



**STORIES IN WHICH SOMEONE OR SOMETHING IS
PERCEIVED AS A MONSTER... BUT WHETHER IT
REALLY IS, IS UP TO THE AUTHOR. (OR MAYBE THE
READER!)**

Table of Contents

The Monster Under the Bed	3
by Jennifer Moore	
The Right to Hang	8
by Brandon Barrows	
Slaying Monsters.....	20
by Leonie Harrison	
Swipe Right	27
by Daphne Strasert	
A Monstrous Bargain.....	41
by Adelehin Ijasan	
Skins.....	49
by Michael D. Winkle	

FIRST PLACE

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The Monster Under the Bed

by Jennifer Moore

The monster under the bed isn't like other monsters. Sure, he's got two heads and bulging, red-veined eyes, and his razored claws and glistening yellow fangs are every bit as sharp as the next beast's. But this monster's only a child and hasn't grown into his daylight invisibility yet. Plus, try as he might—and he does try, really he does—he still can't deflect the gaze of grown-ups. It's a delicate skill that comes with age and experience, neither of which he possesses.

The little girl *in* the bed isn't like other little girls. Leila doesn't mind having a stowaway under her springs. It gets lonely, sometimes, being an only child, and there's plenty of spare room down there, between the Lego box and her secret collection of used tissues and odd socks. Some nights, when she's having trouble dropping off, or if she wakes in a sweat from a bad dream, the monster lulls her to sleep with a lilting lullaby, his two heads duetting in rasping harmony. Sometimes he and Leila count sheep together. Hers jump over a white picket fence into a sunny field of grass, while the monster's leap two at a time, straight into his waiting jaws. He lets out a funny gulping sound after every fleecy mouthful: *Two - unnggh, four - unnggh, six...*

No, Leila doesn't mind having a monster under her bed. Aside from the occasional outburst of sulphurous flatulence, he's no trouble at all. It's Leila's mother who has a problem. She doesn't like the mice in the attic. She doesn't like the weevils in her flour, or those little brown moths who set up their nursery in her favorite winter coat. And she *really* doesn't like monsters with black blubbered lips and sharpened spikes along their spines. She's tried everything she can think of to get rid of him: king-sized moth balls (which the monster snacks on between meals); ultrasonic mouse deterrents that plug into the electric sockets; an entire Yellow Pages worth of pest controllers. But none of their sprays and traps and smoke guns are the least bit of use when it comes to evicting two-headed pests from their under-bed lairs. And, after an unfortunate incident involving the slightly chewed left hand of one particularly careless bug-buster, it looks like Leila's mother is finally ready to admit defeat. Short of selling the house (tricky with their live-in lodger), or investing in a gun and shooting him out herself (which rather goes against her left-wing vegetarian principles), she's at a loss. It looks like the monster's won.

"That thing wants muzzling," gasps Bruce the Bug-Buster, as Leila's mother tightens the home-made tourniquet above his wrist and waits for the paramedics to arrive. Bruce's face is white with shock and the unfortunate loss of blood and fingers. "He wants locking up with the tigers at the zoo."

"No he doesn't," calls Leila, watching from the bedroom doorway. "He belongs here, with me."

Leila's mother turns from one to the other—from the pale one-and-a-half-handed man with the blue waxy lips, to her equally pale daughter.

"Do you know?" she says, with what looks suspiciously like a smile (Leila's mother never smiles—at least not since the monster appeared), "I think you might be right." It's not quite clear at first which one of them she's addressing, but it turns out to be both.

Leila's mother has already approached every zoo in the country to see if they'd like a two-headed beast for their menagerie, and they all laughed at her like she was mad. But who's to say she can't set up her own version at home: a mini zoological collection of one? No doubt there are plenty of laws about keeping

regular animals in captivity, but surely there are no rules for monsters? After all, they don't really exist. Not officially.

By the time she's mopped up the last of Bruce's blood from the carpet (hooray for Scotchgard!), Leila's mother is positively beaming. Of course the poor old monster, who's curled up behind the Lego with an embarrassed head in each paw, doesn't have a clue what he's in for.

Things take a more tangible turn for the worse the following day, when his Lego box is hooked out from under the bed with the vacuum cleaner nozzle. He can only look on in despair as his knobbly treats are banished to the top of the wardrobe, where even Leila can't reach. The monster feels a cold finger of panic in his spare stomach, and gobbles up the last few escaped bricks before they disappear too (even though they're blue, and red ones are his favorite). In fact, he's so worried by this unwelcome turn of events that he swallows down an odd sock and six dirty tissues for good measure. Stress always makes him hungry.

What comes next—after the invasive vacuuming-up of sock fluff and flaked-off monster scales—is even worse. A long roll of metal netting (chicken wire, according to the man Leila's mother has brought in to fit it) is double-wrapped around the bed legs, and fixed into place with a hammer and nails. The monster couldn't leave now, even if he wanted to.

Leila is suitably aghast when she gets back from pre-school.

"My monster!" she cries, flopping down on her belly to check on him through his chicken wire cage. Four scared-looking eyes stare back at her, their red veins pulsing brighter than ever in the under-bed gloom. "What have you done?" she asks. "Why have you taken his bricks away? He'll be hungry."

"No one's keeping him here," says Leila's mother, even though she's spent the last hour caging the creature in. "If he doesn't appreciate our hospitality he can always find somewhere else to live, can't he?"

Leila doesn't know what "hospitality" is—probably something to do with the crying bug-man who disappeared off in the ambulance the day before—but her mother doesn't seem to need an answer anyway. She's already flapping around

the bedroom, stuffing fallen clothes into drawers, and scooping up paper and wax crayon stubs from the floor.

“It’s about time he started earning his keep,” she tells her daughter. “I’m not *made* of Lego bricks, you know.”

Yes, of course Leila knows. You’d need boxes and boxes of bricks to make a whole person and the colors would be all wrong.

“Come on,” says her mother, pointing to a pile of barely used tissues in the corner. “We need to get this place shipshape before our visitors arrive.”

*

Leila’s room is still nothing like a ship, despite her mother’s best efforts. And the visitors are nothing like normal visitors. They don’t bring bottles of wine to drink with dinner, or flowers, or presents for Leila. They don’t ruffle her hair and tell her how much she’s grown. They bring money instead, and clicking cameras, and they queue up all along the landing, waiting for their turn in Leila’s bedroom. One by one they slide down onto their bellies to stare at the cowering monster under the bed. And with every “*ugh*” and “*yuck*” they throw at him, the monster shrinks into himself a little more. He might not be getting any fainter, but he’s definitely smaller than he was.

Every night he has Leila sweep the bedroom for hidden gawkers before he goes to sleep. He makes her look inside the wardrobe too—you can never be too careful when it comes to humans.

“Have they gone yet?” Every night he checks and double checks, his blubbered black lips trembling with fear.

“Have *I* gone yet?” he asks each morning, searching himself all over for signs of disappearing limbs. If only he were invisible there’d be nothing for the humans to gawk at.

“Not quite,” says Leila, feeding him consolatory squirts of toothpaste through the holes in his cage. “But you’re a bit more see-through than before,” she adds, to be kind. She may only be little but she knows about feelings and magic from

her favorite bedtime book—the one her mother used to read from the doorway for fear of getting her ankles scratched. Leila knows that if you really, truly want something to happen, then belief is everything. Just like she believes her mother will stop fussing over the visitors and the growing pile of money on the kitchen table, and start fussing over her again. She’s been feeling rather invisible herself lately. “In fact, I can’t see your fifth tail at all,” she tells the monster, holding toothpaste-covered fingers up to the light, to make sure they’re still there.

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SECOND PLACE

Brandon Barrows is the author of several novels, the most recent being *Strangers' Kingdom* from Black Rose Writing. He has published over seventy stories, selected of which are collected in the books *The Altar in the Hills* and *The Castle-Town Tragedy*. He is an active member of Private Eye Writers of America and International Thriller Writers and was a finalist for the 2021 Mustang Award.

The Right to Hang

by Brandon Barrows

Pa squinted at the sun, just dipping behind the hills to the west, one hand shielding his eyes. “‘Bout supper-time.” Hoe slung over his shoulder, he turned to me. “Hungry, Al?”

“Sure am,” I said.

Pa nodded and began walking, his heavy brogans kicking up little puffs of dust on the path between rows of corn sprouts. He was like that: nothing to say unless he *really* had something to tell you. Imitating him, I put my own hoe on my shoulder and followed.

Halfway between field and house, we stowed the tools in the shed, then Pa pulled up a bucket of water from the well. It tasted sulphury, but it was always cool and that was more important to me after a hot day’s work. Pa and me each had a drink, then he dumped what was left over my head, sending a shiver down my spine and making me laugh with pure joy. The tight little smile Pa showed me was about all the emotion I ever saw from him, but I knew he was happy, too. A spread of your own and a son to carry on your name was everything a man could ask for, he once told me.

Pa replaced the bucket then, quiet as ever, headed towards the house. As we reached the low fence that surrounded it, a chorus of squawks and little chirrupings greeted us. He ignored the scrawny rooster and six little hens who crowded around his feet, begging for their supper, and continued to the door of the house.

I stopped in the dooryard, though, and called after him, "Chickens are hungry, Pa."

Without a glance at me or the birds, he answered, "Reckon," and veered off towards the henhouse for the sack of cornmeal, hanging in its rafters.

I stood and watched for a moment, enjoying the happy sounds of the birds as they scrambled and pecked for the meal my father gave 'em, and when he went to put away the sack, I pushed open the door to the house and went inside.

I saw the stranger then.

He was nobody I knew from neighboring homesteads or that I ever saw in town. Finding him in the house brought my heart up into my throat. A twelve-year-old boy may like to think he's about grown, but when something like this comes along, he's a kid again lickety-split.

The man stood, silent and staring, his eyes wide in his unshaven face and a handful of dried apples clutched to his chest. He was narrow-hipped and wide-shouldered, but wasn't a very big man, not much taller than me, even if he was probably fifteen or twenty years older. Pa was about six feet, and this stranger maybe would have come to his shoulder. The man was dressed like a cowpuncher, but his Levis were so filthy they were more dirty brown than blue, with holes worn in the knees and a long, thin tear high on his left thigh, crusted with dried blood. He had no hat and wore no gun-belt, so I knew something was wrong; I never before saw a 'puncher without either.

"Where'd you come from?" Pa's voice boomed behind me.

The stranger hesitated, looking like he wanted to run. Our house was a soddy, though, with only a single door and a pair of small windows on either side of it. With us between him and the door, there was nowhere for him to go.

The small, dirty man looked from Pa to me. Turning his eyes to the floor, he said tiredly, "Narrow Flats."

Narrow Flats was the nearest town, less'n eight miles away, but I didn't see no horse and it was a ways to walk in a horseman's high-heeled boots.

Pa thought for a moment then said, "Looks like you come the roundabout way."

The stranger smiled weakly. "Reckon so. Don't know this country too good. Guess I got turned around. I saw your place and thought maybe I could get some grub. Nobody was home and..."

"And so you thought you'd steal yourself something?" For the first time in years, there was anger in Pa's voice.

"No, no! I just wanted something to eat, I swear—"

"Look here, mister." My father's voice grew hard in a way I'd never heard. "You came into my house without invitation, looking like you've been crawling through mudholes and over bobwire, so don't hand me no guff. You're running from something, so just tell me about it and then I'll decide what to do with you."

Behind the dirt and the tangle of whiskers, the stranger's face went pale. It was plain he wanted to just run away, but unless Pa let him, there was no way he could. After a moment, he seemed to sag in on himself like an empty sack leaned against a wall. "All right."

