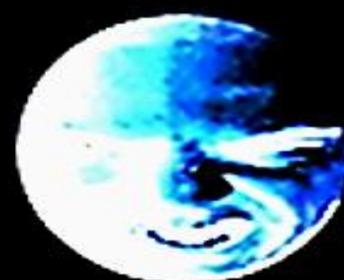


Death

Throes

Webzine

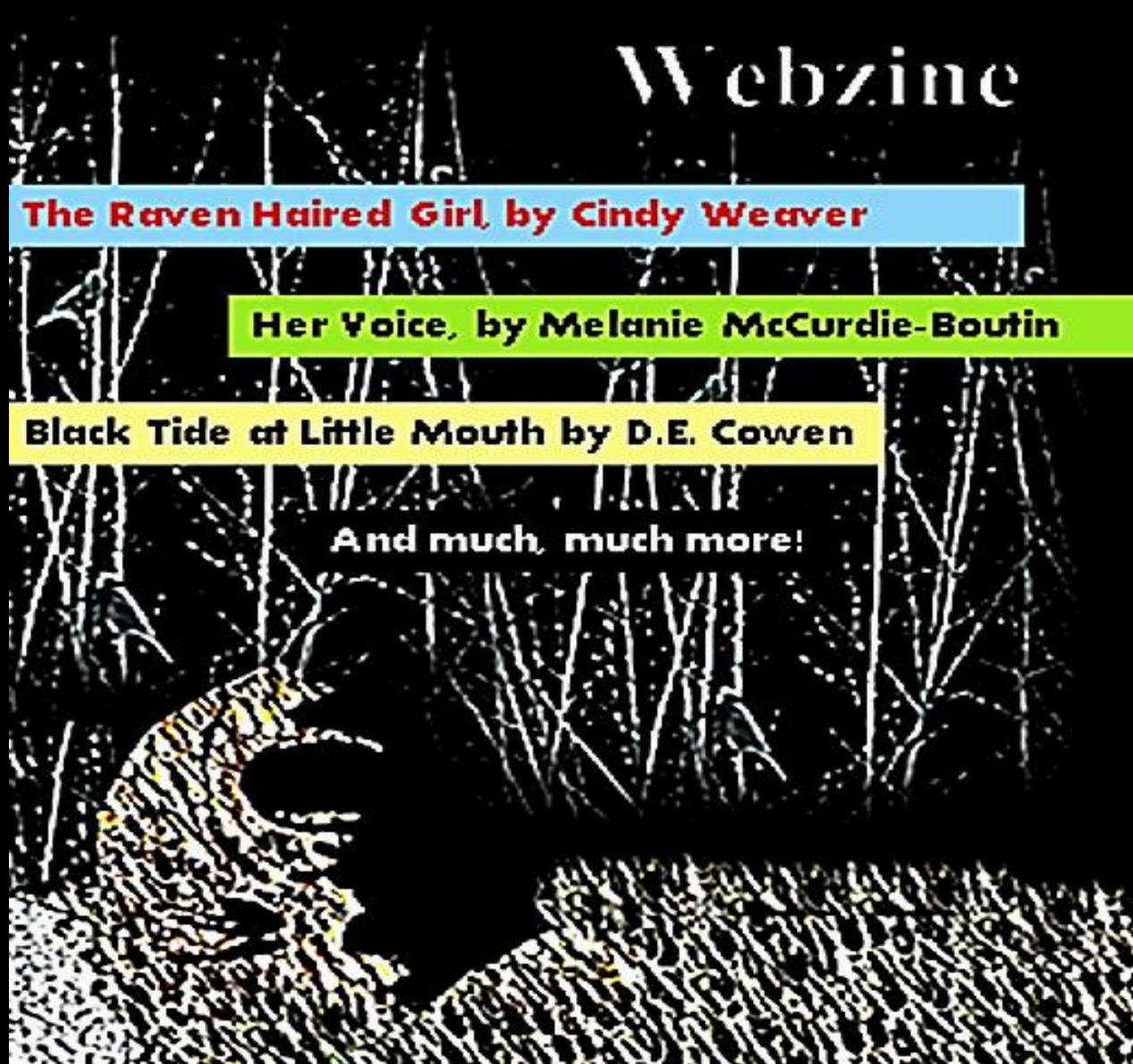


The Raven Haired Girl, by Cindy Weaver

Her Voice, by Melanie McCurdie-Boutin

Black Tide at Little Mouth by D.E. Cowen

And much, much more!



Black Tide at Little Mouth by D.E. Cowen

Red mornings were always harkened by the slow Vs of the brown pelicans hanging in their patterns as if judging the small specks of humanity that sometimes littered the little mouth of the bay onto Offats Bayou by San Luis Pass. Sunday mornings were best to be alone. Being alone in the red haze of a burgeoning dawn suited Henry best. He knew that the red lines that streaked the horizon were harbingers of rain or storms. The surf was already murky from the churning of the sojourning system that had begun to form offshore. When these systems formed quickly, the larger fish would get caught by the sudden shift in tides. That made for good fishing.

Henry Stauller was many things - a retired NASA engineer, a widow, a father of three children who had forgotten he was still living except when they needed money. Most of all he was a fisherman. He loved to peel on his long waders, tie the suspender straps and drag his feet along the bottom of the black surf. You drug your feet to avoid stepping on a sting ray or into a rut carved by the tides from Hurricane Ike.

Henry liked this spit of sand at the little mouth best. Other fisherman told him that they were afraid of it. The undertow was too strong and there were too many large shallows that could swallow a fellow. Henry would listen to the cowardice of these amateurs and smile to himself. He hated having to listen to them in the bait shops. They knew nothing about fishing, only drinking beer and swapping stories about fish they never caught. They always mocked him for his catch; always spouting off successes that lacked proof. Old men, Henry thought, flopping like minnows on a deck. Good for nothing but bait and the stench of their carcasses rotting on the bleached wood.

Henry moved forward in the rising foam as the sky became bloated with ochre as if some child had spilled juice on a cerulean floor. He loved the brine smell from the water; the salt caressed his lips and nostrils as he was up to his waist. The flats at this point let him go out more than a hundred yards

into the water. He could see the dark outlines of the island behind him. In the distance silhouettes of high rise condominiums were lengthening into view. In a few hours the sun would be in high form and the tourists would spill out of those condos like black ants from a hill disturbed by a wayward dog. He was glad to have the morning alone.

Henry adjusted the Harvester cap he always wore over his thick whitened hair; his four lucky hooks piercing the bill. He adjusted his rod, He preferred a skirted spool spinning reel. He liked the feel of the line rushing out to the dark water. It made him feel like he was extending himself into oblivion, forcing himself into the chaos of the sea and dragging its soul back to him.

Henry cast a half dozen times before adjusting his position. With this surf, the trout should at least be out. Maybe a small shark or even a drum that lost its bearings. The line was heavy enough. As the early morning began to rise, he could feel the tug of the undertow at his legs. He smiled. Just keep the feet firm and the body at an angle and it can pull all it wants. He liked that struggle between himself and the surf. No matter how strong it felt, Henry knew he was stronger.

The horizon began to grow a dark blue-black. Soon it would rise and the lightening would start. The storm did not have enough time to become anything other than a big wind with water, but it would cool the Island down at least. Henry heard the slow rumble of thunder in the deep of those clouds. The wind began to rise spraying more salt onto his face.

Henry knew he'd have to go in soon but he was hoping for something to bite on his line before he had to go in.

A strong gust hit his face and he felt as if the sand below him was grabbing at his ankles. He lost his footing on his left foot and brought the rod down into the water to keep his balance. It struck something moving. The surf around him seemed to be agitated and swirled around him.

