

**NEVER MIND
THE BOLLOCKS**

HERE'S

EIDOLOTRY DIGITAL

#2

FROM THE LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT

Welcome Back Psychos! This month we are beyond thrilled to present five chilling stories from across the pond. Horror has its roots in the pens of great U.K. writers such as Mary Shelley, H.G. Wells, Henry James and so many more. The five stories in this month's issue continue that proud tradition. Keep calm and carry on? Not this month Psychos!

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Spots

Dave Musson

Mid-afternoon, Happy Woodland Nursery main office

The shrill warble of the office phone was cut off mid-ring as Emma snatched it from the cradle. Her eyes were wide with panic; she could feel the nervous sweat racing down her spine and dripping from her armpits.

‘Laura?’ she almost yelled into the handpiece, ignoring all the usual phone-answering protocol. ‘Laura! Speak to me!’

Emma squinted, trying to hear something positive, but the only sound that came through was a strange static, like the sort that would play from a white noise machine. Only this sound was vicious, jarring, ear-splitting. Underneath that awful racket, Emma thought she could hear the panicked voices of her colleagues.

Clara rushed over to Emma’s desk and mouthed ‘speaker’ at her. Emma nodded and pushed the button that broadcast the call to the room. Now both women could hear the horrible, fuzzy alien squall.

‘Laura!’ Emma tried again. ‘Laura! Matt! Kirsty! Margot!’ Her hysteria inched up with each name.

Clara put a hand on Emma’s arm to try and comfort her.

‘Someone! Anyone, please answer!’ Emma shouted.

In response, the static, but still with undertones of other voices. Then—quiet but unmistakable—came the sound of screaming.

‘What was that?’ Clara asked, fear etched onto her face. At the same time, there was a loud noise in their office—a clunk, as their door locked on its own.

Clara rushed to the door and rattled the handle, but it was no good—it had somehow been locked from the outside. She rushed back to Emma and

soon both women were yelling the names of their colleagues over and over into the speaker phone, desperate for someone to pick up.

Finally, someone did. There was a heavy thud followed by a rustle as someone clumsily picked up the other end of the line.

‘Laura?’ Emma asked. ‘Laura, is that you?’

It wasn’t Laura.

Above the din of the white noise and the continued screaming underneath came the very loud sound of a toddler laughing

‘Ha ha ha!’

The line went dead.

Emma and Clara looked at each other, both of them failing to find anything to say. Then the office was bleached out in a bright white light and very little mattered any more.

Three hours earlier, Happy Woodland Nursery main office

Clara darted back to the front office when the phone started to ring. She picked up the receiver, cutting off its shrill warble mid-flow.

‘Happy Woodland Nursery,’ she said on auto-pilot in her best customer-facing voice that came naturally after almost nineteen years running this delightful daycare, which offered daycare services for equally delightful middle class kids in the obviously delightful middle class haven of Kingsworth. ‘Clara speaking.’

‘Hey Clara, it’s Laura,’ the voice on the other end of the line replied.

‘Hello Laura, love,’ Clara said to her colleague, smiling as she did. ‘Is everything OK?’

There was a brief pause as the sound of a toddler screaming with sheer delight ran through the background before Laura spoke again with a mild

chuckle.

‘Can you send Emma over to the Badger Sett? Something weird is going on with the kids and we’re a bit stumped by it.’

The Badger Sett was the delightfully cutesy name for the room holding the nursery’s second-oldest kids—those who would turn three over the course of that academic year—and Laura was its leader. They were a fun group, old enough to actually do interesting stuff—painting, playing games with something resembling rules and structure and, as had just been evidenced, tanking around with absolute glee. The Badgers were full of beans, sure, but also still young enough to need a nap once a day, giving the staff in there a blessed hour of quiet to grab a cup of tea and let their ears recover a little. That was how it was sold to them anyway—the reality was sixty minutes or so of cleaning, tidying, and paperwork.

Clara frowned. ‘Of course, Laura. What can I tell her about it?’

Laura made a slight clicking sound, then answered.

‘Spots. Two spots have appeared on the face of every child in the room today. Only they don’t look like zits or anything, they’re just little red circles—perfect red circles. They’re on slightly different parts of their faces, but they definitely all have them.’

She paused.

‘There’s none of these spots on their bodies, their temperatures are all fine, and they otherwise seem totally normal. But ...’

Clara waited for Laura to continue, drawing on her years of experience to know when to stay quiet and let the other person get it all out.

‘Well, we’d just like another pair of eyes on them,’ she finished.

‘No problem Laura. I’ll send Emma over now. And thanks for calling—you did the right thing.’

She replaced the phone and headed back to the kitchen to fill her business partner in on the news.

A few minutes later, Emma was heading across to the Badger Sett. She was always the one to get involved with the kids and go out to any of their four rooms if needed. It's why she and Clara were such a good team; Emma hit the front line, while Clara did all the boring financial and administrative stuff. They were each happy with their lot and, as a result, worked well together.

Emma let out a gasp as a stab of chilly November air whipped around her exposed throat, its icy fingers clawing at her neckline, desperate to be invited in. She zipped her jacket all the way up to her chin, batting away nature's chilly roaming hands.

The Badger Sett was the farthest room from the office, which meant Emma got to the full range of Happy Woodland kids on the walk over. Well, almost. The tiny ones in the baby room wouldn't be outside on a cold day like this, but all the other rooms were letting their residents enjoy some fresh air. That was part of the delightful appeal of this delightful place—outdoor experiences at every opportunity!

Emma passed the Bunny Burrow first, the room that catered to kids too old for the baby room but not ready to become a Badger yet. It was always a hilarious sight—a mixture of walking abilities that had almost two dozen little people staggering and flailing around their Astrourfed garden like they were the world's youngest stag and hen parties out on a big session. Emma laughed and waved as she went past. Some children smiled at her; some looked confused. Most were too busy in their own worlds to even notice.

The vicious November wind licked at Emma's cheeks and stung her nostrils as she rounded the corner of the Bunny Burrow and moved towards the preschoolers. How those little bodies could enjoy being outside when it was this cold, she would never know. Nineteen years of working with kids hadn't explained this resistance to winter to her, and she thought not even another nineteen would either.

The preschoolers were all much more aware of Emma as she passed their garden, and all seemed to have something Very Important to show her. She said she had to go to the Badger Sett first, but promised to stop off on her way back. Being the delightful little middle class kids they were, they all accepted Emma's answer and went back to playing.

Picking up her speed, Emma continued towards the Badger Sett, another jolt of cold wind causing her eyes to water. Wish I'd put my hat on, she thought as she finally made it to the little black-and-white gate.

Apart from feeling the cold, there had been nothing on Emma's walk over from the office to give her cause for concern. It was just another normal day full of normal things at the Happy Woodland Nursery. As she walked through the Badger Sett gate, closing it carefully behind her, she hoped it would stay that way.

Late morning, the Badger Sett garden

A few minutes later, Emma was just as perplexed as Laura had sounded on the phone.

Every child in the Badger Sett had two little spots somewhere on their face. Some were on foreheads, some on cheeks, some on throats, but only ever two on each child.

And, just as Laura had said, they didn't look like regular spots. When Emma got close, she could see they were all actually perfectly circular—like tiny stamps—and they seemed to give off a slight but noticeable wave of heat, although they hadn't caused the children to have a fever.

'Talk me through when you noticed them,' Emma said. 'I really don't think I've ever seen anything like it.'

'I know, right?'" said Laura. 'I'm glad it's not just me who thought they were weird.'

Emma grinned as the children ran in all directions across the room, avoiding clattering into her and Laura's legs as if by some unconscious obstacle-sensing safety system. Zoom! Whiz! Whoosh! Just as in all the other gardens for all the other rooms, everything seemed normal here. The kids were busy living their best, delightful lives. To Emma's left, a small gang appeared to be Going On A Bear Hunt; to her right, a trio used toy cars as paintbrushes on a large sheet of paper. On the far side of the garden, the mud kitchen was proving as popular as ever, while coming towards them were two boys, each holding a piece of string and giggling hysterically. Attached to the pieces of string were small tree branches.

