New Fiction from Andria Williams: “The Attachment Division”

1. The Bureau for the Mitigation of Human Anxiety

They were the survivors, they should have been happy, they should have been fucking thrilled (the President accidentally blurted that on a hot mic few years back, everyone quoted it until it was not even that funny anymore, but that’s what she’d said, throwing up her hands: “I don’t get it. They should all be fucking thrilled”), but three decades of daily existential dread had taken its toll. The evidence was everywhere: fish in the rivers poisoned not by dioxin runoff now, but by Prozac, Zoloft, marijuana, ketamine. There were drugs in the groundwater and the creeks and the corn. Birds were constantly getting high, flying into windshields, Lyfts, barbeque grills, outdoor umbrellas, the sides of port-a-potties. The different types of thunks their bodies made, depending on the material they struck, were the subject of late-night talk show jokes.

As for humans, the pills weren’t enough, the online therapy, in-person therapy, shock therapy, exposure therapy, clown therapy, none of it. The suicide rate hit twenty percent.

It was Dr. Anton Gorgias—still alive, now, at one hundred eight, and very active on Twitter—who initially proposed, and eventually headed, the Bureau for the Mitigation of Human Anxiety. The leaders of fifty-six nations came together to declare a worldwide mental-health crisis. Ironic, really, because the climate problem had been mostly been solved (the U.S being third-to-last to sign on to the Disaster Accords, just before Saudi Arabia and Equatorial Guinea. Thank God we even did, Steph sometimes marveled. She was twenty-seven;

people just ten or twenty years older than she was would often tell her she was lucky to have missed the very first years of the Wars; she'd think, yes, it had all been a real joy, thank you). Nothing could be reversed, but they could buy themselves some time, maybe even a few hundred years. That was in Sweden—of course it was Sweden—and so Minnesota was the first U.S. state to grab the ball and run with it, copying its spiritual motherland with only a smidge less efficiency.

Twelve states had Bureaus now, with more in the queue. But those states all looked to Minnesota, where the successes were measurable: suicide down by seven to nine points, depending on the study; people rating their daily satisfaction at a respectable 6 out of 10. It had once been two. Remember that, Stephanie's local director had told them in training. We brought it up to six. It used to be two.

Using combinations of genomic scanning, lifestyle analysis, and psychological evaluation, people could pinpoint their main source of anxiety and apply for its corresponding relief branch. The only hitch, at this point, was that each person could apply to only one branch. It was a budget and personnel thing, Steph explained when asked; the Bureau had its limits like anything else. People did not like being told they had to choose, but their complaints made Steph feel a little defensive. What more could people ask of a government agency? "At least we allow you to be informed," she'd pointed out to her parents, her sister, Alex, anyone who took issue. She was cribbing from the Bureau's original slogan, "It's the Most Informed Decision You'll Ever Make."

"Yeah," quipped Alex, in the recent last days before their breakup, when he claimed Steph was getting too sensitive, too cranky, too obsessively hung up on the death of her dad. "We should all be fucking thrilled."

People complained about other aspects, too: registration was a bitch, the waiting period took at least two years and there

was mandatory yearlong counseling, but, again—the numbers didn't lie. "It Used to Be Two" was now printed on the sides of bus stops, above the seats on the light rail.

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2. Never Laugh in the Presence of the Pre-Deceased

Steph worked for a small subset of Mortality Informance called the Attachment Division. The Attachment Division was tailored to people with anxiety caused by the prospect of loss: that their significant other might pass away before they did. This was what kept them up at night, what woke them with gasping nightmares. They wanted to know that they would die first, because the opposite horrified them. They could choose to be informed—if indeed they would be first to go—either six months or three months before their partner.

True, plenty of people registered for the program as newlyweds and then rescinded their applications a few years later, submitted them elsewhere. But Stephanie still liked this niche, this branch of the Bureau, for its slightly less self-involved feel, its unabashed sentimentality, the gamble its applicants were willing to make for love. A person had to put aside a bit of their pride to work for the Attachment Division. It was not considered one of the sexy branches. It was the Bureau's equivalent of an oversized, well-worn cardigan sweater.

I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not sad. Each day I do my job with compassion and, above all, professionalism. I am on time, clean, and comforting, but never resort to intimacy. I remember that a sympathetic nod goes a long way. I do not judge or discriminate based on a Pre-Mortal's appearance, race, creed, economic status, or any other factor. I will never contact a Pre-Mortal on my caseload outside of work for any reason. I remember always that I, too, will die.

She recalled her classmate Devin, the first day of training, raising his hand and asking how the Attachment Division defined “intimacy.” Steph tried to get his attention, jabbing her finger silently at its definition on page four of their brand-new handbooks to spare him the embarrassment of asking something obvious, but he asked anyway. It turned out that “intimacy,” for a Mortality Informant, encompassed almost everything, other than 1) helping someone if they collapsed, and 2) the required shoulder squeeze upon first releasing information. They’d practiced The Shoulder Squeeze in the same Estudiante A/Estudiante B setup she remembered from high school Spanish, reaching out a straightened arm, aiming for “the meat of the shoulder.” “One, two,” the instructor had called, briskly clapping her hands. “One, two. Fingers should already be prepared to release on the two.”

“You could probably squeeze a little harder,” said Devin, diligent in his constructive criticism. “But that could just be me. I like a lot of pressure.” They practiced with classmates taller, shorter, and the same heights as themselves.

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3. Nils Gunderson, Neighbor

Steph settled onto a green metal bench across the street from the address she’d been given, swiped her phone, and logged into her Bureau account to access the file, waiting as it loaded. A long page of text came up. Mortality Informants like herself were required to read their cases’ backgrounds first, before viewing the image, to help prevent involuntary first impressions (which, it turned out, were unpreventable).

She jiggled her foot as she scanned, her flat shoes slapping lightly against her heel. Even a year and a half into the job, she was always nervous, right before. She'd been assigned to tell whoever came up on her screen —as professionally as she could, and because this was what they had requested, they had signed up for the program themselves — that in three months they would be dead.

The top line read, in bold, NAME: NILS GUNDERSON.

"Shit," she muttered. It wasn't that this name made anything worse, necessarily, but that it represented, to Steph, something particular. A man named "Nils Gunderson" would be what she thought of as one of the Old Minnesotans. A lot of them had moved out of the Cities the last few decades, but she — perhaps because she was not one, or only partially one (on her mom's side), her late father having been relocated to Minnesota from Thailand as one of thousands of the state's climate refugees — had a soft spot for the ones who'd braved the rapid change and stayed, the folks who loved their city and weren't freaked out by the people from all over the world who'd come, out of necessity, and often reluctantly, to live in it. She scrolled down: Nils Gunderson was forty-four years old, married to Claire, worked a desk job for the utilities company. Mother, Edna, still alive; father, Gary, dead of a heart attack at fifty. Four sisters, alive also. An adopted brother from Ghana, interesting. Thirteen cousins around the state. A large family, the traditional sort that believed in upward mobility, that had reproduced with diligence, steadily,

starting in Sweden or wherever five generations back, and then came here and just kept it up, moving through the world as if it all made sense, as if the world were bound to incrementally improve simply because they believed or had been told it would, naming their children things like Nils Gunderson. (Although it was worth noting that Nils Gunderson, himself, did not have children.)

