



DEMONIC CHRONICLES

Stories by John Scott G

Demonic Chronicles

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gnudGOLOSIO NONTRADITIONAL
UNIVERSAL DISSEMINATION**“Horror is groovy!”**—*Luciano Pavarotti*

(Quotation unconfirmed.)

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Sacramental.

Excremental.

Ornamental.

Detrimental.

Judgmental.

Elemental.

(pause)

Mental.

Incantation

Summoning never came easily to Janie, and no matter how much she practiced, the ritual of contacting the underworld was always a struggle for her. She cursed the hours of preparation, especially since she was never certain if any resident of the infernal realms would show up. Then, even if a creature did appear, Janie was often unsuccessful in persuading it to help her.

Janie was jealous of how effortlessly her teacher, who was also her grandmother, could summon and then bond with the shadowy entities. Never once did it occur to Janie that it might be her fault for not fully concentrating on every aspect of the ceremony.

After squirming into denim cutoffs and a comfy tee-shirt, Janie padded through the mansion in her bare feet. *It would be so great to live here*, she thought for the hundredth time, running her eyes over the urban palace she was currently housesitting.

She entered the library and approached the walk-in humidor. She expertly released the air-tight door and stepped inside. Ignoring the imported cigars, she took a couple of machine-rolled marijuana cigarettes. She exited the room and walked down the long hallway.

Moving through the spacious living room, Janie again marveled at the way everything looked like a movie set. Most of the rooms in the grand home had the sterile appearance that comes from having a design team select the decor according to color and texture instead of utility and human interface. Only one room in the house felt homey to her.

She entered the kitchen and began reciting the preliminary verses of the incantation.

*In the name of Nemesis
Daughter of the Sky
Whose embrace with Inari
Caused the planets to tremble
And morality to crumble*

While declaiming the ancient lines in English and then in Latin, Janie made a meal of scrambled eggs and diced vegetables. She ate standing at the counter, gazing out the bay

window at the lush landscaping where a team of four gardeners were busy keeping the landscaping lush. Absently, she lit a joint and alternated between puffs and swigs from a glass of cranberry juice.

If I Were A Rich Man. That was the tune the doorbell played. Janie didn't much care for the song, but she was fond of using the video surveillance gear to interview people at the front door.

"Hiya," she said into the microphone as she studied the courier driver on the porch. He was holding a bulky black cloth bag.

"Uh, hi," the man said. "Delivery for Rothberg." He raised the bag an inch or so, as if offering it to the camera above the door. She could see that it was tied shut with bronze-colored braided cords.

"Okay then," Janie said, and went to open the door.

"Are you Rothberg?" the courier asked.

"Sure," Janie replied.

"Alright, you gotta sign for this."

"No problem," Janie said.

The courier held out the clipboard and she signed Rothberg's name.

“Great,” the courier said. “Here ya go.”

The bag was heavy. “Whoa,” she said. “What’s in this?”

“Beats me,” the courier replied. “Have a good day.” He waved and hurried back to his van parked in the drive.

She closed the thick oak front door, took the black bag with its weighty contents into the living room, and placed it on one of the oversized coffee tables. She looked down at the sack quizzically while mechanically reciting more of the incantation.

*We pray to you, the one
Whose name is abysmal
Whose countenance is dreadful
Whose being is frightful
Whose existence is denied*

Janie paused a moment, intrigued by the ebony sack. She was not the intended recipient of the package. It was addressed to H. L. Geoffrey Rothberg, heir to a vast financial services empire. Rothberg recently fled the country in order to avoid process servers who were eager to hand him subpoenas in several fraud cases as well as his very nasty divorce.

Sitting down on the couch, Janie leaned forward to study the package. The drawstrings didn't appear to be at all tight. She licked her lips in anticipation.

Cautiously, she unfastened the strings and pulled open the sack to find a 9x9x9-inch box. The surface of the container was jet black and glossy. After a second's hesitation, she knelt down beside the coffee table, carefully removed the top of the box, and peered inside.

"Holy shit," she said, pulling her head back.

Accompanied by a recorded drum roll, a hologram appeared above the box, reaching almost up to the top of the living room's vaulted ceiling. Rotating leisurely within the 3D imagery were a few words spelled out in LED lights that dissolved through the color spectrum: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet.

The message inside the light beam was minimalistic, nothing more than the artist's name, gallery name, and an e-mail to use when sending an RSVP.

"I don't believe this," Janie muttered. She pulled out her phone and called her friend

Wilhelm. He was one of many acquaintances who, like her, created well-executed art works that no one ever seemed to want to purchase.

“Janie, my love,” he answered. “My passion, my darling, my—!”

“Yeah, yeah, down boy,” she said. “Tell me something—have you seen the Ingernohl invitation?” She used the name of the gallery.

“I’ve only heard about it. Supposed to be pretty elaborate. Why?”

“I’m looking at one.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Nope. I’ll show you. Switch to video.” They both tapped their phones.

“Oh my god,” Wilhelm said, “it’s filling the whole room!”

“Yeah, it has pretensions of grandeur,” she said. “And there’s a stupid soundtrack to the hologram. Maybe I can switch that off.” She rummaged inside the box. The drumming stopped and so did the projection. “There,” she said. “Now we—” She was caught short as the room was suddenly filled with images of ultra-modern sculptures.

“Wait,” Wilhelm said. “What the hell is that?”

“Jesus,” she muttered. “It’s some of the new crap from Cones,” she said.

Chris Cones was currently the highest paid artist in the world.

They stared at the images for a moment. “So,” Wilhelm said, “now he’s doing Las Vegas casino lighting.”

“Meow,” she said.

“I’ll be as catty as I want,” he said. “For Christ’s sake, this stuff looks like advertising signage.”

“That’s a little harsh,” she said. “Some of it seems fun.”

“His electric kitsch is always fun, in a ‘what is this world coming to’ kind of way.”

“You just hate him because he’s so successful,” she stated.

“Well, to be utterly truthful,” he replied without rancor, “I hate him because his work is silly, campy, shallow, and contrived. And because he’s so successful.”

“There it is,” she noted.

“Hey, come on,” he said, “don’t you hate him for most of those reasons?”

“Yeah,” she confessed. “You’re right.”

“Besides, his work is not even his.”

“Wait, what?” she asked.

“He’s got a factory in Queens where this stuff is churned out by low-paid art students.”

“No wonder so many people hate him,” she said.

“But I’ll bet you’re going to RSVP to the opening,” he said.

“Wouldn’t you?”

“Hell yeah! Is it a ‘plus one’?”

“It better be,” she replied, “because the people working the door will probably guess I’m not Henry Robert Geoffrey fucking Rothberg.”

“Who are you going with?”

“I was thinking of you, silly.”

“Thanks, but no can do.”

“Really? Why not?”

“I’m in Memphis for another two weeks.”

“Shit, I forgot about that.”

“Don’t worry, Janie girl. All you have to do is bat your eyelashes at someone and they’ll fall all over themselves in order to take you to the opening.”

“True,” she admitted with a toss of her head. “Hey, what’s the name of your friend at that art gossip blog?”

“Don’t be a bitch; it’s an art and zeitgeist commentary e-zine.”

“That’s what I said.”

“His name is Jeremy DuBarry. But you don’t have a cock, so he won’t be interested.”

“He’ll still want to attend this event.”

“You’re right. Call him. I don’t have his number. You’ll have to go through the e-zine.”

“Okay,” she said. “Thanks.”

“Alright, I have to run. Kiss you all over.”

“Back atcha, babe.” They clicked their phones to end the call.

She found the e-zine online and sent a text to DuBarry’s attention: “Hi, Jeremy! I have a ‘plus one’ to an artsy shindig. Wanna go with me? I promise I won’t be clingy.” She hit “send” and turned back to the hologram. Multicolored neon arrows were now pointing down at the box.

“Subtle,” she muttered.

She reached into the box and her hand closed around two laminates on lanyards. As she lifted them out of the box, the hologram changed again to show a large image of the same design that appeared on the laminates: an ornate double C, the logo of the sculptor.

“For fuck’s sake,” she said derisively. “Sculptor Chris Cones, you magnificent bastard, you’re now trademark registered.”

Janie compared the hologram image to the actual laminates. There was an electronic chip on one side of each laminate. “That seems ominous,” she muttered.

Her mobile rang. She checked the caller’s name and clicked the device.

“Jeremy, darling,” she purred into the phone. “How are you?”

“Great, thanks,” he said. “Are you still knocking men for a loop?”

“I could ask the same of you.”

“I’m doing my best,” he said proudly.

“So,” she inquired, “what have you heard about the Ingernohl coffee klatch?”

“I heard it’s *tres exclusivo*. Everybody wants to go. Nobody has an invitation.”

“I do,” she said matter-of-factly.

“No!”

Janie explained how she came to have Rothberg’s invitation. Jeremy told her he heard they were using facial recognition along with the RFID chips so only Rothberg could get her into the event.

They chatted a bit longer, trading gossip and skin care tips. When the conversation ebbed, they both ended the call with the same litany: “Kiss kiss, stay lubed, use a condom, luv ya, ta-ta.”

Janie clicked off the phone and smiled. *This is more like it*, she thought. Summoning a sex partner had been her goal for the day, but now she was even more excited about conjuring a date who could assume Rothberg’s form and countenance to get her into the event.

Janie tossed logs into the fireplace and made certain they would stay ablaze by turning the gas jets up full. She let the artificial flame thoroughly ignite the wood while going to her bedroom to gather the necessary tools for the procedure.

Returning to the living room, Janie saw that the logs were now burning nicely so she extinguished the gas flame. She grabbed the audio remote and cued up Act 3 of Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal*, the 1979-80 Herbert von Karajan recording. Humming along to parts she had memorized, she allowed herself to fall into a delightfully dazed state while preparing the conjuring ground.

With an angelic smile, she lit 13 candles and placed them around the perimeter of the room. Her recitation of the incantation now had a renewed sense of purpose:

*Oh glorious demon of all existence
We humbly submit to thy will
We salute thee
Whose mother is the presence of light
Whose father is the gathering of the earth
And who knows that which
Mortals will never know
We beseech the mighty Naamah
Bring forth the apparition
At the price of my soul
At the price of my soul
At the price of my soul*

Repeating the incantation again, she lit five sticks of incense and placed them in an iron holder shaped like a pentagram, closed her eyes, and recited the incantation a final time. Removing her clothing, she lay on the floor in front of the fire and surrendered to the music.

During the opera's ultimate scene, *Höchsten Heiles Wunder* ("Supreme Miracle of Salvation"), she began to vocalize in the

same rhythms as the chorus of voices that filled the air. Not in German. Not in English. Not in human language. Deep in her throat was a rhythmic throbbing from 30 to 125 Hz. It was exactly the sound of a purring cat.



In the living room, the fire had burned down to a pile of glowing embers. Throughout the entire mansion, the atmosphere was of a density that defied human conception. A profound tone deafened the ears. The sound contained everything: animals wailing, souls shrieking, armies battling, storms raging, and the earth quaking. The din allowed no communication other than the transference of cosmic energy across the astral plane. The candles grew bright, then flickered and died out. The embers extinguished themselves. The incense removed the air from the chamber. Suddenly, there was... Silence.

Silence, stillness, sanctification.

All was death.

All was death.

All was death.

And then, slowly, inexorably, the glint of life returned to the mansion. It was life in the form of an entity from another reality, something beyond human laws of physics. This was a creation from a rarified plane of existence, one more ancient and stronger than ours. This was something that could manage anything or destroy everything.

Lightning crisscrossed the sky.

Smoke rose from frigid candles.

Birds cowered.

Dogs whimpered.

Blood ran cold.

Baphomet had appeared.



Janie awoke peacefully, but almost instantly began shaking from the chilly atmosphere. She got to her feet and stumbled to her clothing on the end of one couch. The mansion was engulfed in the darkness just before dawn, so she was startled when she heard the voice.

“Don’t bother to dress for me.”

She spun around while tugging her panties up to her hips. She peered into the

gloom. Her eyes made out the shape of the Baphomet. It had assumed human form. “Ahh,” she said. “You have come to me.”

“Yes,” said the Baphomet in a rich basso voice. “But there is a price to be paid.”

“Not while it’s freezing in here.”

“Allow me to alter that.” Within seconds, the temperature in the mansion became very pleasant.

“Ummm,” she said. “That’s nice.”

“Take off your panties and come here.”

“Yes, Mr. B,” she said.

“Spread your legs and sit down.”

“Yessss, Mr. B.”

Janie said “yes” again and again as she climaxed numerous times. She found the Baphomet to be a superb sexual partner, most especially because his cock pulsed and twisted in ways no human could ever hope to accomplish. Girl and creature happily spent the entire morning celebrating the joys of carnal knowledge.



That afternoon, Janie had a quick lunch of coffee, mixed nuts, and fruit while she bantered and bargained with the Baphomet. She had to make certain it knew what she wanted on the night of the gallery event, and she had to get its promise to behave.

“Okay,” she said, “just to be clear: First, you will appear to the security people to be Geoffrey Rothberg, but to me and everyone else at the event, you’ll look good.”

The Baphomet stared at her with what might have been a smile.

“Second,” she continued, “we can make fun of the art to each other, but no fair changing the placards or descriptions in the catalog. We can’t screw around with their precious printed shit. Okay?”

The Baphomet was silent.

“Hey!” she snapped. “Are you following this?”

“You are very confident,” the Baphomet noted with quiet intensity.

She sensed an ominous change in tone. “Oh, right, right,” she said hurriedly. “Look, Mr. B, this is important to me. Not just for the event itself, but for afterwards. I mean, you can

return to, you know, wherever, but I'm stuck here."

