjoy her love? *Weeks? Months?* Desire scorched Stanton's mind. Body parts throbbed with need. Hormones soaked him with greed. He was her husband, damn it!

Ever so slightly, he moved his right hand. It rested just inches from her waist. His breath grew louder.

Watching the form of her bosom appear through the translucent shirt, he could take no more. He closed his eyes and slid his right arm around the beauty. Oh, warmth and sensuality. Trembling, Stanton pressed his body against hers.

Tara jerked awake, switched on the bedside lamp, and shoved Stanton away.

"Don't touch me!" she snarled.

Stanton's disappointment flared into a scowl.

"Tara, I love you."

She rolled her eyes. "Shut up, or you'll wake Nathan."

"We can close the door, honey. He won't hear a thing. I'll be quiet, I promise."

Tara switched off the lamp and rolled over. Stanton leaned back into his pillow, frustration roiling his insides.

"This is getting ridiculous," he finally blurted. "You had the miscarriage almost a year ago! I wait on you hand and foot. I'm faithful and think of nothing but you. Most of all, I still love you."

"I told you I don't want to be touched," answered Tara, her voice cold and threatening.

Courage surged through Stanton. "Touched? All you do is read those 'About Your Pregnancy' books. How many have you read in the past six months? Twenty? And don't kid yourself, Tara, you're leading half a life."

"I'm searching for an answer."

"An answer to what? How to let a marriage fall apart? The doctor said the quicker you put the miscarriage behind you, the quicker we would resume a normal life together."

"You don't care about any of that. You're like all men, only concerned with fulfilling their own physical needs!" Tara retorted.

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“You and I are married. That means you have certain obligations...”

“Mommy! Mommy!” The child’s pathetic moans curtailed their argument.

“Great! He’s awake. Go get him, before Mrs. Vanderkirk calls the cops again,” Tara commanded.

“He’s four years old, for god’s sake. He needs his mommy.”

Tara turned her back in silence.

Stanton tossed the covers aside and looked at the clock: 1:23am. Nathan’s night frights were growing worse. At first, he had screamed only once or twice a week; now it was every night. Nathan’s counselor suggested mild sedatives, but Tara refused to give Nathan anything pharmaceutical. The only cure was for Stanton or her to get up and hold Nathan, talking the child to sleep.

Stanton chucked the comforter at Tara as he got up to put on his slippers and shuffled down the hallway to Nathan’s room. He found Nathan crumpled in a corner, hands covering his eyes, weeping.

“Where’s Mommy?”

“Mommy is asleep, big guy. Daddy’s here.”

“I don’t think Mommy loves us anymore.”

“Don’t be a silly boy,” Stanton said, staring at the happy little clowns painted on the wall. He’d painted them himself. “Why are you crying, Son?”

“It’s in the bathroom, Daddy,” Nathan said.

“What’s in the bathroom, Nate?” asked Stanton, kneeling to face his son.

“Something bad!”

A quiet, well-behaved child, Nathan was also fearless. But in the past four months, he had acquired an unnatural fright of the bathroom. And for four long months, Stanton had performed the bathroom check every night.

“But Daddy checked before you went to sleep, remember?” he said.

“It’s still there,” insisted Nathan.

“Okay, Nate. I’ll check again,” Stanton said, weariness flattening his voice. “But this is the last time tonight.”

Nathan wrapped his arms around Stanton, hitching a ride to the bathroom. Stanton flipped the light switch and stepped inside. Nathan shivered in Stanton’s arms.

“It’s cold in here.”

“It’s okay, Son, I’ve got you.”

Stanton pulled the shower curtain aside.

“Nothing there.”

Stanton lifted the lid to the toilet.

Breaking Up is Hard to Do

“Or there.”

“Mommy left something bad in there after dinner! I flushed it!”

“Yuck, Nate! Don’t be disgusting.”

“It was something bad. If I could flush it, I could make it go away,” Nathan said with a child’s innocent certainty.

“No, no, Nathan. I don’t want to hear about Mommy’s ablutions.”

“What’s ablutions, Daddy?” Nathan looked up, his expression of fear replaced by that of interest.

“The things you do in the bathroom. Washing, brushing your teeth and...well, you know. Now come on, back to bed.”

Stanton carried his son back to the boy’s bedroom.

“You ready to go back to sleep, kiddo?”

“No, Daddy.”

Sleep? Stanton never slept. He spent most of his nights staring at Tara in the dark. His brain clamored to explain Tara’s hatred.

“Down, Daddy?” Nathan asked.

“Oh, sure.”

He remembered things turning for the worse after the miscarriage. She wanted less to do with him, while her after-hours meetings with Trent, a co-worker at the law firm, became more frequent. They attended spirituality workshops together and occasionally made business trips to Nevada.