Shark!

Henry stood still trying to see if he could find the thing that had grabbed onto his rubber boots. Whatever it was apparently

couldn't get its teeth on him to grab him. He'd dealt with baby sharks before. A good swat on the dorsal fin and they would swim away. Anything bigger than them that could fight back needed to be given respect. Typically once the things realized he was not food they would swim away. This thing hadn't learned its lesson yet.

Something grabbed at his right leg. Henry brought down the butt of the rod straight down and felt it hit something. A large fish tail broke through the surface near beside him. He struck again and it let go of its grip. He could see a shadowy form swim away. It was large, about 5 feet. But the tail was too large and too flexible to be a shark.

What in the hell?

Five feet in front of him a figure seemed to rise in the waves. It was human. Henry saw a girl's face, white and dripping, emerge from the water. She stood up more and exposed her upper torso. Henry gasped. She was naked.

She had brilliant red hair that though wet seemed to flow in the wind as if still submerged. Her face was cold white and her lips were dark red. He could see spots of freckles on her face. She raised up her chin, causing her breasts, white with dark hardened red nipples, to rise. The salt water cascaded off of them as she rose. The girl stared at Henry longingly. Henry saw a bruise on her forehead as if she had been struck by something.

He reached out to her but she backed away. She looked at him with deep dark brown eyes and began to move toward him. Henry grew nervous and unsteadily backed away. She began to move even faster toward him and Henry raised his arms as if in shock; the rod striking her as his arms flew up. Startled, she let out a shrill cry that hurt Henry's ears. She turned and dived back into the water. Henry saw the flick of the same large tail as she swam away.

As the first of the storm clouds began to form overhead, Henry made his way back to the shore. He was uncertain of his own sanity. The bait shop boys would certainly have laughed at him over this one. He also felt an odd sensation when images of her

bare chest flashed back into his mind. It had been a long time since he'd seen the sight of such a young body.

He drove to the bait shop before heading home. The shop owner asked if he was okay; then lectured him about not buddying up when he fished.

"You'll fall in a hole someday and we'll have to go dredge for your bloated half eaten corpse Henry"

Henry just smiled and opened a soda after paying for a bucket of frozen bait.

That night the sky howled in anger as the first bands of the system moved in. Apparently it was a quick forming tropical system that had even formed an eye. The weather reports noted that the center would cross the island just before dawn.

The lights flickered as Henry stared at the ceiling thinking of the large tail and the white, red tipped breasts of the girl. The night was streaked bellicose white which would illuminate Henry's bedroom of his beach house. It had been one of the few that had made it through Ike. Most, along with his neighbors, had been washed out. Memories washed into him mind.

Solitary he had stood on his deck as Ike's vapid surf crashed into the homes around him. They built too low and suffered for it.

He remembered one neighbor who had a young daughter with brilliant red hair and full breasts that seemed to emerge from her blouses. The girl was innocent of her bounty or its effect on even an old man. She would sunbath on her deck and wave to Henry as he came out. She laughed at Henry's scowling, occasionally flashing him by raising her top.

Henry sweated.

He remembered screams as he watched faces on that house stare at him Ike's black waves moved in. He saw the red hair flowing in the water, a white bleached form floating out into the darkness.

Henry knew that early morning the first part of the storm would have passed and the waterline on the sand would be littered with the sprawl of lost creatures trapped in the waves. Their writing

bodies would wither in the sun and become stiff and smell of brine and death. Some would be intertwined in red sea weed that would rot in the sunlight until the wind would finally bury them in new dunes, their shells and bones forgotten and worn back into sand.

Henry knew he had dozed when he woke with a start. 4 a.m. The indigo glow of his feckless alarm stared the time harshly. He dressed and gathered his gear. The wind was dying. The eye was watching overhead. Henry rose quickly and gathered his gear.

The moon had broken through the clouds and was a brilliant white stone on black; bleaching the water. It sat low on the horizon and was mirrored in the glassy still surf. With nothing to push the waves the water lay exhausted on the surf; flaccid and spent. Henry began to wade, his rod erect and firmly in his hands.

He reached what he knew to be the outer reaches of the flats. Beyond that the water would grow darker and colder as the bed sunk into deeper reaches. Henry saw a single pelican floating overhead; it's pterodactyl like form looking down on him; judging him as if some avian god of shadow. Henry cast out his line.

Henry waited.

He sensed the movement of the water around him. The tide was shifting with a rise in the wind and the undertow was beginning to rise. He could feel its pull around his ankles; subtle at first; as if a warning. Then it grew in strength and began to wrestle with Henry. He reeled back in his line and brought down the metal studded handle into the water. Once again, he felt it connect with something soft and firm.

A head rose up from the water and glared at him. Henry saw her hardened nipples emerge; glistening in the bath of the moon's light. The girl stared at Henry angrily; watching him as if contemplating her next move. Suddenly, she opened her mouth and screamed. It was a piercing shrill cry mean to cast fear into Henry. Her mouth revealed two rows of sharp, pointed teeth. She leaped for Henry and put her arms around him. At first Henry felt the cold, hard breasts press against him and heard her

quicken breaths. He looked into her eyes and saw that they were blood red around her brown pupils. She opened her mouth again to scream, bringing her teeth toward Henry's bare neck.

Then she gasped. She looked down to see that Henry had plunged a large serrated fishing knife into her lower stomach. She screamed in pain and tried to pull away but Henry had already grabbed her, his other hand working its way to her neck, twisting her around in a half nelson as the knife worked its way across her abdomen, so that her teeth now faced the sky as the water around them grew scarlet.

A splatter of red had already begun to work its way across the horizon. Another red morning. Another day of storms.

Henry smiled at the shop owner as he unwrapped his catch. The owner whistled as he looked at the three foot long tail. He had opened back up in the rain after recognizing Henry banging on the door.

"What kind of fish was this Henry?"

"A big one. Gave me quite a fight."

"You threw away the head? You can't mount it now?"

"You can't eat the head. I was never much for mounting anyway."

"It's amazing what those storms will bring to shore ain't it? You know you're crazy as hell for going out there in this storm."

"Yep, but it sure makes for good fishing." Henry replied as the floor rattled again with thunder from another rising band of clouds outside.

D.E. Cowen. A trial attorney by trade and author of a volume of poetry entitled Sixth and Adams (PW Press 2001). David lives in Houston, Texas with his wife Susan and his two sons. He practices law in the historical city of Galveston, Texas which has inspired much of his poetry and photography. His poems have

been published in various online journals (such as Eclectica, Gumball Poetry, The Cynic, Cosmic Debris, Wired Hearts and others), as well as hard copy journals published by George Mason University, University of Texas at Edinburg (formerly Pan American University), Stephen F. Austin University, Sam Houston State University and many privately published journals as well. His poetry was featured in the Canadian Broadcasting Company's radio program "Outfront" in a 2005 tribute on 9/11. His most recent poetry publications include poems placed in "Dark Portal"

Her Voice, by Melanie McCurdie-Boutin

He paces in front of me, arms waving, and all I can think of is pantomime. It's like a giant game of charades, guess what I'm really saying, read between the lines of raised tones and anger. That's when it started again, that voice in my head. More like the Devil on my shoulder, whispering madness in my ear.

You can do it. You want to.

It's a running monologue in my mind, and I find myself hearing it closer and louder as the raging continues in front of me. I roll my eyes and shake my head, knowing the lines by rote at this point. It's always the same..