Pa gestured towards the table in the center of the room. "Sit down. Let's be civilized about this, at least." He was a good man, and a kind one, even at such a time.

Setting the dried apples on the table, the stranger pulled out a chair, gratitude on his face now. "Obliged."

Pa wasted no time. "What's your name?"

"Lester McCray."

He said it like he expected us to recognize the name, but it meant nothing to me and I could tell it didn't to Pa, neither.

McCray added, "Thought you'da heard of me." Pa said nothing, just stared at the other man. McCray lowered his eyes to the table. "I've been in the pokey over in Narrow Flats the last few days."

"How come you're here now, then?" Pa asked.

McCray took a deep breath. "Folks were getting riled up, said they weren't gonna wait for no trial when they could just have themselves a necktie social and save trouble all around."

"What folks?"

"Whole damned town!" McCray cried. "I heard 'em talkin' all day yesterday, outside the jail, 'bout the circuit judge takin' too long to show up and there bein' no point anyway when they knew I was guilty. The marshal was aimin' to take me to the county seat and stick me in the sheriff's jail soon as it got dark enough to sneak me out, but I didn't trust him. There was something in his eyes when he looked at me..." He shook his head.

"So when he pulled me from the cell last night, I saw my chance, got in a lucky punch and lit a shuck. I ran most'a the night and hid all day in that stand of trees yonder from your place." McCray waved a hand. "I wanted to keep on goin', but I had to eat somethin' and then I saw your house and..." He trailed off again.

Pa stared at McCray a long time, digesting what the other man said, I guessed—maybe trying to decide if McCray was telling the truth. Finally, Pa asked, "What did you do to rile folks so bad?"

Lester McCray waited plenty long before answering and when he did, he seemed to be choosin' his words real careful. "They say I killed a girl."

The room was awful still all of a sudden, as if everything, even our heartbeats, had stopped. I stood next to the table, trying to keep all my attention on both men at once, wondering what would come next, scarcely daring to breath for all the tension. Images flashed through my mind, of Pa overpowering McCray, tying

him up, throwing him in the bed of the wagon and bringing him back to town, being treated like a hero by all the neighbors.

Or maybe that was too much trouble. Maybe Pa should just take down the scattergun over the hearth and put an end to McCray himself. If McCray really was a woman-killer, that was the least he deserved.

“Did you?” Pa asked, real quiet.

McCray’s face scrunched up. “What difference does it make? Them folks already made up their minds.”

“It ain’t up to them, just like it ain’t up to me,” Pa answered. “That’s what it matters. We got laws for a reason.” He sighed and leaned back in the chair. He cast a glance at me before turning back to McCray. “Fact remains, though, that whether you did anything else, you broke jail and I got to turn you in.”

“To that mob?” McCray got pale all over again.

“No.” Pa shook his head. “I believe in the law and every man’s got a right to a fair trial. If you can’t trust the marshal, I’ll turn you over to the sheriff.” He indicated me with his head. “I can send Al up to the county jail with a note for Sheriff McLaughlin.” Something sang in my chest when he said that. I was never trusted with anything so important before.

Relief came into McCray’s eyes. “That’s something, anyway.”

“I *will* see you into the law’s hands, though, McCray. Don’t believe for an instant I won’t.” Without looking at me, he added, “Al, get the scattergun. Make sure it’s loaded.”

“Yes, sir!” I snapped. Pa spoke more words in the last few minutes than he did all together in the past week and the importance of what was happening hung heavy in the air all around us. I moved to the hearth and lifted the gun down. From the cabinet by Pa’s bunk, I took out the box of shotgun cartridges, broke open the gun and fitted a cartridge into each barrel.

That’s when I saw them.

I was so focused on first the gun, then loading it, that I didn't notice the men outside, coming from the direction of the woods, until they were halfway across our fields.

"Pa..." I said.

He must have heard something in my voice, because he left his chair and joined me by the window. He only looked for a moment before moving away from it again. To McCray, he said, "Guess they tracked you."

"What're you gonna do, Pa?" I asked, my voice high-pitched with fear. Ordinarily, I'd be embarrassed by such a thing, but I didn't even notice then.

Both McCray and I watched Pa as he worked it over in his mind. I kept stealing glances outside. The men out there weren't hurrying, but they were closer each time I looked, and they were making straight for the house.

"I won't let them take you, Mr. McCray," Pa finally said.

My throat thick, I asked, "You gonna fight all those fellers, Pa?"

Pa looked at me. "I won't fight any man unless he forces me." He indicated the shotgun with his chin. "Hold onto that, Al. Guard McCray. They won't take him if we can help it, but don't you let him loose, either."

I nodded. My mouth was suddenly too dry for words. I looked at McCray, then quickly turned my eyes away again. I was terrified, but almighty proud, too. Pa was trusting me just the same as he would trust a full-grown man.

Pa looked to the stranger. "You get all that, McCray? Just keep quiet and stay put. I'll go out there and when those fellers ask, I'll tell them I haven't seen anything, don't know anything, never heard of you." McCray's head bobbed up and down.

Pa went to the window. The men were past the fields now, almost to the house. He turned to me. "No man deserves hangin' without a trial, Al. Those folks out there are mostly good, but they're scared and angry and that can make 'em lose their sense. It ain't up to them or us to judge anybody. That's why laws and

courts exist.” His eyes shifted to McCray. “Laws protect all of us, guilty or innocent. You understand me?”

I swallowed hard, my head bobbing.

Pa nodded, turned and went out the door.

I wedged myself into a corner where I could see out of the nearest window, hoping I couldn’t be seen from outside. With the shotgun, I gestured to McCray and he got the message, cramming himself into the opposite corner, in back of the house, where nobody could see him. The way we were positioned, I could cover both the door and McCray with the shotgun without moving too much. My heart was beating so hard, though, and my hands were so slippery with sweat, I didn’t know if I’d actually be able to was it necessary.

Through the corner of the window, I saw Pa tromp across the dusty dooryard, scattering chickens. He met the possemen at the fence surrounding the house, Pa inside and the other men out. He lifted a hand and his mouth moved, but I couldn’t hear the words. One of the men moved out of the group, a big, rawboned man I recognized from around town, named Stevens. He held a Winchester in both hands and there was a sixgun strapped to his hip. His eyes were shaded by a dusty-black planter’s hat, but his mouth worked fast and I could tell he was angry.

Stevens and Pa talked for a minute or so and then, from somewhere in the mass of men, a voice called, “The hell we’ll take him back! We’ll hang him from the nearest tree!” One of the small panes was missing from the window and I could hear the words, but didn’t know who of the ten or twelve men out there said ‘em.

“Then I’m glad he ain’t here!” my father shouted back.

Stevens stepped forward, brandishing his rifle, pushing his way through the gate in the fence. He was close enough and loud enough that I could clearly hear him say, “Sticking up for McCray, are you, Sloan?”

“Sticking up for the law,” Pa answered. “Only the courts got the right to hang a man.”

“You a law-yer now, Sloan?” Stevens jeered. There was a chuckle from somewhere in the posse, but it sounded weak and tired.

“He’s guilty!” someone shouted. “Old man Drake found McCray’s hat in his yard and two other folks say they saw him leaving the place.”

“Let them tell it to the judge,” Pa said.

There was a kind of growl from Stevens. “We come to ask you to join us in the search, Sloan, but I got a feeling we won’t be looking much longer.”

“I wouldn’t join a lynch mob no matter how nice you asked, Stevens.”

The big man opened his mouth to reply, but a rail-thin fellow dressed like a townsman yelped, “Hey! Ain’t that blood?” his finger outstretched.

As one, every man turned to the dark stain on the top bar of the fence, by the gate. Neither me or Pa noticed before, but pointed out, it was plain.

“Reckon it might be,” Pa said. “I killed a chicken for supper.”

“Is that right?” Stevens asked.

The thin man who spotted the blood swiveled his head towards the others. “Was McCray hurt anywhere?”

“Found scraps of denim on some bobwire a ways back,” someone answered.

“How about it, Sloan?” Stevens snarled. “Got a supper guest?”

“Ain’t seen this McCray,” Pa said, matter-of-factly.

“Then you won’t mind if we take us a quick looksee inside.” Stevens made to push past Pa.

I turned towards McCray. Even half-hidden in the shadows at the back of the room, he looked scared and frail. He pressed his back so hard against the wall, it seemed like he was trying to burrow right inside it.

“You stay out of my house, Isaac Stevens.” Pa said it real loud, like he was warning all the men, not just Stevens.

“A look won’t hurt if you got nothing to hide.” Stevens shoved Pa away as two other men leapt the fence to restrain him.

As the possemen grabbed Pa, he cried, “Al, watch out!”

I had no time for deciding what to do. The door swung open and a huge shape, black against the growing night outside, filled it. Stevens stepped inside, the Winchester rifle leading him. He paused, letting his eyes grow accustomed to the darkness. I could have shot him down in that moment, but my heart was racing and I was too scared to lift the gun. I was so prideful when Pa needed my help that I forgot for a few minutes that I was still just a twelve-year-old boy.

“Put the gun down, kid,” Stevens ordered and I knew his eyes were adjusted because he was pointing the Winchester right at me.

I tried again to lift the scattergun, but my arms wouldn’t obey. I heard someone shout, “Don’t take another step or I’ll blast you!” It was a moment before I recognized my own voice.

“Fine. I can shoot from here,” Stevens said and brought the rifle in line with where McCray huddled in the corner of the room.

I was scared so bad I thought I might pee myself, but Pa trusted me and that meant a lot. Somehow, I found the strength to bring the shotgun up and before I knew it, the right barrel was belching fire and the Winchester was spinning out of Stevens’s hands.

“Yooowch!” he bellowed.

Faces appeared at the windows and Stevens, his own face full of rage, clutching his right hand to his chest, shouted, “Get Sloan in here!”

Nobody moved. Stevens roared again, sounding like a wounded bull, and then many hands pushed my father forward, through the door, to stumble into the house. Stevens was breathing heavily as he wrapped his right arm around Pa’s

throat and with his left hand, pressed the barrel of his sixgun to Pa's head. "Tell your boy to put the gun down, Sloan."

Pa looked at me and I think he was trying to decide how scared I was, how much I understood of what was going on, and whether he could ask any more of me. I did my best to look brave, and slowly, he said, "Al, you just stay where you are. Keep hold of that gun and you shoot down any man who takes a step towards Mr. McCray."

That made Stevens even madder. Even in the worsening darkness, I could see his eyes get bigger and wider, and his jaw clenched in fury. He let go of Pa's neck and nudged him with his shoulder, making Pa stumble again, then smashed him in the side of the head with the butt of his revolver. Pa might have fallen, but suddenly two other men were inside the house to grab and hold him up.

It happened fast and my anger rose just as quickly, burning away the fear. I raised the scattergun to my shoulder, aiming at Stevens. I didn't fire, though; I didn't dare. Pa would be caught in the pellets' spray. My eyes strained, searching through the gloom for the rifle Stevens dropped, wishing I had it instead of the shotgun. If I had a rifle, I could have picked off Stevens and the men holding Pa without touching a hair on his head.

"What's the matter, boy?" Stevens said the last word like it was something dirty. "Don't like seeing your Pa hurt, huh?"

My chest clenched and my finger tightened against the trigger. My mind raced. I didn't know what to do. My eyes bounced from Pa to Stevens to McCray hoping someone, anyone, would give me the answer. McCray, too, was waiting, crouched down, looking less and less like a man and more like a scared, hunted animal.