“Goodnight, Daddy.”

Stanton hated Trent. Trent received the love and attention once reserved for him. Plus, the thought that Trent had touched his beautiful wife made him want to—

“Daddy?”

“Oh, sorry Nate.”

Stanton tucked his son into bed.

“Goodnight, Sport.”

Stanton rushed down the hallway, flipped off his slippers, and dived under the covers. Tara was asleep, on her back. Oh, this was Stanton’s favorite position! He watched the rise and fall of her chest, the stretching of cotton against her bosom, and the movements of her stomach. His privates came to attention. He scooted closer, making the slightest contact between her backside and his organ. The voyeuristic bliss made their earlier argument a distant memory.

The right strap of her top slipped down her shoulder. Stanton felt a rush of blood to various parts of his body. The ever-growing area of bare flesh created a fine sheen of sweat on his forehead.

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Seven years ago, he'd been an art student working toward his Master's degree. She'd been a rookie lawyer, searching for employment. One sunny afternoon at a Woodbine Park bench, their paths had crossed.

"I hate interviews," a lovely woman had said as she threw her briefcase onto the bench. It landed next to him with a clatter.

"Excuse me," asked Stanton, scratching his head.

"Nothing. Never mind."

Stanton pushed his hair back and stared at this new beauty. He flipped a page in his traveling portfolio and started a new drawing.

"That's a nice suit," Stanton said idly, his pencil scraping the paper as his deft strokes captured the woman's face.

"You're drawing me!" Tara exclaimed in astonishment. She craned her neck to see his work.

"Yes, if that's okay?"

Tara paused, then with a shrug said, "Sure, why not?"

"Tough day?"

"I had an interview with Smith-Kline today, but they don't want a real attorney. They want office decorations. Either I scare people with my inexperience, or I get squished into a roomful of perverted, sweaty, old men wanting a piece of ass. My ass."

"Sometimes, old men aren't shy about what they want," Stanton said, trying to be smart.

A silence passed between them.

"What do you want?" Tara asked.

"A job when I graduate. I'm an art student."

"Darn." Tara winked. "Cute, but poor with no future. And I had such hopes!"

Stanton couldn't hide his blushing.

A few minutes of coquetry passed while Stanton finished the drawing. He ripped it from the portfolio, stood, and with a flourish, handed it to Tara. She rose, and with a curtsy, accepted his offering. "This is . . . amazing."

Stanton smiled. Impetuously, Tara grabbed Stanton and hugged him against her lithe, sensuous body.

"Thank you," she said, simply.

Stanton took her hand. "Stanton Mills," he said by way of introduction. His voice wavered.

"Thank you, Stanton. Would you be free for dinner tonight?" She peered shyly through her cascade of flaxen locks.

Shocked, Stanton nodded his assent. Tara giggled. She wrote down her number on a slip of paper and stuffed it in his shirt pocket.

Breaking Up is Hard to Do

“I’ll see you tonight,” she said and walked slowly away.

“Wait, I don’t even know your name!” Stanton called out.

“Tara, Tara Grant,” she called back.

That night, Tara Grant and Stanton Mills had enjoyed what was to be the best night of their lives.

Terrified wails echoed throughout the house. Tara hopped up and switched on the lamp.

“I told you to put him to sleep!” Tara snarled over the anguished cries of her child.

“I did!” Stanton protested. “We even searched the bathroom!”

“Well, make him stop. Mrs. Vanderkirk is probably reaching for her phone right this minute, the old bag.”

“Okay. Okay. Just a second,” Stanton said, caving in as usual. He put on his slippers and slumped at the edge of the bed.

“Now!” she screamed as the phone started ringing.

“All right!” His frustration boiled over into helpless rage.

Stanton went to his crying son, picked him up and cradled him in his arms. The wails fell to a whimper.

“Where’s Mommy?” Nathan asked.

“She needs to sleep.”

“Daddy, I’m scared!”

“Daddy already checked for monsters. There are none.” He stroked Nathan’s forehead.

“But it’s not a monster.”

“Then what is it?” Stanton asked, unable to stop the alarm inching into his thoughts even though he knew it was stupid.

“Don’t go in the bathroom anymore,” Nathan begged, hugging his father.

“Of course, the bathroom,” muttered Stanton.

Dragging his son to the bathroom once again, Stanton checked behind the curtain, under the sink, in the toilet, and inside the linen closet. No signs of monsters or anything else dangerous. Nathan pointed at the toilet.

“I already checked the toilet,” Stanton said.

“It’s there, Daddy. It’s there,” cried Nathan wretchedly.

Setting Nathan down, Stanton lifted the lid of the toilet tank – to see nothing but water and plastic parts.