My Monster is raging behind the bars of her Cage, rattling her nails across the bars, whispering promises that shriek in my ears. She dares me to free Her, begs and cajoles, batting Her eye lashes as she bares her teeth at me in fury. You would think the danger signs were plain, but he continues on as do I with my script to this old and tired game.

You know what I'm thinking. No, I highly doubt that. If you knew what I was thinking, you wouldn't be standing here, in front of me, yelling at me like you are, a wronged prince. No,

you would be running as far and as fast as you could.
Screaming.

Slice his gut open. Use that knife.

Oh you think so. No, I'm not thinking anything like that actually. That's laughable; you really think it's all about her? I would care but my give a damn is broken No, I really don't care if you do. You really should run now. For your own safety, you should RUN...NOW.

Use your nails. Scratch his eyes out.

Yes, I know you think that. You've said it enough times. You've practically shouted it off rooftops. But then your discretion was never the better part of valor in your world. You are so wrong, and you won't listen to me. You don't hear me. LISTEN. You need to RUN. For your own safety. Go...now

I could make you do it.

Grab his balls and rip them off.

Good, yes fine, go. Go! Run. That's what I've been saying, go...run...now I'm not accusing you...No. Please for once HEAR me. I'll use small words. You. Need. To. Run. Now. No. I'm not arguing the point. I'm just saying you need to get out of here.

Never shuts up does he? Tear out his tongue.

You could do it now, he won't see it coming.

There is a knife sitting right there.

Jam it in his eye.

Are you through? Have you had your say? Thrown your 10 cents into the ring? Okay now listen. There's a reason you have to go. If you don't my Monster will escape and you will be eaten alive. No, it's not a threat. It's a fact. It's feeding my ears with its evil thoughts. It hates you.

Use your teeth. Tear out his throat.

Bathe in his blood. Drink it in.

Do not accuse me of such wrongdoings. I have done nothing to deserve that. You really need to get out of here now. Run away. Go now. She is picking the lock on Her Cage. If she gets out... You want to back off now. Stop running your fucking mouth and pay attention. GET OUT. RUN.

Feed me. Slice his flesh. Destroy him. Feed him to me.

Let me end him if you won't. You are weak.

Me? I'm crazy? I'm not crazy, you are. You have been warned so many times. Had this same argument over and over, and I've saved you, time and again from Her. And yet, you still stand waving your arms like a deranged fool, ignoring the signs. You what? You did not...

He did. Let me out. I will feed. There will be nothing left. You will be free.

You. Fool. What have you done?

The recording ended there. Why she chose to record this particular argument we still aren't sure. It listens like an old movie script. He raging and deaf, and she bored, responding to the same things again and again.

What we do find in the background, behind the raised voices, are whispers, a dead and cold voice. It hisses its demands. I haven't slept in weeks after hearing this. Now we speak with her, for a short time, as she has been committed for life to this institution.

"What happened after you asked him what he'd done?" I ask her, watching carefully as she raises her eyes to mine. Open and frank, she hides nothing from us or our cameras.

"Surely you know," she replies in measured tones, voice steady and strong, "It's been all over the news. I didn't do it you know. It was HER" She shrugs her shoulders, not anger just statement of fact.

In fact I do know what the papers say, what the tabloids have blown up into epic proportions. They say she was found drenched in his blood, with bits of his skin in her teeth. The most horrific photos accompany these horrible tidbits. This does not

seem the woman who was found sitting among the dead and decaying body parts of her lover.

"I'd rather hear it from you if you don't mind," I suggest, "The papers often...enhance the truth? We think that your own story in your own words would be more informative."

She appraises me, our crew, and nods. "He said he had made arrangements to have me committed. That I was insane. She didn't approve of that. She escaped Her cage. It just wasn't strong enough to hold Her this time. She snuck up behind him, bared her teeth and bit him. Ripped off a chunk of flesh from the nape of his neck. He knew then that I wasn't insane. I couldn't stop Her." Tears cloud her voice, the sound of real regret.

"He screamed. It was so loud. I remember it echoed through the house. She was slobbering, giggling, as she started to tear him to pieces. She batted on him, ripping off his nose, sucked the eyes right out..."

Her voice breaks here, gagging slightly, obviously nauseated by the memory of this horror. I hand her a Kleenex, and she takes it with a sad smile, the shackles banging on the metal table that we sit at. No matter how hard we try to act civilized, the obvious reality of the situation is never more clear.

"She sucked his eyes right out of his head, I could hear the slurping sounds over his screaming. She dug her nails right into them, I heard them pop. Then... She drank them in." She falls silent now, eyes glassy and far away.

I let her think, process, and from the looks, swallow back her bile that was obviously threatening to come up. "So she took his eyes. What happened after that?" She looks at me with an incredulous expression, shocked that I would ask.

"She peeled the skin from his face, with her nails. It came off in ribbons. I remember thinking, like peeling an apple. I can't eat those anymore. He kept screaming, every time She would take a piece of skin or bite off a finger, it would rise. I wished he'd stop. I shouldn't have wished for that."

She is sweating bullets, the collar of her shirt already wet, and her breath is coming in sharp gusts, reliving the memories of that day must be horrific for her. She holds my eyes with hers, there is something odd in them, nothing that I can put my finger on exactly. "She grasped hold of his tongue then, piercing it with her claws, they sank right through, and yanked, it tore off, there was so much blood. It was almost black it was so red. She ate it," and wretches, her stomach sounding like it was exiting her throat, a raw grating sound. I start to rise and the guard motions for me to stay seated. He hands her a bucket, to which she puts to use catching the vomit that explodes from her mouth.

After a moment I ask if she is prepared to continue. She nods, motioning towards the pack of smokes I left on the table. I glance at the guard, who nods and I hand her one, offering a light. The cigarette jitters and dances before the flame and the match burns my fingers as she gets it lit. "Can you tell us the rest?"

"The rest. She tore him apart, into pieces. He'd bled out by then, finally stopped screaming. My ears were still ringing from the shrillness of it. There were bits of him laying everywhere, spattering the fireplace mantle, hanging from the screen. She was chewing on a bone, from his arm I think, gnawing on it. His head was on its side, eyes rolled back," she says, eyes down and shoulders slumped, "The voice was gone, drifted back into whatever hole it hides in, and the Creature was as well, back in Her cage. All that was left was the...what was left of him. That's when the police burst in, and arrested me. The neighbors must have heard him screaming," she finished, quietly, her head still down, staring at the floor.

I consider her story. It sounds like a story, made up. Creatures, Monsters, strange voices, like some kind of horror movie. "Did you do it?" I ask her, waiting for the typical no that all killers give, as though innocence was an acceptable defense. She is still looking down at the floor, the cigarette burning on the floor, curling poison smoke swirls up towards the fan.

She smiles slightly, slowly lifting her head, staring at me. Her lips part and expose a mouthful of sharks teeth, eyes

glowing with some kind of unhinged delight, and she snaps the chains that hold her captive. "She is me, I am She, Yes, We did."

Doctors Note: The patient in question has been removed from this facility and placed in a maximum security hospital. She was deemed extremely dangerous after the interview conducted by (name removed due to pending lawsuits) in which 5 men died. She remains one of the top 10 most dangerous offenders.

New Things, by SL Sullivan

Have you ever had one of those days when you woke up and decided that you wanted to try something new for a change? I did. I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to do, but I knew it had to be new and unorthodox. "I've never been skydiving." I thought. "Bungee jumping? Mountain climbing? No, those were too common." Pacing around the house, I could not come up with anything that would fulfill my hunger for something outrageous and foolish. I decided to take a bus downtown and then walk around trying to decide what I wanted to do. What would be really out there and completely unconventional, even for me. I started down a very empty, very long alley and surveyed the area. Nothing stood out. Maybe I was trying to think too hard. Maybe there just wasn't anything for me to do that would be 'new'. I was about halfway down the alley when I heard a noise by a dumpster. "Rats." I thought to myself and went over to kick a pile a cardboard leaning against it. A loud moan of rejection and arms came flinging out of the pile.