Emma raised her eyebrow, and Laura turned to follow her gaze. She laughed.

‘Ah, dog logs. We played that game in Forest School on Monday and those two have been obsessed ever since!’

‘Very cute,’ Emma said.

‘Sorry, the spots,’ said Laura. ‘Well, I noticed them first on Archie.’

‘Archie Hopkinson?’ asked Emma, almost without thinking.

‘No, Archie Andrews,’ Laura replied, also without thought—the running joke of the two Archies had simply become part of the Happy Woodland vernacular—“although I did find them on Archie Hopkinson later. Anyway, not long after I saw them, Matt found some on Sammie, Lola, and Lily; Kirsty saw them on Aubrey and Zach; and then Margot found some on George, Millie, and Joseph. That’s everyone who’s in today.’

‘Strange,’ said Emma, barely aware she’d spoken the word out loud.

‘Really strange,’ Laura agreed, ‘but, as I said to Clara, none of the kids have a fever. All their nappies and toilet doings are normal and, as you can see, they’re as lively as ever.’

Laura flung her arms out to indicate the normal maelstrom of Badger Sett fun that was going on around them. Unfortunately, it was right at the same time that one of the dog log-toting children was walking past. Laura’s hand caught him across the side of the head, which was covered in a delightful, hand-knitted rainbow woolly hat, and the little chap flopped to the leaf-covered ground.

‘Oh, Aubrey!’ Laura turned bright red. ‘I’m so sorry! Let me help you up.’

It was only then Emma realised how quiet the garden had become. Seconds ago, the air had been filled with the sound of toddlers having a great time. But now, nothing. It was as close to silent as being outside could get—and not just here in the Badger Sett garden. It seemed as though every child on the premises had been muted.

The fallen child—Aubrey—was trying to get onto his hands and knees, adding a fresh layer of mud to his already-filthy jumpsuit in the process. Emma also bent towards him to help set him back on his feet, but not before glancing to her side.

They were being watched. The children had all stopped and were staring at Laura and her. The eyes of every child in the Badger Sett garden were on her and, even though she couldn't see them, she knew all of the other children on site right now were doing the same.

Emma saw this, but didn't really take it in, as her instinct was still to help pick Aubrey up. Only once he was back on his feet and holding the string attached to his dog log did Emma realise the eeriness of that scene.

She snapped her head up and looked around.

No one was looking at her. The garden was as it always was: full of life, with the volume cranked accordingly. The mud kitchen, the Bear Hunt, the painting cars ... they were all in full swing. None of the other staff had seemed to notice what she had.

Laura stood up and dusted her hands on her trousers as Aubrey and his pal continued on their dog log walk.

'I really should have learned to not talk with my arms by now!' she said.

Both women laughed.

'What do you think, then, about these spots?'

'They're weird, but I don't think they're dangerous. Just make sure you tell every parent about them at pick up later, explain that they're otherwise fine, and ask them to keep an eye on them.'

'OK.' Laura smiled. 'Thanks for coming out in the cold to see us. I feel like I've wasted your time a bit.'

Emma shook her head. 'Not at all. That's what I'm here for. You did the right thing. Call me if anything changes.'

‘Will do. Thanks again, Emma.’

Laura jogged after Aubrey, obviously still feeling awful about knocking the little guy over despite him having long-since moved on. Emma took one final look around the garden. She still felt like she was being watched, but as her eyes struggled to keep up with everything that was going on in front, she told herself she was being silly—that she’d imagined what had happened a few moments earlier.

And she probably had been watched. Any time a Grown Up From The Office came outside, it was a big event—a spectator sport, in fact—and the kids would usually gawp at the strange-but-familiar visitor.

She left the Badger Sett garden and headed back to the office, not forgetting to stop in with the preschoolers and to see all of those Very Important Things they had to share with her. And they were, indeed, Very Important ... depending on your definition of important of course.

Nothing of note happened for the next hour and a half.

Mid-afternoon, Happy Woodland Nursery main office

This time, it was Emma who answered the office phone.

‘Happy Woodland Nursery,’ she said. ‘Emma speaking.’

‘Hi, Emma. It’s Matt, over in the Badger Sett,’ said the voice at the other end. ‘Laura asked me to give you an update on the spots situation.’

‘Oh, yes. What’s going on with them?’

‘Well, the spots are all still there, but everything else is fine. No fevers, no unusual behaviour. Nothing weird.’

‘Did lunch go OK?’ asked Emma.

‘Yep. They had cheesy pasta—popular as ever! In fact ...’ he paused.

‘Go on, Matt,’ Emma said.

‘Well, that was something slightly different,’ he continued. ‘I’ve never seen them so hungry, every single one of them. They were ravenous—we actually ran out of food!’

Emma let out a small laugh. ‘Oh wow. Bet that was unpopular.’

‘Now you mention it, they did all go quiet when I explained they’d eaten everything. They all stared at me at the same time, like they were genuinely angry with me.’

Emma’s stomach was suddenly full of butterflies. Her face lost some of its colour and she became aware of her heartbeat in her ears. She was instantly back in the garden that morning, feeling the combined burning gaze of every child on site.

‘At least, it felt like that.’ Matt’s voice snapped Emma back to the present. ‘But I probably imagined it. It’s just that they usually never stop talking when they’re round the table.’

Emma felt the knot in her core slowly unravel and she let out the breath she didn’t know she was holding.

‘Anyway, that’s all I have to add. Margot and Kirsty are just getting the last few down for their naps.’

‘OK. Thanks for the update, Matt. If you can have someone from the room check in towards the end of the day with another, that would be really helpful. Have a fun afternoon.’

It was only after she’d hung up that Emma noticed the dark—almost black—spiral she’d carved into her notebook with a pencil she didn’t realise she’d been holding. Round and round and round until, at some point unknown to her, the stick of graphite had snapped—actually snapped—in half. There were splinters in Emma’s palm and even a few drops of blood, but she hadn’t even felt it.

Why am I so worried? she thought. Everything is fine, so why have I snapped a pencil in half?

Emma stared at the broken writing implement and the doom-filled black spiral she'd scrawled for a moment, then shook her head. It was fine. Everything was fine.

She took herself off to the kitchen to microwave her can of tomato soup.

Naptime, Badger Sett room

As Matt replaced the phone in its cradle, Kirsty and Margot tidied the line debris left abandoned by the now-sleeping toddlers in the corner of the room. Cuddly toys, model cars, wooden kitchen utensils, even a rogue glove—it was like a two-year-old had taken over an episode of *The Generation Game*, or at least been given the task of choosing that week's prizes

While Kirsty carried an armful of crap over to the toy box, Margot bent over to pick up a book. As she did, she caught a reflection of something strange in the plastic storage boxes mounted to the wall out of the corner of her eye.

It looked as though all of the children were sitting bolt upright, staring at her.

She half-jumped and quickly looked away from the reflection towards the kids.

They were asleep. All of them.

Margot shook her head and grabbed the book, only to subsequently drop the three Hey Duggee figures she was holding in her other hand.

Sighing, she scabbled over to grab them from where they'd landed near the full-length mirror the team had installed so the children could enjoy pulling faces at themselves. Margot glanced in the mirror and properly jumped this time.

Again, the children were all sat bolt upright, staring at her with looks of pure hatred and fury.

Trying to keep her breathing steady, she slowly turned back to the room. No children staring at her. They were all still sleeping. Was she imagining it?

Margot dumped the toys in their box and hurried back to the rest of the staff, still holding the discarded book.

Kirsty, Matt, and Laura were making cups of tea when they saw Margot's expression. All of them felt their pulse quicken.

'What's wrong, Margot?' asked Laura.

Before she could answer, things started happening.

The drawers in the small kitchen area of the Badger Sett flew open, then slammed shut one at a time, while the kids' coats and bags rattled so hard on their colourful pegs that they spilled onto the floor.

'What on earth—' began Kirsty, when the two doors to the Sett—the main entrance and the emergency exit—locked from the inside with a defiant and definite click.