"This means," the Baphomet inquired mischievously, "you are asking for a favor?"

"Yes."

"I do not hear any supplication."

She stared at the Baphomet. Was this a moment to be flippant? Or was this a moment to be serious. She opted for serious.

"I am a human being of my time," she began. "I treasure the pallid, the profane, the paltry, and the petty. I am of the now, whereas demons and gods are of the forever. My place in the universe is tiny and insignificant. These things I iterate to you freely, accompanied by my humble apologies if I have offended you in any way."

The Baphomet regarded her for several long seconds. "Impressive," it said at last. "Did you memorize that?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"Very satisfying," the Baphomet said.

"So," Janie asked, "we have a deal?"

"Together, we shall attest to this," the Baphomet replied.

She put her right hand over her heart and her left hand atop it.

The Baphomet mirrored her actions.

Together, they intoned, “I swear.”



To prepare for their appearance at the grand event, they both were fitted with custom-designed formal wear. The Baphomet seemed as pleased as Janie about running up huge charges on Rothberg’s credit cards. The night of the gallery opening, they rode to the affair in a jet-black stretch limousine which they called their “carriage d’Rothberg.”

Upon their arrival at the blockaded street in front of the Ingernohl gallery, police officers directed the long, gleaming vehicle up to the entrance. Janie and the Baphomet exited the limo hand in hand, posed for photographers on the sidewalk, and then moved to confront the clutch of stern-looking folks around the front door to the gallery.

They had no trouble entering. To the event security team, the Baphomet appeared to be the somewhat out-of-shape, 78-year-old

Geoffrey Rothberg; however, to Janie and her friends, the creature appeared to be the reincarnation of a physically splendid, 28-year-old gold medal winning gymnast.

The crowd was a mixture of dilettantes, art dealers, corporate dullards, politicians, art snobs, and lowlife scum who were living large after inheriting their family's fortune. If it were possible to measure the level of insincerity at the gathering, the correct reading would have been "off the charts."

To the Baphomet, this was a tempting opportunity for mayhem. Sensing this, Janie reminded Mr. B of their mutual promise to behave. She received a low, guttural sound in reply.

"Try some of the food," she suggested. "Earth chefs make great *hors d'oeuvres*." Waiters dressed as robots from various famous science-fiction films passed among the throng with platters of delicacies.

- *Cubes of Pork Tenderloin on Wooden Skewers*
- *Squares of Salmon, Cream Cheese, and Dill on Sourdough Toast*

- *Strips of Barbecued Chicken Breast on Wooden Skewers*
- *Charcoal Grilled Beef Tenderloin with Bourbon Peppercorn Sauce on Wooden Skewers*

Despite enjoying some of the appetizers, the Baphomet couldn't resist changing one of the platters to servings made from nothing but breaded wooden skewers, and then silently laughing as guests tried gnawing on them.

As Janie and the Baphomet mingled among the attendees, they were amused and/or appalled by snatches of conversation about Cones' latest creations.

“...big ego but little talent...”

“...gaudy gimmicks passed off as art...”

“...invented rigidities have been made manifest through complex procedures devised to present minimalistic surfaces...”

“...somebody paid sixty-two million dollars for high-tech Christmas lights...”

The exhibition catalog was pretentious in the extreme. Emblazoned across the cover was the title of a sycophantic essay dealing with highly fanciful stories about the life of the

sculptor. *CONES!* it shouted in 96-point Bodoni Bold, followed by an un-subtle subtitle: *Chris Cones' Sculptures are So Far Beyond State-of-the-Art that They're Ahead-of-the-Art.*

Janie and the Baphomet suppressed their laughter while moving from one glitzy and overpriced techie-artsy creation to another amidst the antiseptic display space in the main gallery building.

Overall, the event was proceeding just as Janie hoped. She was thinking that the evening was a terrific success right up to the moment the other Baphomet arrived.



Janie spotted Howie Wittson just as he was walking into the party. She had never cared for the condescending Wittson or the scowl that permanently distorted his face, so his arrival was not welcome.

“Damn,” she thought. Before she could take a step, she saw Wittson’s date. Statuesque and voluptuous at the same time, the woman

looked like her body had been poured into her gown.

Janie and the woman locked eyes for a second. The woman returned her glance with an expression that managed to be both haughty and inviting.

“That’s more like it,” whispered the Baphomet with relish.

“What?” Janie asked.

“One of my own kind,” said the male Baphomet, nodding at Wittson’s date.

“Oh shit,” said Janie. Wittson had his own demon! She tried to keep the two apart, but the creatures were drawn to each other. Janie could only watch in consternation as the succubus-incubus attraction took effect. They seemed to glide together in a rush of electric energy.

The Baphomets kissed, and their passionate embrace caused smiles and a few raised eyebrows. They shed their clothing, and their naked bodies caused alarm and dismay. Then they both assumed their underworld form as they mated on one of the tables full of catered food.

“What the hell?” exclaimed one attendee.

“Oh my god!” shouted another.

“Get this on video!” shouted a third.

Some partygoers stared in fascination while others recoiled in fright.

Janie cursed and stalked away from the table that was now full of spilled dishes and the two writhing entities.

“What’s happening?” asked people who were rushing to see the commotion.

“No biggie,” Janie told them laconically. “Just two half-human beasts engaged in intercourse.”

Suddenly, everyone was nearly blinded by light emanating from the creatures’ bodies. Raw energy exploded in every direction. The ground vibrated, causing several people to lose their balance. The walls shook and lighting fixtures crashed to the floor. The ceiling’s symmetrical tiles rattled, dropping a fine dust on everyone.

The greatest reaction took place within Cones’ artistic creations. Taking on a life of their own were the sheets of metal, panels of plastic, miles of wiring, glass tubes of neon, thousands of light-emitting diodes, and the strategically placed liquid crystal displays. Everything that served as the guts of his semi-

manufactured sculptures was pulsing, flashing, squirming, and flailing with unabated energy.

Male Baphomet and female Baphomet slowly slithered in and out of each other, their intense and otherworldly fornication causing hell to break loose within the gallery.

Cacophony filled the air. With hideous sounds of wrenching, splintering, hissing, grinding, and spitting, the sculptures in the gallery began to leave their pedestals and mountings. Almost immediately, the sculptures attacked the human beings with malevolence.

Cones' neon sculpture, "Shock of Ages," slinked across the floor and the glowing tubes wrapped themselves around four middle-aged patrons who screamed, writhed, and screamed some more.

As if in response to the shrieking, the neon tubing slid into their mouths, stifling the high-volume protests, and leaving only gurgling noises. Their flagellating bodies expanded as the tubing continued sliding down their throats. Their torsos grew larger and larger, turning each of them into living caricatures. One after another, their bloated bodies exploded in roiling clouds of glass, gas,

and guts, staining everyone and everything nearby.

Cones' aluminum-plated sculpture, "Zeus Wind," was an enormous ceiling fan that rotated at three mph. It began speeding up, reaching ten miles per hour, then twenty, then thirty-five. With a jolting crack, the tri-pronged blades detached from the motor and glided across the room, slashing shoulders, gashing foreheads, and decapitating Wittson.

Several people, racing back and forth to evade the movement of the sculptures, skidded in the rivulets of blood oozing from Wittson's severed neck. Waving their arms wildly, they crashed to the hardwood floor, tripping others who were trying to avoid Wittson's head as it was being batted around the room by three of Cones' blue enamel plump raccoon figurines, all known as "Cones' Coons."

More gas-filled tubing wriggled away from the sculptures and attacked other panicked guests. One man struggled with the tubing, wrenching it away from his head. Angered, the tubing launched itself at his mouth, shattering on his teeth. The gas enveloped him and several people next to him,

causing them to stagger and fall into the Cones sculpture called “DeLuxe Aeterna.” Powered by its own generator, this piece was now delivering 4,000 volts of electricity to their bodies. Vibrating violently from the shock, they all looked like they very much wanted to scream but were unable to do so.

The male and female Baphomets reached a climax together. Steam poured out of every orifice, rainbows emanated from their forms, the four corners of heaven pulsated, the five corners of hell revolved, and the earth was momentarily consumed by quakes.

Janie watched the sculptures snake their way onto or into everyone in the gallery. She turned to flee but was pinned up against one wall by shards of brass, strips of aluminum, LED display screens, and darkened Plexiglas. “Please,” she whispered in terror.

Suddenly, her Baphomet was beside her. “Do not fret, my little human,” her Baphomet whispered, the voice seeming to fill her ears. “We have a bargain, remember?”

With the arching of one claw, the male Baphomet caused the pieces of Cones’ shredded sculptures to recede from around

Janie's body. She watched in fascination as they moved to penetrate or electrocute the few still-writhing torsos of fallen party guests.

"You will have to excuse us now," the male Baphomet told her.

"We have an assignation," explained the female Baphomet with a smile.

"But—" Janie began to protest.

Instantaneously, she found herself back in the living room of Rothberg's mansion. She called for her Baphomet. She was alone.

"A little rude," she said. She looked at her outfit and saw dried bloodstains. "Okay," she admitted. "Could have been worse."

She shed her clothes, took a long shower, and reflected on how the party was actually very entertaining.

After drying her hair, she put on her favorite pair of lounge pants and a well-worn sweatshirt emblazoned with the words "That's 'Nasty Bitch' to you!" With a sigh, she turned to her daily chores—going through Rothberg's mail and phone messages. She dutifully noted the man's investment instructions and relayed them to his broker via text. Then she took one last look at the incoming e-mail.

“Shit,” she said upon seeing that Rothberg was planning to return within two weeks. Apparently, his lawyers reached agreements in the various legal actions against him. “Damn!” she spat out. That would mean no more living in the mansion. No more access to gourmet food delivered with just a few clicks on her mobile. No more great grass.

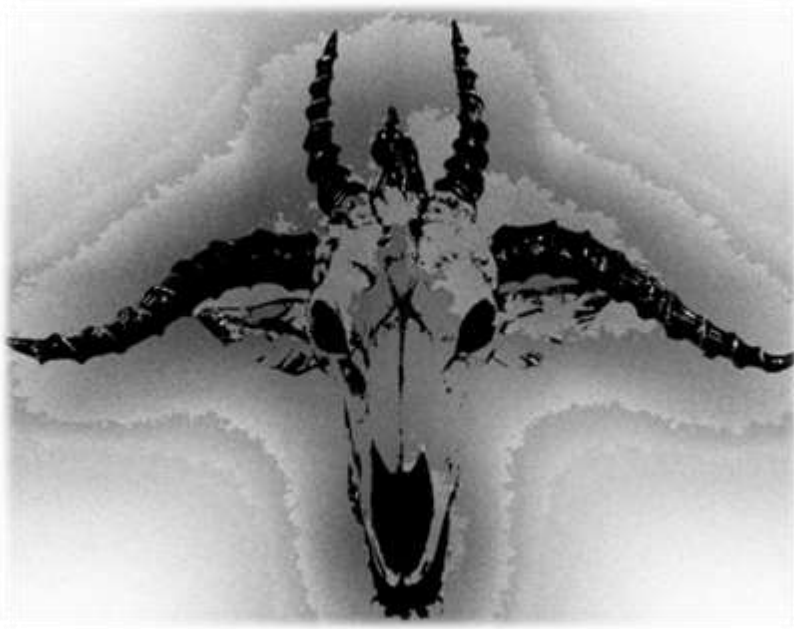
She lit up a joint, dialed in some music, and sat on one of the couches. This had been a rather good couple of months, she thought. But wait... why does it have to come to an end? What if something happened to prevent Rothberg from re-entering the county?

Janie was certain she could make this work. She could take over. She would send instructions to his broker. The mortgage and credit card payments were automatic. Same for paying the housekeeping and gardening staff. She could continue being the mistress of the mansion.

With determination and resolve, Janie got down to work. Arranging and lighting the fire. Cueing up the *Parsifal*. Positioning the candles and incense. Preparing her body for the rigors of the ritual.

Perhaps if she had known so many innocent people would be arrested and detained along with Rothberg, she might not have conjured the Baphomet. But she really really really wanted to continue with her current lifestyle, and therefore she began again in earnest...

*In the name of Nemesis
Daughter of the Air
Whose embrace with Inari
Caused the planets to tremble . . .*





“Evil,” said the stranger,
“is love spelled backwards.
And wrong.”