She tapped “Open Photo.” But when she saw his face she gave a small jump, not because of anything alarming about the image itself, but because, surprisingly, she recognized him. He was the man who walked his cat past her apartment every night. He was someone she, casually but genuinely, liked.

The Bureau tried to prevent matching caseworkers with anyone they knew. Each time a name came in it was scanned against the lists Steph had provided: her mom and brother, extended family, ex-boyfriend Alex (newest name on her list), former bosses. But she hadn’t known this man’s name, and couldn’t list him. And so while it hadn’t happened until now, here she was, confronted with the face of a familiar person. Her phone buzzed with the drone update: he was ten minutes out, headed home from work now.

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So now she knew that the man who walked his cat past her apartment in the evenings had three months left to live. It would have been a sad piece of information even if she did not have to deliver it herself.

“Walking the cat” was an energetic phrase for her neighbor’s nightly routine. He and the cat strolled, really, in no hurry, stopping often, Nils Gunderson smoking, following the gray tabby which wore a red halter and leash. Stephanie had seen him just the night before, in fact, as she’d hip-nudged shut the door of her car, a cloth bag of groceries in each arm. He was shy and polite, middle-aged, always slightly rumpled-

looking, dressed in the way of a person who was not entirely proud of his body and embarrassed to have to select clothing for it. He wore, usually, an oversized gray t-shirt with the writing worn to nothing, baggy cargo shorts; his white legs slabbed into sandals that were themselves slabs. He had a way of answering her “hello” with a head motion that was both a nod and a duck, replying “How’s it going” so quietly she could hardly hear him—as if he were almost-silently, in a disappearing voice, reading the disappearing words on his shirt— then glancing fondly down at his halter-wearing cat as if glad for the distraction of it. He didn’t carry a phone, which was unusual. Maybe along with the cat and the cigarette that would have been too much. The cat’s name was Thor. Stephanie knew because she’d hear him try to chuck it up like a horse sometimes, a click of his tongue and a little jiggle of the leash: “Let’s go, Thor.”

Thor, who matched his owner with a slight chubbiness, did not go. Thor moved along the sidewalk with excruciating distraction, sniffing every crack in the pavement as he came to it as if solving a delicate mystery, inspecting each tuft of grass or weedkiller-warning flag (“No, no,” the man said with gentle concern, tugging it away, though he must have realized the flag was a joke, pesticides had been banned for two decades). It must take a world’s worth of patience to walk that cat three blocks, Stephanie thought. Or maybe this was the only opportunity the man had to smoke, and he was relieved not to hurry. Smoking was illegal indoors now, even in your own home, and you needed a license— one pack a week, but of course people still got cigarettes other places.

She hadn’t, all this time, known Nils’s name. But because she saw him almost daily she also saw him on the worst day of her life: the evening, six months before, when she’d gotten the phone call, at work, that her father had died. Frantic, numb, she’d only just texted Alex to tell him, and she pulled up in front of the apartment and couldn’t park her car. The space

was too small. In and out and in and out she tried, yanking the wheel, blind with tears, and the man with the cat, walking by, seeing her struggle, paused to direct her into the space. She remembered him in her rearview mirror, waggling his fingers encouragingly, holding up his hand, *Good, Stop*. His supportive, pleased thumbs-up when she finally got the car passably straight. And then she whirled out of the car and rushed toward her apartment, toward the blurry form of Alex who had come out to take her in his arms with the gorgeous, genuine sympathy of some kind of knight – Alex had held her and cried; he had loved her father, too – and she'd almost collided with the man-with-the-cat, who noticed, suddenly, her stricken, tear-streaked face, and said, quietly: *Oh.*

Just "oh." With a slight step back, and so much empathy in his voice, sorrow at having misjudged the apparent triumph of their situation. There was an apology in the *oh*, and she had felt bad later that she hadn't been able to reply, to say something stupid like No worries or even just thank him; she'd jogged forward in her haze of grief, her heart still revving helplessly, her stomach sick, while the man quietly tugged the cat's leash and walked away.

In winter, of course, she saw Nils and his cat far less. The cat would not have wanted to stroll in a driving January rain. But after she got back from her dad's funeral, and started to readjust to life, slowly, and notice the things she had noticed before, she liked spotting them. There was something endearing about the pair, the cat's refusal to move quickly or in a straight line, the man's attendant humility, his lack of embarrassment (in a neighborhood of joggers, spandexed cyclists, Crossfitters) at being an unathletic forty-something male out walking a cat.

Of course, the smoking, the lack of fitness might have contributed to Nils Gunderson's situation. Because there he was, looking back at her out of his profile photo with an almost hopeful expression, as if he were waiting for her to

speak so he could politely respond. She'd never had the opportunity to study him the way she now could, in the picture: gray-blue eyes, a slightly hooked nose, the gentle roll of a whiskered double chin cradled by what looked like the collar of a flannel shirt, a fisherman-style sweater over that. She flicked to her badge screen and held it loosely on her lap, closed her eyes a moment, preparing herself with the first line of the creed on a loop in her mind, because it was the most soothing to her. *I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not sad. I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not—* Her phone buzzed and she opened her eyes, glanced down, saw the newest drone update that he was two miles away, expected home in four minutes. He was driving a gray Honda Civic, and would be alone. *Please activate recording device,* the message concluded, *and Good Luck.*

The capitalized "Good Luck" always struck her as slightly odd, as if she were about to blast into space. But, glancing back down at Nils Gunderson on her phone screen, imagining him coming home to his wife—Claire, she read, was a librarian, Jesus; *it is not sad*—and his cat, she did feel a sudden drop in her stomach that could have been described as gravitational, or maybe it was just the gravity and density of the information she held, about to pass through poor Nils's unshielded, unprepared rib cage like molecules of uranium, changing him almost as much as his real death would. His death, according to her notes, would occur on September 8th, three months from today.

She pressed her recording button ("for quality control") and took a deep breath. She would be compassionate and professional and punctual and clean and non-intimate. It was the best she could do.

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That morning, not for the first time, she had typed a

resignation letter, then deleted it. She'd just had to tell a nineteen-year-old that her fiancée would die of a sudden, aggressive leukemia; that an 80-year old woman would lose her husband of 57 years. (Parents were exempted from the program until their children were at least 18, or else the whole world would have gone into chaos.)

"We're not all suited to the job," her friend Erica had said over the phone. "You know all the lifers are on drugs." Erica had quit the main Mortality Informance branch (not the Attachment Division) after eight years; now she had her Master of Fine Arts in creative writing and worked for a chocolate company, writing inspirational quotes for the inner foil wrappers. "Everything is for the best!" she'd write. "Kathy N., Lincoln, NE." Or, "Don't forget to giggle! — Lisa P., Detroit, MI." One night Steph and a very tipsy Erica had amused themselves by brainstorming the least inspirational quotes they could come up with. "Imagine opening your chocolate to find: 'Shut up.' — Jenny, Topeka, KS," Erica had laughed, wiping her eyes. "Or: 'Yes, it's probably infected.' — Marsha, Portland, ME."