A somewhat large man stood from the pile of cardboard and started cussing at me. I tried to apologize, but he wanted to hear none of it. He started for me, angry and violent. He was swinging an empty bottle of whiskey at me. "What the fuck!" I yelled at him, just as he took a large swing at me, which in his intoxicated state, threw him off balance. Seeing this as an opening, I lunged for him, wrapping my arms around his waist, I lifted him off the ground and tackled him into the wall behind.

I let go and reared my right arm back, making a fist, then I froze for a moment. I dropped my arm down at my side. The bum was grabbing his lower right torso area. There was a red liquid running between his fingers. "Blood?" I thought. That's when I noticed a tubular metal object with a jagged edge, protruding from his body. "Oh fuck." I said in almost a whisper. He placed a hand on the wall behind him and began to push himself off the broken pipe. The vagabond was growling, almost insane like, as the pipe disappeared into his torso. Bits of organs and flesh dropped from the wound as well as little spurts of blood. Once he was separated from the pipe, he looked down at the ground. I saw it too. His whiskey bottle lay there, broken. He charged for it, I shouldered him away from it and grabbed the bottle at the neck. As I was leaned down, I felt a pain in my left side and fell. Dropping his knee, the bum growled and raised his other foot. I rolled left as his big boot came down inches from my head. I moved to stand and the son of a bitch threw himself on top of me, grabbing at the bottle. We wrestled around, each of us with a hand on the glass weapon. With one last effort and every bit of strength I had left in me, I rolled him onto his back and straddled his chest. With the broken end of the bottle towards the vagrant's neck, I placed both hands on the top and started to push downwards. He grabbed my wrists in an attempt to resist, but gravity was on my side. With nearly all my weight, I leaned on the bottle. I watched as it slowly moved downward and began to penetrate the skin on his throat. The entire incident seemed to unfold in slow motion. The broken bottle slowly sunk deeper and deeper into his neck. His breathing began to decelerate. His hands relaxed and then slowly fell, lifeless to the ground. His eyes continued to stare at me. A dead stare, void of any sign of a living soul.

I sat there for what seemed to be hours, but was only mere minutes. I noticed snowflakes landing on the poor bastards face. At first they would melt away, but now they were not. His body was cooling fast in this bitter cold weather. With some gruesome sounding squishing noises, I pulled the bottle from his neck. I stood up and threw it in the dumpster. I looked back at the corpse. I was shaking. Not from fear or guilt, but with excitement. Adrenalin coursed through me. This was it. This was what I decided that was new and exciting. I smiled slightly in a

"Nice job" sort of way. I almost jumped up and down like a little kid on Christmas morning. Just then I realized I was forgetting something. I had to clean up this mess and get the fuck out of here. I picked up the now stiffing corpse and dragged it over to the dumpster and shoved him in. I threw the garbage lying around over-top him and closed the lid. I followed the alley the remaining way and made my off for a bus.

After returning home, I contemplated the entire days event. After some thought, I decided I was not completely fulfilled. I wanted more. The rush I received was like a drug. I had to kill again. But this time, with determination and purpose. Not accidental. I decided that my next victim would be one of those harlots that walk Fifth Street every night. I'd have to catch one alone. I couldn't take the bus this time. I needed a vehicle. I also confirmed that I wanted a disguise of some sort, nothing to eccentric, but just enough to change my appearance, just in case. I went to the attic and pulled out my old box of Halloween costumes. After rummaging through, I pulled out a beard and a matching wig. I also found an old pair of non-prescription glasses. "Perfect", I thought. Donning my new look, I went on my quest for a vehicle. About two blocks down the road, I found an old station wagon sitting in an alley behind a warehouse. It was covered in leaves and other debris as if it had been sitting for a while. The doors were unlocked, so I hopped in the driver's seat and turned on the headlights. They worked, which meant the battery was still good. I ducked down under the dash and yanked some wires from the ignition. With my knife, I started stripping them and touching them together one by one until I heard the engine crank over. "Score!" I shouted in my head and popped back up into the seat. I shifted the car into gear and made off for town. It was close to one in the morning when I arrived on Fifth. I parked about a block away from where the 'Women of the night' usually took their stance. There were only two girls out. Possible the cold had kept the majority at home or where ever they crashed for the night. I didn't know and I didn't care. I saw a car pull up to them. Apparently some discussion took place and one of the girls got in. It was my turn. I drove up to the last girl and gave my pitch. I flashed a hundred dollar bill and she was in the car within seconds. "Where we goin' sweetie?" She asked. Her

cigarette chewed voice almost made me gag. "I know a private alley." I answered and drove off to where I killed the alcohol reeking bum.

I pulled the rusty wagon to the side, just past the dumpster. The whore took her chewing gum out of her mouth and said, "So, what'll it be sugar?" Again, I held back a gag. This was going to be easy. The amount of hatred I had for this disgusting female, boiled inside me. I told her I wanted to bind and gag her. She asked for another hundred dollars. I didn't care, I was getting it back anyway. I duct taped her hands first. She started complaining about the tape. I then wrapped it around her mouth to shut her the fuck up. The slut wasn't happy with this and started kicking her legs at me. "Fucking cum-bucket!" I yelled, pulling out a large chopping knife. Then I heaved my arm back and rammed it straight into the bitch's cunt. I could hear the 'ching' of the blade striking her pelvic bone. That stopped her legs from flailing around. She just froze. Her eyes were as big as plums. I leaned into her face. "You enjoying this you dirty fucking whore?" I said as I twisted the blade inside her. I could hear her screams, though muffled by the duct tape. Blood poured from her pleasure box like a crimson river. Oh, this was more exciting than I could have ever imagined. I slowly withdrew the knife, making certain to let experience as much pain as possible. I showed the knife to her, then wiped it off on her forehead. My head was spinning with the rush of adrenalin. I ripped off her top and gazed at her stomach for a moment. It heaved up and down with each muted scream. I slowly began to draw circles on her with the point of the knife, pressing ever so slightly. Eventually the skin became scratched and then started bleeding. I continued my circle, round and round the knife spiraled. I gently pushed harder on the knife, forcing it to cut deeper. I then completely sliced through the skin and removed the circular piece. I poked at her organs with a bit of a giggle. She wasn't screaming anymore. I think she passed out. I was not happy about this. I slapped her across the face and screamed, "Get up, bitch!" Her eyes, drowned by tears, lazily opened. I reached in the freshly formed gap in her torso and clutched a handful of entrails. Pulling them out I raised them up to the street-walking sluts neck and diligently intertwined them tight around. Her eyes bulged, darting back and forth. Snot

blew from her nose as her body started to convulse uncontrollably, fighting for air. I laughed. I laughed so hard that I puked on the tramps face. With one last effort, I pulled tight on the slippery guts tangled around her neck and she was gone.

I sat back and took a deep breath. I think I may have ejaculated a little. I laughed about that for a moment. That had to be the most excitement I've ever had in all my life. I hopped out of the wagon and opened the rear gate, grabbed the dead whore by her hair and then slid her out. Her heels thumped on the ground with a wet splat in the damp, slushy snow. I grabbed the entrails from her neck to save as a souvenir, and then I heaved her upper body over the dumpster edge, grabbed her legs and then shoved her in. She landed directly on top of the bum. As I was closing the lid, I heard someone say, "Hey! What'cha doing down there?" I turned and saw some good Samaritan rent-a-cop standing in front of a rusty, blue door, lighting up a smoke. I grabbed my knife, closed the tail-gate and then made my way towards him, grinning from ear to ear, squeezing my handful of hooker guts. They just felt so neat and squishy in my hand.