“Like I said, Nate, nothing here.”

Nathan hugged his father’s leg and shivered.

“Can I sleep with you and Mommy tonight?”

Stanton wanted to say yes. Instead he thought of Tara. She would

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probably be awake, unable to sleep, and he knew a great antidote for insomnia.

“Sorry, Son, but you’re going have to be a big boy about this.”

Stanton carried Nathan back to bed. He switched on the closet light in hopes of comforting the boy.

“Next time you get scared, come get your daddy. But knock first, ok?”

“I love you, Daddy. Stay with me?”

Tears trailed down Nathan’s cheeks. Normally, such affection would melt his heart, but at this point Stanton wanted to give his boy a dose of sleeping pills.

“Okay Nate, let me go tell Mommy that the boys are going to camp out, then I’ll be right back,” conceded Stanton.

In their bedroom, Tara rested on the bed, cross-legged and unhappy.

“That was Mrs. Vanderkirk. She says she’ll call the police the next time Nathan screams. She thinks we’re abusing him!”

“That’s ridiculous!” objected Stanton. He sat down next to his wife and rubbed her arm, amazed and suddenly hopeful when she didn’t flinch. “Why are you wet?” he asked.

“I searched the bathroom. Nathan has me spooked.”

“Oh no, not you too?” groaned Stanton.

Tara rested her head on Stanton’s shoulder. The sweet scent of her breath nearly made him howl.

“I am so tired,” she sighed. “Nathan decides to go crazy the night before my board interview.”

“You’re interviewing for partner?” Stanton exclaimed. “Why, that’s fantastic, Tara!”

“I have a 7 a.m. prep review with Trent at IHOP. He’s been a great help.”

Stanton stiffened. “Trent? You know I don’t like him.”

“He’s the reason we can afford a house like this,” Tara retorted, motioning around at the lavish bedroom. “If it wasn’t for Trent, I wouldn’t be at Smith-Kline.”

Stanton lowered his head. As angry as it made him, she spoke the truth. He made two hundred dollars a week commissioning his art. Three years ago, Tara’s income had hit six figures.

Tara slid to her side of the bed and switched off the light, leaving Stanton to sit in the dark.

How did it come to this? Paradise lost. Literally.

His thoughts wandered. Nathan became a distant memory. He remembered the night Tara had miscarried . . .

Breaking Up is Hard to Do

Tara reclined in her favorite maternity gown, a pale brown number with a delicate lily pattern stitched into the collar. Tonight, she was studying the Jenkin's case, using her rounded stomach as a prop for notebooks and legal pads. Stanton dozed in the recliner. Nathan was spending the night at his grandma's house.

Just as Letterman went to his break, Tara squealed. She jerked upright, knocking all the case papers to the floor.

"Oh my God, is it time?" Stanton asked. He would be a daddy for a second time.

"I think so," gasped Tara. "But something's..." She reached for her stomach. "Something's not right."

Stanton gathered their personal belongings, throwing them in the back of Tara's BMW. Delicately, he helped his wife to the garage, pausing at the doorway.

"Stanton!" Tara moaned, falling to her knees. A pool of crimson crept outward from beneath her gown. Something slick and moist flopped around in the blood.

"Holy Christ!" Stanton shouted. Tara's moans snapped him back into action. He hoisted Tara in his arms, nearly slipping on the blood. Placing her crumpled body in the passenger seat, he raced to St. Mary's hospital.

"Did you see that . . . thing?" he asked his wife.

Through the tears, she peered out of the rain-streaked window. "My baby," was all she could say.

Tara had almost died that night. The doctors told her she would never have another child.

Tears trailed down his face, then and now. He cried for the child he'd lost. He cried for the woman he still loved.

"Are you crying?" Tara asked, incredulously.

"No."

Again, Nathan screamed. The sound came from the bathroom.

Stanton jumped to his feet, and stalked down the hall. "Damn Nathan and his bathroom fetish," Stanton fumed. "This will end now!" He'd never spanked Nathan before, but tonight it might be necessary.

"Oh my God!" he shrieked, reaching for Nathan inside the bathroom.

Nathan lay against the edge of the bathtub, blood pooled around him.

"I found the bad thing," Nathan gurgled, warm red liquid dripping from his mouth.

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“Oh my God! Nathan! What’ve you done? Swallowed toilet cleaner? His foot landed on something slippery. Water? One leg jerked outwards while his body fell backwards, smacking his skull forcibly against the white tiled floor.

“Get up Daddy, Mommy wants to kill you,” Nathan whispered, pointing up to the doorway. “She hides it here.”