Stevens was the first to decide. His long, beefy arm shot out, latching onto Pa's collar, ignoring the pain it must have caused his injured hand, and pulled him close. He swung Pa around like a ragdoll then pressed the sixgun against the back of Pa's head. I still had Stevens covered with the shotgun, but now Pa was between me and the big, hateful man. "Put the gun down, boy. Is McCray's life worth your Pa's?"

“What do I do, Pa?” I cried, feeling hot tears rolling down my cheeks. I hadn’t cried in almost three years, not since ma passed, but the fear and the anger were just too much.

“You shoot if you have to, Al,” Pa said, calmer than I could have imagined.

Shoot Pa? To save a woman-killer like Lester McCray? I couldn’t believe my ears. And even if I did, how would that save the man? Even if I killed Stevens, there were a dozen others to take his place.

Stevens must have read my mind because a grin spread across his face. He pushed Pa forward, putting the two of them squarely in front of me, using Pa as a shield. “You don’t want to shoot your Pa, boy. McCray ain’t worth it. Put the gun down.” When I didn’t, he repeated himself, shouting, “Put the gun down!”

“Do what I told you, Al!” Pa yelled.

The sights at the end of the gun-barrels wobbled and it was getting hard to see through the mist in my eyes. Pa struggled, but couldn’t break Stevens’s grip, not with that sixgun at his head. Others crowded into the house behind Stevens, eager to get in on the “justice” they planned to dish out.

For an instant, my eyes cleared and I saw Pa looking squarely at me. He stopped struggling against Stevens, then his chin dipped the slightest bit, and I knew that it was a signal. With every ounce of willpower in my body, I steadied the scattergun and fired.

A lot of things happened all at once. Men screamed—more than just Stevens and Pa. Lead pellets zinged around the room, burying themselves in wood and flesh. The possemen were pushing and shoving, falling over each other, trying to get out through the narrow doorway and into the safety of the night.

Pa and Stevens were separated now. Stevens was on the floor, clutching a ruined knee, wailing and sobbing. Pa was leaning against the overturned table, inspecting the bloody gash in his denims where the spray of pellets tore through the pants and the meat of his leg.

McCray, ghostly white, eyes huge and staring, collapsed to the floor, pulled his knees up to his chest and put his head on top of them.

*

Solemnly, the circuit judge's deep voice intoned, "For the murder of Sadie Drake, I sentence the accused, Lester McCray, to hang by the neck until dead." With a crash like thunder, his wooden gavel fell on the table, ringing across the temporary courtroom.

A pleased-sounding murmur went through the folk assembled in the Longhorn Saloon. I tried not to look at Lester McCray. I didn't want to know what was on his face.

My father, sitting against the wall by the door, levered himself to his feet with the aid of the crutch Doc Feeny loaned him days earlier. "Let's go, Al," he told me and turned towards the street.

People streamed around us, headed towards the square where the gallows, built the night before, stood. There was a carnival atmosphere, like when the rodeo was thrown a year ago to celebrate the five-year anniversary of Narrow Flats's founding. None of that happiness touched either Pa or me.

When we reached the buckboard, I made to help Pa up onto the seat. He put his hand on my shoulder, but instead of propelling himself upwards, he looked straight into my eyes and said, "It was always going to end like this, Al, and I don't say it's right, but this way, it's legal at least. Do you understand why that's important?"

I wasn't sure if I did, but I just nodded. I didn't think I could handle any more lessons. Not on this subject, not for a while. I helped Pa up onto the bench and we set off for home. Neither one of us said a word all the rest of the day.

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THIRD PLACE

Leonie lives in northern NSW, Australia. She studied creative writing at the University of Canberra and writes mostly flash fiction and short stories, with several prizes and publications to her credit.

Slaying Monsters

by Leonie Harrison

Allie struggled to reconcile the larger-than-life monster that lived in her head, with the stooped man here in the flesh. His skin no longer fit his body. It hung in loose creases and folds. That, and the shuffling gait, made her think of an old elephant come home to die. She wished him a long hard death. Without warning, the monster lifted his head, and his eyes locked on hers, before flicking away with no hint of recognition. It sucked the breath out of her. There was a whooshing sound in her ears and she might have fallen, but Gene's fingers curled around hers, and the solid presence of him kept her upright. He folded her gently into a chair and she shut her eyes in an effort to stop the tremors.

Twenty years on and she could still feel his breath on her face and the chill that coursed through her when she realized it wasn't a dream. The tip of the blade nicked her throat and she remembers wondering if there'd be blood on the fresh washed sheets. His voice a whisper in the dark.

"Scream and I'll kill you."

There was no need for his words. Her body had already shut down, the scream stuck in her throat. She couldn't have made a sound even if she tried.

“All rise,” said the clerk as the judge swept into the courtroom.

Allie took a deep breath and opened her eyes. Gene squeezed her hand. “You okay?” he said, not looking at her. She didn’t know what hurt him the most; what happened to her or that she’d never told him, but at least now he understood why she double checked the locks on the windows and doors every night, and why there was a part of her that she kept walled off. She squeezed his hand in return, knowing they were both a long way from okay.

It was over in the blink of an eye. An anticlimax. Court adjourned until the following day, the lawyers called to the judge’s chambers to argue over a legal technicality. The courtroom filled with the buzz of a dozen or more conversations. Allie slumped in her chair, knowing she’d have to do it all over again tomorrow. This was just the beginning. There’d be many more tomorrows.

The hallway was packed. The proceedings might have been done, but nobody was ready to leave yet. Allie saw a group of women huddled together. She knew straight away who they were. Her heart thudded in her chest and her cheeks burned as one of them glanced her way. Allie saw the spark of recognition. The woman broke away from the group and strode toward her.

“Hi,” she said, holding out her hand. “I’m Jess. You must be Allie.”

Allie’s arm was pinned to her side. She stared at Jess, who didn’t flinch. She held the line. Allie’s arm moved seemingly of its own volition, and there was her hand cupped between both of Jess’s, and in that moment a bond passed between them. Allie fought back tears, at the nod of understanding that came from the other woman.

Jess’s eyes flicked toward Gene who took the cue.

“Hi. I’m Gene,” he said. “Allie’s husband,” and was rewarded with a warm handshake and a beaming smile.

Jess motioned to the group of women, her eyes fixed on Allie. “Would you like to meet the others?”

Allie knew their names. Jess. Brenna. Tamiko. Sonya... Thirteen in all including Allie. The baker's dozen the press had named them, the catchy phrase ricocheting from one media outlet to another, without a thought for the thirteen lives ripped apart. Allie was number six. He'd refined his craft by then.

He gagged and tied her and flipped her on her stomach, her face buried in the pillow, so that she thought she'd suffocate, and when he spread her legs, a core part of her crawled away and curled up in a ball. She closed her eyes, trying to shut out the sound of the grunting, aware of his hand on her back still gripping the knife, the cold steel of the blade flat against her spine. She'd forgotten how to pray, but in her head, she kept repeating. Please let it be over. Please let it be over. No one was listening.

Allie never told her parents the real reason she decided to move back home. She'd spun a tale about a spate of break-ins and not feeling safe on her own. If her mother sensed there was more to the story, she never said, though Allie caught her mother looking at her sometimes as if checking to see she was okay, especially the days Allie sat staring into space, her hands wrapped around her coffee mug way past when it had gone cold. Allie would paste on a smile, give her mother a hug, and a throw away cheery line as if she hadn't a care in the world, when in reality, her mind was locked on the night a stranger crept into her room and changed her life forever.

When he was done he pulled the sheet up over her, his hands tender, careful not to touch her skin. Hot tears of shame splashed her cheeks. His weight lifted off the bed and moments later she heard the fridge kick into life, the scrape of a chair and the sound of a ring pull popping. He was sitting in her kitchen, drinking a can of her soda. She lay frozen on the bed, not daring to move. Waiting for him to go. Not knowing if he would come back.

Meeting the other women had never been on Allie's agenda. In her mind, she was somehow different or stronger if she stood on her own. At least that's what she told herself. But these women, the rest of the baker's dozen, they were just like her. They had good days and not so good days, and somehow, they'd managed to make a life for themselves and put the worst behind them. They were the only ones who could understand.

Jess, a mother of four, ran her own catering business. Sonya worked in real estate. Tamiko was a primary school teacher. Brenna, the clown of the group, was CEO of a non profit. It floored Allie to learn that after the rape, Brenna stayed in her room for nigh on three months only coming out for the occasional shower. She would have been there longer, but her mother refused to bring her meals anymore. Brenna's voice broke when she spoke about her mother. The rest of the stories blurred. Allie would need time to let it all sink in. None of them had come through unscathed, but they were still here. Except for Holly. Holly had taken a handful of pills one night. It was too late by the time her mother found her. Allie knew that dark place. She'd skated round the edge of it, but never fallen in. She wondered if it took more courage to stay or go. She still didn't have an answer.

"We're going to the pub for a few drinks," said Jess. "Wanna join us?"

Allie turned to Gene.

"Go," he said. "It will do you good."

*

"Look," said Brenna. "A dartboard," and proceeded to rummage in her handbag for pen and paper. Her hand raced across the page, and when she was done, she held up her drawing as if it were a prize exhibit. "Let's see how many times you can hit the target, girls," she said.

There was a moment of stunned silence, then they fell about laughing at the image of a stick figure, its slack penis dangling between a pair of grape sized balls.

Jess and Brenna both missed. Allie stepped up for a turn, and felt the adrenaline kick at the weight of the dart in her hand, and the thud in her chest as it hit the board, heard the collective "ohhh" when it clipped the edge and fell to the floor. Her blood was up now. She turned to Jess as if for permission. Jess smiled and nodded. Allie lined up again, one eye closed, zooming in on the target, like a sniper fixed on his prey, and wham.

"Bullseye," they all screamed as Allie twirled round and round.

They managed twenty bullseyes between them, and squealed and giggled every time one of them hit the mark. Brenna kept adding details to the drawing. Crosses for eyes on the balls. A downturned mouth. A line of stitches running the length of the penis. A knife poised to chop it off. She laughed so hard she peed her pants, and that set them off again.

“The winner,” said Jess, and raised Allie’s hand in the air.

Allie beamed as Jess gave her the drawing and one of the darts for her three-bullseye haul. Then the smile slid from her face and the others turned to follow her gaze. Tamiko was sitting on the lounge, her knees clasped to her chest, tears rolling down her cheeks, and in an instant, they were all stone cold sober.

*

Allie’s stomach lurched as the monster shuffled back into court. Jess caught her eye and drew two grape sized circles in the air, and Allie had to smother a laugh at the thought of his balls pinned to the dartboard.

“Thank you,” she mouthed, and the tension dropped away.

“All rise,” said the clerk, and they were set to do it again. The judge reeled off the list of charges. Break and enter. Aggravated assault. Assault with a deadly weapon. Sexual assault. Thirteen counts of each. The judge turned to the monster.

“How do you plead,” she said.

Not a sound in the courtroom. Everyone holding their breath. Allie gripped Gene’s hand as the seconds ticked away, and finally, the monster opened his mouth to speak.

“Guilty.” The word coming out as a mumble, so that Allie had to strain forward, not sure what she’d heard.

“Speak up,” said the judge.

“Guilty your honor.”

Stunned silence in the courtroom. Guilty. No trial. No having to listen to the evidence, and hear their stories described detail by humiliating detail. The air went out of Allie again, but this time, it was a slow hiss of helium, as the weight of twenty years floated to the ceiling.