The staff looked at each other, then turned to the nap area to check on the children.

They were no longer asleep.

Every child's eyes were open, and they were slowly getting to their feet. First Sammie, then Lola, then Lily. Next was Aubrey. Archie Andrews and Archie Hopkinson stood up together, Zach following immediately after.

George, Millie, and Josh did the same behind this group, but they were blocked from view. None of the children smiled, none of them talked; none of them even blinked.

Once they were all on their feet, they started walking towards the staff. As they did, they linked hands, forming a circle around the adults, still looking like they were in some shared sleepwalking fever dream.

Just as Laura was about to say something to the children, they all formed a perfect O shape with their mouths. Then, the singing started. Only it wasn't singing, not really.

It was broadcasting.

'Ring-a-ring-a-roses,' the children chanted and started to skip around the adults in perfect time with each other, with the kind of grace and balance normal two-year-olds don't possess, 'a pocketful of posies. Atishoo, atishoo, we all ... fall ...'

The children stopped skipping.

'... downnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn,' they finished, holding the final note for an unnaturally long time.

Rather than cut the sound off, that final consonant seemed to break up, like a radio losing signal, morphing into white noise—loud, ear-splitting white noise.

The adults instinctively huddled closer to each other for protection from the circle of hissing toddlers. The children took a step towards them, still making that awful sound.

Another step. Laura noticed that one of the Archies was holding the phone, but she was too terrified to even work out which Archie it was.

The children took another step together and, as they did, their eyes all started glowing a hideous, toxic bright yellow.

They took another step towards the adults and the volume of the white noise coming from their mouths ramped up several notches. That's when the grown-ups started to scream. They looked around in a blind panic for a way out, but there was none. The circle was complete, the children coming closer—each with their mouths open, their eyes glowing, and two small, perfectly circular spots somewhere on their face, now more prominent than they'd been all day.

The spots looked alive.

Kirsty noticed Archie holding the phone—Archie Hopkinson, as it

happened—laughing into it, before pushing the big red button to cut off whoever was on the other line. She felt scared adult hands grabbing hers and pressed herself against the rest of her colleagues in the middle of the awful circle.

The white noise was excruciating, the adults screaming themselves hoarse and then, the room bleached out in a bright, white light.

All the noise, all the horror, was lost in the glow.

Home time, Happy Woodland Nursery car park

Paul yanked the strap on his son's car seat tight, securing him in place, and then swivelled him round to face the iPad that was mounted to the back of the passenger seat. The current hit video—that one of some Japanese guy pushing Thomas the Tank Engine toys down a ramp into a bucket of mud—was already playing and Aubrey locked onto it straight away.

'Let's go home, dude,' Paul said, then shut the car door. As he walked around the back of the vehicle, dropping his son's nursery bag in the boot and then continuing round to the driver's door, he found himself chewing over the weirdness that had been tonight's pick-up.

First, Aubrey seemed quieter than usual. Then again, it was a Friday—a Friday after a long week—and today's good weather would have undoubtedly been maximised by the nursery staff, with as much time spent running the garden as possible. Probably just tired, Paul thought.

Second, the staff appeared off-kilter too. Not just tired, but almost coming in and out of focus. Even during the course of the two-minute handover chat, Matt had seemed to lose the thread a couple of times—and Kirsty did the same with Archie Andrews' parents, from what Paul had overheard.

Still, he thought, toddlers are exhausting. That's the big secret everyone keeps from you before you become a parent: how you come to dread weekends and how going back to work on a Monday is actually a chance to relax and recharge. They're probably just shattered, like I will be by Sunday after-

noon.

Paul pushed his key into the ignition and started the car. He flipped on the headlights to cut through the dark November afternoon and plugged his iPod back into the USB hub. That was the deal he'd struck with Aubrey for car journeys—videos in the back for the little dude, Daddy's music up front for Paul, so long as he didn't turn it up too loud. And yes, Paul still had an iPod. Streaming be damned, he liked owning his music, even if it was still digital.

The opening riff of *Swarm* by Palm Reader whirled around Paul as he pulled out of the car park, his mind still ticking over.

It was the weird conversation about the spots that sat the most uncomfortably with him.

Paul wasn't too concerned about the spots themselves; sure, he'd never seen such perfect circles on his son's face before, but Matt had assured him that Aubrey didn't have a fever and that, apart from those little dots, was his normal self. Paul had tried some cliché dad quip in response to this—Uh-oh, still a cheeky monkey, then!—but it coincided with one of those strange lapses from Matt, where he seemed to check out for a moment.

What was bugging Paul the most was how every child was now heading home with a pair of spots somewhere on their face. The nursery staff were clearly having the same conversation with all the parents, and it was probably nothing, but all the other kids Paul had seen at pick-up had the same subdued vibe that his own did.

And, now he thought of it, hadn't Paul noticed two perfectly circular spots on Matt's face as they were talking? And on Kirsty's too?

Forget it, Paul thought as he signalled left and made the most of a gap in traffic by joining the main road and easing all the way up to fifth gear. They're all just tired. It's that time of year—Christmas is in sight, but still a few weeks left to get through before we get a break.

They're just tired, he thought again as *Swarm* gave way to the hypnotic, lumbering riff of *Internal Winter* that always calmed Paul right down.

In the back seat, Aubrey was staring at the video on the mounted iPad, but he wasn't watching it.

He was perfectly still, waiting. Then, as if responding to some silent cue, his mouth dropped into a perfect O and he started to make a strange crackling sound, like white noise.

The sound from Aubrey's mouth grew louder, loud enough to seep into Paul's music. Paul frowned at the interference and tried jiggling the cable that connected his iPod to the car stereo, while also keeping his eyes on the road ahead.

As the noise got louder, Aubrey's eyes started glowing bright yellow. They reflected off the slightly-tilted iPad screen and onto the ceiling of the car—two throbbing yellow spots.

The car cruised towards a crossroads and, as it did, Aubrey turned his glowing gaze towards his father.

Be sure to follow Dave on YouTube for his outstanding 19 Reasons Series.





Gifted

Michelle Ann King

Francie sat cross-legged on the floor. The rough carpet scratched her legs and she shifted position.

‘Concentrate, please, Francie,’ Dr Lomax said.

Concentration was a virtue. So was obedience. Francie sat still and focused on the items in front of her: a cotton wool pad, a fifty pence piece, a yellow tennis ball and a large textbook called *Gifted: Developing Extraordinary Potential in Ordinary Children* by Dr Paulina Lomax. Francie had tried to read it once, to be polite, but she didn’t get very far. She liked the photos of all the brains, though.

The cotton pad lifted a few inches off the floor. Francie held it still for a couple of seconds, then rotated it in a small circle.

Dr Lomax tapped on the screen of her computer pad. ‘Controlled movement,’ she said. ‘Good, Francie. Now try the coin.’

Francie let the pad drop and floated the fifty pence piece. It spun, glinting in the overhead light.

‘Very good. And the ball?’

Francie looked at the tennis ball. She wiggled it but left it on the floor. ‘I can’t.’

Dr Lomax made another note. ‘That’s fine, Francie. You did well.’ She beckoned to Francie’s brother, who was kneeling behind her. ‘Okay, Everett.’

Everett curved his palm around the back of Francie’s neck and a surge of power flared through her. Her skin burned under his touch. She took two big breaths through her nose—grounding, Dr Lomax called it—as the fire settled in her belly. It tried to rise up but she squashed it down until it behaved. Then she looked back at the tennis ball.

It flew up, cracked against the ceiling tiles and shot down again. Dr

Lomax ducked with a squeak of alarm.

‘Sorry,’ Francie said.

Dr Lomax smoothed her hands over her hair. ‘Don’t worry, Francie. The book, now?’

Francie lifted the front cover of the textbook, flipped the pages and turned it over. The back cover showed a black and white photo of Dr Lomax, in jeans and an open-necked blue shirt instead of her lab coat. Through the window behind her, you could see mountains. It was Everett’s favourite picture. Francie liked it a lot, too. She wondered what mountains looked like in real life.