"There are jobs out there," Erica had promised her, "that are so easy, you could cry. You don't have to make life so hard on yourself."

And here was his car now.

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Nils Gunderson parallel-parked, smoothly, a quarter of a block away, fumbled with something in the passenger seat for a long time—a backpack, Stephanie saw as he stepped from the car, hoisting it over one shoulder—and finally made his way in her direction up the sidewalk. He was slightly duck-footed; maybe this was more pronounced in his work khakis and brown shoes. There were light creases of sweat across the top of each khakied thigh.

Stephanie stood, patted her dark bun, smoothed her skirt, gathered her small shoulder bag and phone. She wore a butter-yellow shirt because she thought it a comforting color. The skirt, pale brown and A-line, was “sexy as a paper bag,” Alex had said: joking, she knew, but screw him anyway, she wasn’t supposed to look sexy at her job. He acted as if she should go out the door in a black leather miniskirt and stilettos, like some dominatrix angel of death.

Halfway across the street she was interrupted by a group of college-age kids, sprinting, shouting a breathless “Move!” and waving her out of the way. She knew what they were doing, playing a new game everyone was obsessed with, where they scanned their locations into their phones at surprise moments, and then their friends had ten minutes to get there and catch them. She heard people talking about it everywhere she went. They’d win virtual cash which they spent on an imaginary planet that they’d build, meticulously, from the first atom up. People spent months on their planets and were devastated when they lost; a guy had been shot over it in Brainerd the week before, and the game itself was causing traffic problems, accidental hit-and-runs, a lady’s small dog had been clipped right off the end of its leash by a speeding Segway. Steph jumped back as the three men plowed forward, one, at least, calling “Sorry” over his shoulder. “Hope your imaginary planet is awesome,” she snipped. Alex had been getting into this game; sometimes his phone went off at three a.m. and he’d dash out the door almost desperately. He had started to sleep fully dressed, even wearing his shoes. If she slowed him down by talking as he made for the door, he’d get crabby, in this weird, saccharine tone where she could tell he was trying to moderate his voice because he knew it was, at heart, an absurd thing to get irritable over. He was aware of that at least. So she’d started pretending to stay asleep. Then, once he left, she’d toss and turn angrily, obscurely resentful of this idiotic game. She was glad all that was over now, Alex and his dumb game, even though he had named his planet after her,

which was sweet. And last night she'd been tossing and turning anyway, but because he *wasn't* there, and she'd ended up fishing his basketball sweatshirt with the cutoff sleeves out of the back of her closet and wearing it to sleep– sweet Jesus. Was there no middle ground?

She had to catch up to Nils Gunderson. He was almost at the front door. "Mr. Gunderson," she called, trotting the last few steps in her flat, unsexy shoes. He turned, a quizzical smile crossing his face–not one of recognition, in the first instant, but because she was a small, non-threatening female person calling after him–and then growing slightly more puzzled as he placed her.

"Mr. Gunderson, may I speak to you for a moment?"

"I – sure," he said. "Wait. You – you live a few blocks that way." He pointed.

"I do. Please come over here, if you would." She gestured to the grassy strip alongside his building, wishing there were a bench closer by. It was good to have a place where people could sit down, but she didn't want to lead him all the way back across the street.

He followed her a few steps, as she asked him to verify his name, address, date of birth. He answered so trustingly, his grayish-blue eyes patient, politely curious, that she could hardly stand to see (as she flashed her badge) the dim knowledge gathering around their edges and then intensifying. She told him, in the plain language she'd practiced hundreds of times, that she was a Mortality Informant, reminding him gently that he had signed up for this program, had requested notification three months before his death, that he would pass away long before his wife, and that was why an Informant had been sent. No, she could not tell him when his wife would die, but it was far into the future. He paled before her eyes, she could see it happen, his mortality crashing in on him like the

YMCA wave pool he'd later tell her he'd loved as a child, arms outstretched, staggering backwards, chlorine, briefly, in his nose and throat—the exhilaration of having cheated death, which he was not cheating now. Steph placed one hand on his thick shoulder and gave it a squeeze, one, two. She was prepared for him to cry, to ask why so soon, so young, even his dad had made it to fifty; to tell her in shock to go away, fuck her, fuck the program, he wished he'd never heard of it: some people got very upset. They wanted this information in the abstract, but not the real, or they didn't want the moment of receiving it. Several mortality informants had been punched or kicked. Devin had once been chased three blocks. Now they had an emergency button on their phones that could call for backup.

But he surprised her. "Thank God," he said, his voice choked, overwhelmed. "Oh, thank God, thank God."

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It was close to eleven p.m. when she heard him. Windows cracked, crickets singing through the warm St. Paul night, and then suddenly a wail from street-level that sounded agonized, almost otherworldly. Somehow Steph suspected it was him even before she went to peek. From her second-story brick apartment she saw Nils Gunderson's large figure hunched on the bench below, the cat sniffing thoughtfully at a crushed cup.

I will never contact a Pre-Mortal on my caseload outside of work for any reason.

The wail was followed by distinct, repetitive sobs; someone cycling down the street glanced over, pedaled on.

I remember always that I, too, will die.

"Fuck," she muttered. She yanked off Alex's old basketball sweatshirt with the cutoff sleeves and threw it onto the couch. Strode out the door and down the wooden stairs in her

baggy, checked pajama pants and ribbed tank top.

When she stood next to him, he looked up, his face swollen, tear-streaked, awful.

“You can’t do this,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest, self-conscious of her braless state. “I’m not supposed to talk to you.”

“I’m not doing *any*thing,” he said. “I come to this bench every night.” She glared at him and he added, automatically, “I’m sorry.”

For a moment they both stood, staring at the black, puddled street. There’d been a late afternoon rain. Four young men raced by on bikes, whooping, phones in their hands, the thin tires splitting the puddles in two like bird-wings.

“That is the dumbest game,” Nils Gunderson said, and before she could stop herself Stephanie let out a dry chuckle. He looked at her gratefully. Tapped his shirt pocket. “Smoke?”

She hesitated. The first week of training they’d had to swear off cigarettes, alcohol, weed, opiates, anything that might dull or heighten their sensitivity to other people. The database bounced them from liquor stores and dispensaries. Their mornings began with fifteen minutes of guided meditation on their phones, setting their intentions for the day. Their intentions, it turned out, were always to be compassionate, professional, punctual, clean, and non-intimate. Meditation annoyed her. She recalled Alex coming out of the shower one morning, a towel around his waist, and spotting her meditating (she’d cracked one eye just a sliver when she heard the door); grinning, tackling her, teasing her until she turned the phone face-down and just let it drone on. That had been a fun morning.

Nils held out a cigarette.

“Yes, please,” she said.