“Take him down,” said the judge, and the courtroom erupted into squeals and shouts and fist pumping and back slapping. The judge didn’t even bother to bang her gavel. There were tears and laughter as the women hugged one another. Guilty. It was over.

It took two days to read the victim statements. Mothers and fathers cried. Men squirmed in their seats and hung their heads, as if ashamed to be a man in the face of what they were hearing, and even the judge had to wipe her eyes when Holly’s mum read her statement.

Allie gripped the edge of the lectern and tried to steady her breathing. Her eyes searched for and found Gene. “You can do it,” he mouthed, and a lump formed in her throat, filled with love for this man. She took a breath, blew it out, and began. The monster was sitting right there in front of her, but she didn’t care whether he heard or not. She wasn’t speaking to him. She was speaking for herself. Twenty years she’d held the words inside, but she wouldn’t be silenced any more. They’re all the same, the cowards who hunt in the dark. They take your body; they strip away a piece of your soul and leave you to bury the darkness so deep, so that nobody can see that you’re unclean. They tear your life apart, but it’s the shame that grinds you down and makes you small.

Her voice. All their voices, counted. Life behind bars. No chance of parole. Bittersweet words.

*

Allie and Gene drove out to the old quarry. Allie took the crumpled piece of paper and pinned it to a weathered post. Gene had to squint in the fading light to make out the image through the creases and the holes. He turned to her with a grin, and she handed him the dart. Whack. Bullseye first go, and his shoulders were heaving, and her arms were around him, and they slid to the ground crying. They stayed there, holding each other until the moon cast shadows on the rocks.

Neither of them spoke on the drive home. Gene had one hand on the wheel, the other holding tight to Allie's. A light rain had begun to fall, the sound of the wipers a soothing background noise. Allie's thought flicked back to the quarry, the moment she touched a match to the paper and watched as it curled in the flame and turned to ash. The ritual loosened something inside of her, as if all the parts of her had come back together again and she'd been made whole.

Gene turned the key in the lock as they hunched against the rain trickling down their necks. Allie leaned into him, and breathed in the scent of his damp coat. It smelled of walks by the river, the warmth of his body, the two of them curled together on cold winter nights. It smelled of home.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Daphne Strasert is a horror, fantasy, and speculative fiction writer from Houston, Texas. She has published many short stories through HorrorAddicts.net, Dark Water Syndicate, and Crimson Streets. When not writing, she plays board games and knits. Her interests include monsters, murder mysteries, and things that go bump in the night.

Swipe Right

by Daphne Strasert

The DMs were by *far* the worst part. “my what big teeth you have! jk you are gorgeous tho”

Delete.

“WOW! I bet you’re an ANIMAL in bed lol”

Ugh. Del-ete.

“hey, so this may be a weird question, but my girlfriend is really into werewolves and we were wanting to experiment, so—”

DELETE.

Farrah tossed her phone onto her pillow and flopped face down onto the bed.

Seriously, what was the *point* of joining Monstr if humans infiltrated it anyway? “The dating app by monsters, *for* monsters” That was the slogan! And instead, her DMs were flooded with humans looking to fulfil some weird fetish.

Dating a human wasn't *wrong*, but it was exhausting. There were the stares in public, then meeting his friends, meeting his *family*. She hated answering endless questions, constantly having to correct misconceptions. She wanted a boyfriend (or even just a *date*) where she could be unapologetically a werewolf. Or where she didn't have to deal with weird stereotypes and expectations. She just... wanted to be herself.

Farrah groped blindly forward to grab her phone, then flipped onto her back. She swiped idly through profiles. How was it possible in a city of a few million—where tens of thousands of those were monsters like her—that she couldn't find *one* person she felt comfortable with? If she kept striking out, she might actually have to respond to her mom's suggestion that she date her Aunt's hairdresser's cousin (she hated to admit it, but every werewolf really did know every other werewolf). Even if she had moved out of her home town, the Werewolf Mothers' Gossip Network extended across the globe. Farrah was getting too old to have her mom in her business all the time.

She swiped left on the vampire fuckboy with the fake red contacts. Left on the Chupacabra posing next to a mangled goat corpse. Left on the shirtless wendigo with his face cropped out of the picture. Left. Left. Left.

And stop.

The picture was a gorgeous landscape, high on a mountain overlooking a lush forest that extended as far as the horizon. Farrah's heart ached with longing. Her gaze skimmed down the profile.

"Birch: 35"

Birch liked hiking, classic rock, and black and white movies. She scrolled through the other pictures. There was a lake as smooth as glass, a tree the size of a skyscraper, and a snow-covered forest floor. And finally, a selfie. The angle was awkward, like he'd had taken pains to get all of him in the frame. Brown fur covered his face, nearly concealing kind blue eyes. His shy smile revealed wide white teeth, the canines showing just the hint of fangs. Birch was a sasquatch.

A sasquatch. Wow. You just didn't see many of those. Even as cryptids had become more outspoken about their existence, sasquatches had stayed away, still preferring the solitude of their home territories.

Farrah's thumb hovered over the picture as she considered. She'd never dated a sasquatch before. A ghoul, yes. A skin walker, sure. Even a Jersey Devil once (long story). But... a sasquatch. She'd never even considered it. But Birch seemed like the only honest person she'd ever seen on this godforsaken app.

She swiped right. Her phone lit up: "You've made a match!"

*

Howl used to be an underground monster bar, somewhere cryptids could let their fur down. A few rave reviews in a local magazine later and now a line of humans went around the block. *Howl* was the new hot spot attraction for hipsters and monster fetishists.

Farrah skipped the line. Humans had to wait, but she gave a flash of fangs and the bouncer let her pass with a smile. The bar was clothed in the scent of sweat and stale beer. Her shoes stuck to the floor with each step, glued by layers of spilled drinks. Indistinct thumping betrayed the presence of a jukebox somewhere deeper inside.

Farrah hardly had to look to find Birch. Even slumped on a bar stool, trying to seem as small as possible, he was the biggest thing in the room. The pint he was nursing looked like a shot glass in his hand. He kept casting glances around him. He was wearing a jacket that could have housed a circus and still seemed too small.

A sasquatch in jeans and a jacket. Even with him right in front of her, the image was jarring. Well, what did she expect? It wasn't like Birch could just go around naked. Monsters had to conform to *some* human standards. The real question was where had he bought them?

Farrah made her way through the crowd, squeezing between a group of black clad vampires and a pair of swamp creatures gurgling at each other over their glasses. Birch jumped when Farrah laid her hand on his arm.

"You're Birch, right?" she asked, voice a little loud to be heard over the muted roar of conversation.

"Farrah?" He looked her up and down. There was naked admiration on his face.

"That's me." She smiled.

Birch returned the expression, a little timid. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Jack and Coke, if you don't mind." She pulled out the stool next to him and hopped up. "You look about as comfortable as I feel," she said, as he flagged down the bartender.

Birch's lip quirked. "I'm not used to crowds."

"Must be hard living in the city."

"I make it work." He handed her the drink the bartender poured.

"So, your profile pictures," Farrah said, "where did you take those?"

"They're from Montana," Birch said. "But I didn't take them."

"You didn't?"

"No." His eyebrows furrowed. "How else would I be in the shot?"

Farrah froze with her Jack and Coke halfway to her lips. "You were in the pictures?"

"You didn't notice?"

She set down her drink and reached for her phone. "Where?" She pulled up the first picture. Birch pointed to the upper left side of the screen.

Farrah had to zoom in. Then she had to tilt her head and squint a little. But, yes. There he was. A little blurry, a little obscured by the underbrush, but he was there.

She burst out laughing. “I didn’t even notice!” She beamed up at Birch. “I was too distracted by the view. I should have looked harder.”

“I, uh,”—a shy smile made its way over Birch’s face—“I was surprised that we matched.” His eyes met hers briefly before he looked back down at his drink.

“Why’s that?” Farrah asked, scooting closer to him. Yes, she was fishing for a compliment, hoping he’d say she was pretty.

“Well, werewolves tend to date other werewolves.”

“Oh.” Well, he wasn’t *wrong*.

He seemed to realize her reaction wasn’t exactly warm and hurried to cover for himself. “I don’t mean that you’re prejudiced. I mean, obviously you aren’t—” He cut off into embarrassed silence. It was hard to tell under all the fur, but there may have been a tinge of pink to his cheeks.

Farrah smiled. “Don’t worry. No offense taken. It’s pretty true. You wouldn’t believe the things my mother says.”

He let out a laugh—a real one—big and long and loud enough to shake the bar. Farrah’s heart jumped in her chest. The ambient noise from the crowd dropped in response and Birch looked around self-consciously.

Farrah continued, eager to hear him laugh again. “If my mother had her way, I’d marry the only man back in my hometown who isn’t my cousin.”

“Imagine the nearest eligible girl was a two-hundred-mile hike away.”

Farrah smiled wickedly and leaned in. “Lucky you’ve got a big stride.”

The laugh was even louder this time. When he was done, he looked almost ashamed that she’d managed to surprise it out of him.

“Do you want to get out of here?” Farrah asked.

Birch’s mouth opened and closed a few times and he was definitely a little pink around the cheeks. Seeing his embarrassment, Farrah laughed.

She held her hands out in front of her to placate him. “I don’t mean anything... you know.” She wagged her eyebrows suggestively. “I have good intentions! Promise!” She chewed at her bottom lip. “I’m just... not really into bars. And you seem like you’d rather be somewhere quiet.”

Birch’s expression softened. “Yeah. That, uh, that sounds nice.”

“Okay then!”

Farrah downed her drink, the whiskey and carbonation burning her throat, and hopped off her stool. Birch stood up (and up and up and up). Farrah thought that she had understood just how enormous he was, but *really*, he was just HUGE. His head nearly grazed the ceiling.

They squeezed through the crowd (or, rather, Birch squeezed and Farrah followed in his massive wake) and emerged back in the parking lot.

“So, just how far are you willing to go tonight?” Farrah asked.

Birch froze. “I, um, well—” He stared fixedly ahead. Farrah found that she liked making him blush.

“I *mean*,” she said, “are you willing to drive for a while? There’s a national forest about forty miles from here that’s nice for stargazing.”

“Forty miles, huh?” Birch huffed and a cloud of mist bloomed to life in front of him. “That seems nice.”

“Your car or mine?”

“I don’t think I’ll fit in yours.”

Farrah thought of her Jeep, packed with spare clothes and camping gear.

“Probably not.”

Birch led her to a humongous Hummer.

“Wow,” she said.

Birch held the door open for her and helped her step up into the passenger seat. "I can't walk everywhere."

"I'd say you were compensating, but something tells me I'd be wrong." She raked her gaze over him and bit her lip. "At least, I hope so."

Birch's hand froze on the door. He stared at her for a second too long before clearing his throat and averting his gaze. Farrah grinned to herself as he closed the door.

It was nice. Really nice. Leather seats that smelled like new, no discarded napkins or month-old mail. Farrah tried to look as inconspicuous as possible as she checked out the interior. There seriously wasn't any trash or clothes... not even a discarded receipt.

Birch climbed in behind the wheel. Even in the massive cab, with the seat pushed all the way back, he looked scrunched and uncomfortable.

In the confines of the car, she could smell Birch better. He had an earthy scent, not bad, just natural. No cologne, thankfully; that tended to irritate Farrah's sensitive nose.

"So, where's this forest?" Birch asked as he turned on the ignition.

"Take highway 265 west and keep going til the city lights fade," Farrah said. "I'll tell you when to take the exit." She lounged back in her seat as Birch steered them out of the parking lot, asphalt crunching under the tires.

