

New Fiction from Susan Taylor Chehak: “With a Whimper”

This isn't the first time that man has visited this cemetery, and he supposes it isn't going to be the last. As a child he was one of the pack of kids from the neighboring sprawl of houses who came here, against all warnings, to scare themselves silly with games of Ghost or Hide-and-Seek or Sardine. They gathered near the hedges where the black angel spreads her wings, looking down on anyone who dares look up. Her expression might be a face of horror or sorrow or rage, depending on the moon and how dark the night. Later, when he and his friends were older, they crept around in pairs and fell against each other, desperate to become one.



Now he stands alone here, a grimy shadow in his khaki pants and his brown shirt and his black shoes. His wife would have told him to change the shirt, at least. Put on something cheerful, such as the pale-pink one she bought him, but he didn't care for it and only wore it that one time, to please her.

The grave is new. Dirt. Waiting for rain. Waiting for sod to cover it over green. A motor grumbles in the distance. He looks up. It's the big, yellow backhoe trundling down the lane toward him. There was a time when a shovel was all you'd need. He lets fall the roses he's brought and turns away.

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This is a young woman over here, but you might not know that just by looking at her. Just by looking at her you'd have to make a guess because of how she has her hair cropped so close to her skull. That's how the kids do now—just shave it off and forget about it. Also she's hidden her body inside baggy jeans and an old sweatshirt—pitch black except where it's faded and fraying at the cuffs—so you can't tell by that either. Her face is youthful, though, exposed and shining in the morning light. Pretty little thing. She's got her mask pulled down under her chin, so you can't see the dancing skeletons on it, a wry design created by her younger sister, who is dark and depressed and, for the last few months, eager for the world to just come to its end already, the way the prophets have been promising her all her life it will. "Soon," this sister whispers, gazing into her own eyes. She's had enough, she says to anybody willing to listen. This girl here isn't like that, though. She's always been known by family and friends as the sunny one—no matter what else might be going on, she's always able to find something to make her feel fine. Right now that's a job to be done and a lollypop burrowed into one cheek while she does it. Banana Dumdum, her favorite flavor, though she didn't choose it, just left it to chance and got lucky, and so it goes.

She's moving along house by house—through a gate, up a walk, up the steps, and then back down to the street again—going door to door in this neighborhood that looks like it's deserted, but how or why is none of her business to wonder. She'll leave a census form and a Dumdum in a plastic bag inside the door or in the box or just there on the porch planks of every house she comes to on her assigned route. That's the job, plain and simple.

Who is this girl? She's not a kid and not a teenager either. You might guess her to be in her twenties. Early twenties, anyway. A college student, maybe? Had to drop out because of

the plague, when classes shut down or went on-line and she had no computer of her own, or she had to drop out and move back home to live with her mother and that gloomy younger sister, who have the old house to themselves now since Dad died of alcoholism or jumped out a window or has been institutionalized somewhere. Whatever. It's enough to know he's not around anymore, so the sisters have gone from riches to rags. And the mom? She suffers from anxiety, depression, agoraphobia, OCD, she's a hoarder who hasn't left her house for years and now, with the plague going around, won't ever leave it again, not even the backyard, such as it is. So this girl...this young woman, that is...she's not a girl, she doesn't like being called a girl...this young woman is doing the best she can under the circumstances.

She throws her head back and breathes deep, so now you can see the blot of a bruise on her neck, just there, below her chin, along the course of her jugular vein. A hickey is what it is. She was at a plague party last night is what, and the guy in whose arms she ended up was moaning as his mouth found her throat and branded it with his mark. She won't tell her mother this or her sister either. She thinks she doesn't care if she gets sick and dies, but she also doesn't believe she's going get sick, and she definitely doesn't believe she's going to die. Not anytime soon, anyway. She knows people who have been going around spreading the plague on purpose. Taking their chances with a single round, spin the cylinder, nuzzle the muzzle, pull the trigger, and...click?

The younger sister has a room in the basement of the mother's house, and that's where she makes the masks. If you put your ear to the grate, you can hear the clatter and whir of the old sewing machine at all hours of the night. But this girl took the attic because it's least cluttered with her mother's growing accumulation of all that she thinks she needs and must save. Because the mother can't get up there is the only reason why. The folding stairs are stuck and have been stuck for

years, so this girl, ever resourceful as well as cheerful, comes and goes through the small dormer window on the side where the old oak has grown up taller than the house. She can shinny a rope to the tree's lower reaches, then climb on up the branches to the roof or vice versa on back down to the ground.