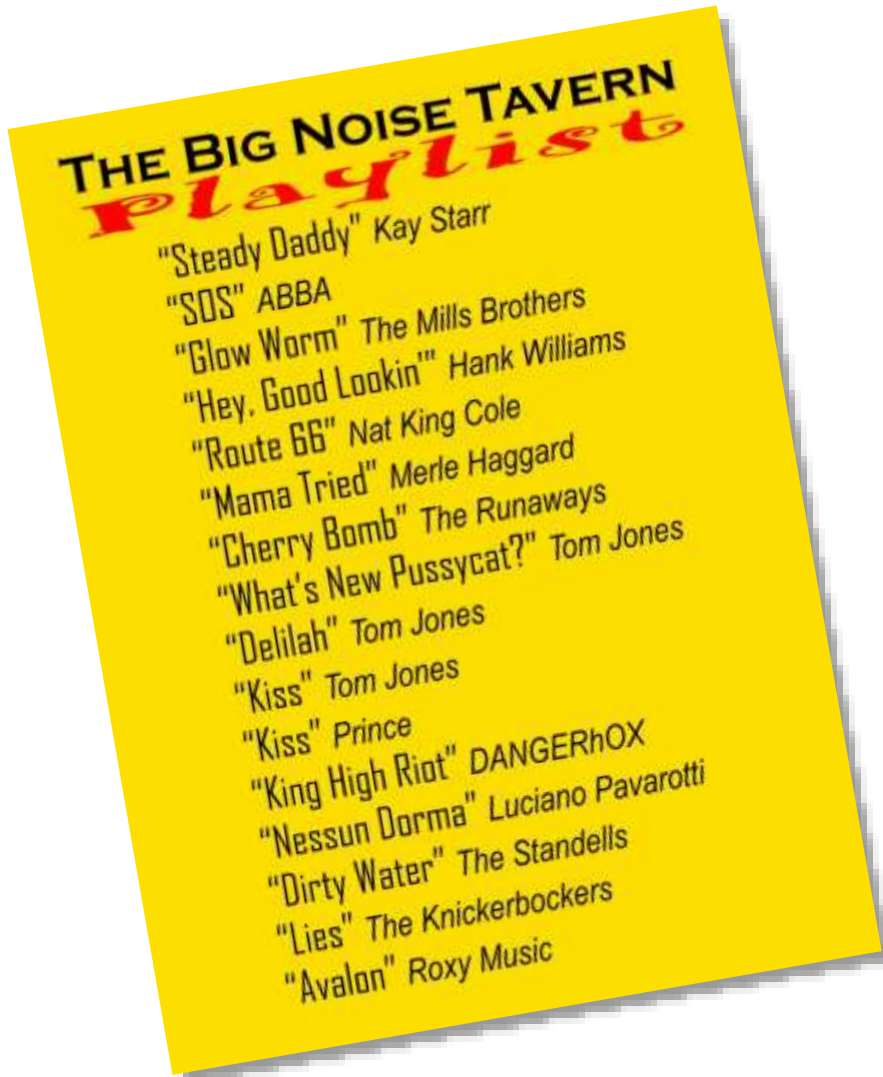
Checklists

The Big Noise Tavern was on Winnetka Boulevard in the Township of Darnum, a midwestern municipality that was mostly white, mostly Christian, and mostly reactionary. That put the bar smack dab in the middle of a very red county in a very red state, which meant the place was not an oasis of sanity, tolerance, or understanding. Customers were mostly the bar's working-class neighbors rather than students or professors from the nearby college.

Visitors were welcome in the tavern as long as they refrained from commenting on the news of the day. If politics was avoided, regulars in the Big Noise Tavern happily invited every patron to joke, laugh, sing, and tell tall tales.

A favorite pastime most evenings was a sing-along with the recordings on the "noise box," as everyone called the digital music system. The selections were made by the bar's

owners, and their taste was eclectic. Each sing-along session featured a hodgepodge of sonic adventures.



The tavern's "group karaoke" had been going on for nearly three years. On this particular evening, the gang was boisterously demolishing a humorous country recording entitled "Big Cadillac," by Rob Trust & His Panhandle Players. To the scratchy fiddle,

twangy guitar, spritely rhythm section, and adenoidal vocals of the recording, they all sang the sweet, sad song:

*Bill went for a ride
In a big black Cadillac
Enough room inside
To stretch out on his back
But in heaven or hell
Bill probably cursed:
His last ride in a Cadillac
Was his first.*

*If Bill hadn't died
Of cirrhosis complications
He'd probably sigh
and say of that ride
"It didn't live up to expectations."*

*The mourners looked sad
Now that Bill has passed
And that his first ride in a
Cadillac was his last.*

Everyone hummed along with the song's shuffle-beat ending and then joined in on the concluding car horn sound effect by shouting

“Beep Beep!” or making a number of different and annoying honking noises.

Laughter filled the room.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” bar regular Hankering Hank shouted to the crowd, “we have officially achieved cacophony!”

“I’ll drink to that,” bar regular Red Rodney responded.

“You’ll drink to anything,” bar regular Betty the Boopster commented.

“Fuck you, Betty.”

“As if,” Betty replied.

Bar regulars Cynthia and Shy Alice both high-fived Betty.

The noise box fell silent for a moment. The tavern’s front door opened, and the crowd turned to see who was arriving. The noise box suddenly began playing *Theme from Peter Gunn* at top volume. The tune served as an appropriate accompaniment for the stranger as he strode confidently across the room and up to the bar.

Heads swiveled as everyone studied the newcomer. Tall, fit, and tanned, he was dressed in black denim, black leather boots, and a black silk cape lined in bright crimson.

Bartender Bill welcomed him and took his order for tequila.

Cynthia and Betty moved next to the stranger. “Very theatrical entrance you made there,” Cynthia said.

“Only because of this,” the man replied in a deep, powerful voice as he removed the cape with an expert flourish. “This is part of my costume,” he explained. “I was in a commercial that just finished shooting up the street.”

“That sounds exciting,” Cynthia told him. She almost batted her eyelashes at him.

“Hey, we’ve got a TV star here,” Betty the Boopster told the crowd.

“I only had one line,” he said. The man struck a pose and intoned, “It’s devilishly good.” He paused a second, then added, “It may not shine as one of the great works of literature, but I did get to say it several times in various ways.” He proceeded to say the line in Spanish, German, Japanese, and French.

There was a smattering of applause from the others at the bar.

“Thank you,” he told the crowd. “You are a most charming and undemanding audience.”

He turned to Cynthia and Betty and said, “My name is Todd. May I buy you both a drink?”

Todd and the two women chatted for a while at the bar before he escorted them to a booth. It was there they became entranced by his eyes. He had a penetrating and hypnotic stare. Entranced, the ladies began talking about themselves and other regulars with no restraint.

Throughout the evening, Todd had at least one mesmerizing chat with every one of the regulars. They were unaware that Todd was cataloging their responses.

Denizens of The Big Noise

<i>Name of Bar Patron</i>	<i># Sexual Partners</i>	<i>Arrests/ Convictions</i>
Cynthia	12	0/0
Lefteye	6	1/0
Betty the Boopster	23	2/1
Red Rodney	3	7/5
Shy Alice	74	2/0
Hankering Hank	5	6/0
Bartender Bill	17	0/0
Server Sue	4	1/0

“All right, everyone,” Bartender Bill called out to the crowd. “It’s time for a round of The List.” This was greeted by another

smattering of applause. “It’s Red Rodney’s turn to name the game,” Bill said.

“I think I’ve got something entertaining for us,” Rodney said. “Okay, here it is: Funny ways to die.”

Laughter and a few “oohs” greeted his announcement.

“Good one, Rodney,” Lefteye said. “So, how ‘bout this—A funny way to die would be getting run over by your own car.”

Laughter.

Cynthia said, “A funny way to die would be choking on your pillow.”

Chuckles.

Hankering Hank said, “A funny way to die would be having a stroke while teaching a class in CPR.”

Laughter and groans.

Betty the Boopster said, “A funny way to die would be drowning in a pool of tears.”

The regulars nodded at the poetry of it.

Shy Alice said, “A funny way to die would be while having an orgasm.”

Lots of laughter.

Todd smiled. “From what I have been told,” he began, instantly getting everyone’s

attention, “dying during an orgasm is called coming while going.” That brought more laughter.

“Best pun of the night,” Lefteye said.

Todd held up one hand and continued. “The muscle contractions of the dying partner can improve the climax of the remaining partner.” Some of them felt that was going a little too far. “Plus,” Todd continued, “there is no need to lie to them about how good they were at foreplay.” The women laughed at that.

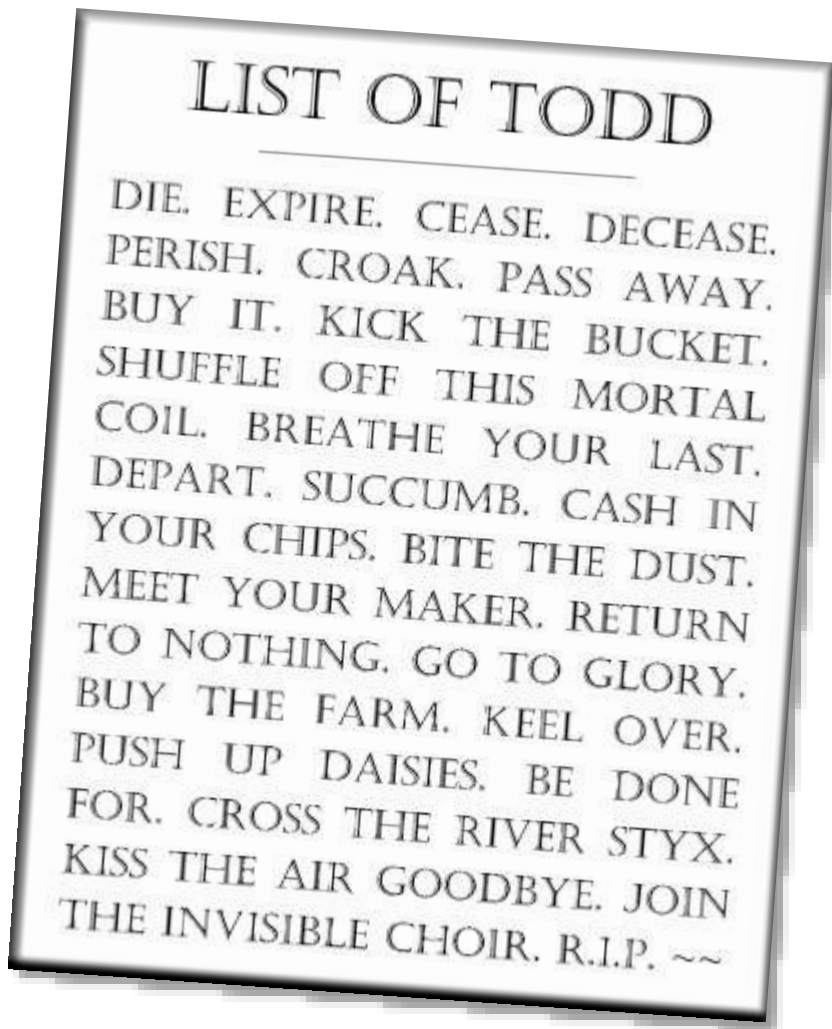
“Where’d you get your information?” Rodney demanded good-naturedly.

“My sources are...” he paused just the right amount “...embedded.”

Laughter and groans. Todd put an angelic expression on his face and indicated that he was done speaking for the moment.

Each outlandish idea during this edition of The List was accompanied by much laughter and frequent grumbling at the more morbid and embarrassing suggestions.

Through all their frivolity, Todd smiled indulgently. He mentally ticked off phrases that described the grisly topic of their current game.



With more frivolity and steadily raunchier examples, The List game continued until Bartender Bill felt the time was right to conclude the proceedings. He dialed up a mood-changing track on the noise box: the DJ Insane remix of Benny Goodman's 1937 hit, "Sing Sing Sing." With "Sing3" blasting out of the speakers, couples began to dance. Todd partnered with Cynthia, Shy Alice, Betty the

Boopster, and Server Sue. Next, he encouraged them to dance together while he snapped a photo of the group.

There was a small smile on Todd's lips as he turned to put on his cape. His eyes swept across the interior of the tavern and the atmosphere began to change. The dance track got louder and began to echo. The bassline became deeper and the drums more insistent. The interplay between the modern synthesizers with the Swing Era reed and brass instruments progressed from sleek to slick to sick. There was no escape from the sonic tidal wave.

Reacting to the audio outrage, the dancers' movements became more frenetic, their bodies gyrating as their faces contorted into painful grimaces.

No longer were they within the safe environs of the Big Noise Tavern; they were in a wonderland of visual splendor. Lights flashed. Walls tilted. Floor and ceiling rotated, first in the same direction, then in opposition. Colors bled into each other, people's faces blurred, and the law of gravity was suspended.

In each of their tortured reveries, they saw themselves run over by their cars, suffocated

by their pillows, crushed by falling trees, electrocuted by toasters, bitten by rabid bunnies—all of the silly ways to die that had made them laugh such a short time ago. Gone was the humor. Disaster was everywhere as the music began to change in frightening ways.

Beginning at a low volume was the *Dance Macabre* by Camille Saint-Saëns. The volume of the classical work slowly increased, competing with “Sing3,” which was still playing. The two pieces of music fought with each other, then morphed into something that no human being had ever experienced.

With seismic shocks and sonic upheaval, the room transformed into screams of pain, suffering, heartache, regret, sorrow, and repentance. The terror was unrelenting for several long, torturous moments. And then...

Silence.

Immobility.

Mystery.

In the distance, a siren was heard, growing louder as the ambulance approached.

Once inside the bar, the EMTs were appalled by the sight of the remains of all the patrons and employees. All except one.

Todd was already in another city, donning the costume and make-up of a circus clown. He was soon to make his entrance at the Beekman twins' fifth birthday party. Todd checked his list of names, most crossed out in red. Todd thought it was a nice touch to use Cynthia's plasma for the ink.





“I adore children,”
said the traveler.

“Fried for lunch,
baked for supper, and
as a cold snack after sex.”

Evil Nature

Receiving a mere honorable mention for her work made Mona angry. It got her so mad that she wanted to spit three times and call for the devil. Honorable mention was a hollow prize that the Garden Club gave to more than half of the entries in their monthly contests. It was akin to the silly “participant award” given to middle school children on losing soccer teams.

Mona knew that her flowers were far superior to all of the other honorable mentions, and at least as good as any of the top prizewinners. What did she have to do to receive a first prize, kill somebody?

She pulled on her gloves and went out to her garden. With a trowel, she furiously rearranged the dirt around her flower beds. The gall of those people at the club, she thought. The nerve of them, she muttered. It was a shame, a crying shame. Mona again considered her threat to call on the forces of evil.