The drive was quiet, just the hum of the radio between them. A classic rock station played and Farrah sang along when she knew the words.

It was strange, the companionable silence. Her dates had always been chatty before, but Birch didn't push and Farrah found she didn't need to fill the silence with small talk. She turned instead to gaze out the window, watching as the city melted into suburbs, then was slowly overtaken by the wilderness. It felt like going home.

She could feel Birch's eyes on her every so often and she took the opportunity to stretch out her legs (they looked damn fine in her jeans, if she did say so herself).

It was almost sad when the exit approached and Birch steered them off into the side road that led into the national forest. Farrah reminded herself that this was only the beginning, really.

As she stepped out of Birch's hummer, Farrah took a deep, lingering breath. The air was a crisp in a way that was refreshing. The wind was heavy with the scent of pine and earth. Wild things. Things like Farrah. Like Birch.

The temperature had dropped outside the city limits. Farrah shivered and wrapped her leather jacket more tightly around her.

"You okay?" Birch asked.

She smiled up at him. "My jacket isn't as good as my fur."

"Do you want mine? I don't need it."

"I think it might be a little too big." She patted his arm and led the way toward the forest edge. "I'll be okay once we get moving."

Gravel gave way to dirt, then to pine needles as they made their way deeper. Farrah didn't bother to keep to the paths. Paths were for humans.

"Seems like you know your way around," Birch said. He'd been following a few steps behind her, letting her take the lead.

"I come out here every full moon. Set up a tent, spend a couple of days running wild."

"By yourself?"

"Yep."

"So, you're a bit of a lone wolf."

Farrah turned back to him and raised an eyebrow. "Oh, there's no such thing as a lone wolf."

She lifted her head and let out a low, long howl. The sound reverberated in the trees, rebounding back on itself. She stopped. Waited. After a few seconds, a chorus of answering calls came back. She smiled and Birch smiled back.

They continued walking. It was easy to talk to Birch out here. In the dark, with the sounds of the forest all around, with her body moving purposefully forward and a slight sweat working over her skin, she didn't have to worry about the words. They just came out.

"I grew up surrounded by people. Werewolves have no shortage of family. I've got twelve siblings. *Sixty* cousins. It's not hard finding someone to play with. It's getting alone time that's difficult."

"Is that why you moved?"

Farrah thought about it. "Maybe. Something like that. It's hard to make your own decisions, live your own life, when everyone in town knows you. You can only be what people want you to be because that's the only opportunity open for you." From the corner of her eye, Farrah saw Birch nod. "What about you? Sasquatches usually keep to their territories."

"They do. That's what my parents wanted for me."

"And what about you?"

"I want to make sure we aren't being left behind. Solitude is all well and good until society finds you."

"So, you're what? Some kind of sasquatch ambassador?"

"Something like that." A twig snapped and a scared rabbit rushed from the underbrush. "I make sure my people can get internet access, stay in the wild if they want, find a place in society if they don't." Birch caught up to Farrah, matched his pace so they were side by side. "And I work to keep as much of our territories from being developed as I can."

Farrah chuckled. "That's like lawyer stuff."

"Yep."

She stopped walking, her feet frozen to the ground like the air in her lungs.

“You’re a lawyer?”

Birch turned back. “Yeah.”

“That wasn’t on your profile.”

He shrugged. “Is it a problem?”

Considering Farrah had barely scraped her way out of high school, maybe it was.

“I just suddenly feel like I’m way out of my league.”

Birch laughed. It wasn’t out of place in the forest. The trees were big enough to take it.

“I don’t think you have to worry about that.” He glanced at the canopy above them and at the peek of stars through the branches. “I thought you said we were going star gazing?”

Farrah took his hand in hers. “It’s still up ahead.”

They walked another mile before the trees thinned, then opened onto a ridge where the great expanse of the sky was visible. Away from the bustle and noise of the city, the stars formed a canvas of light.

“I know you’ve probably seen better,” Farrah said. “But it’s still one of my favorite places.”

“It’s beautiful,” Birch responded.

They watched the stars slowly turn in the sky and talked. It wasn’t small talk; it was stories, things they’d done and seen. What they still wanted to do. Farrah liked the way Birch talked. His voice was dark and sweet, like fresh tapped syrup. She liked the way his laugh mixed with hers.

Midnight came, then went. One o’clock. Two. Farrah would have gladly stayed in the shelter of the trees (it wouldn’t have been the first time) and she thought maybe Birch would have liked that too. But they went back anyway, savoring the sound of their steps through the pine needles and their hands joined together.

But the peaceful night sounds of the forest were replaced by loud, drunken voices as they neared the parking lot. They were jarring in the peace of the wilderness. Alien. Unwanted. Farrah cringed as she caught wind of revelers. She wondered how good Birch's hearing was, if he had noticed them yet. They stepped out of the path and back onto the gravel, under the yellow haze of the streetlights and caught sight of the party. A group of four men, in their thirties maybe, with just the beginnings of pot bellies and bald spots taking form, were gathered in the back of a pick-up. Birch and Farrah kept walking.

"The fuck is that?" one of the men, wearing a red ballcap, asked.

Farrah felt Birch's hand tighten around hers.

"Shit, fuck, man," another said. He stumbled out of the truck bed, barely catching his balance as his boots hit the pavement. "That's a fucking sasquatch."

Birch was walking faster now and Farrah had to practically run to keep up. But the drunks were still between them and their car.

"Hey! Hey, Sasquatch!" Red Hat Guy called. "Give us a roar! You do that, right? Roar? Come on!" He let out a Chewbacca imitation. His buddies laughed.

"Just ignore them," Birch muttered, eyes straight ahead.

"Holy shit!" one of the others said. "He's got a fuckin' *girl* with him."

And now, all eyes were on Farrah. She felt the hair rise on her arms under the scrutiny.

The man spit on the ground. "You've gotta be shitting me. Bigfoot here has a girlfriend." Farrah bristled. She wasn't a sasquatch, but everyone knew Bigfoot was a slur. She fumed on Birch's behalf.

"Life's just no fucking fair." The drunk shook his head. "No fucking fair at all." He advanced. The others from the truck got out. Farrah felt a low growl rumble in her chest.

The drunks were in their path now, blocking the way to Birch's Hummer. Birch and Farrah came to a stop.

“Hey, girl,” one of the backup boys said. “Is it true what they say about guys with big feet?” Drunken sniggers slithered over the parking lot.

“Come on,” Birch said, tugging Farrah’s hand, leading her toward the left and around them. The pack of drunks persisted, following. Farrah’s nails grew into wicked claws, splitting her cuticles.

“How can you even fuck something that big, huh?”

“Jesus, look how hairy he is. He got fur on his dick too?”

“Hey! Hey, monster fucker, we’re talking to you!” There was a crash and a spray of liquid as a half empty beer bottle bounced off Birch’s back and shattered on the pavement.

Farrah snapped. She turned in a fury, fangs bared and eyes burning. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

The drunks stopped in their tracks, one stumbled backward, landing on his ass.

“The fuck, man?”

“She’s a fucking cryp too!”

Farrah snarled at the slur. “Say that again, fucker!”

Birch’s hand closed around her arm. “Farrah, don’t.”

She turned to him, still blazing, but cooled at the sad expression on his face.

“Let’s just go.”

Farrah fixed one more withering glare at the men, but followed Birch when he tugged her toward the car.

The drive was silent, but less companionable this time. Birch stared at the road, gripping the steering wheel so tightly that it creaked. Farrah fumed.

“Why didn’t you do something?” she finally exploded.

“Do what?”

“Like tell them off or... or...”

“Punch them?” Birch raised an eyebrow. “I’m twice their size.”

“Exactly!”

“Exactly,” he agreed, solemnly. “And in that case, they’d end up in the hospital. And how does that make *us* look on the nine o’clock news?”

Farrah swallowed. “They still shouldn’t have—”

“No, they shouldn’t have. But they did. People always do.”

Farrah sat in stunned silence. “You’re used to this.”

“I don’t exactly pass the same way that you do.”

Farrah swallowed the guilt rising in her chest. Passing. Yeah, she did pass. She was a monster through and through, but someone on the street didn’t know that. Birch didn’t have the same luxury.

“Look,” he said, “this kind of thing happens to me all the time. I... I understand if you don’t want to deal with that. I just... I wanted you to know I had fun tonight.”

Farrah felt her heart actually splinter inside her chest. He was giving her an out. Letting her down easy.

“I had fun too,” she said.

Birch nodded, resigned.

“So why does tonight have to end?” Farrah asked.

Birch turned to stare at her, keeping his eyes off the road for an uncomfortable amount of time.

“You... you’re okay with that?”

“Look, I’m not going to promise to be a pacifist about it like you are. But I’m not going to let some dumb drunks scare me off. I like you. So”—she unbuckled her seatbelt, slid over to the middle seat next to him, and bucked back in—“how about you be the bark and I’ll be the bite?”

He chuckled. “A tree pun? Really?”

“And a wolf one,” Farrah said with a grin.

“So, then,” he lifted one arm over her shoulder, “how far are you wanting to go tonight?”

Farrah snuggled under his arm. “How about to my place?”

“You sure?”

She beamed up at him, but then suddenly stiffened. She swore.

“What?” Birch asked. “What’s wrong?”

Farrah swore again. “Oh, I just realized I forgot to shave.”

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HONORABLE MENTION

Adelehin Ijasan's stories have appeared in The Best of Everyday Fiction, Takahe, On The Premises (second place winner Mar 2008), The Tiny Globule, Page and Spine, Pandemic Publications, Omenana, Sub-saharan Magazine, The Naked Convos, Kalahari Review and Canary Press. He was once nominated for the Commonwealth short story award (2014) and was recently on the Nommos award long list for African speculative fiction (2021). Adelehin also spends his days peering into or operating on eyes as an ophthalmologist. He can be found at <http://www.adeijasan.com/>.

A Monstrous Bargain

by Adelehin Ijasan

Our internal clocks chimed in unison. *Zhuhr*. We were in a private train carriage and Zuwaira retrieved her prayer mat and unfurled it with a tenderness. She donned her pitch black hijab and faced northeast, her arms folding across her brass-plated chest.

"Bisimillahi rahamani raheem," her speakers purred. She bowed, kneeled, every movement a constellation of moving parts and efficient joints. "Salaam aleikum warakmatullah," she bade the invisible angels on either side and then twisted her neck to look at me.

"Won't you join me, Aisha?"

"No."

I stared out at the countryside: a vista of trees, farms and the occasional herdsman and his herd of white cattle. "I won't pray to a non-existent God."

“Cover yourself!” she said, getting up and rolling her mat. My burka had slipped off. I pulled the black chiffon material over my head and tossed it across my shoulders. I have a transparent body made of pure silicone and hydrophobic acrylic... only haute chiffon will do. Somewhere inside me is a machine core powered by uranium and it burns fluorescent white.

“Are you not even a tiny bit concerned for your soul?” She asked.

Zuwaira believed we were already dead-*dead*, our continued and perpetual existence a blight on the face of the earth, an abomination, a sin and a debt to Allah multiplying by compound interest every tick of our nuclear powered hearts. She hoped that prayer was payment for the passage of our dear departed souls into the seventh heaven. Basically, Allah had our souls hostage and we must pay obeisance or else...

We got off at the Ahmadu Bello train station and basked in the familiar smells of incense, agar wood, and *turare*. After all the time spent in the south, we were finally home. Tafira was waiting for us, Baaba’s sagely and dutiful driver; we hugged him tightly and when we pulled away, saw tears in his eyes. He had been more than a driver to us, taking us to school and back, all those years; buying us toffee; and as teenagers, allowing us smoke shisha secretly in the back seat on the way back from *Isha*. We used to be Tafira’s girls, but now we had no warmth and it was like a dagger through his heart.