Dr Lomax’s fingers danced over her screen. ‘Everett, your boost is creating a significant power differential. This is very good work. Well done, both of you.’

‘Thank you,’ Everett said, and cleared his throat. Francie smiled. It sounded like he was trying to purr.

The office door flew open and James, Dr Lomax’s assistant, rushed in. Dr Lomax looked up and frowned, and Everett did too. Francie glanced at the clock. They still had half the session left.

James bent close to Dr Lomax’s ear. At first Francie leaned forward, trying to listen, but she remembered that was rude and sat back again.

Dr Lomax frowned harder and widened her eyes at the same time. It looked odd. Francie tried to make the face, but couldn’t manage it. She poked her tongue out at James instead, but if he noticed, he didn’t say anything.

‘What’s the matter?’ Everett asked.

‘I’m sorry, children,’ Dr Lomax said, and Francie felt Everett stiffen behind her, ‘but we’re going to have to stop for today.’ She grabbed her pad and strode out of the room.

Francie got up and brushed at her itchy legs. ‘So we’re finished early,’ she said, trying to make it sound like a treat. ‘Do you want to get an ice

cream, or—’

‘I want to find out what’s going on,’ Everett said. ‘Come on.’

He ran after Dr Lomax. Francie paused in the doorway and glanced back. She hooked the tennis ball from under the desk and replaced it neatly on its spot, righted the textbook and shut the door after her.

There was nobody in the corridor. Francie tried the door to the other assessment rooms, but they were locked. She peered into the kids’ playroom, and Nurse Martin looked up. ‘Are you all right, Francie?’

Francie chewed on a strand of her hair. ‘Do you know what’s happening? We were with Dr Lomax, but then James came in and—’

Nurse Martin shook his head and pulled one of the toddlers off the wall. ‘There’s nothing to worry about,’ he said, but his face was pinched and pale. ‘Do you want to come and play, sweetie?’

Francie shook her head and walked down to the library. Everett was there with Gino, who lived in the room next door.

‘There’s a new girl,’ Gino said. ‘Her name’s Tania. A load of men just brought her in a big black van.’

‘So what’s all the fuss about? Why’s she so special?’

Gino shrugged. ‘Dunno.’

‘Well, I’m going to find out,’ Everett said.

He turned around and ran straight into James. ‘You need to go back to your rooms now, kids,’ James said.

Everett stepped back and folded his arms. ‘Where’s Dr Lomax?’

‘She’s busy.’

‘Why? What’s going on?’

‘She’s got work to do. Just go back to your room, Everett.’ He raised his voice. ‘All of you, now. Go back to your rooms. Quickly.’

‘Come on,’ Francie said. ‘We can play cards. Or do some more practice, if you like. I bet I could move—oh, something really big, if you helped me. Then Dr Lomax will be extra pleased next time.’

Everett shot a final glare at James, but he allowed Francie to lead him away.

They went back to Everett’s room and played Canasta for a while. Everett won. Francie built a castle with the cards, then kept her word and let Everett boost her. She lifted the bed, with both of them on it, and shuffled the big wardrobe back and forwards. Everett was thrilled and wanted to go and find Dr Lomax, but Francie said she had a tummy ache. It wasn’t really a lie: controlling the extra power was hard sometimes. When she didn’t let it out, it stayed in her stomach, hard and heavy, and made her feel like she’d eaten too much.

‘But we should tell her,’ Everett said. ‘You moved the bed, Francie. And the wardrobe. That’s big. She’ll want to know.’

He ran to the door and pressed the release, but it didn’t open. He grabbed the handle, but that didn’t move either. ‘Huh. It’s locked.’

He rattled it again, harder, but the door refused to budge. ‘Hey,’ he called, knocking on it. ‘Is anyone out there? The door’s locked. We can’t get out.’

No response.

Everett came back and sat on the bed next to Francie. ‘Why would they shut us in?’

Francie thought of James and Martin, and their worried expressions. ‘They must be busy,’ she said.

‘Busy with Tania,’ Everett muttered darkly. He leaned across and thumped on the wall instead. ‘Gino? Gino, are you there? Can you hear me?’

A thump came back in reply, and a muffled voice yelled something Francie couldn't make out.

Everett rapped out a sequence of knocks. He waited, and an answering series came back. 'Morse code,' he said.

Francie rolled her eyes. 'I know. He said he's locked in, too.'

Everett looked from Francie to the door. 'Do you think you could make it open?'

'Maybe we should just stay here. There could be, I don't know, poison gas out there or something. Let's just wait. I'm sure they'll let us out when it's safe.'

'If there's poison gas, they could all be dead. Come on, we should go and find out.' He looked at the door again. 'Can you do it?'

Francie sighed and scooted off the bed. 'I can try.'

She put her hand flat against the cool surface of the door, closed her eyes and imagined all the electrical connections that ran through it, the wires snaking around like tangled wool. Then she pulled them apart.

The door snicked open. Everett grinned at her. 'Good job, sis. Come on.'

He slipped out. Again, the corridor was deserted. Francie followed her brother to Gino's door. He rapped on it: get ready, we're going to make it open.

He nodded to Francie, who repeated her wire-slicing action and Gino's door opened. A couple of the ceiling lights above them flashed and went out.

Gino peered out. 'Everett? What's going on?'

'I don't know. But I've got an idea how we can find out. Is Karen still on the other side of you?'

'Yes, why?'

‘I bet she knows something.’

Gino put his hands in his pockets. ‘Maybe. But even if she does, I don’t think she’ll tell us. You know what she’s like.’

Francie looked at the door to Karen’s room. Karen used to know a lot of things, but she’d told Francie once that it was hard to try and make sense of it, and worse to try and explain it to people. She said it made her very tired.

Karen hardly ever came to the library any more. She just stayed in her room, sleeping.

More of the overhead lights went out. ‘There’ll be alarms,’ Francie said. ‘We should go back.’

Everett shook his head. ‘They’re busy with Tania, remember? They’re not going to drop everything and come running just because some lights went out. Open Karen’s door, Francie.’

Francie did as she was told and they slipped inside. Karen lay curled up on her side, blue-black hair spread over the pillow.

‘Now what?’ Gino said. ‘She doesn’t talk, I told you.’

‘So you talk for her.’

‘What do you mean?’

Everett pointed at Karen. ‘Share.’

Gino backed away from the girl in the bed. ‘Oh, Everett, no. I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to be like Karen.’

‘It’s not for good, scaredy-cat. You only have to do it once. Find out what she knows, and tell us.’

‘I still don’t—’

‘Come on, we have to know what’s going on. What if this Tania is all

they're going to be interested in, now? What if they don't need the rest of us any more? What if they send us away?'

Gino looked unhappy, but he shuffled back to the bed. He sat down and put his hand on the back of Karen's neck.

'Well?' Everett said.

Gino went rigid. He made an incoherent noise, let go of Karen's hand and flung himself backwards off the bed. She sighed and rolled over. Her eyes stayed closed.

Gino bolted for his own room. He slammed the door, but it was still unlocked and Everett walked straight in after him.

'So? Come on, what?'

'That was horrible,' Gino said. 'If she has all that in her head, it's no wonder she doesn't want to wake up and let it out any more. It's like you're everywhere at once, like you've got those big eyes that flies have and there's something different going on in each one. But it's not just that you can see out of them. It's like you can feel out of them as well.' He shuddered. 'I'm never going to do that again.'

'But what did you find out? About Tania?'

Gino's eyes unfocused. 'There were so many people, it was hard to tell what was going on. But I got into one of the men who brought her here. And James, and Dr Lomax.'

Francie pulled at Everett's sleeve. 'Are you sure this is okay? Getting in people's heads? I don't know if that's okay, Evvie.'

'Don't call me that. And of course it's okay. They wouldn't have Karen here if it wasn't okay. Go on, Gino.'

Gino looked at the ceiling, his eyes flickering rapidly. 'They took Tania from another place kind of like this, but more like a hospital. They were giving her injections. Great big needles.' He winced. 'There was a man, an old man, they all know him—Dr Lomax as well. He's their boss, I think.'