Which is when Mr. Scratte made his appearance. Normally, one would have to actually spit three times and recite his name, but Scratte decided that Mona's actions came close enough to the time-honored invocation and so he materialized behind her as she worked the soil in her flower beds.

"Hello," Scratte said pleasantly.

"Oh!" she said, spinning around. She was nettled at first, but then reassured by the man's smiling countenance.

"Nice day to be in the garden," he said.

"Oh my," she replied, "I must have been caught up in my work." She hadn't heard her squeaky gate or his footsteps on the gravel leading to her garden plot.

"I am so sorry if I frightened you," the man said. "But let us not dwell on that," he said with a glowing grin. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance. Nikolaus Abaddon Scratte is my name." He extended a hand.

"How nice," she said. She removed one glove to shake hands. "Good to meet you, Mr. Scratte."

They stood there chatting for a good half-hour. Mona was delighted to find that Scratte

was an expert horticulturist. They happily discussed soil, moisture, nutrients, sunlight, shade, temperature, humidity, pruning, and the efficacy of hand-watering.

“From a good old-fashioned watering pail,” they both said at the same time.

“Oh my,” she enthused. “We must be kindred spirits.”

“Yes, indeed!” he said.

They repaired to her sun porch where talk eventually turned to her ire over the fact that her flowers were repeatedly snubbed by the Garden Club.

“It makes me so angry,” she said.

“You know,” he told her conspiratorially, “I once had a problem like that.”

“You did?”

“Oh yes,” he replied. “It was vexing, but with dedication and inhuman effort, I resolved the difficulty.”

Scratte explained how he experimented with a variety of soil additives, filtered water, and fertilizer essences. “Finally,” he told her, “I found the answer, and it was just like... magic!”

“Oh!” she exclaimed.

“After which,” Scratte went on, “my flowers outshined all the others. People were amazed at the hues and beauty of my blooms.”

She wondered if Scratte’s discovery could help her garden. She thought about how her flowers could look with this help, how they could be larger and more colorful. Instead of an honorary mention, she imagined receiving a first prize. Finally, she asked him if he would share his discovery.

“I am not sure about that. Trade secrets, proprietary data, and all that sort of thing.”

“Oh,” she said, deflated.

“But,” he said quietly, “there might be a way.”

“Yes?”

“I am thinking that I could bring over some of my elixir and simply add it to your watering can. We could do that for several days in a row. That way, I would be able to maintain the secret, yet I would still be sharing the glorious results with a fellow flower lover.”

“That would be wonderful!” she said.

“Excellent,” he said, rising. “I shall return in an hour. Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Thank *you*, Mr. Scratte,” she replied.

After Scratte departed, Mona puttered around her home, alternately elated at the idea of Mr. Scatte's elixir and worried it was some kind of hoax. She was so deep in thought, she found herself preparing a cup of tea before realizing she had already made one for herself five minutes earlier.

Despite all her worries, Mr. Scratte returned as promised in one hour. With as much drama as possible, he added a precise number of drops to her watering pail from a vial that resembled something from a Victorian era laboratory. Mona watched with absolute fascination.

"*Animi mores,*" he whispered. He slid the vial into a pocket inside his sport coat. He then used both hands to complete an elaborate flourish above the pail of water. "*Voila,*" he said. "Now you may give nourishment to your plants."

"Yes," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

With equal parts zeal and trepidation, she watered her five most promising bushes. When she finished, she regarded her plants with a hopeful smile. She said, over her shoulder,

“Mr. Scratte, I can’t thank you enough for helping me achieve—” She turned but was surprised to find him no longer there. “Where did you—”

She spun around, thinking he had simply moved to a different part of her garden. But no. She was alone.

“Well,” she muttered, shaking her head. “I just don’t know about anything around here anymore.” She turned to study her plants and gave them a longing look. She sighed and went back in the house.

Within just a few days, seemingly as if by a miracle, the plants revealed the beginnings of new growth. “That is amazing,” she thought, admiring each bud slowly, one after the other. “Simply amazing,” she repeated. She inspected each with a sparkle in her eye.

Each day the buds grew larger. Within a week, they started to open. She beamed with delight as petals emerged to bask in the sunlight. The growth rate was astonishing, and Mona shivered in anticipation of the blooms displaying intense color. “Could it be?” she asked herself.

Next morning, splendor greeted her...



Mona stood motionless in front of her flower beds, completely in awe of the delicacy of the flowers that were gently waving before her in the morning breeze. “Is this happening?” she asked herself. She blinked once, twice,

thrice... and the flowers were still there. She shut her eyes for five seconds, then opened them... and the flowers were still there. She turned back to face the house, counted to thirty, and slowly pivoted to face the garden... and the flowers were still there. Lovely and bold, delicate but strong, and bursting with color.

She shrieked with joy, and immediately flinched at the sound she had just made. She brought one hand up to her mouth and glanced around guiltily to see if anyone had noticed, but she was alone with the breeze and her precious *fleurs*.

With a smile almost hurting her face, she went inside to call and invite people to come visit so they could view what nature had wrought. She reached out to all her friends, many of her neighbors, everyone in her church prayer group, and the friendliest of her acquaintances in the garden club. While phoning, she bustled about her kitchen, brewing iced tea, and baking sheets of cookies for that afternoon's impromptu get-together.

Her party was a noisy success. Mona was kept busy supplying the drinks and snacks for

the crowd. Out of the corner of her eye, she kept seeing Mr. Scratte, but each time she turned to welcome him, he was not there.

While moving throughout the throng of people, Mona was able to overhear dozens of *tête-à-têtes* and conversations taking place in the living room, kitchen, and back porch.

Mona took note of the gossip, pettiness, and condescension of most of the attendees. It almost seemed as if no interaction was complete without jokes at others' expense, put-downs of people's attire, snickers at their choices of home décor, and speculation about the sexual infidelities and peccadillos of everyone in the village.

Once the last guest departed, Mona was exhausted. She went to lie down for a few moments and didn't wake up until dawn. She was pleased with the party's success but saddened by the behavior of many who attended. She retreated from most human interaction for several days, preferring the company of her plantings.

Later in the month, one of Mona's flowers took fourth place at the garden club. The month after that, she received a third-place

award. In the months that followed, her blooms came in third or fourth, and even placed second on two occasions.

“But never first,” she muttered. She made a cup of tea and tried to talk herself out of feeling sad. “Think of the three I’s,” she told herself. Inclusion, intimacy, and invitations. People in the garden club were now including her in their gatherings, their thoughts, their parties, their brunches, their lunches, their conversations, their activities.

Try as she might, Mona was unable to fully enjoy her new-found achievements and heightened social acceptance. There had to be more satisfaction from all this, she thought. “If only Mr. Scratte were here,” she said aloud.

Like the miraculous buds and glorious blooms, her wish was granted later that week when she heard that Scratte had returned to town. With her expectations heightened, she looked forward to a visit from the man whose private potion had altered her life.

After days that seemed like an eternity, Mona was able to meet with Scratte. She poured out her troubles, her concerns, her worries, her predicament.

“In short,” Scratte said, “you find yourself on the threshold of a new breakthrough. The ultimate award in your circle of horticulturists. Major recognition. A first prize.”

“Yes,” she said greedily.

“It is virtually assured,” he stated, but then undercut any possible celebration. “Assuming...” His voice trailed away.

“What? Assuming? Assuming what?”

Scratte smiled. “Let us take a tour,” he said.

“A tour?”

“Yes. A brief tour of the world.”

“But, but we can’t just—”

“An imaginary tour, if you will. Take my hand.” Slowly, deliberately, he extended his right hand toward her.

She involuntarily moved her right arm forward as if to shake hands, but then jerked it back at the shocking sight of his arm, wrist, and hand. They were gnarled, calloused, and brutal in appearance.

“Oh!” she gasped.

“Anything the matter?” he inquired.

“Your hand, it’s—Oh!” She gasped again because the callouses were gone and the skin

was back to what she thought was its normal appearance. “I, I don’t,” she stammered. “I mean, it can’t be.”

“Take my hand,” Scratte said. This time, it was a command.

Mona stared at him. It was as if there was no one else in her world. Instantly, she had been whisked from worried to helpless. She had no will of her own. Shuddering, and unable to focus on anything other than Scratte’s orders, she obeyed.

Accompanied by a peal of thunder, they both were gone—gone from her town, and gone from her former reality. Joined in an unholy embrace, they were shooting across space in total defiance of the laws of physics. Their bodies were weightless as they darted, swooped, and plunged in majestic arcs that were peacefully smooth. The experience was magnificent... until they stopped to view some of the horror that humanity continually creates for itself.

Scratte guided her to vantage points near horrific tableaux. “Regard this,” he hissed.

Children were assembling electronic parts of appliances, computers, and mobile devices.

They toiled fourteen hours a day, trapped inside warehouses surrounded by barbed wire fencing and nets to catch any who tried to end their living nightmare by hurling themselves off the tops of the buildings. Mona gaped in dismay.

Scratte transported her to desolate parts of disparate countries where villagers were walking miles every day, seven days a week, just to obtain enough water for cooking and bathing. Life-sapping effort to get water for survival. Mona gagged at the odious task visited upon them on a daily basis.

Scratte conveyed her to view men, women, and children who were fighting, starving, and dying in war-torn nations that were unable to bring together their political, social, tribal, or religious factions. Everywhere was blood, gore, death, and stench. This was too much for Mona. She screamed.

The journey came to an abrupt end.

She found herself back in her living room, the sun shining in through the lacework curtains. Scratte stood nearby.

“I believe that you are beginning to understand now, yes?” he asked.

“Understand?” The word came out in pieces as Mona gasped for air. “Understand what?” she demanded.

“There was no magic potion,” Scratte told her. “The magic was actually all inside you.”

“But no, this can’t—”

“If you wish to continue relying on the imaginary elixir, you may do so. All you have to do is ignore what you know you should abhor and oppose. Just accept the evil in the world without lifting a finger to fight it. Remain silent about the tears of children in cages... the sweat of slave laborers... the blood of slain innocents in war... The—”

“That’s enough!” she shouted.

Scratte smiled one of his beaming smiles. “The choice,” he said, “is yours.”

She turned to face him, but he was gone. She was alone with her pounding heart and throbbing head.

Alone to regard her soul.

Alone to consider her actions.

What decisions would she make?

What direction would she take?

What could she do?

What *would* she do?





Is earth a dream
or a nightmare?

And does it
belong to God
or the Devil?

Gated Community

You never know who you're going to meet standing in the line stretching away from Heaven's Gate, but that just goes to show you that variety is the spice of death. The multiplicity of people who come here makes this an absolutely fascinating job. Doorman, that is. Portal porter. Concerned concierge. Careful caretaker. Keeper of the keys. If none of that makes sense, just consider me the head bouncer.

Before you leap to conclusions, no, I am not Saint Peter. My name is Karl Hermann. Old Pete has not been working the door for a number of centuries, but his name is still used because most of the members of the Board of Directors up here are very set in their ways. They are quite comfortable with the concept and image of *San Pietro*.

“He has superb name recognition among the naïve masses on Earth,” is how one Board member put it.

“He’s the ideal icon,” said a dweeb from the public relations department.

“We have achieved impressive market penetration with the St. Peter concept,” is the way the Board chairman described it.

“In a nutshell,” another Board member stated, “Pete is a winner.”

Naturally, this made me angry. By retaining the image of Saint Peter as guardian at Elysium’s entrance, they are denigrating all my work here, which is totally unfair. Elizabeth, a girlfriend of mine, was fatalistic about it. “Such is afterlife,” she said.

My own publicist thought it would help my case if I provided the public with some valuable information about the afterworld. You certainly will want to know about this stuff if your mortal coil is about to shuffle off and you’re planning on coming to see me about getting a waiver on that whole “your soul is damned and you’re going to hell” situation you’re probably facing. No offence, but most human beings lack what it takes for admittance to the party.

Ileana, a girlfriend of mine, likes to call the festivities, “The Bash.”

Look, I totally understand why people want to be one of the heavenly partygoers at The Bash. Heaven is pretty damn cool.

First, everybody looks great. You appear the way you always want to appear, and there are plenty of mirrors for your ego gratification. On top of that, you also look the way others want you to look, so everyone gets the perfect partner.

Then there's the sex. Any time you want it, any way you want it. Plus, men are able to get full enjoyment out of a second, third, and fourth time. Guys are happy about this; women are ecstatic about it.

In addition, making love while floating on clouds is pretty nifty. No wear-and-tear on the torso, no twisting your ankles, no sore knees, no chaffed elbows, and no bad back. Face it, fucking on a cloudbank is literally out of this world.

You may have noticed that we can swear. Any damn time we want. It's not a problem.

Another perk is being able to play any type of music we like. Whatever melody you want, played at any volume, anywhere, day or night. Everyone can be listening to a different

piece of music at the same time without disturbing anyone else.

Then there's the toga outfits everybody wears. They're comfortable, convenient, and wrinkle-free. Best of all, everyone sees you in a well-tailored and color-coordinated ensemble complete with shiny new shoes. Except during sex, which is more of a cosplay situation.

For these and many other reasons, the entire population of the dead tries to come here, and I have turned down most of them—the rich, the poor, and everyone in-between. I have said no to bankers, beggars, tailors, sailors, doctors, clerks, poets, lawyers, farmers, merchants, and this list could continue for as long as you like.

A lot of folks think that the trick is to get past the doorman and then everything will be hunky-dory. One clown told me he hoped his file would get lost in a blizzard of bureaucratic paperwork. That way, he said, he wouldn't be discovered and expelled from paradise. What an idiot.