You might notice now that she's also wearing gloves on her hands, the floppy rubber kind made for cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors. She found them in the kitchen of the abandoned house where she woke up in the dark only a few hours ago. Where she woke up and rolled away from the guy whose mark she bears. Where she crept downstairs to scrounge in the cupboards with a hope of finding something to eat. Or drink. But there wasn't much there. Cans of soup and something floating in brine in the pantry. Sponges and disinfectants, bleach and scouring powder and the gloves under the sink. The others were all fast asleep by that time, but this girl has long been in the habit of rising with the sun. Or maybe it was just she's the only one who has a job.

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That man is at home now. He's right over there, in the house on the corner. The yellow one with the white fence and all the flowers. He's sitting at his desk, where he's been writing a letter to the editor of the local paper. He has something to say about the situation. His situation. The world situation.

"There is a virus," he writes, "and it's going to kill us all." But everybody knows that. This isn't news. Whether you want to believe it or not, which his son does not. The boy called last night. Not a boy, another man, but he will always be a boy to his father. The boy had been drinking. Or something. He wasn't in his right mind, whatever that means. He seems to have some ideas that he picked up somewhere. Crazy talk about a hoax, is that it? The Pandemic. The Plague. The Plan-demic. Here to control us. Here to keep us locked down

and desperate. But he can't stick it out. He doesn't have enough food to last the months it's going to take before we're free again. "Do you, Dad? Do you?"

"Dear Editor," that man writes. "Can you tell me what's happening? Do you know what's real and what isn't? My son says this and my son says that, but it all sounds like something somebody made up to entertain us or to scare us or to cause us to...what? Do you know? Because I'm afraid I can't say I know anything for sure anymore."

But that's a lie. He does know one thing for sure. He has firsthand knowledge, that's what he has. And his wife is dead, that's what he knows. She was in a home, her brain already scrambled. He never wanted that for her, but it just got so bad that he had no choice. The children insisted. The boy and his sister. He couldn't care for her properly. That's something else he knows.

He didn't get to see her in the end but it doesn't matter, she wouldn't have recognized him anyway, and all she'd have to show him would be that quizzical look she'd get at the sight of his face, stabbing him with its emptiness. Her gnarled fingers at her lips, all twisted like twigs from some ancient tree, and her whisper nothing more than a whistle, "Who?"

He hadn't bothered to answer the last time. Just raised a hand and waggled his own fingers, which made her smile, before he turned around again and walked away.

So you see, she was already gone before she got sick, before she died, so he's not really in mourning for her now. More like he's in mourning for himself. She was cremated and then buried over there in the cemetery, in one of the plots they bought for each other a long time ago, when they were young, knowing but not really believing that that would be where they ended up. In the long run. Or the short, depending. He assumed he'd be the one to go first. All of us did. But what do we

know? Nothing.

So now he walks over there every morning, before it gets too hot and when no one else is up and about, while it's still safe.

Yours truly? No.

Sincerely yours? No.

Always? No.

Ever? Almost.

As ever, then. Followed by the trembling scribble of his name.

He folds the letter once, twice, three times. His hands are clumsy. His fingertips are numb. He licks the envelope, seals it, then opens it again. Unfolds the paper, crumples it in his fist, smooths it on the desktop, folds it once more. His head throbs and his pulse stutters in his ears. He doesn't want to lick the envelope, so he staples it shut, then hammers on the staples with his fist to flatten them, which causes the small frame at the edge of the desk to tip over and fall to the floor, leaving the glass shattered and her face in pieces behind it.

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Over there, at the end of the block, this girl has paused. She might as well be the only person left alive on earth, one last girl standing there, sucking on a banana-flavored Dumdum with a satchel of official questionnaires slung over her shoulder, in these precious last moments we have left before the end.

Soon she'll turn the corner onto another street, and then she'll be out of sight, and after that there won't be anything left to disturb the frightful stillness that's settling in all around us now, acting for all the world like it might never go away.

While the flowers in the gardens nod their heavy heads, docile and dreamy, with nowhere to go and nothing to do but bloom and die and bloom again. Like that.