He scooted over and she sat down beside him. He lit her cigarette. The nicotine wrapped her brain in the most welcome hug, tight, tighter, like a snail in a shell. God, now she craved a drink.

Nils talked. He was worried about his wife. The librarian, Claire. “She’ll be so lonely,” he said.

“When you signed up for this program,” Steph said, rallying her work-voice though she felt worn out, “there was an unselfishness to your act. Remember that.”

“Okay,” he said. “That makes me feel better. Talk about that a little more. I mean, if you don’t mind.”

Steph took a drag, exhaled. If she could just smoke all the time her job would be a lot easier. “We’ll have a team of grief counselors, a doctor, and after-care staff at your home within minutes of your passing. Claire won’t be left alone until her family can get there. The best thing you can do when you feel it happening is to quietly go lie down. It’s less upsetting for everyone.” Steph looked at him, his bleak expression heavying his face. She could see him imagining his own, undignified death, gurgling facedown in a cereal bowl, slumped in the shower while water coursed over his beached form. She repeated, “Remember that, just go to the bedroom and lie down.”

“She has a sister in Sheboygan,” Nils began.

“We know. We have it all on file.”

“Will you be one of the people there with her?” He’d suddenly developed the ability to cry silently and abundantly, like a beautiful woman in a film. Tears ran down his cheeks. He picked at his bitten thumbnails, weeping.

Steph shook her head. “It’s a separate team. My job was only

to inform you.”

“I won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

“I can put in a request for something to help you sleep, but only for the next few nights. We don’t want you sleeping away the last three months of your life. Try to enjoy yourself, Nils. Go on a vacation. Sit outside. Re-watch your favorite movies, go to restaurants.” She thought of her friend Erica and her chocolate-wrapper slogans. “Remember to giggle. Watch the sunrise. Have a lot of sex.” That was not from a chocolate wrapper; that was what happened when she winged it. She should never wing it. “If you can. I mean, maybe not tonight. Give it a week or so.”

He glanced at her, tear-streaked. “Have sex with Claire, you mean.”

“Well, of course. That’s what I meant.”

“Just checking. I don’t know what kind of advice you guys give. You’re all so smug,” he added after a moment, but in a sad voice, almost to himself, and it would turn out this was as insulting as he got.

“We’re really not,” Steph said.

“Should I tell her?”

“I can’t make that decision for you.”

They sat for a while; Steph accepted another cigarette. The cat rubbed against her pajama pants, his back arched, tail upright and quivering. She reached down to pet him. His fur was slick and soft as a seal’s.

“That one time I helped you park,” Nils began.

Steph looked at him.

“You were crying,” he said. “I felt terrible. I didn’t even

notice until after you got out of the car."

"It's not your fault. I mean, I was in a car. You probably couldn't see my face clearly. You were being nice by helping me out."

"I just remember giving you this really stupid thumbs-up, and I was still holding it when you almost ran into me. Just grinning with my thumbs up, like a fucking idiot."

"It was a really tight parking spot."

"What were you crying about?"

Now her own eyes were stinging. "My dad," she said after a minute. "I'd just found out he died."

"Oh." There it was again, Nils Gunderson's *oh*. Steph's vision swarmed. Nils said, "I'm really sorry to hear that."

"Yeah," said Steph, an edge of bitterness to her voice. "Car accident. Can't really be prepared for something like that."

"He wasn't in – in the program? Like I am?"

She smiled bleakly. "He didn't believe in it."

Nils nodded, looked out at the street again. "I'm wondering if it was a mistake. For me, I mean."

Steph hesitated. "Everything always works out for the best," she said, and then stopped. "No, that's bullshit. It's total bullshit. Sometimes things just don't work out at all. Sometimes people die and it's just fucking sad." His mouth dropped slightly and she sped up: "But I don't think that's the case with you and Claire. I mean, that any part of this is bullshit. I think – I think you've had a wonderful life together and you've done right by her. And that signing up for this program was the right thing to do." She rallied: "It was the most informed decision you could have made. I believe

that. I do, Nils."

"Thank you." He wiped his face on both arms. Droplets glittered on the hair. "That was really nice of you to say. Will you meet me here tomorrow night?"

She tossed her cigarette onto the pavement – also illegal, she didn't care right now – and Nils ground it out with his shoe. "I can't," she said.

As she got up, scuffing back toward her apartment in flip-flops, he called: "What department did you sign up for, anyway? For yourself?"

She was honest: "I didn't sign up for any."

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4. The Confession

But he was back out by the bench the next evening, a large, forlorn form in the dark, this time standing and looking directly up at her building. He was holding something in his hands. Steph waited him out, tried to do the crossword puzzle in the Strib, made a cup of tea, dumped it in the sink. If this kept up, she would certainly lose her job before she could make any decisions herself about it. "Jesus fuck," she said finally, flip-flopping downstairs.

He immediately apologized in a voice so hoarse she could barely hear him. "I'm sorry, but I need your help. I made something. I was wondering if you would listen to it for me, tell me if it's okay." He added ominously, "It's the most important thing I've ever made." He thrust the package toward her. It was wrapped in newspaper and he had triangled the corners, taped them. If he'd had a bow he probably would have put one on. "What are you *wearing*?" he blurted. "Do you play basketball?"

Steph's cheeks flared as she fingered the edge of the

sweatshirt, which went down to her knees. “Oh. It was my boyfriend’s. Ex-boyfriend’s. I shouldn’t be – I shouldn’t be wearing it.”

Nils’s eyes widened, wet. “Did he die?”

“God, no. It’s not like I – *make* people die,” Steph said, and then she started to laugh, an odd, cathartic laugh, one hand over her eyes. She realized she hadn’t laughed all day. She wheezed until she half-bent over, holding her waist with the other arm. The thought of herself as some cursed being, walking around while people dropped away like playing cards – it was too much. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she said, waving her hand, getting control of herself. She was not supposed to laugh in the presence of the pre-deceased.

But he was chuckling, too, tears blinking on the edges of his eyelids. He was laughing simply because she was laughing, out of some empathetic impulse. For a split second she wanted to hug him. She could probably get away with a shoulder squeeze. Lord knew she was royally fucking this up already. Instead she pinched her nose, took a deep breath, looked down at the item as he handed it to her. “What is it?” she asked.

“It’s just – things I wanted to tell Claire. Things I want her to know about me. I feel like, after all this time, she should know everything about me. Before we’re parted forever.”

“Maybe not forever,” Steph tried, regretting it the moment it came out.

He brightened. “You think so?” Whispered: “Do they teach you something in school the rest of us don’t know?”

“No,” Steph said. “I’m sorry. Why are you asking me for advice on your – your recording? I’m not, like, a writer or artist or anything.”

“But you’re honest. I can tell. And I want you to be honest

with me, tell me if you think it’s any good. Promise me you’ll listen to it,” he said.

“There’s a chance people shouldn’t know everything about somebody else,” she cautioned.

He shook his head. It was the most emphatic thing she’d seen him do. “That’s not true,” he said, nearly defiant. “This is me and Claire we’re talking about here.”