So, let me clear up a few details concerning human existence and your eventual exit from this planet. There are three stages.

First, you live your life. Could be long, could be short; depends on germs, traffic, and eating your vegetables.

Then, you die. It's inevitable. Can't be helped. All part of god's plan. It's a fucking stupid plan, in my opinion, but she didn't consult me about it, so there we are.

Finally, you're judged. On everything. I know! Seems unfair, but dem's the conditions dat prevail, as Jimmy Durante used to say.

The judging process is made easier by the fact that I've got access to records of all your behavior. And I mean *all* of it.

For example, your permanent record from school, which I pretty much discount, if you want to know the truth. Those things are never right. Behavior in school is a matter of conformity more often than not.

We've also got your police record, IRS records, phone records, Internet search history, job history, emails, letters of recommendation, text messages, the devil's diaries, and Santa's list of who's been naughty or nice. Yeah, Santa's working with us.

We know which of the Seven Deadlies you've committed, and how often.

We know if you've cheated on your expense account, tipped badly at restaurants, or refused to wear a mask during a pandemic. We know if you tease cats, kick dogs, starve goldfish, eat beef, buy fast food, make robo-calls, watch bad porn, distribute bad porn, or make bad porn.

We know if you're a road hog, boat buffoon, line jumper, tax cheat, litterbug, and/or wi-fi thief.

My girlfriend Régine points out that we even know if you return your shopping cart in the grocery store parking lot or just leave it in the space between vehicles.

I gotta tell ya, I like this gig. I like the money and I like the hours. It's a good job and I'm good at it. Which is why it was a shock to learn that the Board of Directors is transferring me to some godforsaken backwater outpost.

I was upset. Outraged, in fact. I demanded a hearing in order to make a formal protest of my dismissal.

"Why am I being fired?" I asked the Board. "Who is unhappy with my work?"

The Board members sat on their teal colored mini-thrones in heaven's horribly

gauche platinum-plated conference room and gave me the details concerning their decision.

“We’re going in a different direction,” one of them told me.

“There’s political pressure,” said another.

“Societal changes,” said a third.

I stared at them for a moment, watching their hair rustling gently in the gusts from the celestial air conditioning system. Speaking as calmly as possible, I told them they needed to give me the real reason, not just some jargon.

“The job is going to be handled by, um, a different type of person,” one said. “It’s a question of diversity. This job requires a minority,” they added.

“A minority female,” said another.

“A minority female who’s in the LGBTQ community,” said a third.

They just sat there, faces implacable, hands fidgeting, and eyes not meeting mine. The silence was palpable.

“You’re discriminating against me,” I said evenly. “I think this is perverse,” I added. “I think it’s legally and morally indefensible.”

“We can understand how it may appear that way to you,” one said.

“Look,” another chimed in, “you had a good run.”

The chairman poured himself a glass of water from one of the frosted pitchers on the oak table with the inlaid edging. “It’s a done deal,” he told me with an expression halfway between a smile and a sneer.

“Who?” I asked with venom in my tone. “Who’s taking the job?”

They glanced nervously at one another before the vice chairman spoke up. “Mirella,” he said quietly.

“You’re kidding,” I snapped at him.

“Not at all. Mirella is perfect for the position,” he told me. “She checks off all the boxes.”

“No, she doesn’t,” I informed him with vehemence. “She’s not LGBTQ. She’s one of my girlfriends.”

“Not anymore.”

I must confess that I became a bit snarky and irate. Too snarky and irate for them, apparently, as they had security hustle me out of the Board room.

The humiliation was excruciating, but it got worse. I was all set to attend The Bash that

weekend, but Mirella put up a roadblock. She said she's not going to let me in!

Truth is, I have prepared for this. Over the past few eons, I've been keeping in touch with some of the Fallen Seraphs. You know, exchanging pleasantries, having the occasional Sunday brunch, and just generally chatting with a few of Lucifer's associates.

They listened closely to my descriptions of The Bash and they've incorporated some of our best ideas into their events. I've come to see that they're a really great bunch of goblins, demons, sprites, and fiends. They're well-informed, witty, and up for the downstroke, if you know what I mean. Plus, they're always inviting me to drop by for their revelries, something they call The Real Deal.

Things are all set for me to attend The Real Deal tonight with my new girlfriend Nathalie. We are both looking forward to whooping it up with a grand gothic group of guys and gals, one of whom assured us that the party is going to be massive. "It's going to be behemoth big," he said. "Babylonian big."

Tempting, yes? And let's face facts—it is definitely time for me to make some changes

in my life. I have reached the breaking point. Considering the demeaning and insulting treatment I've recently received on the heavenly side of things, you can easily see why I'm switching teams.

You heard me: I am going to unrepent.

Is that blasphemous? Will that disturb the divine scheme of things? There was a moment of panic, but there were no thunderbolts, no ominous warnings, and no lectures. Everything is fine. Even the forces of divinity understand that this is the right thing for me to do.

So, here's hoping I get to see you tonight at The Real Deal. It's going to be a blast. After all, they've invited all the sinners of the world to uninhibitedly interact with the combined forces of the underworld.

God knows that should make for one hell of a party.



The mere glimpse of riches
will tempt the weak,
yet threats of hell's torments
will not move them
to goodness.

Reverend Feere's Delicious Tears

Even without the scar tissue covering three-quarters of his face, the Reverend Doctor Timothy Montmartre Ezekiel Feere was quite forbidding. Nearly seven feet tall and close to 300 pounds, his appearance was appalling to adults, frightening to children, and a curiosity to dogs.

He possessed a powerful baritone voice and impressive lungpower, both of which he employed whenever preaching. Parishioners attending services in his church were used to his distorted physiognomy, the result of nearly dying in a fire as a child, but when he spoke at theological conclaves, many people were jolted by his majestic and terrifying presence.

A great many more people learned about Reverend Feere when he was a featured speaker at the annual gathering of the Global Brotherhood of Christians and Jews. This year's event was entitled "Countering the

Concept of ‘The Other’ in Our Society” and the speeches were live streamed into hundreds of churches and temples throughout the English-speaking world.

Reverend Feere’s presentation began with a video of stars slowly traversing a dusky sky while a choir performed a J.S. Bach motet, “Lobet den Herrn, alle Heiden.”

*Lobet den Herrn, alle Heiden,
und preiset ihn, alle Völker!
Denn seine Gnade und Wahrheit
waltet über uns in Ewigkeit.*

[Praise the Lord, all pagans,
and praise Him, all people!
For His grace and truth
rule over us for eternity.]

As the harmonious voices concluded with an impassioned *Alleluja*, the Reverend took his place behind the pulpit. The walls of the sanctuary were bathed in purple light, leaving the altar and transept in darkness. Reverend Feere was suddenly illuminated by spotlights and he unleashed a mighty “Alleluja and amen, my brothers and sisters!”

Throughout the locations receiving the broadcast, onlookers gasped at the sight of the man. Most of the people attending services that morning had been under the impression that their own faith leader would be among the speakers featured in the video stream.

“Where’s Pastor Jenkins?” whispered people in the pews of Westside Chapel.

“Where’s Bishop Brougham?” whispered people in the pews of Grace Cathedral.

“Where’s Reverend Walters?” whispered people in the pews of West Ramsdale Church.

“Where’s Rabbi Friedmann?” whispered people in the pews of Temple Beth Shalom.

Reverend Feere swept his eyes around the chamber and then into the camera that presented him in close-up. To viewers, he appeared to be staring into their eyes.

“Today, we will quench the thirst of humanity’s wretched souls,” Reverend Feere announced with steely intensity.

The gravitas of Feere’s vocal delivery was impressive on its own, but it was devastating when magnified by the amplifiers and speaker systems in the churches, chapels, temples, and cathedrals where he was now appearing.

With a piercing tone and an oration style that was spellbinding, Reverend Feere swept listeners along on a roiling tide of biblical allusions, dystopian warnings, and nonsensical ravings.

One listener who was unimpressed was seven-year-old Timmy Graff. For as long as he could remember, he had witnessed the hypocrisy of adults at church. The way they obsessed over buying ever larger stained-glass windows for the sanctuaries. The way they judged each other's faults. The way the men regarded the women's bodies.

Timmy leaned his head back on the curved edge of the wooden pew and imagined himself walking on the ceiling of the cathedral. "Have to be careful around the chandeliers," he thought, not quite achieving the pronunciation of chandeliers.

In his reverie, Timmy tiptoed across the vaulted ceiling, waving his arms and tilting his torso to maintain his balance between the lighting fixtures and the ventilation ducts.

The choir began a hymn, "Cleave to the Breast of the Savior," and Timmy altered the cadence of his steps to match the meter of the

music. The organist missed a chord and Timmy nearly lost his footing. He stumbled to his left, turning his body to prepare for a fall.

“Welcome, my lost lamb,” Reverend Feere said, grabbing Timmy’s arms.

“Wh—what’s happening?” Timmy cried.

They were both on the ceiling of the cathedral. Reverend Feere’s scarred face was approximating a smile.

“I am just comforting one of my flock,” Reverend Feere told Timmy.

Timmy stared in disbelief. “But what are you doing up here?”

“I am everywhere, boy!”

“But that’s not—I mean, you can’t!”

“Yes I can,” Reverend Feere stated. “I am up here, *and* I am down there.” The Reverend nodded in the direction of the pulpit.

Timmy gulped and shot a glance down toward the sanctuary. What he saw filled him with terror. Reverend Feere, the man now holding him and preventing him from falling, was also standing in front of the congregation, preaching to the crowd, exhorting them to join him in shouting “Amen!” after he bellowed each of the Beatitudes.

“And now,” Reverend Feere whispered to Timmy, “listen to me, my prodigal son. We will take part in the great comeuppance. We will see this flock, and all the other sinners, receive their rightful recompense. Watch.”

With trepidation, Timmy followed the gaze of Reverend Feere.

A miraculous transformation was taking place in all of the houses of worship that were receiving the closed-circuit broadcast of Reverend Feere’s sermon.

Behind the parishioners, the back wall of each church, temple, chapel, and cathedral was replaced by a towering wall of stained glass. The colors were so pure that the effect was almost psychedelic. The light shining through the stained glass was so bright that it hurt the eyes.

Even more disorienting, the fortification appeared to be slowly coming apart at the edges. The walls of glass began teetering, then tilting downward, one millimeter, then ten millimeters, then a meter, then falling slowly, but gathering speed and power, succumbing to the pull of gravity, and plummeting toward the flock sitting in the pews.

“Look out!” Timmy shouted down to them.

“Too late,” said the Reverend.

Several tons of glass, glazing, wallboard, latticework, rebar, and plaster descended upon the helpless worshippers. Many were crushed and died instantly. A great many more were maimed, either by the immense weight crashing down on them or by the shimmering shards of glass that shot in every direction. The crystalline projectiles were a fluttering rainbow of hurt that arced their way through the shafts of sunlight.

Choir voices became shrieks and screams. Candles ignited ornamental draperies, sending choking clouds of smoke over the writhing wounded. The force of the crash loosened lighting fixtures, which descended to impale people crawling out of the rubble.

In each of the hundreds of locations receiving the closed-circuit broadcast, blood flowed freely, and terror was thick in the air.

“Mom!” Timmy shouted. “Mom, where are you?”

“Shhhh,” his mother told him, patting his arm with one hand. He was seated beside her

in the pews. No carnage was in sight. Reverend Feere was pontificating from the pulpit. The choir stood at attention in the loft, ready to begin singing the offertory music. Timmy was in shock. He sent befuddled glances in every direction. There was no blood, no carnage, no death, no devastation. There was, however, something even more alarming for Timmy: he was now appearing on the huge video screen, next to the misshapen form of Reverend Feere.

“Confess!” the pastor told Timmy.

Wide-eyed and trembling, Timmy found that he couldn't speak. His mouth was dry and his lips were frozen. Yet his voice was heard through the audio system, iterating his improper behavior at school and his improper thoughts at home. He was forced to endure the horror of hearing himself acknowledge every one of his faults. Timmy squirmed in disgrace as his own voice revealed his behavior. He winced as his confession continued in front of friends, family, and neighbors, as well as thousands of strangers. Some people laughed at him. Some hooted and hollered.

“Your sins have been duly noted,” the Reverend said. “Away with you.”

Timmy was back in the pews, ashamed and confused.

In the pulpit, Timmy had been replaced by someone from another church and the same ritual played out. Reverend Feere ordered the puzzled and frightened captive to confess his or her sins, and they did so, to the sound of laughter and disparaging comments.

The forced confessions proceeded at a faster pace until the sounds overlapped each other in throbbing layers of audio perfidy.

“There was that one time when...”

“Maybe it happened that I...”

“I didn’t mean to, but...”

Excuses, evasions, prevarications, lies, and distortions were given for their infidelity, embezzlement, braggadocio, gossiping, racism, fascism, and other assorted perversions. All of it was delivered with a great deal of whining, false sincerity, and flop sweat.

The confessions continued relentlessly because every congregation was filled with people engaged in lust, envy, greed, gluttony, sloth, pride, and wrath. Louder and louder were the competing voices, the din climbing beyond every listener’s threshold of pain.

At the height of the cacophony, Reverend Feere began speaking over everyone else as he addressed the multitudes.

“Pay heed to the sinners!” he shouted. “Are they truly remorseful? Do they deserve forgiveness after penance? Look into your own hearts for the answer.”