S Stanton awoke to Tara’s smiling face. A vision so perfect, Stanton thought he was in heaven. She leaned over, revealing a bounty of cleavage peeking out of the skimpy red night shirt.

“You awake, my dear?”

“Yes. . . sss,” Stanton gasped. “So hot.”

Tara applied a warm press against Stanton’s forehead. She lovingly rubbed her pinky finger around his mouth. “You fell and knocked yourself unconscious, silly man.”

Stanton tried to stand, but only his head would move. His body was immobile, hog-tied facing skyward and supported by a board in a tubful of steaming water. An intravenous needle attached to a slender plastic tube fitted with a turn valve dangled from his neck. The tube snaked between the toilet lid and the rim.

“What . . . is . . . this?” Stanton asked.

“Our way of breaking up.”

“Nathan, he knows what you’re doing,” Stanton gasped. “That’s why he screams.”

“Nathan is taken care of, dear. He knows you’re dying.”

“Untie me, Tara. We can file for a divorce tomorrow.”

“A conventional divorce would never work. You love me too much, Stanton. How can I possibly be cruel enough to end our marriage, knowing you’re dying each day without me? I can’t deal with that.”

Tara adjusted the needle in his neck and checked that the tubing was secure inside the toilet.

“Don’t do this, I love you,” Stanton said.

Tara reached down and gently rubbed the side of his face. “I know,” she answered. “That is why I have to do this.” With a silent twist, the valve opened and blood streamed from Stanton’s neck cleanly into the toilet. A sound like two slabs of raw meat slapping together came from underneath the lid.

“But I also need you to understand how I’ve felt the past six months. I want you to feel the blood, your life, escaping your body like the life of our child escaped me,” Tara whispered. She caressed her husband’s face, as he grew paler.

“We take your life to give life.”

Breaking Up is Hard to Do

Tara flipped up the toilet lid. A fleshy, slender beast slapped its mouth open and closed as it gulped Stanton's blood. Thick veins pulsed around its body and its bulbous eyes stared at Stanton.

"For the past six months, my child has been feeding on me."

Stanton gasped as black dots started to obscure his vision.

"But now, the child feeds on you."



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All along, he'd planned for this to be his last hunt. Agent John Norman pulled up to the abandoned train station and parked the rented Toyota Corona away from the neon glow of the lot's single lamppost. Bitter exhaust fumes rolled in through the open driver's side window, the scent sending the acrid rice liquor tempest in his stomach pushing up his esophagus and into the back of his throat.

Norman swallowed it down with another shot of cheap saké and a chalky antacid tablet and stepped out of the black, rusted sedan.

He wasn't a big man, even by Japanese standards, but the bulk of a fashionable black trench coat at least disguised his slight, bent frame. Black hair combed straight back from his face joined an oft-broken crooked nose that gave Norman the thuggish appearance of a walking crow. He hated crows, always had, even as a child growing up in the rolling hills of Appalachia where his grandmother paid him a dollar for every one of the buggers he shot dead with his pump-action BB gun. Crows were ruthless scavengers, and he didn't like to think of himself as a scavenger. Not anymore. After seven years in the *business*, he fancied himself as an opportunist, even though the difference between the two blurred many times.

The Tokyo sex trade operated in a simple manner. The yakuza bought unwanted female children from China for as little as a few grand and put them to work in the *mizu shobai*, the yakuza's network of bars, restaurants, and nightclubs. So-called agents like Norman transported the girls, keeping the yakuza lords' hands clean.

Norman covered the distance from the Toyota to the raised train station platform with a cautionary hand on his sidearm, a SIG P220. Most of the Chinese fathers selling their children gave no resistance, especially after they were handed five year's worth of salary, but it always paid to be careful.

Up the last creaky step and around the corner, he saw his latest catch. There, maybe thirty feet away, stood a beautiful farm girl, head down, tears sparkling under another dim lamppost. She wore a simple cotton dress, brown, frayed at the hemline across a pair of bruised knees. Weather-worn sandals protected her slender feet. The girl's father paced in front of her, eyeing the darkness and chattering quietly to no one in particular. Neither had noticed his arrival.

"Ni hao, Mr. Wong!" Norman called out, shattering the heavy silence.

Mr. Wong jumped at the sound and spun around to face Norman.

"I speak English, you stupid American."

Norman approached the man, and then turned his eyes toward the

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girl. "Ni hao, Li Mei. Well met."

The girl's arms were crossed; she kept her eyes hidden, cast down. She ignored his greeting and huffed like a petulant teenager.

Mr. Wong whipped around and slapped Li Mei across her face. The sound snapped across the quiet countryside like a firecracker. Li Mei fell to the ground.

"Answer when he speaks to you," he commanded.

