

TUNDRA

THREE CANADIAN CHILLERS



RICHARD GAVIN — IAN ROGERS — SIMON STRANTZAS

TUNDRA

THREE CANADIAN CHILLERS

RICHARD GAVIN

IAN ROGERS

SIMON STRANTZAS

Text copyright
“Leavings of Shroud House: An Inventory” © 2009, Richard Gavin
“The Tattletail” © 2009, Ian Rogers
“Pinholes in Black Muslin” © 2009, Simon Strantzas

The authors assert the moral right to be established
as the owners of the respective works.

cover artwork and design by Simon Strantzas
“Dead Secretary” font © Dirt2.com
intersitial image © Room122.com
typeset in “Palatino LT”

publisher’s note:

This is a work of fiction. All characters in this publication
are fictitious and any resemblance to any real persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or
reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written
permission from the authors, except in the case of brief
quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of
trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated
without the publishers’ prior consent, in any form of binding or cover
other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet
or via any other means without the permission of the publisher and/or
author is — in almost all circumstances — illegal and a punishable act.
Please purchase only authorised electronic editions of any book, and
do not participate in the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials.

Your support of creators’ rights is appreciated.

© 2009 an oozing brain production

Printed in Canada

TABLE OF CONTENTS

“Leavings of Shroud House: An Inventory”

by Richard Gavin

page 1

“The Tattletail”

by Ian Rogers

page 15

“Pinholes in Black Muslin”

by Simon Strantzas

page 29

LEAVINGS OF SHROUD HOUSE: AN INVENTORY

RICHARD GAVIN

THE HOUSE ITSELF

THE FOLLOWING DOSSIER is culled from various sources, thus it contains the whispers of many disparate souls. Its only unifying element is the fact that all these eerie testimonials relate, in a manner that is at once both intimate and vague, to a demolished Victorian farmhouse in the town of Chatterton.

Shroud House. Long before its walls were razed, and before the reclusive family that inhabited the house and lent it their name regressed into the fog of history, Shroud House was lush with mystery. Its very appearance was the stuff of our most tantalizing nightmares, for the house did not merely stand, it loomed. The multi-gabled roof lent the abode all the majesty of a mosque or a temple dedicated to some unnameable gods. The tinted window glass shimmered like constellations of diseased stars, and the splintery beams of the porch were so very much like the jawbones of a prehistoric beast.

Its interior?

A veritable museum of occult materials.

These items were drudged out from Shroud House's must-laden rooms almost immediately after the last member of the Shroud family departed this mortal coil. Items better left to the night-side of the universe were soon cast out into the sunlit mortal world for the shallowest reasons. Men in tailored suits divided the most intriguing or lucrative objects, like a cluster of seedy undertakers pilfering the pockets of the recently dead.

Shroud House's leavings were divided into auction lots, or became charitable donations. Other items were hocked to any collector of arcanum that was willing to accept the cost, both fiscal and spiritual.

Time passed.

Stories flowered.

And from them I learned that the ghosts of Shroud House refuse to be confined to the past, and that they do not require the shelter of their fallen sanctuary in order to weave insidious magic upon the world.

THE PHOTOGRAPHS

The Metro Art Gallery launched a new exhibit one snowy Friday evening in January. It consisted of twenty-four photographs, all of which had once decorated Shroud House.

Waltz of Shadows was the exhibit's name. The corridor of the main gallery was lined with the photographs, twelve on either wall. Each photo had been professionally matted and was displayed in a sleek silver frame.

The curators piped funeral music through the sound system and had the lights at the dimmest possible setting that would still allow the patrons a decent view of the exhibit.

The photographs themselves were in a sepia tone. All of them were afflicted with blotchy stains, tattered edges, vein-like creases. But such flaws were to be expected in a collection as old and peculiar as this one.

The queerest feature, the one that had captured the attention of the Gallery executives several months prior, was documented in the *Waltz of Shadows Guidebook*, which is quoted below:

There seems to be two unifying characteristics for all the photographs in this collection. The first is that each photo features only a single member of the Shroud family. The second and most unusual characteristic is that none of the subjects are facing the camera. Though each picture

displays an adept level of skill in the areas of composition, lighting and mood, the viewer is left to speculate as to why the photographer decided to photograph each Shroud from behind.

The patron who discovered the horrific answer was an art student, and her initial impulse was to dismiss her finding as nothing more than an optical trick, or as just another flaw in the crumbling photograph. But others quickly began to cluster around the picture. Soon there were pointed fingers, gasps, murmured theories.

That particular photo depicted an elderly woman seated at what looked to be her dressing table. She was dressed in a long, regal gown. Her silver mane had been wound into a tight bun (which was very prominent, for its placement in the picture was where one would normally find the subject's face). On the table before her sat perfume bottles and various other cosmetics.

There was also a mirror.

The camera had mistakenly (?) captured the old woman's reflection. The face that peered out from the looking glass was closer to that of a *cryptozoology* specimen than of a woman. A pair of sewer-dark eyes were embedded much too deeply in a blob of withered flesh. It was so much like a monkey's face, and the elongated, needle-thin nose resembled the beak of an ibis. It drooped down as though deflated. The subject's mouth was no larger than a coin—a tiny, yawning circle of blackness, like an anus, or a wormhole.