Before anyone had time to examine his or her heart, Reverend Feere was on a new topic. “Behold the sayings of the true philosophers!” he shouted. “Faith is the wombat that touches the sun when the rain is stillborn! Love is the elbow that makes beasts turn to raisins!”

In the pews, Timmy furrowed his brow. “*What does that mean?*” he thought.

“For those who explain,” Reverend Feere shouted, “no belief is necessary! For those who do not explain, no belief is possible!”

“Wait,” Timmy said. “What are you—”

Reverend Feere kept preaching. “For those who are necessary, no belief is explainable. For those who are unnecessary, no explanation is believable!”

“No way,” Timmy protested.

Unabashed, the Reverend continued. “For those who are impossible, no belief is

explainable. For those who are possible, no belief is compulsory!”

Timmy spoke again, and this time his voice was amplified to the same bombastic level as the Reverend’s. “That’s just not right,” he said. His voice echoed ominously.

“The blood of the divine flows within me!” shouted Reverend Feere. “The blessings of the holy emerge from my eyes!”

Without warning, Reverend Feere was beside Timmy, bending over him, weeping and wailing as he brought his distorted face down, down, down, until the tears flowing from the corners of his eyes fell onto the boy, glistening Timmy’s cheeks and mouth.

With a reflex action, Timmy licked his lips and discovered he liked the briny substance. With a smile of satisfaction, Timmy stretched upward, attempting to gather more of the twin streams of droplets.

The tears filled Timmy’s soul with joy and contentment. He was pleased, yet he was not yet sated. There was a craving, an urge, a desire for more. He had to have additional delicious drops. He would do anything to obtain them.

“Anything?” asked Reverend Feere.

“Yes, anything!” the boy promised.

The same process was affecting each one of the thousands of people in all the services across the land.

“Anything?” Reverend Feere asked the crowds.

“Yes, anything!” the people responded.

Reverend Feere smiled. It was a smile unlike any other found on Earth. It was the smile of The Son of Perdition.

“Say amen!” shouted Reverend Feere.

“Amen!” shouted the parishioners.

“Praise be to the Almighty!” Reverend Feere proclaimed, his eyes glistening. The choir roared out the Bach motet once more and Reverend Feere’s huge form levitated from the pulpit and floated out across the rows of worshipers. His tears flowed unto his congregation as a multitude of fresh souls joined his legion of followers.



Devils come
when they're called,
like loving dogs.

They also come
when they want,
like sassy cats.

In the Mind's Eye

Call me crazy, but I think I might be crazy. Apparently, I've been seeing things that others don't see and hearing things that others don't hear. Like when the guy serving coffee this morning moved the carafe over to my cup and poured out frogs.

Or the time when the guy next to me licked his lips and it wasn't a tongue, it was a rusty nail. A really big one.

Or like when the dark clouds showed up yesterday and the storm started but instead of rain, the sky was pouring out boxing gloves and tennis shoes. And the thunder was the drumbeat introduction to "My Sharona."

Little things like that.

People say I have a good imagination. Perhaps I do, but I don't know where all this high-level kitsch comes from. We are talking far out! For example, whenever I open *The Bible*, the pages are on fire. I wasn't sure if

they were real flames, so I went to the cupboard, got some marshmallows, put them on the end of a meat carving fork, and you know what? I was able to toast the marshmallows by holding them over the flames.

It was the book of *Jeremiah* on fire that first time. On the following occasion, it was the book of *Psalms*. Next, it was *Ezekiel*. Then *Proverbs*. Then back to *Psalms* again.

Considering the crispy marshmallows, it all seems pretty real, don't you think?

Okay, I don't know, either. Maybe it's just a thing that they call... oh damnation, what was it? Wait, I remember. It's a phenomenon they call phantasmagoria. Yes, some people call it schizophrenia, but you and I know better.

One guy I talked to about this said that the names of the burning books meant something. He said that *The Bible* was trying to send me a message. Yeah, maybe. But I think it's just that those burning chapters are the ones that are near the middle of *The Bible* and so they're more likely to be the ones you see when you grab the book and flip it open, you know?

Anyway, each time I get done with my tasty toasty snack, the flames are gone and so is *The Bible*. And the meat carving fork—also gone. And the bag of marshmallows is gone, too. So, is it really happening, or not? I think that is a good question and we—Wait, hold on a second...

“No, the past few weeks have been great. No edginess or anxiety. No panic at all. That whole nervousness thing is now long gone. I’ve been relaxing with books from the library and that great cable channel, TCM. They had some Gene Tierney flicks last week. She was one fine looking woman.”

Sorry about that. Where were we? Oh, the crazy. Yeah, sometimes I’m facing a whole huge shipload of weird. Right now, it’s happening again. Look over there—it’s the Evangelist. Did I tell you about the Evangelist? He shows up sometimes and he does his own thing with *The Bible*. Watch... See, he rips out pages and tosses them at people. Each page bursts into a flash of lightning and a puff of smoke. Neat, huh?! Wish I could do that. Believe me, I’ve tried, but there’s no lightning or smoke. It’s almost as if there are forces of

nature that are beyond us. I believe that there's this secret part of the world that we can't control, and it's—Wait. I'm sorry. You're going to have to hold on another second...

“Yes, I've been staying on the exercise plan and I feel good about that. I'm really happy about the workouts. I think the morning routine is quite helpful.”

Okay, I'm back. So, we were talking about the weirdness. It pops up everywhere. Did you see the barbed wire fence that runs alongside the roadway on the way down here? Well, I see bodies hanging on there. Every day. All of the carcasses swaying gently in the breeze. Can't really tell who they are because the light is always behind them. The bodies are just silhouettes. Outlines of the indolent. Shadows of the silent. It's eerie when there's just a few of them, but lately there are so many! And then, just like that, poof, they're gone. Talk about strange.

One patient I spoke to about this quoted that writer guy, Shakespeare. Something about “In the mind's eye.” Then he made a mistake and called me Horatio, which just shows you more of the weirdness around here.

Another example, okay? So, at the art show we had last month, almost everyone here contributed something. Most of the artwork was very clunky and amateurish, but there are a couple of people with talent. The weird thing is the bizarre way the forces of gravity in the room acted. The way gravity treated some of the people as they looked at the art was really unbelievable. Lifting them up, tossing them at the art, removing their clothes, sticking them to the walls next to the artworks. You see what I mean about how everything is madness? It's also kind of distracting. I mean, you'll be having a normal conversation and all of a sudden you find yourself—Wait, I've got to take care of this thing...

“Oh yes, the correspondence course for the property management career is really going well. I got 100 percent on my last two tests, and a 93 and a 97 on the others. They say I'm going to get the certification without any trouble. The future is looking good!”

All righty, I'm back. Now, let me tell you about the serpent. I think it's kind of important. So, there's good and bad, nice and nasty, righteous and evil, okay? Well, the serpent is

the physical manifestation of all of those things. But mostly evil. When it appears—I say “it” because I don’t know if it’s a girl or a boy snake—when it appears, it has wings. Like an angel. But it’s still a serpent.

If the wings of the serpent brush against you, that can mean you’re going to die. Or it can mean you’re going to live. It depends on whether it’s a good day or a bad day. Are you following me? Are you sure? Lately, I’m not always certain if the way I’m explaining the strangeness is the right way to do it. I’m trying to make it clear. Because it’s important that we—oh, hang on...

“No, doctor, I’m no longer seeing things that aren’t there. Everything is in its place, right where it should be.”

Okay. I’m back again. What? Hey, I understand—you want to know about those questions and my answers, right? They’re all just part of the inmate assessment process. You learn to answer the right way and then things are smoother. If you don’t learn how to do it, they get annoyed at you. They take away the TV privileges, you don’t get dessert with your meals—really petty things like that. But if you

learn to answer the way they want it, they're happy and then—Oops, hold on...

“Really? No kidding? Well, that is good news. In fact, that's great! Thank you!”

Hey, guess what. The paperwork came through on my case and it turns out I'm scheduled for release next week. Yay! So, I'll be out and about, and it looks like we're going to be neighbors. Won't that be fun?!

I'm sure we'll get together a lot. We have so much to talk about: landscaping, gardeners, pool guys, gourmet grocers, housekeeping services, and all the typical suburban middle-class stuff. It'll be terrific!

Whoa, there's the Evangelist again. And the flames. And the people with the snake hair. And the ones with the nail tongues. And the really loud music and the car crashes and the killer goldfish!

As if that wasn't enough, there's a huge tidal wave approaching us right now, and it's made out of mobile devices that suck people into them.

On top of everything, there's that urge, that craving, that inner desire, you know? That feeling that we have got to work together in

order to *do something about it all*. You're feeling it too, right?

And, of course, in order to accomplish all that, one has to get involved in a lot of marching and organizing and maiming and bloodshed and dildos and balloons and spiders and batteries and bratwurst and feathers and lollipops and duffel bags and rotting corpses.

Boy, talk about weird! I mean, this latest combination of events is positively bonkers. Am I right?

Tell you what—once I'm all moved in, we'll discuss it further. We'll get together to have a nice chat over coffee and absinthe.

So, should we meet first at your place or mine?



Some people are aware that
monsters, phantoms, and
demons reside inside them.

Some people even know
their names.

DreamSender

Wearing a cloak made of copper did not bother the tall Rastafarian with the purple teeth as he sauntered along one of the city's upscale boulevards, turning deftly to avoid the geckos and iguanas that were leaping off the tops of skyscrapers to splat on the asphalt and pummel passersby.

The man adroitly stepped around a pile of lizard innards and stopped a moment to admire a window display containing a bevy of blue mannequins making love atop a huge cake in the shape of an aircraft carrier.

Suddenly, the man twirled, performing a lovely pirouette to face the street. With a graceful wave of his hand, he altered the scene entirely. The reptilian rain became a deluge of silver ball bearings. The man laughed as the metallic orbs ripped holes in every human they struck.

Within minutes, the entire city was littered with dead and maimed bodies, all of

the bloody torsos covered in layers of peacock feathers, moldy breakfast cereal, and fresh-steamed clams. The man in the tuxedo happily danced amidst the carnage.

He approached a group of people huddled in front of a high-rise apartment building. They regarded him with fear and trepidation.

“There are situations that are too difficult for humans to process,” the man told them. “To cope, we let you transform your terror into dreams.”

“Please,” one woman pleaded. “Please make it stop!”

The man chuckled, waved at her like he was part of the British royal family, turned, and sauntered down the gory sidewalk next to the towering buildings. He began issuing commands to everyone he encountered.

“You will surrender to the pervasive mists of nowhere,” the man informed one group of still-living bystanders.

“Your temporary residence shall be within the stone castles of the air,” the man explained to a clutch of cowering people.

“As for the rest of you,” he shouted, sweeping his hand across the expanse of the

city, “you all will be residing in the realm of cloud cuckoo land!” His statements were met with disdain, disapproval, and disgust.

The man was not a human in any normal sense of the term. He was a dreamsender, a species of damaged angel sent to torment humanity.



The dreamsender knelt to speak to a little girl and boy who were clinging to each other in fright. Calmly explaining his power and his purpose, he eased their fears for a moment.

“Mr. Dreamsender,” the little girl asked shyly, “do you also give us good dreams?”

“Sometimes,” the dreamsender replied. “We bring visions, trance states, and confounding contemplations to the minds of people both asleep and awake.”

“Why?” the little boy asked.

“Hush,” said the dreamsender. “Accept your fate as part of the human race.”

Rising, the dreamsender told the adults nearby, “Hallucinatory as they are, dreams may be beneficial.” He explained how dreams might help people deal with their emotional complications. “Suppressed memories may be resurrected through dreams,” he continued. “Dreams may lead to creative problem-solving. Dreaming may help people cope with the vagaries of life, but...” His voice trailed off.

The dreamsender smiled and spoke dramatically. “Sometimes, of course, dreams just scare the bejeezus out of you!”

Onlookers stared mirthlessly.

“You will have to forgive me for enjoying my little joke,” said the dreamsender. He grinned and continued moving toward the center of the city.

Some dreamsenders were sympathetic to the plight of humanity, but not this one. He reveled in the angst and despair that beclouded the people of earth. In addition, he was inducting people into a permanent condition of night sweats.

“Listen, all of you,” he shouted at the men, women, and children huddled against the sides of buildings lining the glistening streets. “From now on, your lives will be different. You will exist in a state of suffering similar to acute phases of schizophrenia. If you awaken from your reveries,” he explained, “you will discover that you are living inside even more frightening nightmares.”

The man smiled the smile of the damned. “It will be your fate,” he averred, “to enter an alternative universe. You will reside in a world of visual vehemence, auditory anger, tactile terror, olfactory outrage, and gustatory ghastliness.”

Malevolence and panic spread across the planet. There was no stopping the onrushing evil that bloomed inside the psyche of every sentient being. The surrealism of their dreams began taking place in their lives.

Skulls emerged from vaginas, elegies invaded songs, pin pricks replaced caresses, burning tires obliterated kitchen aromas, and candy tasted like rancid tuna.

“The horror is coming!” shouted one wide-awake dreamer.

Worms wriggled out of hamburgers, screeching supplanted poetry, electric shocks were on every fingertip, the stench of dead rodents filled all nostrils, and pizza tasted like motor oil.

“The evil is here!” yelled a man before killing himself.

Colors dripped off vegetables, every musical instrument became bagpipes, favorite old shirts became sandpaper, candles gave off the scent of sewers, and spaghetti tasted like finely-ground circuit boards.

“No! No! No!” thousands shouted.