As I drew closer, I saw the guard go for his Taser, holding his right hand up in a 'stop right there' sort of way. His eyes widened when he saw my trophy innards. I saw him mouth the words, "What the fuck?" Laughing maniacally, I continued my approach. He raised his weapon and instructed me to stop. I laughed again, waving my knife back and forth. As the excitement coursed through my body, I felt unstoppable. He took aim, "Stop mutha-fucker! I'm not gonna tell you again!" I just kept on advancing towards him, squeezing tightly on the intestines with the biggest grin on my face. He fired his weapon and I felt a pinch in my neck. My entire body trembled and I fell to my knees right at his feet. The adrenalin rushing through my system kept me from blacking-out. Just as I was pulling out the prongs from my skin, I felt an extreme and very intense pain to the left side of my head. It felt as if my skull had just exploded and I fell to the ground. My head hit the pavement with a loud crack. I saw two bloody teeth bouncing on the ground a couple feet away. Blood and saliva dribbled from my mouth. I propped myself onto my elbow and turned my eyes towards the guard. In his right hand he held a baton high in the air. I braced myself for the

second attack. I tried to avoid the hit, but his weapon connected again with my face, breaking my nose. I could hear the bone snap. Warm blood flowed down across my mouth and over my chin. The panicked guard straddled over me about to strike again. At the same time his night-stick connected with my skull, my knee connected with his groin. He dropped to his knees, grabbing his crushed nuts. I saw this as a chance to attempt to get away. I wanted to finish him off, but I did not have the strength now. I dragged myself over to the wall and propped myself up. I looked down at the guard, called him a 'lucky mother fucker' and threw my souvenir hooker guts at him. He was righting himself as I began to waddle towards the station wagon. I opened the driver's door and pulled myself in. In the rear view mirror, I could see him yelling on his radio and running towards the street. I started the car and threw it into drive. Pulling away, I gave the security asshole the finger and threatened to finish this one day. I drove off and continued to drive all night. I have decided, a new town will lead to a new start. This was just way too much fun to stop now.

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The Raven Haired Girl, by Cynthia Weaver

She stares at me. Rather, her gaze bores through me and gives me shivers. This girl is hardly old enough to be in the adult psychiatric unit. Yet, here she is standing about fifteen feet away just glaring. There is a surreal evil emanating from her and it feels as if she is penetrating my soul. I know this sounds strange. Possibly it is her appearance; black clothing, raven hair, and dark eyes. There is something undefinable about this particular patient. The sensation of darkness is unmistakable. I have never felt this kind of foreboding. She

remains without moving for five minutes or so before leaving. Although I don't know her name, she frightens me.

An abusive boyfriend, Antonio, caused me to move from the East Coast to California. He had become a stalker and broke my restraining order several times. Finally, after reporting him to the police, they arrested him and he's currently doing three years in prison. He's a meth addict and started beating on me while he was high. I fought back once and it resulted in a broken kneecap. I tried to stay in my hometown but he kept finding me. I would change my phone number and the ex would call. He'd show up at my jobs high and start yelling at everyone. I'd get fired each time. After moving around a bit, I made the decision to move as far away as I could - California. However, I think Antonio knows I'm out here. I've gotten a couple of phone calls very early in the morning. There is no one on the line but I can hear breathing. I believe he's checking things out. I'm not sure he is aware I'm here but I've been cautious, I won't be warned when he's released. Good behavior and budget cuts could mean early parole. I'm comforted by the cross I wear that my mother left me after she died. I wear the cross to work even though it's against hospital regulations.

I live a simple life. I own a small house about thirty minutes from the hospital. The type of job I have adds considerable stress to my life. I enjoy gardening. On weekends, when I get them, that's pretty much all I do, putter around my garden. Being outdoors in the sun working in my yard is relaxing. I live on almost an acre of land. The small shed behind my house where I keep the yard tools and riding lawn mower looks like a small barn, it's cute. My father taught me how to use one and at first I couldn't even get it started but eventually I learned to master the mower and all my tools including a small chainsaw. I keep all of my gardening tools razor-sharp so I can keep my shrubs uniform and nice looking. Some are so sharp they could sever someone's head clean off. I'm always careful with these tools. There are several old oak trees and it is necessary to cut down some of the limbs that grow too close to my home. The activity is enjoyable and it takes my mind off of the crazies in the hospital.

I work at a large, dangerous psychiatric facility in Los Angeles County. It houses the most insane patients, sometimes for days, sometimes for months. The psychiatrists and the court judges make the decisions regarding the patients stay. As a psychiatric technician it is my job to chart the 'inmates' activities, interact with them as much as possible, and put them in restraints if necessary. Many of us get kicked, punched, spit upon, and bitten. The pay is lousy but the job is never dull. Sometimes I have to work in the Emergency Room for the patients. They come in without the benefit of drug therapy so they are whacked out of their minds. Often they arrive without clothing. The police generally bring in our patients. On occasion they are caught running down freeways, eating out of trashcans, drunk and disorderly exhibiting bizarre behavior and hallucinating. Families call in because their sons or daughters stop taking their medication and want to kill them or themselves. Most of the patients are homeless. They wander the streets, muttering to themselves, crazy as bats without sonar.

First things first. We take away their belts and shoelaces so they can't hang themselves. Then we inventory all their belongings; most of the time it's all rubbish they collected off the streets. Then we do a body scan to document bruises, cuts or any abnormalities so the facility can't be sued and to prove staff members haven't done anything injurious to the patient. Here lies the problem. The patients can harm us but we can only put them in restraints and they usually hurt us when we do. It's possible that I can be choked from behind so I am always alert to my surroundings. I am vigilant regarding people standing behind me. Techs often have to go out on medical leave. The patients are dangerous people. A few have committed horrible crimes and are waiting to be transferred to the State Hospital for the criminally insane. In these cases we are just a holding place until a bed is found.

Today is ordinary except for the raven haired girl; she's staring at me again. Only this time she's a couple of feet closer. Her gaze pierces through me for five minutes. She doesn't move, doesn't talk, only studies me. I'm not certain but I believe my cross is exposed. I feel the malevolence once more.

Heart racing, I feel like her prey as she focuses in on me like a hawk. My mouth goes dry. I decide to check out her chart at the nurse's station. A simple schizophrenic with religious obsession, this diagnosis means she is on Haldol and Thorazine. This is known as the 'cocktail.' There is no incidence of recent violence in her chart so I calm down a bit. Raven hair was found by police late at night, in a church, talking to herself. That's not too bad, I thought. My heart reaches its normal beat. I start to relax. She was brought in and placed on the cocktail after seeing her psychiatrist, Dr. Lee.

I admire Dr. Lee; she is intelligent, attractive, and has great stories. She recently discharged a patient who met the physician with a shotgun in the parking lot. The patient had gotten too attached to the doctor and decided she couldn't live without her. So the nut threatened to kill her beloved physician. Dr. Lee talked her out of her irrational decision and took the gun from her without further incident. She was arrested and sent to another facility. The story spooked me. I've always been careful going out to my car after shift ends because of the ex-boyfriend. Now I have to worry about raven hair as well.