“Ba damu’a, Tafira.” Zuwaira held his shoulders and looked him square in the face. “At least we’re here, somewhat.”

He stared instead at a loose thread on her shoulder, avoiding her gaze. He looked like a husk of what he once was, as if someone had scooped all of his insides and what was left was this fragile paper thin effigy. The ride home was silent. I stared at the tarred streets of Kano: not much had changed; the *almajiri* thronged as usual in various states of undress and malnutrition. I scanned the area with a magnetic pulse and picked up the occasional artificial limb; there was not a bionic person in the next five hundred miles. Lagos had been different. I’d met Kate and Bayo at a *droid* club on Admiralty way, overlooking the lagoon.

“Tafira,” Zuwaira muttered. “You’re not taking us home?”

“Baaba is at the mosque, he’ll see you there.”

“You know we aren’t allowed in God’s house.” I touched his shoulder from the backseat. The poor man was brimming with tears.

*

It was *Mahgrib* by the time we arrived at the mosque. We avoided ablution and scurried into the women’s section. We pulled our shoes and left them at the door in the bubblegum heap of slippers, sandals, flipflops and I wondered if we would ever find ours when we got back out.

“Sannu,” the women greeted.

“Sannu,” we replied.

“Gidan wa’kuke?”

It was only harmless curiosity. They were wondering whose wives or daughters we were. I had the mind to drop my chiffon and shock them, but was stopped by Zuwaira’s stern telescopic eyes. We prayed together. I had deleted all the Quoran from my mind, but somehow I remembered a phrase from the Fatiha, so I said “... *maleeki yau medin...*” over and over as I kneeled and bowed and thumbed an invisible tesbih. *Oh, master of the day of retribution.*

There was a man waiting with Baaba in the inner sanctum of the mosque. He had a raging beard and was dirty, but wore his dirt like a cloak, with pride and a certain arrogance. I did not recognize him at once, but I should have. A quizzical smirk hung on his chapped lips as he watched us throw ourselves into Baaba’s arms and bury our faces in the plush safety of Baaba’s fatherly breasts. I knew that smirk all too well; I’d gotten a few such smirks in Lagos, walking unclad, hand in hand with first Kate, then Bayo on Kuramo beach. My two loves. The smirk that said, *how una dey take fuck sef?* We were droids, not robots. (Technically, we were bionic humans but the name android, initially derogatory and in homage to the defunct telephone of the 2000s, stuck.) We were people too. Or at the least used to be. Baaba broke my porcelain heart once and forever when he introduced the man to us.

“Zuwaira, Aisha, meet Shekau...”

A toothpick appeared out of his mouth and spun between teeth black and red with paan. “Sisters,” he said, and hugged us without our consent.

“A terrorist?” I asked Baaba.

“Ah, that is the language of the infidels.” Shekau stepped in front of me, peeved. “The word of Allah is absolute and the word of his messenger, Mohammed—”

“*Sallalau wallehi wassallam*,” we chorused.

“—is divine. I am of the one who sent me,” his voice crescendoed, “al mujahid, al ghazi, kayan aikin Allah!” He grabbed my burqa and pulled it off in one swift movement, almost to say I was nothing but furniture clad in clothing, and did not dare call him a terrorist. I could crush his windpipe. But I stood there naked in what Bayo had called “my beautiful android glory”. Lithe acrylic legs, buxom silicone buttocks and breasts, and a transparent torso that showed the inner workings of my gears and circuits—I let him stare.

“Bisimillah!” he gasped finally.

“What does he want, Baaba?” Zuwaira asked. “We are tired from our journey and just want to go home.”

Baaba, like Tafira, couldn’t meet Zuwaira’s gaze. Shekau held up a small device. I recognized it as a vircator. It was useless unless calibrated to the specific frequency of the droid being attacked. A frequency known only to the droid herself or...

I looked at Baaba.

The screech of an electromagnetic pulse rang in my ears and then darkness.

*

In electromagnetic limbo, I dreamed of my time in Lagos. Bursts of light and color emerging from vantablack: Kate’s ululating laughter echoing within the riffs of Afro fusion music, the rush of waves at the sea and the bright flare of

yellow danfo buses. I dreamed of the whale we once saw, Bayo and I, exploring six thousand miles offshore and twelve thousand feet below sea level. A *giant* swirling with a ballerina's grace in the blackness of my limbo, corrugated fins the size of houses, a mournful howl. I relived the car accident that severed our cervical bones many years ago when we were drifting Baaba's Tesla at Kano stadium, and heard in excruciating detail all the arguments about the meaning of life that tore Kate and I assunder.

I came to to the sound of Zuwaira screaming. I looked around and found we were in a cave of sorts, lit with a small oil lamp. They had chained me to the wall in the most gruesome manner, like a pig to slaughter, and Shekau was finishing up a prayer in the corner, counting his tesbih and muttering a hadith. Propped along the wall were endless rows of guns and ammunition and men crawled in and out of an inner room from which Zuwaira's screams emerged. One of them was a young boy. Shekau caught his pitying eyes and said to him, "They're not real women." He added, "they're not even human."

"What are you doing to her?" I twisted around to look at him. He didn't bother to reply. He crawled over, unfurling his loin cloth. There was no pain, only humiliation. And like Zuwaira, I screamed.

*

What is it about women's bodies, bionic or otherwise, that men believed they were owed the right of ownership? What is it about these primal desires that drove men to madness?

"Would you rather my men use real women?" Shekau replied. He had just returned from battle, and blood dripped from a gash in his forehead.

"If we weren't 'real women', why then do we serve this obscene purpose?"

"For that, Insha Allah, you are real enough," he countered. "We are fighting for the soul of all people, against the infidels of the south who persist in sinful western ways, who extend their lives with androids and other tools of the devil."

"We are Muslim too."

“You can never be!” he spat.

“Zuwaira prays five times a day, fulfills the zakat and took the hajj. Are these not the pillars of Islam? Even now, as you defile her, she prays. There’s no place in the Quoran where it says an android cannot be a Muslim.”

At this, Shekau laughed, a full bellyaching sort of laughter. “It is only common sense,” he said. “You are already dead.”

“Yet here we are.”

He scratched his rough beard with long, untrimmed fingernails. “You are nothing but soulless automatons, sex toys.”

“I do not know of sex toys who scream.”

“That is true,” he replied gleefully.

*

So this is our story, and I truly wish it could be different, that it could be a nice revenge tale where we escaped our chains by dislocating our joints—or with some other kung-fu—and killed our captors in gruesome ways for maximum comeuppance, but that would be far from the truth. Most stories of captive women never end this way, regardless of what you’ve seen in the movies.

We were in captivity for six years, and during that time, my sister Zuwaira lost her mind. Perhaps it was the gradual decay of our bodies which naturally needed maintenance: bionic parts like any sophisticated mechanical vehicle wore out with time, use or disuse. Limbs needed changing, gears and joints needed lubrication; the occasional tune up for fried IC circuits; updates of drivers or antivirus; biofuel engine flush; and perhaps a hard reset or two to put things back in working order. She lost her voice first, which could easily have been fixed had we been in Lagos. Then her joints came apart and her limbs got scattered around the cave. Soon she had no further purpose and parts of her went the way of junk: her hand became a paperweight for maps and tactical plans; her pelvis, eviscerated, became a bowl for holding water, *kunu* or *tuwo shinkafa*. And finally, her head was turned upside down, filled with oil, primed with a wick, and it was

used as an oil lamp that illuminated the cave quite nicely for a number of years. My fate was no different, no better, so there's no need to describe it all again. At the very end, most of the boys and men who worked for Shekau died in battle and were replaced by new ones. Shekau himself was killed in a bomb blast during a meeting with a breakaway faction of the group (they had a slightly different ideology but they were all assholes), and by the time we were rescued, there was a whole new set of terrorists who did not know we were anything more than paper weights or oil lamps, or interesting looking food containers.

We were rescued by a special battalion of Nigerian soldiers who stormed the Sambisa forests to flush out the terrorists from their caves; it was a unit comprised solely of bionic men and women, the first of its kind, and they'd only been able to find the cave and warrens because I and Zuwaira (what was left of us anyway) lit up on their radar. The gun fight was quick and glorious. Bullets tore through soft flesh and shattered the skulls of the mujahideens. It was a battle between gods and mere mortals. When the dust settled, only droids were left standing. Their commandant, a Major Nzeogwu, sculpted in a body reminiscent of Spartans, was a living miracle: pure steel and not much else, a tattoo of the setting sun on his chiseled shoulder plate.

"Help us," I croaked from my resting place near the latrine.

*

Much later, I sat on a hill that overlooked Baaba's compound. The good Major had retrofitted me with a temporary body; it was a clunky old model that responded to commands with a nanosecond—but perceptible—delay. What was that phrase about beggars and choices? My sister Zuwaira had been unsalvageable, dead-*dead*, and I wanted to know why.

In the villa opposite my father's, there was a Nikah marriage ceremony in full swing: colorful horses, turbaned in-laws, camel riding entertainers, dancing sword-fighting women, canopies, coolers of bright red jollof rice and in the center of it all, a little girl, *budurwa amarya*, being given away. I could see her eyes through her veil, full of uncertainty as her father and elderly husband shook hands over the *Mahr*, the bride price. Why do fathers give their daughters to men who would hurt them? What was my father's excuse?

I saw Baaba's car appear at the end of the driveway and park near our compound. Tafira got out, opened the door for him, and two android girls appeared on the patio to meet them. One of them hugged him, the other took his bags. I recognized Zuwaira and myself. So this was the monstrous bargain my father made, this was the *Mahr* he took. As they disappeared into the house in a cacophony of Hausa and laughter, my doppelgänger stopped and looked to the hills, one beautifully hennaed hand holding the sliding glass door open. Perhaps she sensed me, an identical copy of our original consciousness. Our gaze locked for a moment. There was no recognition in her eyes, only surprise at finding another droid in the residential hills of Kano.

I raised my hand. She waved back.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Michael D. Winkle was born (and still resides in) northeastern Oklahoma. He is the author of thirty published stories, including "Wolfhead" (*Andre Norton's Tales of the Witch World* 3) and "Leviathan," (*Twenty Thousand Leagues Remembered*), plus one honest-to-Azathoth hard copy book, *I Heard of That Somewhere* (American Hauntings Ink). Hopefully, despite pestilence and war, there will be many stories and books to come.

Skins

by Michael D. Winkle

Ed lay across the stained comforter, reading by the sallow light of an oil lamp. He flipped another page of *True Detective* and clucked his tongue. He shifted on the squeaky box springs, partly to see the illustrations better, partly to show them off.

"Lookee here, Mary," said the farmer. "This feller in Arkansas, he shot some young 'uns in the head while they sat in their jalopies doin' God knows what."

He nodded knowingly.

"Ye reap as ye sow; Ma said that often enough. Seems to me this Texarkana Phantom is an avenging angel, punishing the ungodly."

Mary made no comment. She hardly ever did, not since the day she quit her job at the truck stop. Ed closed *True Detective* and set it on a mound of similar publications. He rolled up Mary, straggly hair, leathery skin and all, and stuffed her in a grocery sack.

He carried the smoky oil lamp to the kitchen. He hardly needed it to navigate; he knew the moldering farmhouse inside and out, being its sole inhabitant and caretaker. Of course, you couldn't really get lost in here, as boxes, broken furniture, tattered clothing and empty cans filled nearly every room, leaving only small pools of space for Ed's couch, table and bed.