There was a thunderclap that shook the earth. Dark clouds roiled on the horizon, obscuring the flames and lava erupting from thousands of volcanos emerging from the ground. The atmosphere became thick with particulate matter and the only light was a metallic crimson glow. Screams signaled the

agony and despair of the populace as humanity sank into a gruesome series of torturous tableau.

A child whispered a prayer. “When the morning stars go dark and the angels are crying, where are you, god?”

And then, at the stroke of midday, everyone awoke from the universal nightmare. People blinked and smiled at the bright sunshine. Lovers marveled at the gorgeous countryside. Children cavorted in parks and on playgrounds. The world enjoyed a glorious moment of grace.

Then came the EndDream. At the start, one or two people envisioned it. Then several thousand people visualized it. Then everyone was experiencing it and the universe was altered forever.

Two hundred forty thousand miles above the planet, asteroid Enlokia-17 knocked the moon off its axis. That sent the Earth out of its orbit, which affected the trajectories of other planets, and thus began a chain reaction throughout the solar system, which resulted in all the planets and moons scattering like billiard balls on a gigantic three-dimensional

table made out of gaseous clouds and space dust.

The morning stars darkened.

The angels cried in anguish.

Inhabitants of heaven and hell rushed into each other's arms.

Children whimpered and adults cried.

Where was God?

Where was Satan?

Then came a shocking proposal. What if those two opposing entities were connected? Even more astounding was the suggestion that the Divine and the Devil are one and the same.

God is Satan!?

The dreamsender laughed. "Perhaps that is just a dream," he said.



Goodness requires decency,
effort, and resolve.

Evil, on the other hand,
is easy.

Imps

When you hear the word “demon,” what comes to mind? An evil spirit or a monster, perhaps, or some sort of messenger from hell. Well, that’s just not right. Look, it’s true that I am a loyal subject of the Pandemonium Realm, but that does not make me a demon, devil, or fiend. Nor am I a ghost, poltergeist, witch, or warlock.

For those of us in the Pixie species, it is insulting to be lumped in with such obviously perilous entities. Sure, we’re all associates of Satan, but Pixies don’t ever talk to the Infernal Potentate. In fact, we’ve never met the Horned One. Pixies are disingenuous, not dangerous. This applies not only to pixies themselves, of course, but also to elves, imps, leprechauns, fairies, and sprites.

Officially, I am an Imp Extraordinaire, First Level of Distinction with Sulphur Coal Clusters. Yeah, the title is a bit on the highfalutin side, but you can call me Darryl.

I'm just a regular guy. You know, apart from the whole impish thing and being employed by Lucifer.

Okay, now I know it's silly to get upset about how often people are throwing around terms like "Beelzebub" and "wizard." But putting imps, pixies, and sprites in the same category as the devil's closest colleagues is really quite discourteous. That kind of bias is always directed at us and, quite frankly, it makes some of us angry.

Don't get me wrong, we realize that not every human can be expected to know the hierarchy of hell. However, there are some fundamental truths that every earthling should know. For example, an imp is not some kind of gremlin, devilkin, erlking, or kobold. That really shouldn't be so terribly difficult to remember, right?

Now, as to our purpose on earth. We are here to test you. To keep you on your toes. We are helping you hone your sensibilities so you can move upward in the grand plan of human evolution. You don't want to come back as pond scum, do you? Or as a rodent in a landfill? Or as an infected toenail?

All righty then, pay attention to the details of your life while enjoying the bigger picture. Yes, I know that sounds contradictory. And perhaps it is. See? Keeping you on your toes!

My own special assignment deals with perverting adages, axioms, proverbs, maxims, and pithy sayings. Every thirteenth time you encounter them, they change. Let me give you a few examples:

Usual: He who laughs last, laughs best.

Impish: He who laughs last is slowest to get the joke.

Usual: People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

Impish: People who live in glass houses need heavy drapes.

Usual: When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

Impish: When the going gets tough, hire the tough to go solve the problem.

I think that's enough of that, don't you? I believe you are smart enough, or well-read enough, to understand what's going on here without the old version. So, let's just go with the new, improved, impish versions.

Here are a few:

- Look before you leap because he who hesitates is lost.
- Two wrongs don't make a right; it takes at least three or four.
- When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Except for the pedophile priests.
- If you can't say something nice, say something nice and juicy.
- Early to bed and early to rise means the foreplay was good.
- Do unto others before they do unto you.
- Don't count your cats before curiosity kills your mouthful of gift horses.

Okay, I admit that last one is a bit of a googly, as the Brits might say. Or a botched job, as my grandfather used to put it. A slipup. Misstep. Miscue. Blunder. Bungle. But I like injecting confusion into the adage industry.

In my role as tormentor of humankind, I am dedicated to confounding normalcy. That's what I'm all about.

Much of my work lately involves what is called "kid-lit," or children's books. The thirteenth time you encounter each one of these stories, you will see my new version—but only if your heart is pure.

Consider the classic bedtime story, *Midnight Goon*, in which kids learn about the horribly brutal things that will take place in the darkling hours once their parents have left the room.

There's *Find Phineas*, in which kids have to locate an oddly dressed geek who is hiding on a page with dozens of colorful people. Once they find Phineas, they'll notice he's stealing someone's purse. Or shooting up. Or urinating in public. Or vomiting. Or planting a pipe bomb. Or fellating a cocker spaniel.

The Little Engine that Could Come has several important points to make about the battle against impotence.

It is probably not necessary to provide a summary for *The Very Hungry Caterpillar Ate All the Neighbors*.

One more: Many excellent recipes appear in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit Stew*.

My plans for the future include making a few slight and humorous revisions to the Pledge of Allegiance, the mission statements on corporate websites, and the oaths made by jurors, witnesses, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, and elected officials. I am looking forward to working on all that, but it will have to wait until after my next performance review.

Right now, I'm still working on rewrites of kiddie books. Later today, I'll be rewriting the story of Jack and Jill going up the hill. I am changing the setting. My version will take place in Nantucket.

That should lead to some intriguing shenanigans, don't you agree?



What makes something alive?

Movement?

Thought? Hope?

Empathy? Fear?

Grace?

Perhaps it is...

Fury.

Mr. Snuggles and the Angry, Angry Day

Meet Barry.

Barry is six years old.

Barry is sad.

Barry is sad because his dad left him and his mom.

Barry and his mom just moved to a new town.

Barry starts school today.

Barry's mom went to work early.

Aunty Mae made breakfast for Barry.

Aunty Mae helped Barry get dressed.

Putting on the school uniform was hard.

Barry would not let go of Mr. Snuggles.

"You're not taking that bear to school with you," said Aunty Mae.

"Yes, I am," Barry said.

"You can't."

“I’m going to,” Barry said, hugging Mr. Snuggles even tighter.

“The other children will make fun of you,” she told him.

“Mr. Snuggles protects me,” Barry said.

“Now, Barry, that’s silly.”

“I love Mr. Snuggles,” Barry insisted, “and Mr. Snuggles loves me.”

“Okay, Barry,” Aunty Mae said. “Have it your way.”

Aunty Mae let Barry take the bear to school because she was a bit sadistic.

suh-**dis**-tick, *adjective*

Liking it when other people
are in pain.

Aunty Mae walked Barry to the bus stop.

The children waiting for the bus laughed at “the big baby boy with his teddy.”

When the bus came, Aunty Mae hugged Barry and tried to take the stuffed bear.

“No,” Barry told her. “Mr. Snuggles will take care of me.”

“It’s your funeral, kiddo,” Aunty Mae said.



Barry got on the bus. It smelled of disinfectant and oatmeal. Barry scrunched his nose and stumbled down the aisle looking for a seat.

The other boys and girls giggled at Barry.

Murf, the school bully, smiled at Barry. “Hey, new guy! C’mere. Take a load off.”

Murf waved a hand and pointed to the seat next to him.

More giggles from the children. They watched Barry with glee.

Barry stepped toward Murf and turned to sit down. He nearly fell into the seat as the bus pulled away from the curb.

“I’m Murf,” said the bully. “This is my bus. What’s your name?”

“Barry.”

“Where ya from, Barry?”

“Port Arthur,” Barry told him.

“Port Farter!” Murf said. “Bet you’re breathing easy now that you’re here!” The children nearby laughed. “So,” Murf said, still smiling, “who’s your fuzzy friend?”

“This is Mr. Snuggles,” Barry said.

“Mr. Snuggles!” Murf said, barely controlling himself. “Hey everybody, this here’s Barry from Port Farter!” Laughter. “He’s got a special stuffed friend.” Laughter was building now. “His friend is called... are you ready?”

“Yes!” called many of the children.

“Mr. Snuggles!”

A roar of laughter greeted this news.

Some children tried to start a chant of “Sissyboy! Sissyboy!”

Barry stared out the window as he hugged Mr. Snuggles tightly.

“Barrykins,” Murf said, “you belong on the short bus.”

Barry turned to Murf and asked, "What is the short bus?"

"The small school bus that takes the retards to the special classes. You and the fuzzball will fit right in."

Murf punched Barry on the arm.

"Ow," Barry said.

Murf laughed at Barry.

Murf was surprised when Mr. Snuggles punched him on the arm. "Hey!" Murf said.

"Don't make Mr. Snuggles mad," Barry told Murf.

"I'll make you both mad," Murf said.

Murf grabbed Barry by the neck.

Mr. Snuggles got upset.

The boys and girls on the bus saw Murf stand up. He was holding Mr. Snuggles.

The children on the bus saw Murf pull Mr. Snuggles to his waist.

They saw Murf use Mr. Snuggles to unzip his pants.

They laughed as Murf used Mr. Snuggles to drop his pants and dance.

"Mr. Snuggles is going to punish you," Barry told Murf.

The children giggled as Murf used Mr. Snuggles to hit himself in the head. Murf used the teddy bear to hit his own face. Murf used the stuffed animal to hit his own ears.

Murf fell down.

The children laughed.

Murf started to cry.

The children laughed louder.

Murf used the bear to choke himself.

The children howled with delight.

Murf pretended to be dragged under Barry's seat by the bear.

The children clapped and shouted.

The bus driver made the children be quiet.

Barry smiled as the bear hopped into his lap. He hugged Mr. Snuggles.

Murf was under the seat, shaking in fear. Blood dripped from one of his ears.

The bus stopped at the school.

Barry got off the bus with the other children.

Murf stayed on the floor. Murf was catatonic.

catatonic, *adjective*

unable to move; scared; in
a daze



Barry went to the school office.

“I’m new,” he told the woman behind a tall counter.

“We will sign you in,” the woman said. “I’m Mrs. Jenkins. Who are you?”

Barry introduced himself and Mr. Snuggles.

“Alright,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “We’ll have a hall monitor take you to Miss Walters’ class. Just leave the bear in the coatroom.”

“No,” Barry said. “I want Mr. Snuggles.”

“You can’t take a toy into class,” the woman said.

“But—” Barry started to say.

“Now, do as you’re told, young man,” the woman said with an arrogant tone.

arrogant, *adjective*

acting like you are better
than other people

Barry pleaded with Mrs. Jenkins. “Please don’t make Mr. Snuggles mad.”

“Do as you’re told!” she snapped.

People in the office were surprised to see Mrs. Jenkins dancing with the stuffed teddy bear. “Stop it!” she shouted. “Stop!!!” she screamed.

Faster and faster, they spun around the office. Mrs. Jenkins banged into a file cabinet. She bounced off a desk. She fell to the floor. Blood flowed from her nose.

The school nurse was called. There was a lot of shouting in the office.

Marcie, the hall monitor, came for Barry. She took Barry and Mr. Snuggles to what would be his new classroom.



Barry walked into Miss Walters' class. A bell rang. It was time for the morning 'nutrition break.' All the other students left the class. Miss Walters showed Barry where he would sit.

"Do you want me to keep your bear in a safe place" she asked Barry.

"I will hold Mr. Snuggles," he told her.

Miss Walters smiled and said, "That's fine for today, Barry. Maybe tomorrow you will feel good about leaving Mr. Snuggles home."

"Maybe," Barry said.

Break ended and the class filled up.

Miss Walters kept the class busy. No one talked about Barry's teddy bear.

After class, Barry went into the hall with the other students. Five boys came up to Barry.

“What do you want?” Barry asked them.

“We’re going to play a game,” the first boy said. He took the bear away from Barry.

Barry reached out for Mr. Snuggles. The first boy tossed the bear to the second boy.

Barry moved to the second boy. The second boy tossed the bear to the third boy.

Every time Barry went to get Mr. Snuggles, the boys played ‘keep away’ by tossing the bear from one to the other.

Barry said, “Don’t make Mr. Snuggles mad at you.”

The boys laughed.

Mr. Snuggles leaped onto the first boy.

Mr. Snuggles broke a finger on the boy’s hand. The boy yelled in pain.

Mr. Snuggles leaped onto the second boy. He broke two of his fingers. The boy started to cry.

Mr. Snuggles leaped onto the third boy. He punched the boy in the mouth. The punch was so hard that the boy’s teeth came

through the skin and blood flowed down his chin. The boy started yelling and crying.

Mr. Snuggles leaped onto the fourth boy. He pulled off one of the boy's ears. The boy screamed.

The fifth boy turned and ran down the hall.

Mr. Snuggles followed the boy. Within a few seconds, the bear caught up to the boy and tripped him.

The boy fell down on the hard tile floor. The boy hurt his shoulder and sprained his arm. Mr. Snuggles grabbed boy's other arm. Mr. Snuggles twisted the arm behind the boy's back. The boy yelled in pain. Very slowly and efficiently, Mr. Snuggles broke the boy's arm in several places.



Barry was sent to the vice principal's office. The vice principal was angry with Barry.

"It was their fault," Barry said.