*

Back upstairs, she tugged open the newspaper to reveal a memory stick tucked up against a pack of Marlboro Reds. She smiled in spite of herself, cracked the window.

The file was enormous. He had talked for twelve hours straight: indoors, perhaps while Claire was at work; outside, voices in the background, cars swishing past. Initially, he was quite poetic. He must have been a reader, Steph thought, to marry a librarian.

He talked with a low urgency, but slowly, clearly, his voice growing drier by the hour. Steph, sitting with a notepad and pen, initially tried to jot helpful notes.

“My first memory,” Nils was saying, his voice strong at this point, “is of my own foot. I must have been six or seven months old. I remember looking at it in my crib, grabbing it, marveling. I think I found my foot beautiful. The toes were lined up in descending order like small pearls, the nails pink as areolas.”

Steph frowned. “Shifting point of view,” she scribbled. “A baby wouldn’t be able to make these comparisons.” Then she crossed it out. “Which foot?” she wrote. She crossed that out, too.

Nils roamed on, through his toddler years, a dog bite, falling off a tall piece of playground equipment, the disappointment

of the local pool shutting down for water conservation (Steph didn't even remember public pools – a startling idea, to have your body in the same water as a bunch of strangers'), accidentally wetting his pants in first grade, his first memorable, puzzling erection a year or so later, and how his mom had spanked him afterward. He didn't think the two were related, but he couldn't be sure. "Maybe more positive memories," Steph suggested.

"Dad used to tell me I was a quitter," Nils was saying, two hours later. "I quit four jobs in high school. I quit the football team because half the guys were assholes. I quit lunchtime Spanish club. There are forty-six books in our house I've never read, Claire. Forty-six. You've read all of them. I didn't make it to Grandma Clark's funeral. I'm a failure in so many ways. I feel like I've never stuck with anything except you, Claire. You're the only thing worth sticking by."

Steph noted the time and wrote, "Sweet."

"And Thor," Nils amended. "I've stuck by Thor." He went on a brief tangent of memories about the cat, charming particularities of its behavior. "Good!" wrote Steph. Smiley-face.

"But," the recording went on, "I'm still ashamed. If I'm being really honest, Claire, I'm ashamed. Because I've had so many secret thoughts in my head. Do you ever wish we could know each other's thoughts, Claire? What would happen to the world if we could all be inside each other's heads?"

Steph yawned, a cigarette dangling from her left hand. It was the middle of the night but she couldn't seem to stop listening. Outside, crickets sang.

"The thing is, Claire," Nils went on, "you're so good. I've realized I'm not as good and I wish I could find a way to make it up to you. I know you don't sit there at the library checking out every guy who walks in but I look at girls all

the time. I mean like all kinds of girls and women. I can't help it. Teenage girls, older women. I can't help but notice their bodies in their clothes. Sometimes I think about them later. And I know that's so hypocritical because I'm no Ricardo Lee myself [an action-movie star]. I've never even taken very good care of my feet. I should have made my feet look better for you. I should have lost weight for you, Claire. Sometimes I thought about it but I could only stick to a diet for, like, three hours. I have no self-control."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Steph wrote.

"Sometimes, when we'd make love, Claire, I'd picture someone else. Rhonda Jones [a prominent Black actress]. Remember that movie where she had sex with Ricardo Lee? I would think about that a lot when we'd make love. Just the way her breasts bounced. I would picture them and it would help me, you know, get there." Steph felt her nose crinkle. "And sometimes I would picture your sister. Not Marla: Kate. When we went on that beach vacation to Ocean City I felt terrible because that was some of the best sex of our lives and I was picturing Kate in her orange bikini most of the time. You were always so self-conscious about your small chest but it never really bothered me. The only thing I really should have been feeling, every day with you, was gratitude. You know?" Nils was crying now and Steph, at a loss, had turned to doodling swirls in the margins of her notepad. "That's the part that just kills me. Why did I waste any of you, Claire? You're precious to me. The only thing I ever should have felt was gratitude."

Steph clicked on the screen: there were still five hours remaining. She closed the computer. It was nearly time for her to go to work. She was going to be a mess. She had only four cigarettes left and she felt too sick even for coffee. She turned the shower as hot as she could, briefly pondered her own smallish breasts, washed her hair three times to get the smoke out, braided it down her back, changed into fresh clothes, and drove to work.

*

5. Feedback

Nils waited two evenings, respectfully, before returning to the bench. “I didn’t want to rush you,” he said. He was composed, even a little eager, but slightly puffy through the face. He had freshly showered and shaved and was wearing a polo shirt, and the overall impression was that he had been sort of scraped, steamed, and stuffed. It made him look both less tired and more so at the same time. “I’m trying to look better for Claire,” he explained. “I even brushed Thor.” The cat did look sleek.

“Have you told her yet?” Steph asked.

“No. I’m waiting a little longer.”

“That must be hard,” she said, as if it were the only hard thing about the situation. When his eyes began to water she changed the subject. “Your recording,” she said.

He brightened. “What did you think? I decided to call it The Confession. Because that’s what it is. The truest thing I’ve ever told anyone.”

“Yeah,” said Steph. “I think—I think you should definitely not give it to Claire.”

Nils’s face changed utterly with confusion. “What?”

“It’s just – I think you want to leave her with the best possible memories of you. With – with this,” she said, indicating his hair, his shirt. “These are the last memories of you she’s going to have for her entire life. I think you want them to be positive, you know?”

“But it’s the truth,” he said.

Steph made a small irritated sound. “Lots of things are the

truth," she said. "Think about Claire—"

"All I ever think about is Claire."

"Apparently not," said Steph, and then apologized. "You shouldn't give someone a confession they can't respond to. It's – unethical. She'd be stuck with just your words here, and who knows exactly how she'd interpret them? Which ones she'd focus on? What if she doesn't hear all the times you're telling her you love her, and just thinks endlessly about the other stuff? Why do you need to confess, anyway? I hate to break it to you, but nothing on this recording is that bad. It's just – it's just kind of inappropriate. You know?"

"But it's the truth."

"Yes, you keep saying that, but this is your marriage and your life, Nils. Do you really want it to be some kind of social experiment, or do you want it to be warm and loving and meaningful? Don't shoot yourself in the foot here. You want – you want Claire to feel like she made a good decision with her own life," Steph blurted helplessly. "That she made the best possible decision."

Nils stood quietly a moment, seeming to shrink slightly into himself. "And you think she didn't," he said.

Steph felt a wash of shame. "That's not what I meant to say."

"No, I understand," he said, not accusingly, but as if reeling with the thought. He spoke slowly, almost as if in wonder. "When I expressed my truth, it became clear to you that I was not Claire's best decision."

How many ways, Steph wondered, am I going to be forced to hurt this man? "I think giving her this recording is not the best decision," she said. "I think *you* were probably a great decision."

He nodded to himself, his eyes brimming again. "Well, thank

you for listening to it," he said. "And for your time. I know I took a lot of your time and energy. I feel bad about that. I took a lot of your emotional energy."