‘Don’t worry about him. What about Tania? What’s she doing here?’

Gino inhaled through his nose. Grounding, Francie thought. She wished she could do something to help, but she didn’t know what.

‘They’re all—I don’t know, excited?’ he said. ‘Dr Lomax is thinking about her all the time. She’s planning to do a lot of tests. She’s worried about the man in the uniform. And someone else is worrying a lot about defining operational parameters, I don’t even know what that means. They’re all thinking about replication and variants. They want more like her, like Tania. And Dr Lomax—Dr Lomax is really sad about it, too. She’s thinking about Tania, and she’s crying.’ Gino stopped. He was pale and sweaty.

Everett stood up. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘That was very good work. Well done, both of you.’

Francie didn’t feel like she’d done good work. She didn’t feel like she’d done anything good at all.

The next day, there were no sessions for anyone. James came and looked at their doors and the corridor ceiling lights, but he didn’t say anything. Francie thought he seemed scared, but Everett said she was imagining it. At least he didn’t seem to know it was her fault, which was something. A little while later, one of the maintenance men came and put in new lights and keypads.

Francie and Everett went to the library, where most of the kids were milling around and looking lost. Nobody liked it when the routines were broken.

Everett tried to ask James about Tania, but James told him to go away and shut up. Francie was shocked. Nobody was ever rude to them.

‘What did I tell you?’ Everett said. ‘They don’t want us, now they’ve got Tania. They’re going to get rid of us.’

‘But this is where we live,’ Gino said. He folded his arms across his chest. ‘I don’t want to go home. My dad—’ he shook his head. ‘I don’t want

to go back there. I won't.'

Everett shrugged. 'They might put us in foster homes, I suppose. Orphanages. It doesn't matter. You heard James. Go away and shut up, that's what he said. They don't care where we go or what happens to us, as long as we're not in the way. As long as we're not distracting them from their precious Tania.'

Francie looked up at him. 'Would we go together?'

'What?'

'In a foster home. Would we go together?'

'I shouldn't think so. People don't want two kids at once.'

'I won't go without you,' she said.

He scuffed his heel on the floor tiles. 'You won't get a choice. None of us will.' He put his fingers together in the shape of a gun and pointed it at Gino's temple. 'They'll probably just put us down. Neat, easy, no fuss.'

'No paperwork,' Gino said. His shoulders sagged.

'They wouldn't do that,' Francie said. 'They wouldn't. Dr Lomax wouldn't let them.'

'Dr Lomax has forgotten all about us.'

'Then we have to do something. We have to, Everett.'

'Like what? What can we do?'

Francie hopped up and down. 'I know,' she said. 'We can share Tania. If you boost Gino while he does it, then he can share it with all of us. If we've got the same as her, they'll be interested in us again, and they won't want us to go away.'

Everett rubbed his cheek. 'That's not a bad idea. It could work.'

He looked at Gino, who nodded. 'I don't want to get sent away. Let's do it.'

'Okay. Do you know where Tania's room is? Did you get that, or do we need to go back to Karen?'

'No, I got it. She's in the big suite on the seventh floor, near Dr Lomax's lab. There are guards, though. They won't let us go in.'

Everett thought about it. 'Francie, can you do something? Like you did when we were locked in our rooms?'

'I can open the doors.'

'But the guards,' Gino said.

Francie hesitated, then nodded. 'I can move them,' she said. 'Make them go away.'

Everett looked at her with wide eyes. 'You can do it to people? Really?'

She nodded.

'But why didn't you tell Dr Lomax? That's—I mean, tennis balls and books, that's one thing, but—'

Francie looked down. 'I never wanted to be special,' she said.

'Tough,' Everett said. He hugged her, hard. 'Because you are.'

They left the library and ran along the corridor toward the lifts. James came out of his office and stood in their way. 'It'd be best if you stayed in the library or your rooms today, kids. We've got some visitors in the facility, and we don't want you wandering around and getting under their feet.'

'We're going to see Tania,' Everett said.

James laughed. 'Oh, I don't think so. Now, come and—' he began, and Francie pushed him backwards. He was softer than she expected, and the push was too hard. He hit the wall and hung there until she released her hold,

her hand flying to her mouth. Then he slid down and lay still.

Everett ran over to him. 'He's fine,' he said. 'He just got knocked out. It's no big deal, Francie, it's just like that time I fell off the bike, remember? He'll wake up soon and he'll be fine. So we should go, quickly.'

He snatched James's laminated ID pass from the lapel of his coat and they all piled into the nearest lift. Everett slid the pass into the slot. He pressed the button for the seventh floor and the doors closed.

The lift delivered them to a white-tiled corridor that looked very similar to their own. A man in a black uniform walked towards them. 'What are you doing up here? You're not allowed to be—'

Francie pushed him, much more gently this time, and his mouth opened in an O of surprise. She lifted him up and dropped him on the floor inside the lift. She glanced at the button for the basement floor and it lit up. The doors closed with a quiet whoosh.

'It's the door at the end,' Gino said. 'Down here, to the left.'

They followed him, rounding the corner. Another guard appeared but this one didn't speak, just moved his hand to his belt. Francie couldn't see what he was trying to grab, but she didn't let him reach it. She snapped his hand up and he yelped.

'You have to sit down and wait here,' she told him. The guard folded up and hit the floor, both arms sticking straight up in the air.

Gino watched with wide eyes. 'She's kind of brilliant,' he said.

Everett grinned. 'Of course she is. She's my sister.'

Francie looked at the door, but it was hard to get a feel for the thin lines of wire while she was holding the guard. She breathed deep from her stomach and simply pushed at the door. It flew inwards with a loud crack.

The room looked much like her own, just larger. A scrawny girl was sitting on the sofa, reading a book. She put it down, splayed open, when they walked in. 'Who are you? Are you supposed to be in here? They said no-

body—’

‘So, you’re Tania,’ Everett said.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Why?’ She was thin and dark-haired, and dressed in what looked like exercise clothes—blue jogging bottoms and a long-sleeved baggy top. She looked about Everett’s age. Francie had been expecting someone older.

Everett stood with his hands on his hips, looking down at her. ‘You don’t look like you’re so special.’

‘More guards will come,’ Francie said, looking behind them. ‘I can’t hold them all.’

Everett nodded and beckoned to Gino. ‘She’s right. We should do it now.’

‘Do what?’ Tania said. ‘What are you talking about?’ She grabbed a pair of leather gloves that were lying beside her on the sofa and pulled them on.

‘Worried we’ll give you germs?’ Everett said.

She gave a small snort and stood up. ‘I wish you would. Look, I don’t know what you think is—’

Somewhere behind them, an alarm sounded. Everett and Gino both ran towards Tania.

She tried to scramble away from them but tripped and tumbled back onto the sofa. ‘Don’t touch me,’ she said.

‘Calm down,’ Everett said. ‘We’re not going to hurt you.’

Gino reached down and clamped a hand around the back of her neck, then Everett did the same to him.

Tania screamed and yanked at Gino’s hand, but too late—even Francie, still at the door, felt the flare of power raise the temperature in the room.

Gino let go and slumped to the floor. Everett stayed on his feet, but swayed slightly.

Francie ran over and grabbed his hand. 'Are you all right? Evvie?'

'I'm fine,' he said, although he was breathing hard. 'And I thought I told you not to call me that.'

Francie smiled with relief and squeezed his hand tighter. Tania got to her feet and backed away from all of them. 'What did you do?' she said. 'What just happened?'

'Sharing,' Everett said. He pointed at Gino, who was slowly picking himself up from the floor. 'That's what he does. And I boost. So now we can do what you do. Now we're all important. Now we're all special.'

Tania put one of her gloved hands to her mouth. 'Oh, no,' she said, shaking her head. Her stringy hair fell in her eyes. 'Oh, no.'

Francie swallowed hard. She cast around inside herself for whatever this new thing might be, trying to get a grip on its shape. She found nothing obvious, but her skin tingled.

'Evvie?' she said.