Norman grabbed Mr. Wong by his throat and shoved him hard enough against the station's wall to rattle the whole platform. "You'll not hit her again," Norman whispered. "My bosses wouldn't like the bruises on their new product." Wong nodded, wide-eyed and scared.

Norman shoved the man aside like a sack of flour and turned to Li Mei. "I know you speak English, Li Mei." Before she could answer, he pulled her to her feet. She smelled as enchanting as she appeared—an intoxicating mixture of budding teenage pheromones and perfumed soap. Most of the farm girls Norman brought in stank of pig shit and kitchen smoke. He paused, looking at the girl.

"My money." Mr. Wong grabbed Norman's left shoulder and pushed, only to receive the open end of the P220 in his face.

"She has such nobility, considering where she's from," Norman said. That was enough to get Mr. Wong to stand down.

The dim train station lights made an accurate appraisal difficult. This was the same girl, for sure, but a more thorough inspection would be required before the flight to Tokyo. He needed to make sure she was in prime condition before her presentation to the boss.

Norman pulled an envelope stuffed with 20,000 yuans out of his coat and tossed it at Mr. Wong. "Take your money, you piece of shit." Gripping Li Mei roughly by the elbow, he escorted her off the station platform and back down to the parking lot.

As they walked, her body pressed and rubbed against his. Tingling warmth teased his groin. The young ones didn't interest him, but something about this girl whispered to his primal urges. He brushed it off as retirement cravings, those dangerous, undisciplined thoughts a man got when he was in the home stretch of a job.

After handcuffing her wrists behind her, he opened the driver's side door of the Toyota and shoved her into the back seat. As he did so, he noticed dark spots on her inner thighs. Norman crouched down and forced her legs apart. Li Mei cried and kicked—a useless fight. John Norman knew how to handle angry women.

He pinned her leg against her abdomen, rendering her fairly immobile, and took a look. Just as he had feared, purple and black bruises marked the smooth curvature of her thighs all the way to her white cot-

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ton panties. He looked at Li Mei and frowned. Staring into those dark eyes, he felt a rage coursing over his body.

“That son of a bitch,” Norman muttered. Slamming the door shut, he ordered Li Mei to stay put. “You run, I will hunt you down and shoot you in the goddamn face.”

With a flourish, he gathered his coat around his body and hopped back up the steps to the train station.

Seconds later, a single gunshot echoed across the dusty Chinese landscape.

How old are you, sweetheart?” Norman popped another antacid tablet and swilled it down with cheap liquor. He reclined on a filthy bed covered with a stiff brown and green sheet. One of those weird American cartoons from the 1930s was playing on a small television bolted to the wall.

“Fifteen.”

He watched as Li Mei stripped out of her dirty clothes. She kept her head bowed and her eyes cast downward. Bruises covered her body. Un-sightly, but in time they would heal and wouldn’t affect his payout. She closed the bathroom door and started the shower.

Norman dozed, dreaming of Jessica Kane, his high-school sweetheart from thirty years ago, that same goddamn dream yet again. There she was, barefoot and dancing over him on the hood of his Cadillac, her lips full and pouty, a young body blossoming with womanhood. Rather the opposite of the girl showering in the motel’s grimy bathroom.

The door of the motel crashed open, scaring Norman awake. His hand instinctively went for his P220, only to find it missing. A quick glance confirmed his fear: the holster—and the gun—were on the bureau under the television.

Then they appeared. He never knew their names. Never saw their faces. Just eyes behind black ski masks.

“Get up!”

The taste of a barrel pushed inside his mouth. Another pressed into his back. Norman was forced to his knees.

“You murdered my father.”

Norman got a square look at the attacker. “Who the hell are you? What are you talking about?”

“The train station.”

So this was it. The end of his ride. For some reason, Norman had fancied meeting his end in a blazing Mexican standoff—one for the ages, not this lame bullshit. Not ambushed by some pimply-assed kid looking for vengeance.

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The kid pulled back the hammer.

Norman closed his eyes.

A shot went off, the boom hurting Norman's ears. He expected pain. The light at the end of the tunnel. The whole experience. But when he looked up, he saw the stunned face of the kid covered with a mess of blood and brains. A body fell behind him.

The gun swung upward. "You little whore," the kid said. "Dad was right about you." Again, the boom of a P220, the bullet's impact knocking the kid backwards out through the doorway.

Slowly, Norman stood up and turned around. Li Mei, droplets of water trailing down her naked body, stood just five feet away, the gun smoking from its tip and aimed at his heart.

A long moment passed. She held the gun, and Norman held his hands up in the air.

"Why?" he asked.

Li Mei dropped the gun, fell to her knees. "I can't go back."

Norman covered her with his trench coat. He gathered his P220, lifted her in his arms and left.