Day three and her black eyes are transfixed on me. This time she is standing even closer, maybe ten feet away. There's an odd smile on her face but she says nothing. Usually I chat with the patients, but this one scares me. I think I will wait until she says something first. Clearly she is either taken with me or I remind her of someone. I don't want to provoke her into anything. She's the youngest patient in Ward B. I want her discharged soon because she creeps me out. I feel bad for her; she's young and will probably be institutionalized for life. Yet there is still that incomprehensible sense of dread I have when she is in my presence. It's baffling to be honest. It raises the hair on my arms. She seems devious. I don't trust this one at all.

Patient evaluation is the first thing we do before our shift starts. All the nurses, the doctor on call, and every tech on duty sits in a room and we discuss all the patients in the ward. After days off, there are usually some discharges. Sometimes there are incidents. Nurse Johnson was kicked so hard her leg

was broken and the patient, Alexander, has bitten several others. We were told to watch out for patients Nixon and Cornsky. They were caught having sexual relations in the bathroom. This is a typical patient evaluation for the floor. It is done daily so everyone is aware of what and who to watch.

While writing in a patient's chart I glance up and see her gazing intensely at me for the fourth time in as many days. It's almost hypnotic. She has taken a few steps closer to me and I notice her smile is more crooked and hideous. After a couple of minutes, I finally tell her "hello" and she runs off, but not before looking back at me with those eyes. They are intense and almost murderous I note. Then I stop myself. I'm just seeing things that aren't there. She's medicated and nothing can happen. However, I can't stop seeing her creepy fixation in my mind's eye all evening long. There is something about her I can't put my finger on.

The supervisor approves of my work and I was promoted not long after being hired. I can 'read' patients fairly well and it pays off. I treat everyone with kindness and most of the patients get along with me. On New Year's Eve I was asked to join a card game with a group of them. I had a grand time and allowed them to smoke one cigarette each at midnight. This was against the rules but I figured it was a special event. We all smoked one.

On the fifth day I look up and she is right in front of me. Goth girl is focusing on me while I was sitting at my table charting.

"Would you like to see my drawings?" she inquires.

I sense she is looking right through me. I can see her eyes closely now and they are black. The same color as her hair. My mouth goes dry again.

"Sure," I reply.

I get up and follow her to the dorm room. The rooms house four patients in each but this one is empty now. I notice several pictures taped up on the wall, near her bed. As I get closer to them I see they are all stick figure drawings, two figures on

each piece of paper. They are drawn in black crayon. Pencils are forbidden as they are like shivs to inmates.

"This is me and this one is you," she explains.

I examine them and see that in each one she is killing me. In one of them she is stabbing me, in another shooting me, in the third she is strangling me. The last one completely unnerves me; she's driving a cross through my chest.

"These are nice," I say to her.

Actually I am cringing at the thought of her staring at me for days then running back to her room to draw death enactments. I tell her they are nice because we are the only two in the room. She is almost as tall as me and I am not certain what she could do. Psychiatric patients can often be quite volatile. She watches me and now her smile is wide and I can see her teeth. I can feel my heart pounding again.

"I thought you might like them."

Then she walks away. God, I'm glad I have tomorrow off..

The phone rings and I'm called in because a staff member was injured by a patient. Trudging into work, unhappy, because days off are coveted. However, I can't leave fellow workers understaffed. This is one of the most dangerous situations and the patients seem to sense it. During patient evaluation I discover the raven haired girl was discharged during the night.

I'm mortified that Dr. Lee released the crazy girl. She's definitely not stable. I hunt down the psychiatrist and ask to speak to her regarding the release of an apparent sociopath.

"Dr. Lee, I don't understand how you could have released that raven haired girl. She's completely deranged. Those pictures she drew illustrate her instability. Don't you agree? How is it that you let her out?"

"I'm guessing you're talking about Samantha, the one who had the crayon drawings on her wall. They were not appropriate, I'll agree with you on that, but her medication level was stable. We

cannot legally keep her here just because of some pictures she made several days ago. She's not hearing voices anymore so I believe the medication is working. I released her into the care of a friend from her church. Samantha told me her friend will monitor her meds. There was nothing more I could do to keep her in this unit so I had to release her."

I felt my flesh crawl at the thought of raven hair outside. She could be anywhere. Easy for Dr. Lee, this woman wasn't fazed when a patient met her in the parking lot with a loaded shotgun. I fear the drawings were a warning and I can't shake the feeling that she will be waiting for me. Now I could have two stalkers. I'll have to use extra caution. Maybe it's time for another move. I can't keep running.

My shift today is normal, whatever that means, and I look forward to an actual day off after hearing the news of the crazy girl's release. They are bringing up Maroney from the psych E.R. to replace the injured nurse until she can return. At least I don't have to work 14 days in a row. Exhaustion equals carelessness equals injury. My evening is up and I am ready to go home and sleep.

I am warming up my car when WHAM! Someone hits my driver side window. I jump. My heart jumps like an earthquake shock and I can't breathe.

"Fuck," I cry out.

I look up and see my friend Ed, the security guard, smiling at me.

"Hey, you going home?" he asks.

"Crap Ed, you scared the shit out of me."

"Oh, sorry, I'm just use to tapping windows with my MagLight. Didn't mean to frighten you."

"Well, you did and yes, I'm going home. I only have one day off and I'm tired as hell."

"Okay, sorry I gave you a scare, have a good one."

He walks off to bother other employees going home. For a fleeting moment I thought it was the raven hair girl and let out a huge sigh of relief. The thought evaporated while driving home.

The keys unlock the front door. God am I glad to be home. Tired and unnerved by Ed's unexpected rap on my car window, I double lock the door. I've become more prudent lately. I turn on the TV and grab a beer from the fridge. Normally, I'm not a drinker but maybe it will help me relax. Only stupid reruns are on of course, so I veg out on the couch and lay down to watch them. I'm so exhausted I start to fade out but try to stay awake a bit longer for Seinfeld, my favorite syndicated show.

I hear breathing. She is standing over me and leans down to whisper in my ear, "I've been waiting for you, you knew it was coming all this time."

I look up; she is smiling like an insane clown, standing completely still, glaring at me with those black eyes. I am paralyzed with fear but manage to get to my feet. Cold sweat starts to gather immediately on my forehead. In her hands is a large crucifix. I had known she was murderous but refused to acknowledge it. Why didn't I go with my gut feeling? She swings the crucifix as quick as a butcher cutting meat. As it slices open my neck, in horror, I look down and see the blood rushing out of me and down my scrubs.

"Why?" I say to her but I don't think the words ever come out right. It sounds more like gurgling.

"I am the daughter of Beelzebub my Father," she shrieks.

I sink to my knees as her laughter mocks me. As I lie dying, the last things I see are those riveting eyes, the awful stare, and that maniacal grin. They will have to get someone to replace me at work is my last thought on earth.

Jumping up I realize that it was only a dream. I've spilled the beer I was holding all over the floor. I must have dozed off, God that was awful. I hope I don't have more dreams like that one. I'm sweating and thirsty. I get up and get another beer. Just as I open it, the phone rings. 'Shit, it's probably him again,' as I look at the clock. It's a little after one a.m. 'I'm done with all of this,' I think, 'But I've still got a few tricks up my sleeve.' I pick up the phone and hear the breathing.

"Antonio, I know it's you. Baby, why aren't you talking to me? I miss you and still love you. I want you to come home."

There is silence then the voice on the other end speaks.

"I know you're in California but I don't know where, will you give me the address? I have always loved you and I want to be with you again. I'm different now, off drugs, and I've gone through some anger management classes here. Please honey let me stay with you again. I'm getting out in two weeks."

"Yes, I would like that, and I'm glad you're better. I love you too."

I gave him my address and smiled, 'I'm going to get rid of both my stalkers.'