Ed set the lamp on the kitchen counter. He opened the icebox and rattled out a bottle of Blatz Beer.

Alcohol in moderation wasn't a sin; folks in the Bible drank wine. Ed pulled the cap off with a pair of pliers. He sat in a rickety kitchen chair and gulped down the foamy brew.

He was just draining the brown bottle when he heard the snuffling. It was quiet on the farm in autumn, except when the wind moaned or the mice squeaked, so he made no mistake: Something sniffed and scratched along the back porch, whuffing excitedly as it reached the door.

Ed rose. He chewed his week-old wad of Black Jack chewing gum as he studied the door. Maybe a dog, he thought, or a coyote. He couldn't peek out the window to see, because he had tarpapered over the glass years ago. Well, varmints had come nosing around before. Not always the four-legged kind, either.

He didn't think it worth fetching his rifle. If it still sniffed around in the morning, when people could see it and wonder what it was interested in, then he'd do something.

The whuffling crept up the door frame. Ed imagined the black tip of an animal's snout, glinting with slobber and snot, sliding up the wood like a snail. The sniffing sound rose higher, level with his waist, then his chest, then his head—then higher still, passing across the lintel.

Ed stopped chewing. What critter could rear that high? Bear? Catamount?

The critter growled, eye-level with the farmer, as if it watched him right through the wood. The rusty knob rattled. No, it didn't simply *rattle*, as if slapped by a paw. It turned, slow and deliberate, first clockwise then counterclockwise. The

door shook as the critter bumped it, and Ed was glad he'd thrown the deadbolt earlier.

He decided he would get his .22, and maybe his Mauser while he was at it.

*

He took down his .22 rifle and found some loose shells in the top drawer of his splintering old bureau. He slipped one into the breech as the varmint, whatever it was, shook the door again. He carried the rifle back to the kitchen, afraid the deadbolt would give way.

The noise of his approach apparently startled the beast. At least, it quit shaking the door. It snorted or maybe sneezed. The farmer hesitated, rifle port arms, hoping the critter had gone. Then something banged on the door to the summer kitchen.

Ed frowned. He could just see the mess that would result from an animal dragging the old entrails and hides out in the yard. The farmer pulled the bolt with a callused hand and yanked the door open.

The indirect light of the oil lamp showed only a hulking shape on the porch by the summer kitchen, its outline a shagginess of frayed fur. Ed fired the .22 into the air. The animal dropped aside and ran, the warped planks clattering beneath it like the keys of a king-sized piano. It reached the end of the porch and sprang out onto the hard earth. The moon revealed more of the critter as it ducked around the corner of the built-on shed. It was long and low, not at all like a bear, with a muzzle and pointed ears like a wolf. From the side it looked thin, but that flash of it before it whipped out of sight revealed a wide torso, like a bear or even an ape. Its tail hung long and bushy behind it, though, and neither bear nor ape had that.

Rather than pursue, Ed shut the door and dragged a few grimy boxes of machine parts in front of it.

*

In the morning Ed toted his .12 gauge Remington to the edge of his property. He found paw prints leading up from the woods, doglike but huge, wider than his spread fingers. Oddly, there seemed to be only two paws in use most of the time, except at the corner of the shed, where he knew it sprang out on all fours. Here he found the marks of four feet, only each front paw had five rather than four digits, the extra one jutting out to the side like a thumb.

Ed chewed his wad of Black Jack for a long, reflective moment. He recalled the doorknob turning as if gripped in a hand. What critter had a paw so much like a hand?

Ed tracked the animal across fields that boasted only the occasional weed. The trail angled toward the culvert where he buried junk and leftovers he didn't need. The farmer's frown deepened as he clambered down to a bare patch at the bottom of the gully. Clods of earth lay scattered like the aftermath of a shell burst. The beast, whatever it was, had done its best to dig into Ed's buried garbage.

That had to stop. There were things down there that did not need to see the light of day.

But what was he up against? A critter with a wolf's head, that walked on two legs sometimes, that could tear into earth like a 'dozer?

Ed remembered a motto from one of his war books: "Know your enemy." He didn't know this one, true, but, lacking radio and family, the farmer was an avid reader. He knew where to look for answers.

*

Ed's Ford sedan rumbled down the highway towards town.

Wolf's pointy ears and snout, he thought. A man's hands and broad shoulders. Wolf... and man.

He remembered the scary films they ran at the movie house, where he'd treat the local kids to popcorn and a show. There was a critter in those films that walked like a man but left wolf tracks. Bit people's throats, jumped all over that flat-

topped fella with the stitches, chased that funny fat man who was always crying out for his partner.

Wolf—Man—Seemed like Ed had even heard folks mention such things when he'd join them to shuck corn or paint barns. Not like they were real, but like ghost stories. Legends. Well, Johnny Appleseed was a legend, but he was a real man, once.

*

“Why, Eddie Gein! Haven’t seen you in a coon’s age!”

The librarian was tall and thin, her green eyes large behind black-rimmed spectacles. She was not Eddie’s type, but to be polite he said “Howdy!” and “Guess I ain’t been around much.”

He headed back to the card catalog, the maple wood cabinet with the tiny drawers. He pulled open a little drawer and wondered at how it and its brothers resembled corpse-holding slabs in a morgue, only smaller. He started with the very general “Animals”, which, according to the white cards, could be subdivided into such topics as “wild”, “domestic”, “care and feeding” and “in myth and legend.”

The last brought fruition quickly, its own subdivisions directing him to “Werewolves”.

*

The first book he found, by a reverend named Baring-Gould, contained three chapters about an old-timey fellow named Gilles de Retz, who sounded mighty interesting but whose story didn’t really help at the moment. Soon, though, he reached the meat of the book.

“In Norway and Iceland certain men were said to be *eigi einhamir*, not of one skin,” muttered Ed. “The full form of this strange superstition was, that men could take upon them other bodies, and the natures of those beings whose bodies they assumed... By this transfiguration extraordinary powers were acquired; the natural strength of the individual was doubled or quadrupled... The

manner in which the change was affected varied. At times, a dress of skin was cast over the body, and at once the transformation was complete.”

He found another book by, would you credit it, another reverend, and here he read, “The transformation was sometimes effected by donning a girdle made of the pelt of the animal whose shape was to be assumed, or else made of human skin.”

Ed smiled and shuffled into the stacks, putting the books back where they came from. That talk of skins was right up his alley.

The librarian looked up as Ed headed out again. “Leaving so soon, Eddie?”

“Yup,” said the farmer, scratching his thinning hair. “Got a varmint problem and was just readin’ how to fix it.”

The thin woman nodded. “We’ve got in that new copy of *Knights of the Bushido*,” she volunteered. “It’ll be ready for the shelves next week.”

“Thank’ee kindly,” said the farmer. “I’ll be sure to take a gander at it.”

*

That night Ed sat in the old Chevy pickup near the east end of the gully. The beast wouldn’t creep back to its diggings without him spotting it.

The grimy windshield became nearly opaque, though, with his every breath. The farmer wiped the condensation away with his gloved fist. The moon glittered on the fallow grass as on a field of gold.

Ed glanced at the .12 gauge on the seat beside him. Been a while since he’d been hunting. Of course, even back in the day he’d only bagged rabbits and ‘possums, but it had been fun, taking the local boys into the woods and teaching them how to shoot and field dress critters. Made him feel like a part of the community.

He’d never hunted deer, though. As for *this* varmint—

He thought about what he’d read in town. About folks who could put on the skin of an animal and *become* that animal, like those Norse Berserks.

Ed's big hunting knife lay in its sheath on the dash. "No blow with a stick will injure him, but if he be struck with a knife, especially on the forehead or the scalp, and blood drawn, he will be cured," that second reverend had written. The skin would split and a mortal man would be left there, both books agreed on that.

These were-critters had magic powers. Powers granted by wearing pieces of another living creature. He'd always suspected such things could be, by instinct maybe. Ma would call it nonsense at best, the Devil's work at worst... which was kind of ironic, come to think of it.

The windshield fogged over again. Ed wiped the glass harder. Twin red lights burned at him from the end of the hood. Dragonish smoke chugged from the nostrils just below them.

Ed yelled in shock. The beast slapped two wide paws on the hood and sprang.

Gaping fangs and the smaller teeth between them cracked against the glass. The creature's head ricocheted aside, but its wide chest, narrow hips and long legs accorded up like boxcars behind a braking locomotive.

Ed turned the key in the ignition as the beast slid back off the vehicle. The engine ground to life, but the beast scrambled around to the driver's door. The farmer batted the mushroom-shaped button of his horn. Just as the critter seemed ready to yank the door right off, it jumped away from the loud blare.

Ed fought the pickup into gear and stomped the gas. It coughed and shuddered and lurched forward. The critter loped after. It clawed the old Chevy's side and barked. Ed bounced over the uneven earth, clicking on the lights to see the terrain. He had to swerve or he'd drop into the gully. He twisted the wheel right, putting the driver's door to the edge of the precipice.

The beast fell back, and Ed worked the pickup into second gear. There was another bark, and the truck jolted as if he'd hit a curb. The wolfish thing caught the tailgate and hauled itself into the bed of the Chevy.

"Dah-yum!" yelled the farmer.

The beast scrambled for its footing like a dog on a new-waxed floor. Now the toothy muzzle grinned into the rear window, inches from Ed's shoulder.

The creature rose and slapped like a cat. It still did not seem to understand glass. It slapped again, and white fractures crossed the back windscreen. Knowledge of windows wouldn't matter in a moment.

Ed stomped the accelerator to the floor. The smallest bumps jolted him right through the chassis and seat.

What about a big bump? the farmer asked himself.

The family's tractors, trailers and plows jutted out of the dead grass all around, left to rust as the clan died off. Ed aimed for the old hay wagon, specifically its thick wooden tongue angling into the ground. The farmer bounced hard, his cap-covered head banging the cab roof. The beast flew higher, dropped back, cracked its long jaws on the edge of the cab and toppled out.

Ed shifted his work shoe from gas to brake, swinging the Chevy around nearly one-eighty degrees as he came to a stop. The headlamps played over the harsh landscape of stick-saplings, straw-grass and black earth. The beast tumbled along, swiping and kicking, and finally landed on its stomach.

The red eyes flared in the headlights. The creature pushed itself up and sat back on its haunches. Doglike its head might be, but its movements were just not canine.

Ed slid out of the pickup, pulling the Remington with him. The beast sprang as he raised the shotgun. He let fly with one barrel and heard a satisfying yelp. The varmint spun around and galloped away on all fours.

Ed fired again, but the creature already lost itself in the trees. Now running on all fours looked strange, for *it* at least.

The farmer placed the shotgun back in the cab. He climbed into the Chevy and shut the door. The odor of gunpowder and cordite hung over him like the fog outside. Ed had a good look at it; the critter was nothing natural. It about had to be a werewolf.

His hunting knife had bounced down to the floor. He'd need a hell of a lot bigger blade to draw blood from betwixt that thing's eyes.

The farmer rattled off, shaking his head. He had no intention of getting that close. Hell, the thought of returning to the gully, with all his guns, in broad daylight, made unseasonable butterflies flutter in his stomach. But if that critter dug out what all he'd hid down in the garbage—if folks saw it—

He had to beat it to the prize, or kill it, or both, and soon.

He pulled up to the kitchen. He didn't quite run, but he walked fast to the door and secured it as best he could once he was in.

He imagined digging for hours in the gully with *that* hanging around. If only there were some way to get down through the dirt *fast*...