A plump Japanese man, well-dressed in his black pin-striped business suit, relaxed in the corner of the *Mizuko* club. He chewed on a cigar, spouting orders to three of his young lieutenants. Each delivered a sharp bow and an affirmative "Hai!" to every command. These ass-kissers wore the uniform of the yakuza: tight sharkskin suits with snake-thin black ties. Two females, "comfort girls," as Tokyo street slang called them, danced on the couch, one straddling the boss, rubbing his beefy legs with her body. Both of the girls wore skimpy black and red checkered school-girl uniforms, no panties.

The man spied Norman from the corner and gave him a slight nod. Mr. Shenobi, the highest ranking member of the yakuza in Tokyo, had discovered Norman seven years before, passed out face down in a ditch outside one of the filthiest sex clubs in Bangkok. Instead of torturing and killing the pathetic American, as some of the more notorious yakuza did just for fun, Shenobi took the man into his service, and within two years, Norman was the best and most profitable agent in Tokyo.

The lieutenants vanished in a mad rush. More girls appeared around Shenobi, blanketing him in a mass of under-age flesh that would have given Norman's strict Baptist parents a heart attack. Norman kicked back another shot of saké and lit a cigarette. The only other man he knew that harbored such a fascination with little girls was Preacher Crenshaw back at the Big Branch Baptist Church in Kentucky, where his

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family still lived.

His distant thoughts melted away as he focused on a seductive Chinese waitress bowing submissively in front of his table. “Lord Shenobi requests an audience with Agent Norman.” The girl didn’t look up. She was pretty, nearly eighteen years old, likely serving her final few years of usefulness in Shenobi’s *mizu shobai* before being sent into slave labor in the textile factories of Thailand, where she would make shirts for wealthy Westerners until she died. For a moment, Norman tried to remember if he’d brought this one over from China. By his estimates, he’d bought or captured almost two hundred girls in the past six years of work. Very few he remembered. Most had become blurry faces that tormented him in his sleep.

As he stood, the girl scuttled away. Norman stamped out his cigarette and walked to Mr. Shenobi’s table of grinding schoolgirls. The constant rattling of the *pachinko* machines from the playrooms downstairs grated on his nerves. It felt as though those little steel balls were bouncing around the folds of his brain. As soon as he received payment for his last catch, he was taking a flight back to California. This place could go to hell.

Clenching his teeth to remove any sense of lingering annoyance, Norman bowed before the fat man and his flock of sexualized children.

“Yes, my lord?”

“Agent Norman, please take a seat with me.” The lord waved his hands over the brown leather cushions. To make room, comfort girls scattered like frightened birds from a road kill feast.

Norman planted himself opposite the main dancing stage, just a few feet from the powerful yakuza boss. The cushions of the thick leather sofa eased him downward, placing him comfortably behind a cocktail table that held a bottle of Go-Shue Blue saké and several lines of cocaine. A techno-dance version of *The Godfather* pumped through the club’s sound system. The insistent bass brought a rush of excitement to the girls, prompting several to spontaneously grind over his body. Thoughts of Li Mei flashed in his head.

Norman brushed them away and reached for the liquor. *Even over here*, he thought with distaste, *every fucking low-class thug thinks they’re Don Corleone*.

“I owe you a debt of gratitude,” Shenobi pontificated. “This new girl, she’s your best catch in six years of hunting. Big tits and curves, just the way you American assholes like them.” He pointed at a big man wearing a ten-gallon hat that sat in “pervert’s row,” the line of seats directly in front of the main stripping stage. The man was obviously another *American asshole*.

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“Just doing my job,” Norman said.

The boss smiled coldly and grabbed a nearby girl. He ran a possessive stroke down her thigh.

Covertly watching the visitor, Norman helped himself to a shot of Go-Shue Blue. “Your American visitor is from Texas,” he said.

Shenobi smiled. “How perceptive.”

“Used to live there. Worked as a Texas Ranger for ten years before going to Thailand.”

“Even after seven years, there’s so much to learn about you.” The boss spoke while he looked at one of his favorite girls. “You have never told me why you were in Thailand.”

The acid in Norman’s stomach churned. He forced it into submission with another shot of saké.

“Trying to lose myself, boss.”

Shenobi nodded. “You had succeeded until I found you.”

Norman didn’t speak for a long time. “Yeah, I guess you’re right,” he eventually said as he lit a cigarette and looked away to a couple having sex in a dark corner of the club. Neither of them could have been eighteen.

“Agent Norman, I’m going to grace you with a reward tonight. You see that?” He pointed at the door that led to the exclusive VIP area of the *Mizuko*. Norman had never been inside the VIP lounge. Only close associates of the boss were allowed to enter. “Meet me in there. Fifteen minutes.”