On the bookshelf there was a small fern in a terracotta pot. Tania stripped off her gloves and grabbed one of its leaves. 'Then this is what you can do, now,' she said, keeping eye contact with Everett. 'This is how special you are.'

The plant went grey, then black. Thick viscous liquid dripped between Tania's fingers and splashed near Gino's feet. He wrinkled his nose at the smell and jumped back.

'It rots,' Tania said. 'Do you understand? Whatever I touch. It rots.'

There was silence in the room. Behind them, the shrieking alarm got louder and was accompanied by the sound of running feet. They could hear Dr Lomax's voice, rising at a frantic pitch.

Francie looked down at her hand, still clutching Everett's, and began to scream.

END





Needle

By Lauren Jane Barnett

Being afraid of something is different from paranoia. I'm not afraid of travelling on the underground, but when I am there, fear rides along beside me. I feel its shadow stalk me in the weaving crowds of the tube network as I pass from platform to platform. It peers out at me in the space between passing train cars. In the morning, when the platforms are quiet and the cars trundle sleepily up to the platform, I can feel it fluttering at the edges of my mind. Waiting.

In the early darkness of the winter afternoon, it closes in on me along with the shadows, tracing my path away from the lights and warmth of the office building and into the gaping tunnels. I feel fear great me as the barriers of the station swish open. The single juddering movement welcomes me to the bowels of the underground and into the suffocating arms of fear. As I descend the escalators into a swamp of people, it comes over me, and I can see a vision of my deepest nightmare play out involuntarily in my mind:

As I walk along the crowded corridor, a shape in a long, dark coat weaves through the layers of shoulders towards me. I can sense the movement – the change in the oncoming flow – as the figure approaches from the right. In the sea of people, they are anonymous, one of many in the river of the crowd. Shoulders connect, bags hit my thighs, and among the various minor connections, one that I barely feel. A sharp, long needle pierces my coat, slipping between my ribs and out again. My breath stops. My feet stagger. My body sways. And there, in the tunnels beneath Victoria station, I collapse, choking on my own blood.

It is a fantasy, but it haunts me more than those, all too familiar – and too real – dangers of the underground. Ones I have seen with my own eyes. I was on the platform at Bank waiting in the monstrous crush of commuters for the next DLR train. People thrashed like suffocating fish when the doors opened to a car already choked with people. Powered by sheer desperation, we surged forward, carried toward the thin line of air created by the open doors. A woman in front of me lost her footing. In a breath, she disappeared, one leg slipping under the train. I could see the stain of red spread through her trousers.

The passengers stampeded over her, bruising her hands, and forcing her

lower. Someone cried out to give her space. Another person screamed. But everyone else pressed on. As we three strangers pulled her up, the piercing whistle of the platform called to clear the doors. We managed to get her leg out from under the train just in time. You could see the fear in her eyes as she pulled herself together, inches from death. But it didn't shake me. I felt bad for her, but I was never afraid. She got on the next train. We all did. And the underground moved on.

Her story is only one of hundreds along the underground; and though I remember, it doesn't make me shiver. I don't pulse with worry or flinch at the crowd when it crushes towards a train car. My fear grasps me only when I move from one platform to another, amid that relentless sea of people. That is when I can feel my eyes scanning the crowd. Looking for the figure in a coat. The one that is coming for me.

I never see the person's face. And maybe they would never see mine. The underground is an equalizer that way. We are nobody in that vast warren of tunnels. Like cells of blood, useful but indistinct when consumed by the whole. So, I would never know who stuck the deadly needle in me. No one would.

That's the eerie beauty of the thing. In the throng of people, even with a carnival of CCTV, not one of us could be plucked from the crowd. Blinded by masses no one would see the needle, the hand, the swish of a coat. Everyone would keep moving, even as my body feel. Even in the paused moments of a security tape, what could you see? The movement of a shoulder? At most the flash of the needle. Something so common it's untraceable. I checked. You can buy a needle long enough to puncture a lung on eBay.

When I confessed my creeping fear to Bella, she shrugged, commenting that the needle would falter at my ribs. But that was no comfort. The visions of it were so clear, so familiar, that I could see exactly what would happen to me. The needle slipped past my shirt in one fluid motion, not even pausing as it slit open the thin muscles between my ribs. You need a heavy level of force, but you can do it smoothly and quickly. It's like the scene in *Pulp Fiction*, I explained to her. You just need a titanium needle.

Tattoo needles were the obvious choice. It's a greater challenge to get the medical grade needles they use on adrenaline shots – the *Pulp Fiction* needle. But anyone can buy a tattoo needle. They are hard wearing and clean

and you can get them in packs of fifty, so you can practice without worrying about keeping them sterile. It would take this crazed killer a minute to buy them. Maybe two. You can slip them in your pocket without detection, as long as you have a long coat. A trench seems obvious, but a thick sleeved Mackintosh would hide the line of the needle right up until I felt it end me.

In my mind I always know immediately. I feel a cool sharp stab just above my lowest rib. I look up but the person has already passed, leaving me to stare at the continuous flow of bodies coming towards me. The faces blur and sway as I try to draw breath. But air doesn't pull in smoothly. Instead, I feel the weight of liquid in my lungs. Coating my throat in a wet cough. My vision sparkles with light. I manage another step and feel the warm metallic blood on my tongue. And then nothing.

Since telling Bella, the vision has become clearer and more real. Like a hurricane, I can sense the pressure in the air changing as the day comes closer when it will happen. I feel it moving inexorably toward me. Even when I am not actively imaging it, my muscles are poised, waiting for the figure to come for me.

When I am tired, or in the middle of the night, I am overcome by flashes of it. The cold. The pain. The blood. The figure in the crowd. A moment and it's gone. I think it is my mind preparing me. The tension of it began to keep me awake. The waiting became a waking nightmare. I knew I had to do something. There was no other choice; I travel on the underground every day.

Bella thought it was foolish of me to panic. She almost laughed at my urgency. It was a matter of statistics, she explained. People don't just carry needles on the underground. What, she asked, are the chances? I made her go over the statistics with me.

Two million people travel on the underground every single day. If there was someone out there with a deadly needle, the best odds were 1 in 2 million. On top of that, they would need to be on my train route. Through her accounting skills and fast talk, Bella convinced me the chances of that were 1 in 6.8 million. Then I had to include the likelihood that they would cross my path, or – even more unlikely – be aiming for me. After arguing and two glasses of wine we settled the odds on 1 in 16 million.

You would think that was a relief. Instead, it confirmed my fears: there's

always a chance. All you need is one person on the underground. One person with that needle and one moment where I'm walking with the crowd. The thought badgered me through a sleepless night. When I woke, I could feel it in the air: possibility. It was as possible as the lottery, being hit by lightning. As true love. And I knew, one way or another, it was going to happen.

Someone was going to be on the underground. Needle in their pocket, tapping silently against the lining. In a city of 9 million people, how could you ever say there wouldn't be one?

But, I realised in a stroke of genius, there wouldn't be two.

Now, I walk the underground without fear. Instead, I have my .30MM Long Taper KWADRON titanium needle. Extra-long.



I Made A New Friend Today

Ray Daley

Has it really been eighty years since the last true friend left my life forever? The decades have simply flown by. Well, they have for me, at least. They generally tend to, for an immortal. I'm fairly certain I am, at this point. Today, I finally got my extremely well sterilised hands on the final piece. I'd been looking for almost thirty years. It's getting ever harder to procure the right type of brain these days. Heck, any days, if I am honest. I guess I should begin at the end?

#

Everyone knows that Da Vinci liked to chop up dead bodies, for anatomical study. What almost no-one (well, one person) knows is the small fact one of those bodies wasn't completely dead when Master Leonardo got his grubby little hands on it.

Well. It had been dead. Then it wasn't, because that body was an immortal, and it was me, your humble friend and narrator.

While Da Vinci might have thought he knew a thing or two, he had no clue about immortals outside of stories and legends, neither of which were really within his bailiwick at the time. Leonardo was concerned with hard facts, things he could witness for himself first hand.

From the exceptionally small sample group I've been able to speak to since fifteen oh eight (the year I first came back to life), no other person has witnessed a revival. That's the immortal term for when we come back to life.