The next morning I found a rental house in the next town. I told the owner a quick move was desirable because black mold was discovered in my house and it needed to be abated immediately. He agreed and told me to move in when it was convenient. He pro-rated the early move in date and that was fine. The renter didn't run a credit check so I gave him a fake last name. No one will be able to track me down. I'll have to ask for some time off work so I can move. I know I have accumulated a two weeks of vacation; they should be able to give me that.

After returning home I decide to check my mail since the mailman is down the street. I open the box and there are a bunch of printing papers jammed in, along with some mail. I grab all of it and walk back to my house. I glance at the crumpled pages and shit, its black crayon drawings of raven hair killing me again!

She knows where I live and she's still completely insane. Well, that's going to change since I'm moving.' I made a great decision,' I think,' I'm going to fuck both of these losers in one swift motion.' No more stalkers.

Moving again is a pain in the ass but I get it done in two days. I don't have many belongings thanks to all my moves. I've left a lot of stuff behind or thrown it out. Working for the county is great; they give me days off without any problem. Even though I moved in two days I have another twelve off. The owner of my rental has given me permission to work in the yard. I left most of my landscaping tools in the shed since it was just too much to haul and moving quickly was my motive. My house is up for rent as well and the new renters will need to use the mower and such. After a few days of doing nothing I head for Home Depot. They have all the gadgets and stuff required for a lovely garden so I buy what's needed. Almost two weeks of working in the backyard will give me a great tan and a positive attitude. Exactly what I need after all the recent insanity in my life.

I drive through Starbucks and get a mocha Frappuccino with extra mocha, my favorite. Then stop to pick up a newspaper at the gas station across the street. In a new town, I'd like to see what's going on. I'm sure there's nothing newsworthy. I might as well be in Mayberry the town is so small. At least there's a Starbucks and Macy's, I can live with that and happy here. I still have my job, what a perfect move.

Heading home I glance at the newspaper and notice a large headline. "Parolee killed and dismembered." Immediately, I pull over and grab the paper. The police are looking for the former tenant. Holy shit, Antonio was murdered in my house! I read through the article and it states he was hacked to death with a hedge clipper after being hit over the head with a shovel. 'My gardening tools,' I think, 'oh my god.' The paper also reported he was dismembered and body parts were scattered all over the house. A crucifix was sticking out of his chest. According to the story, the homicide was thought to be committed between two and three a.m. The electricity to my home was turned off so it would have been pitch dark. The raven haired girl must have mistaken my ex-boyfriend for me. I know it was her...those

pictures in the mail. I'm frantic; one of them was a drawing of dismemberment.

Home at last. I'm completely freaked out by the news. First I'll check my mail then call the police. I open the mailbox and there is only one piece of paper folded in half. I slowly unfold it, knowing. That sense of dread fills me once more and again, I can't breathe. I stare at the picture in disbelief. It's a black crayon drawing of me making a phone call and the raven haired girl is standing behind me with an axe...she knows, she's here...and now I know my fate..

Short Bio for Cynthia Weaver

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The true horrors of my life are getting a B.A. in philosophy at Berkeley. I have worked in the Emergency Room in North Hollywood, CA and the psychiatric facility for the County of L.A.

I blog about my crazy life, write horror stories, and am starting to work on a unique novel with another writer about our relationship, which started when we were both nine years old.

I moved to Charlotte, NC via forty years as a Southern California native. I don't like culture shock but it happens.

The Girl, by Mark Slade

I was at Marty's on the north side, having a few too many with Skip Below, when she walked in.

There was only a few of us there, just after eleven. Marty's wasn't picking up the business like it used to. So Louis had to sell to his so-called girlfriend Jenna. Still, the business was in the dumps. Thing is, we all think Louis is lying. None of us had ever seen this broad. And this Louis is a liar and a half.

Freddie and Miles was in the back shooting pool. Ross was passed out in the beer he spilled at his table. Louis was serving drinks and wise cracks. I was drinking scotch and chasing it with Rockstar in my Pabst. Skip was having his usual, twelve dark beers and getting ready for number thirteen when the discussion of the evening became heated. It was friendly conversation about basketball, when it suddenly went sour.

It became a pretty heated discussion about what the President was going to do with Syria. Skip was in a highly state of intoxication and that was never good when it was mixed in with his extreme take on politics. Throw Louis in there antagonizing Skip.

"Tell us what you really think, Skip," Louis winked at me and laughed. He wiped down the glasses and placed them on the wall behind him.

"I think we should nuke the whole lot of those towel-heads and shove them back in their mothers," Skip made a disgusting fisting motion. "We as Americans already made several mistakes, including not shipping you know who back to you know where." Skip raised an eyebrow and jabbed his thumb toward Miles and Freddy.

Miles walked over, stopped half way between the pool tables and the bar. He held the cue like it was a weapon ready to be used. "Yo, Josh. Best tell little Adolf to watch his mouth. He's raining on our parade, spoiling the black brother's reunion. You know all us black folk are brothers down deep, all look alike. Right, Adolf?"

Freddie chimed in right after Miles. He grabbed his crotch, stuck his chest out. "Suck my black mamba, you white sheet wearing faggot."

"Don't say anything else," I whispered to Skip. I knew these guys. I work at the warehouse with them. They are dangerous as hell. Freddie spent some time in Chino and only got the job because his brother in law was a manager there. Miles, well he just isn't right in the head anyway. I watched him beat a man for not lending him a smoke here in this very bar when it was under a different ownership. "Okay, fellas. He's just drunk. He talks shit when he's lit up. You know how it is. You talk stupid when you're not sober."

"I make more sense when I'm not sober. What's wrong with you?" Skip said, leaning in toward me.

"Shut up," I whispered, my hand half covering my mouth.

Freddie glanced at Miles, started to walk toward us when the door opened. A tall cool blonde walked in, stood in the doorway. She looked like a photograph, stiff, beautiful angle, all the right shadows dropping on her. She held a cigarette between her perfect red lips, nostrils flared, chest heaving. Her eyes danced around the room. Maybe she was counting heads, or scanning to see if any enemies were present. Her green dress had splotches of red on it...blood I assumed. Any way you look at it, she saved Skip and me some trouble.

"Would you look at that...." Louis said.

"You know her?" I asked Louis when he started to come from behind the bar.

He turned back to me, leaned in. "Not yet I don't." He chuckled.

Freddie and Miles stopped shooting pool, tossed their sticks on the table. They came over to the bar, smiling, tugging at their clothes, primping.

"Who's the girl?" Freddie said.

"Man oh man, this is what Miles likes," Miles laughed.

"She's something else," I heard Skip say. "I don't know about you boys, I'm going to get me some of that." He rose from his stool and Freddie pushed him back down.

"So you say, White boy," Freddie said. "This slash is mine!"

"I don't think the lady likes darkies, buddy-boy!" Skip said.

Miles had already taken a switch blade from his back pocket. The blade sunk deep into Skip's abdomen. He went down without a sound. I jumped from my stool. I couldn't believe this. Guys I had been drinking with the past two years killing each other over a girl they hadn't even spoken to.

Louis ran over screaming, hands flailing above his head. "You idiots! You can't kill somebody and leave him in my bar!"

Miles had produced his .38 he carried with him just in case his ex-wife's boyfriend wanted retaliation for breaking windows in their house. Miles smiled big. "Nigger, you going to die wishing you were the one that brought a gun to a knife fight." With that statement, he fired twice; both bullets caught Freddie in the neck. Freddie dropped on the spot, blood splattered a table behind him.

Louis sighed, approached Miles cautiously, a nervous hand extended toward him. "Give the gun, Miles. Come on, man. This aint worth it. Believe me."