"Don't feel bad," said Steph, exhausted.

"It was really helpful to talk to you," Nils said. He began to shuffle down the street, looking defeated. Thor, gleaming like a tiny streetlight, followed. Then Thor stopped, and Nils stood two feet from Steph making encouraging kissy sounds, and the cat started up again. And then stopped. And then started, and then stopped. Nils tried to gaze up at a tree. I am going to actually die right now, Steph thought.

But she wasn't. Or, at least she didn't think she was.

*

6. The Game

For the next few weeks, Steph was careful not to encounter Nils. She grocery-shopped on Saturday mornings, instead of after work, and she did not go outside during his walking hours. It helped that there were weeks of heavy rain, shining in intermittent sunlight, the gutters constantly steaming as if they breathed. It was not ideal weather for Thor to stroll in.

When her termination notice came, she was not surprised. She wondered, briefly, if Nils might have reported her, but her supervisor produced drone images: she and Nils smoking on the bench. There had been a brief investigation, agents sent to Nils's apartment. Loyally, unaware of the photos, Nils claimed that Steph had refused to speak to him outside of work and never had; Steph smirked at his sporadic attachment to truth. Her supervisor, noting her smirk, reminded her that there was nothing funny about being a Mortality Informant, and that was why it was necessary that she now seek another career.

“Maybe there’s sometimes something funny about it,” Steph said.

Her supervisor told her to pack up her desk.

*

September 8th nagged at Steph on her wall calendar; her eye flicked to it again and again. When the morning came, hot and bright, she found herself unable to sit still. She circled want ads in the paper – low-paying jobs working with the disabled, or small children – and finally went for a run. She passed Nils’s street but could discern nothing out of the ordinary; cars lined both sides, as always, and there didn’t seem to be any more or less than usual. She found herself running faster and faster, the steamy air filling her lungs, her heart pounding frantically and ecstatically until it seemed to fill her whole chest and body and vision and mind. She reached a bench at a park half a mile away and bent over, gripping its metal back, nearly hyperventilating. Her mind was filled with an enormous, pulsing red. It bloomed and bloomed as if trying to push her eyeballs out. Steph dropped to her knees. The ground was muddy and gritty beneath them, pungent, slightly cool. The tiny rocks in it hurt. She tried to spit on the ground, but hit her own thigh.

“Miss?” an unfamiliar male voice asked. “Are you alright?”

She looked up.

“Are you part of The Game?” he asked. “Are you looking for John?”

It took her a moment to parse this. “No,” she said. “I’m not. I was just jogging. Just a little out of shape.” She added, with manufactured effort to pass the nausea, “Good luck with your Game!”

She wasn’t really out of shape, but the man took her word for

it and politely moved on. Besides, he was looking for John. When Steph’s vision had cleared, she walked slowly toward home, hand on her cramping ribcage, small spots still dancing around the corner of her eyes. Just go lie down, Nils, she thought, as if she could send him a message with her mind. Just go lie down.

When she got home, she staggered, exhausted, into her tiny bedroom, laid on her back the bed, and balled her fists into her eyes. She was soaked with sweat, small pebbles spattering her knees like buckshot. She no longer had access to her work files, of course, but she imagined the notification that would have popped up: CASE CLOSED. Her chest tightened again and she rolled onto her side, reaching back to yank hard on her ponytail, a habit she had in moments of grief. It was almost enough to shock her out of any emotion, that pull, hard and fast.

She must have fallen asleep, because when she opened her eyes again the sunlight was slanted, descending. She sat up, clammy, rubbed the pebbles from her knees. Wiped her eyes. She would find a new job, buy groceries, call her mom. When she stood, she let out a small sigh, which sounded like *oh*.

New Fiction from Jim Speese:

“The Darkness”

Sometimes these things happen. You wake from a deep sleep, whether a short afternoon nap or a long night’s slumber, and you’re disoriented. You forget things. Sometimes you shower and dress for work and only after breakfast realize it’s Saturday. Sometimes you stare unfamiliarly around the room you’ve lived in for years and wonder where you are. Sometimes it’s something simple—forgetting what was on TV last night or who called you just before sleep drowned you.

One night Jonathan Peters forgot where his light switches were.

It wasn’t totally uncalled-for. After all, the house was new to him, and it was only Jonathan’s second week in residence. It was an old farmhouse refurbished as a modern bungalow with all the conveniences and plenty of room. Full-sized windows occupied most of the walls, looking out into the yard, surrounded by woods and fields. It combined a rustic, rural feel with modern amenities. There were no neighbors, no streetlights, for miles. The nearest city, Brewer, was over ten miles away. Here, in the country, it was peaceful. Jonathan had wanted comfort and privacy when he’d bought this house, and as usual, he got what he wanted.

On this particular night he arrived home from his job as a used car salesman about six o’clock. It was not a job he’d ever wanted, but he was good at it. He had a talent to convince people they wanted more than what they needed. He was proud of his ability to talk customers into useless upgrades, and his commission reflected this ability. At only thirty, he was doing quite well. This evening brown leaves flurried about his driveway like snowflakes. He only vaguely noticed. To him, autumn was just another season, October just another month. But it hadn’t always been that way. He paused a moment, the key in the door, and stared at the leaves rustling and breaking free in the wind.

He watched himself distantly, a boy rushing home before night, before the darkness came on a Halloween night. He watched himself years ago, afraid of nightfall.

Any other time, any other month, the darkness was benign. February was too cold. The darkness was frozen deep in the

Earth. June it was too warm, bristled with too much energy, the energy of boys released from school, the energy that fueled the summer. And even in September the darkness was toothless. There was a different energy at work then, the energy of the return of the school year, and yet the summer still lingered.

But in October the summer died, along with cornfields and leaves that still, mummified and brown, haunted the landscape. Only then some spirit seeped into the night, and the darkness became a thing alive. He'd always found an excuse to come home early in October, even Halloween, before he was surrounded by this darkness that came on the October wind to watch him from behind his window. And he would hide in his room with the light on, never opening his window. Never letting the darkness inside.

It wasn't just the darkness, of course. It was what the darkness hid in its evil design. Creatures? Demons? He'd never really known. He'd only known they used the October darkness as camouflage.

No one had noticed his fear, not his peers nor his parents, and of course he'd eventually outgrown it. In time he'd even forgotten what a coward he'd been. But now, his key in the door of his new house, an adult, he remembered. He grimaced a moment, ashamed of his childhood cowardice. Then he smiled. He laughed. "What an idiot I was," he said to himself. He looked at the trees, the fields, the leaves, the grass, the red sun sinking in the pink sky. "There was never anything there. There was nothing to be afraid of."

He turned the key and opened the door. He stepped into the house, shuffling through his mail, which he grabbed from the floor, and turned on the TV news. He dropped the remote control next to his chair and prepared himself a microwave pepperoni pizza in the kitchen. He sat in his chair and ate from his lap.