Mr. Shenobi smiled as though pleased with his own sense of being. He bent over, snorted a line of coke, then stood to leave. “See you soon, Agent Norman,” he said over his shoulder as he walked away, a young girl embraced by each of his pudgy arms.

For a second, Norman wondered if Shenobi knew that he was making his escape tonight. Perhaps he should leave now, not worry about the money. His bags were packed, one filled with his clothes, the other with stacks of hundred dollar bills. To ease his worries, he inhaled a line of white powder, chasing it with a large swallow of saké. The drug hit his brain with a jolt. The world rattled, reality became a transgression of the bizarre. He blinked, and suddenly there was the main stripping stage just three feet away from his seat. So close, in fact, he could smell the stripper’s stage powder. This dancing Chinese girl he knew. He’d brought her over the previous Christmas.

Pachinko. More awful techno-pop, a thumping variation of the theme from *Scarface*. More yakuza thugs in sharkskin suits. A girl dancing on stage that towered over him, one of her long, slender legs hooked over his left shoulder. Gyration. Nude flesh moving to the frantic techno beats.

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“Mr. Agent Man, I know you,” she said.

“Yeah, I think I remember you.”

“How could you ever forget?”

Sexual aggression. Ripped clothes. A flickering neon light advertising a local bar.

A sparse hotel room in downtown Shanghai.

No, she wasn't one of them. Norman shook his head to clear the cobwebs. “I don't remember your name.”

“Does it matter now?” The girl straddled him, snapping at her g-string with a long red plastic fingernail.

“No, I guess it doesn't.”

Something shook his shoulder. The girl and the stage disappeared. The Texan.

“Hey partner, Mr. Shenobi is ready to see us.”

Norman grabbed the bottle of saké and followed the man without comment. As they passed through the forbidden doorway, he wanted to feel a flash of power or importance. He felt nothing.

They stepped onto the landing of a narrow stairway that led to the third floor of the *Mizuko*. The carpeted wooden stairway creaked under their footsteps, reminding Norman of a haunted house attraction he'd attended once as a boy back in Big Branch. This time, he promised himself, if a fat hillbilly came running down the stairs wielding a smoking chainsaw, he would shoot his fucking ass.

Another door, then a room that glowed red, blue, and green, lit up like a scene from a spooky Argento movie. Mr. Shenobi reclined in a leather sofa cordoned off to the left. Three of his sharkskin lieutenants stood nearby. A stage recessed into the room's far wall, in view of the couch, was highlighted by a ceiling spotlight. Shenobi motioned for the men to join him.

“Welcome, gentlemen, to my *sanctum sanctorum*,” Shenobi called out, hands and arms open in a grand gesture.

Smoke drifted throughout the room. Brazilian weed. The latest fad in Tokyo gangster circles. One of the three henchmen took a hit from a joint and passed it to another sharkskin.

The Texan positioned himself next to Shenobi, leaving the end of the couch for Norman. He took a hit off the offered joint and passed it on. A waitress appeared and handed the newcomers each a mirrored plate with three lines of cocaine and a chilled bottle of saké.

Before either could dig into the offerings, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* blared in the tiny, soundproof room. Shenobi had a thing about theatrics.

A door squeaked opened from somewhere behind the curtain that

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hid the back of the stage area. Two men appeared, both wearing lab coats, pushing a rectangular table that held a naked girl. Her arms and legs were strapped to each corner of the table with thick leather cuffs.

Norman swallowed hard, forcing back a fresh surge of stomach bile. It was Li Mei.

Mr. Shenobi placed his hand on Norman's shoulder. "You have met our friend, Mr. Malachi Thompson, of Dallas, Texas."

Norman nodded at the Texan, and they shook hands. Big white teeth, big brown eyes. Or green? The cocaine was messing with his vision again.

"Boss Shenobi tells me you worked a decade as a Texas Ranger, Mr. Norman. The best goddamn job in the whole world."

The twang in Malachi's voice vibrated like a plucked banjo string. Norman smiled, amused by the man's glowing teeth. "Yes I did. Hell of a time." Norman's voice slurred, his lips a pair of fat, dried slugs.

The two men toasted and took a shot of liquor.

"Mr. Thompson has traveled all the way to Tokyo to witness the unveiling of the latest *Mizuko* product. He's personally financed the research and development of the whole project. And since you found the perfect girl for our first demonstration, I thought it only polite to invite you to the show."

Norman bowed politely.

The bound girl wrestled with the leather cuffs. Diodes were stuck to various parts of her body, most placed on her abdomen just below her navel. Li Mei's eyes met Norman's. Something akin to cold fire danced down Agent Norman's spine. He looked away, unable to return the accusatory gaze.