"Don't fuck with me, Louis. All I want is the girl. I have to have her. I'm telling you."

Louis took a chance, leapt on him with ability I never knew the man had. He grabbed hold of miles forearm and bent it toward Miles's chest just as the gun went off. Miles looked at Louis in disbelief, then disappointment. Miles staggered back, sat in a chair. Life immediately left his eyes that were fixed on the girl.

Louis resigned. He put his head in his hands and wept, sobbing loudly.

A jar of pickled onions came down hard on Louis head. The jar shattered, and Louis fell on his face. Blood trickled down from his forehead. I stood over him, holding the thick bottom of the

jar. "Sorry Louis," I said. "I need some loving, and it looks like that girl is going to give it to me."

I looked at the girl. She smiled, slinked over to a table, and moved the chairs out of the way. She didn't say a word, not one word. She beckoned me with a finger, hiked up her dress around her waist and bent over the table. I saw the perfect roundness of her ass in those white silk panties. The animal inside me took over. I rushed over to her, grunting and snorting like a bull in heat. I ripped her panties down in one quick succession. She cooed, jiggled a little. I unzipped my fly.

Before I knew it, the girl had turned and pounced on me. She knocked me flat on my back with a backhand. I didn't know what was happening. I laid there, feeling blood run from my busted lip to my chin. She straddled me, riding slow at first, progressing faster and faster. Just as we were both climaxing, she lowered her face to me, bared her fangs.

I panicked.

I tried to fling her off me, but she was too strong. The girl sank her fangs into my neck -the pain was immense and the blood gushed. She drank sloppily, making those disgusting sounds, smacking her lips.

Just as I was losing consciousness, I heard Louis say: "Hey Jenna? You gonna leave me some, baby?"

The Smile, by Sergio Pereira

I smile. The reason is irrelevant, because I'm just happy to smile. Always. The grin, permanently imprinted on my face, bears a constant reminder of my reawakening and what I am supposed to be. I used to be a sad, sad person - always frowning, always afraid - running down the boulevard of broken dreams and counting the endless curses. But then, I found out that the

greatest gift is the simple curvature staring back at me in the mirror, which says, "Everything is a-okay." It doesn't matter if my parents hate me. It doesn't matter if my boss fires me. It doesn't matter if my wife leaves me. It doesn't matter if you smash me in the face. Nothing really matters, because you will never take away my smile. The moment when I decided to end the heartache, bury the depression, cull the sadness, and carved this one true symbol of hope onto my face, I finally found my heart. Now, I can help you, by carrying your heart in my smile, too.

Final Notice, by R.M. DuChene

The navy-blue upholstered sofa was littered with deep maroon splotches and sagging in the middle from the weight of the decaying corpse. The cushions appeared impossibly low to the floor, as if the dead weighed ten times more than the living. Circling around a face that was forever frozen in horror, small houseflies buzzed in circles before landing on a pale nose, a purple cheek, or an open eye.

In the kitchen, another body lay decomposing on the floor. Slightly longer in death, the uniformed cadaver's nose sat even with the floor. With half of its head missing, it appeared to be trapped between this world and the one beneath the black and white, checkered linoleum. Beneath the dark-blue back of its pin-striped jacket, something moved, squirming. Still clutched in its outstretched hand, a crumpled yellow and blood-stained envelope sat littered with maggots that had tumbled out from the dark, cool, food-rich confines of a shirt sleeve.

In the master bathroom, a woman sat in front of a vanity running a brush through her silky black hair. Next, she applied the mascara, eye-shadow, and lipstick. Finished with her make-up, She stood in front of the mirror and pulled down her v-cut top, not a lot, just enough to expose her cleavage. Once satisfied

with her appearance, she returned to the living-room and stared at the corpse on the sofa as if she was considering moving it. They've sent two already, she thought. One more to go - the final notice. Hanging just above an impossibly white fireplace, a hand-carved wooden clock chimed ten times. Ooh, she thought, I better hurry. She took once last look at the decaying body on the sofa, sighed deeply, and then went into the kitchen.

Knowing that her date or dates would be there at any moment, the woman reached under the oak dining table and slid out a small, white, plastic stepping stool. She carried the stool to refrigerator, sat it down in front of two wide, chrome double-doors, and then stepped onto it. Stretching as far as her short arms could manage, she slid her palm along the dusty surface of the refrigerator's top. After a few trips back and forth, her fingers found what she was searching for. Smiling, she pulled down her deceased husband's 9 mm Beretta and ejected the magazine. After seeing that the weapon was fully loaded, she slid the magazine back home and placed the pistol in the small of her back, tucked tightly into the waist-band of her brand new white skinny jeans.

The doorbell rang.

The woman approached the front door and peered out through the peep-hole. She could make out three faces and, beyond them, a police cruiser parked on the street. They're here, she thought. It's time. She reached behind her back, pulled the pistol free, and then looked back through the peephole. One man was wearing a black, two-piece suit, the two other two were wearing police uniforms. This must be my lucky day, she thought as she gripped the brass doorknob tightly and twisted.

Movie Review: You're Next

First off, let me assure you that nobody asked me for my opinion on whether or not You're Next is worth watching. I, like most viewers of this film was actually very excited to see it and

this review is just a few of the residual head-scratching feelings that I came away with.

Now that the formality is done, let me just say that the movie *You're Next* confused me from the very start and became even more confusing after the credits rolled. Perhaps it was the filmmaker's intention to leave me in such an awful state and if it was, I would call the movie a raving success. The special effects were standard to good; the score (consisting mainly of the same song stuck in repeat mode) was fantastic and gave the movie an eerie feeling, and the main protagonist was a tremendously good actress who Chuck Norris probably checks under his bed for before he goes to sleep. Those were the good things. Now, I'll list the bad in the form of annoying questions.

1) What was the whole beginning about? The killers basically killed the poor neighbors for no reason and felt it was necessary to write '*You're Next*' in blood. Was this to throw off the audience?

2) What father would let his daughter run outside to try and get the car when there's a maniac out there with a crossbow and wicked aiming abilities? The dude even opened the door for her. What a douche.

3) What husband (the same dork as the father) leaves his distraught wife alone in a room upstairs when there's a killer on the loose? I was beginning to think that he was the killer!

4) After the Mother is slain (nicely BTW), why would everyone run off and leave a defenseless girl with the body?

5) When the crossbow guy outside was shooting through the windows, why did the family brave running in front of the window with chairs? It seemed to me that they could have safely crawled under the window. Or maybe they could have all stayed where they were. That whole scene felt like an episode of *Scooby-Doo*.

6) That was the first night that the parents were in the house, right? Why did the killer(s) hide out in the closet and pee in bottles for "days."

7) Why oh why did they make this movie? Why did I watch it (and keep on watching it)?

Judging from the IMDB ratings and reviews, there were plenty of people out there who loved You're Next and I don't disagree with their points of view. I saw the good parts of the film as they did, but couldn't get past the shoddy acting, terrible writing, and intellect attacking situations that kept cropping up throughout. There were so many more instances where I scratched my head during this film, but this was supposed to be a simple, one-page review. Instead of telling the whole plot like most reviews, I chose to hone in on the things that bothered me.

The best answer to my questions above that I can think of is that the makers of You're Next was going for a Cabin in The Woods feel for the movie. Cabin in The Woods did an excellent job of using horror movie clichés to its advantage and made them believable within the context of the real story (which wasn't about the kids in the cabin at all, but of the mysterious group that pulled all of the strings behind the scenes). If that was this movie's intention, I believe that it failed in the execution. Overall, I give this movie 4/10 Rattles.

END OF THE LINE, DUDE