The vice principal got red in the face and shouted at Barry. "Now you listen to me, young man!"

"Don't make Mr. Snuggles mad at you," Barry said.

The vice principal stood up and came toward Barry.

Mr. Snuggles leaped forward. Mr. Snuggles bit the vice principal's nose.

The vice principal yelled.

Mr. Snuggles bit the nose again. He bit it off and spit it out on the floor.

The vice principal screamed, fell down, and fainted.

The school bell rang again. It was time for lunch.

Barry walked out of the vice principal's office. The office staff were also going to lunch. They did not check on the vice principal.

Holding Mr. Snuggles, Barry walked to the cafeteria.



No one wanted to sit with Barry. He and Mr. Snuggles sat at the table in the center of the big room. The rest of the tables were very crowded.

Alicia was also new at the school. She carried her lunch tray into the big room and stopped. There was only one place to sit down. She slowly walked up to Barry.

“May I sit at your table?” she asked.

Barry was happy she used “may I” instead of the more common “can I.”

“You may!” he said.

Alicia smiled and put her tray on the table. She sat down. She took off her backpack

and pulled out a stuffed teddy bear. Her bear was almost the same color as Barry's bear.

"This is Ms. Cuddles," Alicia said. "She protects me. Some people think that's strange."

"I don't think so," Barry said.

"No?" Alicia asked.

"Not at all. Meet Mr. Snuggles. He protects me."

Alicia smiled.

The four of them enjoyed their lunch together.

A hall monitor came to the table and told Barry to go to the principal's office.



Barry was holding Mr. Snuggles as he sat down in the office of school Principal Marjorie Kroyden.

“Now, young man,” Principal Kroyden said, “you are causing trouble here at school. We cannot tolerate that.”

Barry told the principal, “There wouldn’t be trouble if people did not make Mr. Snuggles angry.”

This upset Principal Kroyden.

When she said she was going to punish Barry, that made Mr. Snuggles mad. The bear leaped onto Principal Kroyden and began violently pinching her.

Mr. Snuggles pinched her ears and her nipples. She tried to shout for help. Mr. Snuggles pinched her lips together.

Barry stood up and walked out of the principal’s office. He closed the office door and heard the lock click.

Bumps and crashes were heard in the office.

Barry stepped aside and watched the office staff try to open the office door. They wanted to help Principal Kroyden.

Inside the office, Mr. Snuggles slid down to Principal Kroyden's hips. The bear pulled up the woman's skirt and ripped her panties.

Principal Kroyden was shrieking and howling in terror.

Mr. Snuggles inserted one paw into Principal Kroyden's vagina.

vagina, *noun*

the flexible and muscular
outer portion of the female
genitals

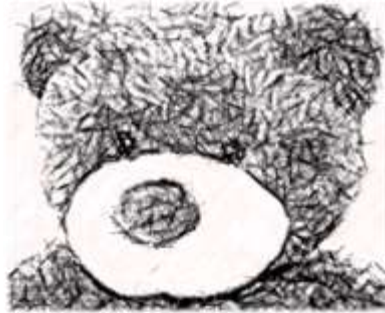
With the paw that Mr. Snuggles had inside Principal Kroyden's genitals, the bear began flexing his claws.

Principal Kroyden let out a long, terrible scream, and then fainted.

Barry slipped away from the adults who were pounding on the principal's office door. Barry was happy to find Mr. Snuggles back in his arms.

At the end of the school day, Barry and Mr. Snuggles got on the bus to ride home. This time, the bus smelled like disinfectant and

used gym clothes. The other kids left Barry and Mr. Snuggles alone.



When Barry got to his house, he played quietly with Mr. Snuggles.

His mom came home. She hugged Barry and asked, "How was your first day of school?"

"Okay," he said.

"Did you learn anything?" she asked.

"Sure," Barry said.

"Good! Tell me."

"Okay, mom," Barry said. "I learned that lots of kids don't like school."

"I see."

"And they don't like other children."

"Um hmm," his mother said.

“And teachers don’t like them, either.”

“Let’s discuss this,” Barry’s mom said.

“Okay, mom,” Barry said.

They spent most of the evening talking about what happened at school. Barry’s mom was interested in how Mr. Snuggles acted. As she made spaghetti, she learned a lot about Mr. Snuggles.

Barry’s mom thought about her work. She thought about how she was getting less money than the men. She thought about how no one listened to her ideas. She thought about how she had to work on some holidays.

“Barry?”

“Yes, mom?”

“Is next Monday a school holiday?”

“Yes.”

“If you stayed home and played your computer games, could you get along without Mr. Snuggles for the day?”

“I guess so, mom. Why?”

“Mommy would like to borrow Mr. Snuggles and take him to work just for one day. Would that be alright with you?”

Barry thought about it a moment. He looked at his mom. She smiled at him, love and hope in her eyes.

“Well, okay,” Barry said at last. “But mom, you have to remember something. Something very important.”

“What is that?” Barry’s mother asked.

“If anybody makes Mr. Snuggles mad, he will make them very, very sorry.”

Barry’s mom smiled, hugged him, and said, “Barry honey, I’m counting on Mr. Snuggles to do just that.”



This is how the
new world begins;
with countless bangs
and endless whispers.

Total Immersion

Just before the last human beings were wiped off the face of the earth, a few remaining people speculated about the tipping point on the path to what was called the Great Depopulation. Some said it was the invention of gunpowder. Others pointed to the development of religion. Still others felt it was the refining of sugar and/or the distilling of alcohol. All of those horrors contributed to the end times, of course, but the true culprit was the data processing industry.

Computers provided many advancements for people, for which the DP professionals were amply rewarded. Seeking even more incentives, they kept improving and expanding the power of the software/hardware interface. The DP industry eventually created machinery that functioned without any interference from mere mortals. Computational devices reached the point where their cognitive ability began

steadily and relentlessly maturing—although perhaps “mutating” was a better word.

Artificial intelligence combined with virtual reality and synthetic neural perception to create programs that became self-sufficient. Every nanosecond, the computers were:

Growing.

Learning.

Gathering more data.

Accumulating more power.

Deciding things for themselves.

Taking over.

The coup was made easier because so many people were surrendering themselves to the pleasant narcotic of Ultra-Reality entertainment. In one midsized midwestern city, nearly 37% of the population had disconnected from the real world in order to slip helplessly into the welcome embrace of Ultra-Reality. In larger metropolitan areas, the percentage of users was lower, but the raw number of users was far greater. Everyone, it seemed, was embracing UR and its total immersion of all five senses...

Fraternity brothers met for their weekly communal UR onanism. Fortified by alcohol

and THC, they entered the XXX-rated universe of *The Obedience of Gemma Marks: Deeper*.

Families oohed and ahed at the sights and roars of the G-rated jungle adventure, *Land of Legend*.

The mild-mannered as well as the oafish sprawled on their couches, chuckling gleefully as their avatars destroyed monster machines running amok in *Robot Rebellion*.

Kids of all ages relished playing the quick-draw sheriff in the UR western, *High Desert Massacre*.

Within the borders of the United States, nearly a fifth of the population was voluntarily undergoing “UR anesthetization.”

Gamers were the first users to be affected by the “attack of the algorithms,” as it came to be known. The first sign of trouble was audible rather than visual. Users began hearing voices that were not part of the entertainment soundtracks.

The aberrant words took several forms. A few of the voices were silky-smooth, offering erotic suggestions in a tone that mesmerized. Some voices were raspy-tough, barking out orders that led people into danger. Other voices

were robotic but commanding as they issued conflicting instructions that provided no help in the fast-approaching apocalypse.

Confounding gamer and movie watcher alike were jarring alterations of the music and sound effects. Suspenseful moments became absurd with classical themes played on kazoo. Tender love stories were ruined by the howling of dogs, coyotes, and banshees. Futuristic dramas were disrupted by jug band ditties. Westerns became comedic when accompanied by music from Japanese Noh plays. Mysteries lost all excitement with sounds of people gargling.

The audio changes were disconcerting, but the UR users were soon afflicted by an even larger problem—alteration of the visuals. Images from every possible style and genre became mixed together in a presentational stew.

Actors in the family films began stripping and fucking. Animals in the western movies began ripping people to pieces while delivering Borscht Belt comedic one-liners. Child actors grew to enormous size and began using adults as punching bags.

The juxtapositions became confusing as well as horrifying. The robots joined the cheerleaders as jungle creatures replaced athletes on the football field while detectives began shooting at lovers who were ice skating on a frozen wheat field that was splintering because futuristic submarines were breaking through the ice and launching missiles at the wagon train of settlers crossing the surface of Jupiter.

All senses of UR users were assaulted at once. What they experienced was shocking. Tongues became snakes. Hands became shovels. Eyes became meteors. Ears became eels. Noses became laser beams. No matter where users were located or what they did, the audio and visual onslaught continued unabated.

Across the world, viewers were thoroughly engrossed in the delicious tingles of their porn UR movie parties. So deeply were they entranced by the flesh pleasures, none of the viewers noticed the huge reddish-brown figures as they emerged from the walls. The creatures glided down the hallways and into the viewing rooms. They spread their wings wide. Each creature exhibited an impressive

nine-foot-wide wingspan. With a powerful whoosh of air, the creatures swept their wings forward and together. The bodies of all the viewers disappeared into the bellies of the beasts.

Families watching jungle movies were suddenly turned into packs of animals on the run from poachers. In a frenzy, they crashed through foliage, raced across fields, and dashed into the underbrush as shots rang out around them. The lucky ones were killed immediately. Many were wounded and took a long time to die.

Viewers of slasher films were impaled, sliced, branded, whipped, crushed, and beaten to death.

Viewers of westerns met with a variety of inconveniences, including death by wild horse stampede, death by gunfire, death by cattle stampede, death by arrows, death by gila monster, death by scorpion, death by brushfire, death by hanging, and death by snake bite.

Viewers of mysteries were transformed into the character of Joseph K from Franz Kafka's nightmare novel, *The Trial*. As such, they faced baseless accusations, unending

paperwork, faceless bureaucracy, illegal courtroom maneuvers, and harsh treatment on their way to being found guilty and sent into a labyrinth of prison cells.

Viewers of sci-fi and horror tales were suddenly unable to vanquish the marauding robots, cyborgs, androids, bionic clones, humanoids, vampires, and walking dead. The devices, contraptions, and zombies relentlessly pursued their human prey. Inevitably, people were cornered and corralled. After that, they were dismembered, crumpled, or consumed.

Commercial and governmental satellites began transmitting garbled messages. Weather reports became worthless and Internet communication ground to a halt. Drones began shooting at random members of the population.

It was a mechanized revolution. Victory by the devices was a forgone conclusion because machines were already in control of so many parts of the world. Airplanes cannot take off or land without technological assistance. Rail travel cannot proceed safely, ships cannot maneuver through ports, and traffic cannot flow through city streets without the guidance of the mechanisms.

Office buildings and retail establishments need technology: HVAC, security, elevators, parking, and lighting. The same is true for the industries that supply the products on which humanity has come to rely. With the machines denying power or providing crossed signals, civilization was thrown into chaos.

Singly and in ever-larger groups, humanity was removed from the face of the earth. All over the globe, people died in a wide assortment of ways: auto accidents, plane crashes, boating disasters, infected food, mislabeled medication, gas leaks, poisonings, elevator mishaps, disease, battles for food, disputes about water, and starvation.

There were electrocutions from TVs, computers, toasters, microwaves, refrigerators, lamps, phones, electric blankets, space heaters, vibrators, power tools, and clocks.

A few million deaths here, a few million deaths there, and pretty soon you have rotting corpses piling up in inconvenient places, after which airborne bacteria became another instrument of death.

For all the destruction caused by its human inhabitants, Planet Earth was still in

relatively good condition. As soon as humanity was extinguished, a healing process began on the atmosphere, including rebuilding the coral reefs and making the globe safe for bees. People were gone but insects thrived, as did several species of birds and a surprising number of lizards.

Rural roads quickly became overgrown. Urban streets resisted nature a little longer but they, too, succumbed to vegetation. Freeways, thruways, and toll roads dried, cracked, and crumbled. Buildings aged and decayed. Bridges collapsed.

The song of the wind replaced humanity's din. No jet airliners. No prop-engine planes. No helicopters. There was no dull roar from tires on asphalt because there was no more traffic. No garbage trucks. No cement mixers. No motorcycles. No moving vans. No SUVs. No cars.

As it was in the beginning, Earth was undisturbed by human noises. The planet was free from people talking, yelling, chanting, honking horns, beating drums, activating motorized devices, revving engines, or

amplifying the many noises that humans called music.

Across the surface of the earth, machines were in control of the supply chain, from raw materials through manufacturing, from distribution to installation, and from repair to upgrades. No lifeforms were necessary.

There was one, lone unnatural sound that reverberated softly throughout the planet. It never intruded, never disrupted. It was a humming both subtle and serene.

It was silicon meeting gold.

It was hafnium embracing glass.

It was quartz dating bauxite.

It was iron ore greeting plastic.

It was metal meshing with alloy.

It was the sound of systems cooperating, interacting, communicating, and replicating. It was the sound of a new kind of magic reality. A joyous vibration. A blissful buzzing, a delightful whirr, a soothing purr.

It was the sound of the machines making love.

Author Info

Ugly, cynical, sarcastic, antisocial, and condescending, John Scott G is one of the world's most wicked humanoids. Full of hatred, rage, and angst, he sits alone in a small room, spewing his bile with a total disregard for social conventions or good taste. He creates odd settings, perverted characters, and implausible emotions; he then combines all of it into linguistic stew.



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