This isn't a story about immortal beings, I could certainly bore you with all kinds of history and facts, but I won't unless it's relevant to this particular tale. Anyway, I came back to life. I had been dead, then I wasn't.

#

Immortal beings can die. You have to die to become immortal. Most people who die generally stay dead. We call those folks humans. Such creatures have a limited lifespan, a fact you learn after two or three centuries. I had buried forty wives, twenty-seven husbands (because you get bored having sex within your own gender fairly quickly, for a given value of quickly to an immortal) and so many casual partners that I stopped keeping count eventu-

ally.

Anyway. Humans are fragile, they die too soon. I'd barely be getting used to their idiosyncrasies and they'd just up and die on me. That's not accounting for wars, plagues, holy schisms or witch trials. It's literally a click of the fingers.

Dead. Click.

Dead. Click.

Shit, what happened to that last one? Burnt at the stake? She was such a good woman and made excellent pies too. You simply can't find a pie like that, nowadays. Where was I? Getting distracted? Yeah, that happens a lot when you're immortal. It becomes a way of life after a while, the only way to make time pass quickly. Anyway, I reached a conclusion fairly quickly in fifteen ten, two years after I first came back to life. People aren't meant to be alone, even immortals. In this case, there are two choices.

Choice the first; seek out another immortal and spend your life with them.

I tried this. I can't tell you how it works (mostly on account of the fact I don't truly understand it myself) but we immortals can find each other. When I came back to life, there were two hundred and fifty-seven of us. I made it two fifty-eight. The closest immortal was a mere hundred miles away.

That was a long way to travel, in fifteen ten. Some people never went further than a mile from their birthplace. A hundred miles may as well have been the moon, for people like that. I walked most of the way there, jumped on any carts going in my general direction to make time pass faster.

Ha-ha. That was a little immortal joke, mostly at your expense. She was surprised to see me, or any other immortal. She knew what I was right away though, I didn't have to explain who or what I was to her, which was a blessing. Apparently, all immortals had an unwritten agreement. Most people couldn't write, back then.

In fifteen-ten about fifty people knew what a pen was. Thirty of those knew what one was for. And roughly ten of those had access to ink and paper. Anyway, I digress. We agreed not to stay together, I walked out of the village, in the opposite direction I had come from. I already knew I wasn't moving towards any immortals then.

#

Choice the second; live with a mortal until they die.

This soon becomes a source of depression. It very quickly ceases to be a viable option.

So I had to come up with a third choice, or face going insane on my own. Make my own company.

The good thing about having people like Da Vinci about, it was fairly easy to get him to teach me everything he knew about anatomy. Folks like that had their own communication system, I was able to pass myself between scholars. Those who were curious to learn how the human body worked.

You'd probably call them Doctors now. They were called all kinds of things by the Pope, back then. Inquisitions were set up. They killed a lot of good people. Folks who were only trying to better mankind by the means of knowledge and discovery.

I killed plenty of those who were murdering my associates though. An eye for an eye, it was that state of affairs for a good decade. Until the Pope saw sense and died. I didn't care to use any of the men I killed during that time. What I did do was use the time to perfect my dissection skills. I could skin a man without killing him. I learned how to remove every organ and keep it alive too.

I completed my first companion in the year of our Lord sixteen hundred. A man unlike any the world had seen his like, previously. Mary Shelley wouldn't come up with my idea for well over another century. Franken who? I wasn't as diligent as Victor Frankenstein, stitching together mismatched arms and legs.

I had a whole body, legs and all. The only thing I'd been missing was a brain, until I met a sailor down on his luck in a local tavern. That was Cyprus, I think? No, Paris? Or was it Berlin? Not that it mattered to me. An immortal can live in a city and learn the local tongue in a few years, hearing it spoken every day. He was happy to tell me his tale of woe, he'd been put ashore, deemed too old to ply the ways of the sea any longer. He seemed an amiable enough fellow and had known the love of many men.

In some small way, I did him a favour. Putting him into my donor body, that of a tailor. He was taller, stronger, younger. His eyes no longer clouded

with what we'd now call cataracts. He hadn't exactly been blind, but it was close enough for his shipmates, concerned he'd walk over the side, out in the abyssal depths.

Shelley never named her creature, literary circles took up that duty many decades later. I called my man Adam. He was my first man, it was only logical.

#

Adam was born frightened. When a man dies, he doesn't expect to wake up again, ever. Unless he's immortal. Or a reanimated corpse. He asked me to end him within three days of his creation. In hindsight, I should have seen it coming.

I was glad for one small thing though. I had a back-up plan. I'd been present at the great master's death bed. Da Vinci gave me his brain, knowing exactly what that implied.

I had spent some time studying how to preserve organs. I knew I had to keep his brain safe, and if I am entirely honest, I had been far too doubtful of my skills to use it in my first attempt to build a man.

No. Da Vinci was my second creation. He lived another eighty years. The brain modern science thinks was his, well, let us say it did not belong to a genius. Full fathom five, his body lies. I'm paraphrasing there, of course.

Sixteen eighty was not a good year for me. I was devastated without my mentor. He had taught me so much in his first life, and even more in the second. Time comes for all men, in the end. No amount of replacement parts could keep Leonardo alive, no matter how hard I tried.

And believe me, I tried. Far longer than that great man wanted me to.

#

In the passing years, being a man of medicine became legal. The Church no longer had a say in such things. As I had time to kill, I studied to become a Doctor. I was one of the first to be licensed in seventeen sixty. I didn't make any more friends for a while.

I stopped for roughly a hundred years. Not content to be alone, but I was able to tolerate it, to a degree. I can't rightly say if I ever met Jonathan

Swift during his life, but if I did, he probably based the idea of immortals off that encounter. We may have met. I've had a long life, I can't recall every detail. The brain isn't perfect, not even an immortal one. Sorry to burst your bubble. I've heard all sorts of strange notions about us, the things you regular folks invent to make your lives more interesting.

One thing I recall for certain, in seventeen eighty-six I made my first woman. Of course, I named her Eve. The body of a ballet dancer, the brain of a Teacher I had met in China. Fifty years passed before she threw herself from the heights of a local cliff formation. Again, I spent some decades in mourning.

London, Eighteen eighty-eight. Would you like to know why Jack The Ripper stopped killing prostitutes? I'm guessing you rather would. Ah, he called himself a gentleman in the privacy of his own home. However, he begged for his life when it was threatened. I don't know why he thought he'd never be caught. Not that he was. I took pleasure in slitting his throat, aboard that dinghy on the Thames.

As the tide was going out, I dumped him over the side and watched his mortal remains float off out to sea. His name, it's not important. In the annals of human history, he was but a blip on the scale. Barely spoken of enough to merit being called a conversation. People.

You just don't live long.

#

Every ten years or so, I would move across the world, find a new city, enrol in medical school and spend a few years learning the latest medical advancements. Sure, you can read books, but it's far more interesting and time-consuming to try and become a Doctor. Again. And again. Ad infinitum. Well, so far, at least.

So here we are, in the twenty-first century. This time it's been a unique experience. Every last part has been sourced by my hand. That brain proved to be quite elusive. I knew I wanted him, the moment we met. I'm certain that Stephen Hawking will prove to be quite the lifelong companion, another man of science to exchange ideas with. Once I've freed him from the prison of that useless body of his.

Don't worry. We'll reach my lab soon enough, new friend. Once there,

I'll be more than happy to share the secrets of the reanimation process. You truly are comfortable in the knowledge you'll perish shortly afterwards? Oh, cancer. That is sad. No, I quite understand.

Death is quite an adventure. I'm only sorry I'll never get to undertake it.

Yes. We're here now. You're ready to go then? Let me tell you a story. I made a new friend today...

THE END.



The Bloody Child

By C. S. Dines

Eyes snap open. I'm awake.

Horrid, troubling but now fading dreams. It's dark. I've been sweating; bed covers soaking against my naked back. I'm hot... and now I'm cold – did I leave the aircon on?