"Mr. Shenobi, if this contraption does what you think it will, why, we're likely to become the richest men in the whole goddamn world!" The Texan's voice echoed inside the small VIP room. Norman wished he'd shut up. Permanently.

"Are you ready?" Shenobi asked. The two technicians nodded and went into motion. They applied power to a small converter box that fed the diode inputs into a laptop computer sitting nearby on a bar stool.

"We're ready, Mr. Shenobi."

"Then let us proceed."

The Texan slapped the table and leaned forward.

Nothing happened at first. Norman watched, unable to look away, as the girl began to writhe. Was it pain? The technician behind the laptop hit some keys, and immediately Li Mei jerked against her constraints in rhythmic spasms. The sounds she made were of pleasure. The Texan smiled at Mr. Shenobi, his eyes glinting while he rubbed his hands

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against his pants.

“Higher,” called out Shenobi.

Li Mei thrashed at her bonds. Smells similar to that of melting rubber leached into the air. Her skin rippled and contorted. Sounds of flesh frying erupted in Norman’s ears. Norman twisted around to see his two companions watching the experiment. Shenobi turned and gave him a slight nod.

“Wonderful, isn’t it? Pleasure. Pain. In one machine. Our girls will no longer wear the bruises of punishment. And now we will have a powerful form of motivation to reward those who are the best performers.

“Higher,” Shenobi called again.

Li Mei screamed. She pleaded to the technicians, to the men watching her behind the bottles of saké and lines of cocaine. The smell of burning flesh was now unmistakable. Agent Norman felt like puking; was he the only one who noticed? What had he done?

“Gentlemen, we normally would never apply a current this powerful to a girl unless we intended to dispose of her. It leaves scorch marks. But since this is a demonstration, that is of no concern. Maximum settings, please.”

Li Mei jittered on the table like a convict performing a death dance in the electric chair. The tips of her hair started to smolder.

“Please, stop!” Norman called out. Could he be heard over the laughing men and wails of the dying girl?

Agent Norman reached into his black trench coat and removed his SIG. He shot the three yakuza lieutenants—three quick bullets, a single smoking bullet hole in each forehead. He flipped the gun, ignoring the blistering heat of the barrel, and smashed its handle into the Texan’s mouth, shattering the man’s glowing teeth. The world teetered for a second before Norman regained his focus. He overturned the cocktail table and kicked Shenobi’s gun away right as the yakuza lord took aim.

The two men on the stage turned and sprinted out the back doorway.

Shenobi frowned, as though saddened by the turn of events.

Norman disconnected the machine. Li Mei stopped jittering and slumped to the table. He worked to untie her with one hand while holding Shenobi at bay with the SIG in his other hand. Her body was dotted with cigarette-like burns from the diodes. He covered her nakedness with his trench coat.

“Li Mei?”

The girl mumbled. She was alive.

Together they made for door he’d entered just moments before.

“Agent!”

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He paused, pulling her to a standstill.

“You rush out that door, you die without honor. My men will chop both of you into pieces of sausage and feed you to our dogs. Go out through the back, behind the stage. It will lead to a fire escape.”

“Why are you letting us go?”

The most powerful boss in Tokyo smiled. “It’s all about the hunt. You should know that, Agent Norman.”

An army of yakuza stormed into the VIP room just as Norman disappeared behind the curtain.

Outside, on the wet night streets of Tokyo, businessmen of all backgrounds and races bumped into one another. Some sought the cozy comforts of the strip clubs. Others looked for high-stakes gambling. The ones with downcast eyes and grim expressions sought darker vices. The *Mizuko* club called to them.

And not a single person noticed Agent John Norman lift Li Mei into his arms and rush away from the madness.



About the Author

When not writing horror stories about failed love, Jason B. Sizemore publishes and edits the popular genre magazine *Apex Science Fiction and Horror Digest* (www.apexdigest.com). A freelance editor/writer living in Lexington, Kentucky, with his wife and two kids, he has sold short fiction to publications such as *Aberrant Dreams*, *Surreal*, *Aoife's Kiss*, *Doorways Magazine*, *Horror Carousel*, and more.

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About the Artist

Melissa Gay pursued a BA degree in Studio Art at the University of the South, an MS degree in Biology from Middle Tennessee State University, and a less-than-satisfying career in fine art before realizing that she had always wanted to be a fantasy illustrator. In 1998 she began to show and sell prints of fairy paintings at science fiction conventions, and she has been happy ever since. Her illustrations have appeared in role-playing games and supplements, lab manuals, herbals, comic books, newspapers, magazines, and more. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee, with her husband and son.

Visit www.melissagay.com for more information about this artist.