*

Ed pulled up to the rental store in Wausau. He hardly ever traveled this far from home, but he needed special equipment today, and he didn't want to set tongues to wagging back home. He stepped in, a little bell jingling over his head.

A bald man with a gray mustache appeared from aisles of power tools and lawnmowers. Ed was glad he didn't have to deal with a woman, as in the hardware store in Plainfield.

"Help you, Mister?"

Ed smiled crookedly. "Name's Travis," he said. "Gotta reach a water line on my land. I was wantin' to try out one of those hole-drillin' machines I seen in *Mechanics Illustrated*. I figger we could poke eight, ten holes in the right places and pick away the rest."

The bald man drew out a clipboard with a paper attached.

"Well, now, we'll see what we can do. If you'd just fill out this form..."

Ed accepted the clipboard and a pencil and sat on a bench near the front. He was glad he'd kept the driver's license a local hunter had—lost. He didn't want anyone or anything pointing back to the farm.

Occupation: Farmer. He'd never convince anyone he was anything else. Address: Too far away and the shop man might ask why he didn't go to a closer rental place. He thought of Mary's tavern and put down its number.

As Ed scribbled, the morning sun crept higher, dispelling shadows along the aisles. The farmer lifted his gaze and blinked. On a table some yards away, between a snow blower and bags of wood chips, sat a strange device with a bright blue cowl, perfectly circular when seen from the side. A pull-rope indicated a two-cycle engine, and handlebars, with grips like those of a motorbike, stuck out fore and aft. A third hand-grip, long and curved, twisted out one side and up behind.

From the bottom of the chassis a metal tongue of a thing, a yard long, stuck out.

"What in tarnation is that?" asked Ed.

"That?" the proprietor asked back. "That, my friend, is the Stihl Model BL One-Man Tree-Felling Machine. They just shipped 'em here from Germany."

"Them Germans are clever about a passel of things," Ed remarked. Then, after a moment's thought: "Is that for rent too?"

*

Ed dragged aside boxes of oil cans and piles of newspapers. He drew tattered curtains away from the closet-niche in his den.

Ma hung there like a scarecrow, her hollow eyes and gaping mouth not nearly as cheerful-looking as the other women's.

"I'm goin' to need your help, Ma," whispered Ed, clutching his hunting cap respectfully in both hands. "Gotta dig up the leftovers we hid out there, or kill that werewolf critter if it shows up again. Gotta get right up to it if it does, and I'm afraid to go out there alone."

“You always did bawl like an infant, Boy,” said Ma.

*

Ed parked the Chevy just where he had last night. He wiped the windshield more frequently. The tips of Ma’s fingers left a slight residue from the mineral oil that kept her skin pliable. It had to stretch considerably to fit over his knobby digits.

Ma’s reflection stared back from the glass, eyes round and empty, mouth a dark “O”. He never could get her hair to behave. It always stuck out as if charged with electricity. Maybe it was, in a way.

Aside from Ma, Ed wore only his dirt-caked work shoes. Usually he took Ma outside in the summer, as he wore nothing else beneath her leathery hide. Tonight, though, he barely felt the cold. An aura of warmth—strength—power—enveloped him.

“No need sittin’ on yor scrawny rear all night, Boy,” said Ma. “If any would not work, neither should he eat,’ it says in the Good Book. Get to diggin’. That critter’ll show up, or else it won’t.”

The farmer stepped out, crunching red-gold leaves beneath his brogans. He stood for a moment, taking in the moonlight, the fields and the ancient white farmhouse in the distance. The night air seared his lungs; cold and hot were alike that way.

“Mighty lonely, the old house in the night,” he remarked.

“Away from the sins of men—and worse, women,” said Ma. “Our fortress of faith in the wilderness, and we must safeguard it.”

Ed studied the tarp-covered machine he had rented in Wausau instead of the power driller. Maybe it was a waste of money. Oh, well, the government *paid* him not to raise crops, not that he could by himself.

He grabbed the handle of a pick and hauled it from the truck bed. The head was a little bent, and the point dull. He wished he’d had time to sharpen it.

A dark mass rocketed up from the far side of the Chevy and sailed all the way over the truck bed. It landed on the dead grass only inches away, hunched like a bobcat. The farmer had no time to reach into the cab for his Remington. He swung the pick awkwardly, burying the dull point in the shaggy mane on the wolf-thing's shoulders.

The beast rose and slapped the pick out of Ed's hand. It seized a pawful of Ma's loose hide and slammed the farmer against the Chevy's cab. The monster wrinkled its chops and snapped its tooth-filled jaws onto his throat.

Ed felt no pain, but Ma's eye-holes shifted away, blinding him. Her skin squeezed against his head, neck and shoulders. The beast had snapped into *her* throat, not his, and now it pulled as if to rip Ma off him like Christmas wrappings.

"You let go of my Ma!"

The farmer clapped his hands together on either side of the creature's skull, as if banging the world's biggest set of cymbals. The beast yelped, and Ed snatched Ma's skin from its mouth as a woman might yank a fold of skirt out of a door.

"How dare you treat a God-fearin' woman that way!" bellowed Ma.

Ed punched. Ma punched with him. Though the beast stood a foot-and-a-half taller than Ed, the blow sent it stumbling back.

"You gonna let this mongrel do that to your Mama, Boy?" demanded Ma.

Ed reached into the pickup bed as the critter sprang again. With Ma's strength aiding him, he whipped up a pointy-tipped spade and swept it around sharply against the critter's skull. The force of the blow knocked it to the left and Ed to the right. The beast crashed against the truck, which squeaked and squealed on its shocks.

Ed kicked the beast in the stomach. It pushed itself away from the Chevy only to receive the shovel blade clean across the teeth.

"Who is like unto the Beast? Who is able to make war with him?" yelled Ma. "I'll show ye who!"

Ed ducked a bearlike slash. He rammed the creature in the stomach with his shoulder and sent it crunching back a few more steps.

“The smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever—”

Ed slammed the shovel against the beast’s thigh, muzzle, and chest. He’d never moved so fast nor hit so hard. The power of the Almighty poured through him, channeled by his mother, the holiest person on earth.

The tangled grass ended at a dark void behind the backpedaling varmint. Ed (and Ma) had forced it right to the lip of the gully.

“—And they have no rest day or night, who worship the Beast and his image!”

Ed rammed with the spade as if it were a bayonet. The sharp tip sank into the creature’s gut. It bellowed in agony.

The farmer raised his foot and set his work shoe on the back edge of the blade. He pistoned his leg as if to cut tree roots. The beast clawed at its belly even as it toppled back. It fell with a coyote yip and made a satisfying thud several yards below.

Ed peered into the chasm. The varmint had landed square on some rusty wheelbarrow parts. The triangular blade of the shovel lay buried in its guts. Steam curled from its gaping jaws and opened belly.

Ed studied the moonlight tableau a moment more then he crunched back to the pickup.

“Where you goin’, Boy?” Ma demanded. “We can’t leave that thing a-layin’ there for all and sundry to see. We gotta bury it.”

Ed bent low and scooped up the fallen pick. “I can handle that myself, Ma,” he said.

He dropped the pick into the Chevy’s bed. He never even got the Remington out of the cab.

“You just want in out of the cold, that’s what,” scolded his mother. “Every generation gets lazier than the one before.”

“I just think it’s time for you to rest, Ma,” said the farmer. “You’re not as young as you used to be.”

He straightened again before climbing in the pickup, taking in his and Ma’s snow-dusted acreage—their little universe. Stark: That was the word for central Wisconsin. Black and white, sharper blacks and paler whites than you’d see in a movie or on one of those newfangled televisions. Cold, still, empty air that sucked the breath out of your lungs and smothered the loudest yell down to a whisper.

He looked over the tarp-covered machine from Wausau. Kind of a shame he didn’t get to use it.

“Good money down the drain, that’s what it is,” Ma commented predictably. “If you can’t run this farm any better than your good-for-nothing Pa, you sure as shootin’ don’t need to spend our life savings.”

Snarls welled up from the gully, not wolf howls but muttered promises of violence and death. Even from the truck Ed heard long claws rake the earth. The beast dragged itself over the lip of the crevasse like a seal popping onto an iceberg.

“On second thought, Boy, maybe we’ll get some use out of this contraption yet!”

Ed yanked off the tarp and grabbed the Stihl’s forward and curved handles. The claim that one person could wield it was barely true, as the machine weighed over fifty pounds. But he was not alone tonight.

“Put your back into it, Boy!” yelled Ma.

Ed and Ma hefted the sawing engine out of the Chevy and set it on the ground. The beast at the gulley climbed to its hind feet only to drop to its knees with a yelp. Maybe a shovel couldn’t kill it, but it was plenty sore.

That didn’t stop it, however. Here it came, galumphing on all fours.

Ed twisted the choke and yanked the pull-start of the sawing machine. It chugged then fell silent. The farmer yanked again. *Chug-chug-putt*, and the pull cord rewound itself.

The beast growled, eyes aglow, as it crashed through some old fence slats. Ed gave the pull-start one last tug, and the engine sputtered to life, kicking out black then white smoke. Ed twisted the throttle, and it roared like an airplane. With Ma's help, he hefted it and swung it around.

The wolf-thing rose upright at last and skidded to a halt. Anger gave way to caution as it eyed the sputtering engine and the spinning belt of metal.

"Geee-yaa!" yelled Ed as if guiding cattle.

The beast fainted to the left, and the farmer followed. It dodged to the right, but Ed kept the saw paddle targeted on its hairy chest.

The monster howled straight into the sky in its frustration.

"Take the offensive, Boy!" ordered Ma.

He lunged forward, bobbing the tip of the saw blade up and bringing it down on the creature's broad chest. The werewolf's crimson eyes swelled tomato-wide, and its howl became a piggish squeal. It bounced backward like a kangaroo in reverse but jumped forward again just as fast. It smacked the blade aside with one hairy fist, its tongue slinging spit and its jaws showing about a thousand teeth.

Ed spun with the blow, lifting the blade over the bed of the truck and bringing it around to the beast again. The monster's outstretched claws raked his shoulder. He slammed the spinning belt into the critter's ribs.

The wolf-thing screeched and grabbed the blade. More blood and muscle sprayed from its clawed fingers. It hopped away like a monkey in a Tarzan movie, its cries twice as shrill.

It stumbled and rolled up like an armadillo, shredding more yellow grass. It fought its way to all fours again and wheeled its legs like Tom and Jerry. It finally

shot off to the east, howling and yelping and even making weird, humanlike “Gaaah!”s.

“Dang it, never did cut it between the eyes,” said Ed.

“Never mind that,” said Ma. “I don’t think that critter’ll stop ‘til it reaches Oshkosh. And if it ever comes back, we’ll give it what-for.”

Ed hefted the Stihl Tree-Feller back into the pickup. He grinned childishly behind the mask. We. Ma had said “*We’ll* give it what-for.”

“Now get us inside, Boy, it’s cold,” continued Ma. “And be sure you check over that contraption for anything bent or broke. They see anything busted on their precious machine, you can bet your buck teeth they’ll charge us for it!”

Ed started the Chevy and turned back toward the dark house. The tires crunch-grumbled over dry weeds and brush. Kind of sad Ma couldn’t give half a compliment without stomping it flat with a new barrage of complaints. Maybe, he thought blasphemously, maybe he *did* need the company of other folks—a new lady friend, at least.

Maybe that hardware store woman wasn’t so bad after all. She was handsome, if not pretty, and she had to have some savvy to run a business by herself.

He’d have to show her the farm.

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