Street noise outside, below. There's some light. City light. From the window: I didn't drop the blind – I'm up high enough; modesty need not prevail.

I'm staring up. My hotel room's high ceiling. Scattered silver circles of smart, recessed lighting. Unlit.

Breathing slowly. Audibly. Why am I sensing...?

OH MY GOD!

Something: a shadow, a figure, a person! Beside my bed! Impossibly translucent. All I really notice are eyes. Horrendous eyes!

Did I just scream in shock, surprise? Was that me?

I roll. It's instinctive. Fear and horror. Frantically kicking and untangling my sweaty, semi-naked form from captive white sheets that want to trap me. This thing at my bedside. I can't look. I won't look! I struggle furiously in continued retreat, toppling over the other side; the muffled thump of my bare shoulder against soft carpet.

I lie here. Hidden. Breathing faster. Rationalising. Merely a trick of the light. A half remembered unsettling dream; the reason for my present ignominy.

Do I stay? Wait? Pray? I'm prone. The ceiling is now further away. My exposed upper body is colder. It's really cold in here now. The raised mattress is beside me. Shielding me. Something still awaits by my pillow on the other side. I sense it. Or do I?

Dare I look? I hear nothing – except my own breathing; it's slowing again.

Am I being ridiculous? This is a modern hotel. Keycard locks and built

in USB sockets for smartphones. I had a bad dream. I was probably still dreaming when I saw what I saw. I'm now wide awake. Freezing. I didn't turn off the aircon. I panicked. Fell out of bed.

I'm lying on the floor and my back is starting to itch. I am being ridiculous!

I count to three. One... Two... Three. I sit up. I turn.

OH MY GOD IT'S STILL THERE!

I think I scream again. My right leg instantly pivots me backwards in terror. Both shoulders and the back of my head crash against the inbuilt desk set in the far wall. I pay no attention to pain. I am numb.

It's staring back at me.

A bloody child!

The eyes. Oh so black eyes! Cold, judgemental, soul piercing, malign. More terrifying than mesmerising. I push myself around the desk's sharp corners, into the cold wall, cowering.

It's just a child. In rags. Incorporeal. A boy? A girl? Pale white transparency, but bloodied. Dripping crimson streaks. No wounds. It does nothing but stare. At me. No words, no gestures. Aged what? Ten? Twelve? My head's all over the place – I can't tell.

“What do you want?”

That was me. I wailed. Has someone next door heard? Will someone come?

The door. Where's the door? I need to get out. Half clothed or not – I NEED to get out!

I'm wretched, whimpering, pleading.

The bloody child looks on. Unchanging, haunting stare. Lips tight, expression... angry?

Who is this? I don't know. I can't tell from tattered clothing. A phantom of past or present? I don't know. What do I know? That this isn't manifestation of past guilt. I'm a blameless man. It's an overnight hotel on a business

trip. I'm a blameless man!

“Please, what do you want with me?!”

The bloody child says nothing. Just that awful stare. I'm compelled to return it.

Now I'm edging around the wall. Getting closer to the door. Every instinct imploring me to run. But fear plays its own tricks. Slows me. Stalls my movements. Makes me hesitant. Goosebumps and upstanding hairs tingle my skin. I can't even stand. I move like some cowering, crouching, simpering thing.

The bloody child looks on. Silent. Condemning. Condemning what? I'm a blameless man!

Have you come for me? Or is this some random cursed room. A cruel allocation; maybe the staff despise my kind. Slick, salesy, thinks he's better than the rest, let's give him the scary room – that'll shit him up!

Damn right it has!

I make progress. The bloody child turns. Its stare follows me. I'm now against the same wall as the door.

Escape is in sight.

It watches. It waits.

I'm petrified.

Trembling fingers fumble with latch and handle. I'll pull open this door – keep my eyes on this dreadful spirit or whatever it is – and back out into the hall. Free!

They'll think I'm mad. Half naked and raving. I don't care. Just let me out; please!

This door! It won't open! Shaking the handle! THIS FUCKING DOOR! Shouldn't need the keycard – not inside. Try again. I face my tormentor as my right hand turns and pulls, turns and pulls.

What the hell!

“PLEASE GET ME OUT OF HERE!”

That's me. That's me screaming!

Now the bloody child is smiling. Cruel. Dark. Sinister. It takes a step. Ethereal, blood drenched bare feet make no indention on the carpet. Leave no stain.

The bloody child is coming for me.

It's coming.

I'm innocent! I'm a BLAMELESS man!

It's coming.

And I'm screaming. Pounding! Hoping... against hope...

Nothing and no one is coming.

Except the bloody child...

End

Pop Rocks and Coke

Steve Pelton

VCR technology is dated. As I sit in front of my very nice LED TV and enjoy the majesty of a Blu-Ray disk, I can honestly say I do not miss videotape. It started off slightly grainy and with subsequent viewings would decrease in quality. I've had VHS tapes become unwatchable due to constant play.

As anybody who has children can tell you, they find a tape they like, and play it over and over again. As much as I like Christopher Lloyd and Tony Danza, I'll be quite happy if I never have to see *Angels in the Outfield* for the rest of my life.

The demise of VHS was inevitable, but one thing I do miss is the video board game. I know they are still being made using DVDs (I can't go into a thrift store without finding at least three copies of various Scene-Its) but there is something lacking in these newer games. The crappy quality of the tapes was integral to their enjoyment. I find this to be especially true when it comes to the topic of this week's article, a little gem called *Atmosfear*.



If you have played the game, I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. For those who haven't, allow me to explain.

The game was released by J.W. Spear and Sons, one of the most significant manufacturers of board games in the 20th century. The company was purchased outright by Mattel in 1994 after a bidding war with Hasbro.

One of the last original games produced by Spear & Sons was Atmosfear, released in 1991. Designed for 2 to 6 players, it featured a strict a run time of 60 minutes. The concept of the game was to move around the board while collecting a series of six keys. Prior to the start of the game, players are required to write their greatest fears down on individual slips of paper, which are then placed in the middle of the board. Once a player has collected all of their keys and made their way to the center, they draw a fear. If they draw another player's fear, the game clock stopped and that player is declared the winner. If no one is able accomplish this task before time runs out, the game is won by this fucking guy;



See, this here is what made the game stand out. The game came with a 60-minute VHS tape that was started at the beginning of the game. The Gatekeeper (played by Wenanty Nosul) is there to make sure that none of the characters are able to escape from The Other Side into the real world. As game play progressed, the Gatekeeper would periodically pop up to reward or punish the current player. Failure to obey his demands could have dire consequences, such as being sent to the black hole. The game featured six characters, most of whom were based on real life figures.

Baron Samedi whose name comes from the voodoo lord of the dead.

Anne de Chantraine, based on the first official witch to be burned at the stake.

Elizabeth Bathory, based on the serial killer believed to have killed over 600 virgin girls and bathed in their blood.

Khufu, based on a Fourth Dynasty Egyptian Pharaoh.

Gevaudan, based on a man who was accused of lycanthropy and was hunted by armies.

Hellin, the only completely original character in the game.

The nice thing about this game is, despite that fact that the VHS is the same every time you play; the outcome is completely different depending on which player has control of the dice at any given time.

Back in the day there were plenty of nights spent playing Atmosfear with a variety of people. What I did not know until recently was that the Atmosfear/Nightmare series of games spawned three sequels, each hosted by a different character from the first game.

Eventually sales began to decline and the makers of the game rolled out a new product called The Harbingers. I know that I owned the game, but don't remember playing it much. A little while back the copy of Atmosfear that I owned in the 90's was returned to me, and I was able to convert the tape into a DVD so the game could be played again, and the great part was it was still the cheesy fun that I remembered. The games were updated officially and DVD versions of it exist today. If you want to check it out, they are all over the place on EBay both on VHS and DVD.

A 30th anniversary edition was recently funded on Kickstarter. Check out the trailer on YouTube.

https://youtu.be/PJp_VnHkbfC

Coming Soon from PsychoToxin Press!

The Road Trip God

<https://youtu.be/kcYXP-hDW2g>



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