After dinner Jonathan just stared at the TV set. He lay back on his brand-new chair, amused but tired. He was proud of this chair, proud of this house, his home, with the big-screen TV, the best remote, with all the modern conveniences. Soon the Wi-Fi would be hooked up, and he'd never have to leave his home. He'd come a long way from a skinny kid afraid of the dark. He enjoyed the moment of self-satisfaction. He let his bones seep slowly into the contours of the chair.

This is usually how sleep conquers: You melt into a chair, and the next thing you know, it's two o'clock in the morning and the late movie is ending.

But just as Jonathan lay teetering on the edge of deep sleep, in that brief but eternal moment when you're not sure whether or not you're dreaming, the phone rang. It rang a second time before Jonathan realized it wasn't a dream, a third time before he, startled, opened his eyes.

He moved to get up, already looking forward to lying back down again, this time in his bed. It wasn't easy. There was no longer any space between him and the chair. They had sort of fused, become one symbiotic organism. Pulling himself up was like forcing lovers apart.

With a frown, he managed. He staggered to the TV and realized he left the remote somewhere else. He glanced down at the box. There were no buttons—he couldn't change the channel or volume without the damn remote—but there was a power switch. He reached down and turned off the TV. There was a brief, eerie silence before the phone rang again. He reached into his pocket for his cell phone, realizing as he did so that he'd left it in the car. His house phone was ringing. One thing about the peaceful rural area he'd moved to was that he rarely had cell service, so there had been no need to bring his cell phone in. This was one reason he looked forward to the Wi-Fi being connected later this week. He wondered who had his new house number; he hadn't given it out to anyone yet. He,

himself, didn’t even know what it was. In fact, now that he thought of it, when had he even gotten a landline number? Hell, he hadn’t even unpacked his computers yet. He looked to find the phone, wishing he knew this house a little better.

It rang again before he could locate it on the kitchen wall. He lifted the receiver only to hear a click, then a dial tone.

“Hello?” he said to no one.

He hung up the phone. He didn’t mind. He didn’t want to talk to anybody anyway. He just wanted to lie down. He was deathly tired.

He sighed and staggered to bed. He pulled off his shoes and socks and lay down, still in his clothes, gratefully among the cool sheets. He thought he’d just rest his eyes a bit. As the sky darkened outside his window, the October breeze blew brittle leaves against the pane. Sleep fell like those leaves rustling, softly and gently.

When distant dreams woke Jonathan again, it was dark.

Not a complete dark, not a black dark. There was a bit of moonlight filtering through the window, but not much. Just enough to soften the darkness inside, to faintly outline the curtains and furniture eerily. Next to the bed Jonathan’s alarm clock glowed 11:13.

The dreams that had woken him had been strange dreams. Dark dreams. Dreams from a distant and dark childhood, he was sure, and they floated in a dark haze outside his memory, taunting him with the memory of the fear the dreams evoked in him but not the dreams themselves.

He shivered and reached for the lamp. He felt a strange, tiny relief as his hand felt its way across the shade to the switch. He clicked the switch, sighing almost gratefully.

Nothing happened.

He clicked it again. And again. The sound floated in the darkness.

But nothing happened. The darkness didn’t retreat. His thoughts cursed the darkness and his childish fear. The damn bulb was burnt out.

He rolled over, trying to sleep again. But it was too late. He was now wide awake. Besides, his dreams still haunted him. He was vaguely afraid to sleep, afraid of his dreams. What a fool he was! He knew that if he could only remember, now that he was awake, what his subconscious was so afraid of, he wouldn’t fear. Dreams were like that. With the light of reality shed on them, they withered; their fears faded like ghosts.

But he couldn’t remember.

He rolled over again.

Outside his window, somewhere in dark fields, he heard a rustling, a whispering. The wind, he thought. The wind through the trees. October trees. The October wind. He closed his eyes.

And his dreams fed his fear. He had no choice but to reopen his eyes.

“Damn it!” he hissed to the darkness. He obviously wasn’t going to sleep. His only choice was to get up, turn on the lights, find something to read, or fix himself a snack.

He began to sit up when a stray thought invaded his brain, a memory of a fear, a foolish childhood fear, a fear that had wracked him at ten years old when, in bed, his feet would slip out of the covers and hang over the edge of the mattress. And he would imagine hands, inhuman and evil, reaching up from the darkness under the bed, somehow connected to the darkness hovering outside his window, grabbing his feet with an unholy hunger and pulling him down into that darkness. He remembered

how he used to never get up in the night to pee as a child, so afraid of the darkness under his bed. His parents had never understood why he'd wet the bed so often as he grew older.

As his feet now fell to the floor, he distantly wondered if someone, something, waited for them in the darkness under the bed.

Despite himself, he stood with alacrity and almost jumped away from the bed. He smiled briefly at his fear. He was no child anymore. There was nothing to be afraid of. Besides, soon the light would drive the darkness and his silly fears away.

He shuffled swiftly across the floor, out into the living room, and to the front door. His fear must've been caused by whatever nightmares had haunted his subconscious just before he woke, he thought. That and the new house—he wasn't quite used to it in the dark. The darkness itself made the house somehow alien.

He arrived at the door and reached out for the light switch, and another stray thought, another childhood and childish fear, floated to him. He imagined the door suddenly and violently ripping open as he reached for the lights. Dead, rotting arms, inexplicably powerful, reaching in from the darkness outside, the smell of newly dug earth and rotting flesh overpowering. He imagined, just for a brief moment, those arms grabbing him and pulling him outside. Out into the darkness.

Almost of its own accord, his hand locked the door. Then his hand slithered across the wallpaper, groping for the switch. Where was the damn thing? Would he find it before his hand rubbed against something else next to the door in darkness…? Shivering, he pulled his hand back like he'd struck a flame.

There was a noise, a scuttling, somewhere in the dark house. Somewhere in the darkness.

Roaches, he thought. Or mice. The damn things overran farmhouses, even clean ones, in the night, in the dark. His feet, naked on the cold rug, seemed to shrivel away from insects or vermin crawling all about him. His hand reached up again. Where was the light switch? It had to be here. He remembered…

And then Jonathan Peters realized he remembered *nothing* about the house. All the memories were shrouded in darkness, as if he'd never seen his own house in the light of day. As if he'd never used any light switches before, he couldn't remember ever turning on a light switch in this dark house. It seemed irrational but he couldn't remember where the light switches were. Any of them.

There was another noise outside, a scratching, a scraping far off. Or maybe not so far off. His hand abandoned the search. There was no light switch here.

Suddenly he had an urge to urinate. As if from nowhere, he felt ready to burst. The urge was vaguely comforting, since he realized that he was certain where the light switch in the bathroom was. With a new confidence he strode to the bathroom, and his hand reached out again for a light switch, this time quickly finding it. He sighed.

He tried not to think of roaches scurrying away into the cracks as he flipped the switch. And in that same split-second, he remembered horror movies from his youth that had inspired nightmares of tiny demons born of darkness who snuck out from corners and chimneys and closets at night, hissing, whispering of murder, of stealing souls, of taking people down into the darkness, but scurrying like roaches in retreat from the light, disappearing once again into their crack. Until, of course, the lights went out again.

He flipped the switch.

His stomach turned to cold oatmeal and dripped into his

bowels.

The light didn’t go on.

Somehow the light didn’t work. It couldn’t be a coincidence. They were coming, he thought; the darkness had swallowed the light, and they were coming to get him. He tried desperately to think rationally, to calm himself. He knew the house still had power. Distantly he could hear the refrigerator humming. Somehow, he told himself, one light switch must simply control another. Somewhere in his dark and alien house, another light switch, the master switch for the bathroom, was off. And he had to find it. Or the fuse box. But how?

He was trembling as he turned from the dark bathroom, unrelieved, to the dark living room. His eyes wandered the darkness, searching for some kind of help. The humming refrigerator soothed him from a distance.

The kitchen. There must be a light in the kitchen.

Gingerly he stepped through the darkness once again, trying not to notice shadows within shadows. He moved slowly, trying to remain silent in the unreasonable fear that any noises he made could mask other noises he didn’t. After a dark eternity he reached the kitchen.

He glanced in the dark.

He was cold.

He realized he was sweating.

There must be a light switch somewhere in the kitchen too, but where? If only he could see…

Suddenly, swiftly, he dove in the darkness for a drawer. He pulled it open insanely and grabbed the flashlight from the darkness inside. The batteries, he knew, were old. But maybe they’d last just long enough for him to find a light switch.

He flicked the flashlight switch. Light gleamed from the utensil dimly into his eyes, blinding him momentarily.

Then it fell dark.

He cursed and shook the flashlight violently.

Again it glowed feebly to life, then died.

He shook it again, wildly, and then there was a noise somewhere behind the noise of the flashlight rattling, a noise somewhere near the front door. The flashlight flew from his sweaty hand and smashed into the floor, batteries flinging in all directions, as his widened but blind eyes turned to the noise.

There was no sound, only silence and the October wind.

It had been his imagination. So he told himself. There was nothing there, nothing but darkness. But it was the darkness that surrounded him, invaded him, choked him. Somehow he had to escape the darkness. He fell desperately to his knees, cursing himself for having left his cell phone in the car, searching for the batteries that had scattered like roaches, like demons, across the floor. He quickly found one but the other must’ve rolled under the fridge.

The fridge. The humming seemed to call him.

He reached up impulsively to pull open the refrigerator door and remembered other childhood nightmares of opening doors to find body parts, the refuse of a madman, a murderer, still hiding somewhere in the darkness, hanging in the cool air. The door opened and he was bathed by the pale light. He stood and, for a long time, he waited in the dim light, trembling.

Finally, after another eternity, he looked out from the kitchen. The house was still dark. This meager light was not enough to hold back the darkness for long. He watched the windows and the darkness beyond, the wind waving deeper

shadows against the darkness. He imagined he could see eyes, orange and glowing, in the darkness outside, watching him silently through the window. A snout, like a pig's but not like a pig's, floated underneath them.

His own eyes retreated to the relative security of the refrigerator light and closed. He felt inexplicable tears trickle down his face. He swallowed. He turned again.

The eyes, or whatever his fear had made into eyes, were gone. He looked briefly along the part of the kitchen wall that was dimly illuminated by the meager refrigerator light for some sign of a light switch. He could see nothing.

He began to wonder insanely if there were any working light switches anywhere in this cursed house. He wondered if the architects who had redesigned the farmhouse had planned all this, designed this house so he could never find a light, never escape the seeping darkness.

Sobbing audibly, he slowly and tentatively turned once again to the dark and silent living room. The digital clock on the TV glowed, a pale-red ghost, in the blackness—2:20 a.m.

Impossible, he thought. It couldn't be. He couldn't possibly have been searching for a light switch for almost four hours.

Lord, as a child, twelve midnight had never been as bad as 3 a.m. Three a.m. was the true witching hour, when everything all around was as dead as a graveyard. And the dead would rise, vampires, zombies, asleep in the dark basement would quietly climb the stairs and sneak into dark rooms. And at 3 a.m. we had no defense. It was the time of night when we were near dead ourselves, already halfway undead. Three a.m., with dusk and dawn a decade away, was the haven of darkness.

Another noise, this time somewhere above. But there was nothing above, only the roof, the attic.

Childhood nightmares again. A dark crawl space of spiderwebs and rotting wood. It never even occurred to Jonathan that he'd been in his attic only days before, that it was empty, that his new house had been thoroughly cleaned. Indeed, his house wasn't new to him anymore. It wasn't even a house anymore, simply a nightmare of other houses, ancient and haunted. It was a trap set up by the darkness after all these years to finally smother him.

He moaned, "Oh, God."

In desperation he dove into the darkness again, leaving the refrigerator door, a light in the distance, hanging open. He needed to find some more light, a more comforting light, in the living room. And he had a plan.

He grinned in victory as he switched on the TV, awaiting pleasant human voices and light. Electronic snow fell on the screen, casting deep shadows across the room. Somehow, when he'd dropped the remote, the input had changed. His grin faded. The noise of static now hid all other noises. Shadows scampered around him. This wasn't good enough. He needed to turn it down, change the input, find some humanity. This was worse than complete darkness.

He needed the remote control.

He trembled uncontrollably when he realized that, like the light switches, it, too, was lost in a sea of darkness. And he couldn't remember where it was. Sweating profusely, his hand searched the couch, at any moment expecting to recoil from something cold and living hidden in the cushions.

It took forever.

He groped the floor, all the while expecting insects or spiders to crawl madly onto his hands, up his arms, to his sobbing face. Shadows continued to fly from the TV screen, phantoms, ghosts, demons.

He imagined watching the TV set, never aware that someone or something watched him alone from the darkness. Somewhere behind the static he heard the knocking, the scratching, the scraping somewhere outside.

The wind. The darkness. Who had called earlier and hung up, found out he was alone? Who hid in the shadows now, waiting for the right moment? Who or what? He fell to the floor, sobbing.

He wanted to turn off the TV, to stop the shadows running around him. But he was afraid of the deeper darkness and silence that would follow.

He was sure they were coming at him from every direction now. He could barely hear them behind the static, barely see their shadows flitting in the corner of his eye. They were coming for him from the darkness. The darkness itself was coming for him, just as it had all those years ago when he'd escaped it in his room, trapped it outside in the October night.

It had waited. All this time.

He crawled to the wall, weeping, trembling, sweating, the shadows dancing all about him. He reached up pathetically, scratching desperately at the plaster, madly hunting the light switch. His fingernails broke, his fingers bled. He slid down the wall and lay on the floor, sobbing.

And that's where he was found the next day, in the light of afternoon, when the police had come searching for him when he'd not shown up for or called work. The TV was on. A pool of water had formed around the defrosted refrigerator.

He sat, his clothes soaked in sweat, staring at something no one else could see, his fingers bloody and raw. And just above him, a hole had been clawed in the plaster of the wall just below the light switch he'd never reached.