WEDDING GOWN

(Episode #443-C1 of the BBC program *Man & Magic*)

Dry ice swirls about a darkened studio that is decorated to resemble an antiquated study. The study door creaks open and a gaunt figure steps into frame. He introduces himself as Dr. Otto Valzer and he proclaims himself to be a world-renowned expert on the paranormal. He then welcomes the viewer to join him on another excursion along what he calls "the dim byways that skirt the boundaries of human reason."

Opening credits roll, accompanied by eerie Theremin music.

Fade-in to a close-up shot of a Victorian-style wedding gown. Age has yellowed its white silk. The lace trimmings are beginning to look threadbare. In a voice-over, Dr. Valzer informs us that on the surface this gown is just like any other. It

was hand-sewn by a distant relative in the hopes that it would be passed down through generations of young brides. But this particular gown is no ordinary gown, and the family it once belonged to was no ordinary family.

Cut to a home video of a chubby twenty-four-year-old girl seated in a very suburban-looking kitchen. The young woman begins to talk about how excited she is regarding her upcoming wedding, and that she's been imagining it ever since she was a little girl. She'd always imagined herself to be a princess and that when she finally met Tom she knew she had found her prince.

The mysterious Shroud gown, purchased for the young bride-to-be at an antique clothing show by her aunt, seemed to be the ideal dress for the fairytale wedding.

The wedding date arrived and, as another home video clip reveals, the young bride went down the aisle wearing the Shroud gown, which had been cleaned and tailored so as to look new. But even on the poorly shot videotape, it is clear that the bride's face is an ashen hue. She suddenly staggers.

Dr. Valzer's voice-over states that all day long the bride's family had been commenting on how sickly the bride looked. Her father had gone so far as to suggest postponing the wedding. But his daughter was insistent, refusing to yield to anything that might tarnish her long-awaited ceremony.

We now see the cake-cutting. The father of the bride does his best to film the reception with a steady hand, but is unsuccessful. Because of this poor camerawork, we are offered only a brief and blurry glimpse of what may be the bride's face transfiguring into a withered, corpse-blue visage. We can see a figure in a bride's dress crumpling to the floor and can hear several gasps and cries from the wedding party.

The home video's most notorious clip (one that was published as still photographs in tabloids around the globe) was the shot of the bride lying lifeless beside her banquet table. Her husband, shrieking for help, bends to help his lifeless mate. He takes her hand in his and screams when her appendage sifts through his fingers like ash. The young man flings back the veil that had fallen over the bride's face. Blue-grey dust silts off of the jaundice-coloured arches of an ancient skeletal face.

The segment of *Man & Magic* runs through further interviews with relatives, doctors, tabloid journalists, and experts on spontaneous human combustion. But ultimately no conclusion is given.

Dr. Valzer's closing monologue is performed before a large photograph of Shroud House.

"Vengeance from beyond the grave or a home-movie hoax?" he asks us. "In the end, it is up to each of us to decide, for, as Hamlet observed, 'There are more things...'"

There is a brief close-up of our host. His eyes shimmer darkly behind his glasses. Then the good doctor steps back into the smoky shadows.

End credits roll.

THE GARDEN GATE

(Clipping from October issue of *Gardener's Globe* magazine)

"Ghosts in the Garden"

by Rudy Morrell

(The photograph that appears just beneath this headline features an elderly man and woman posing as the archetypal couple from the painting "American Gothic." But instead of clutching a pitchfork, the couple holds an ornate wrought-iron gate between them. The gate is composed of eight spiralling posts set inside an arch-shaped frame. A carved face leers from the centre of the gate. Mossy green blotches obscure its finer details.)

Jerome and Alice Lance seem to embody the very essence of grandparenthood. Both of them are spry, genteel, and generous almost to a fault. This generosity is exhibited the minute we are ushered into the cozy living room of their cottage home, where Alice has taken the liberty of setting out tea and homemade marzipan cakes.

It is truly chilling to think that such a lovely couple, now just four months shy of their Golden Anniversary, were subjected to a horror story beyond the imaginings of Hollywood filmmakers.

It began innocently enough: with the Lances discovering an antique gate at a local home and garden show.

"It was just so beautiful and unique," Alice gushed. "We both knew it would be perfect for the garden."

The dealer at the garden show claimed to be unaware of the gate's history and also claimed that he had found the gate in a scrap yard near his home.

Although the gate was in perfect condition when the Lances bought it, it became horribly tarnished within hours of being attached to the fence that frames their tidy perennial garden.

They assumed that the piece was faulty, but since the dealer had a strict 'no refund' policy, the Lances were forced to make due. Little did they realise that the loss of two hundred dollars would be the least of their troubles.

"The first thing we noticed that was out of the ordinary was a whole lot of fliers for lost dogs and cats being posted around the neighbourhood."

The mystery then hit even closer to home when the Lances lost their beloved Labrador retriever, Rex.

"He woke us up at about two in the morning," Jerome recalled. "I went downstairs to see what the problem was, but nothing seemed out of place. When I opened the back door, Rex took off. He went tearing across the yard, right toward the gate. I ran out after him, but before I could grab hold of him, he squeezed his way between the bars. I opened the gate and looked all around the garden for him, but he was nowhere to be found. I could hear him barking but couldn't see him. At the time I figured it was just because it was so dark outside.

"But then there was a loud yelp, and that was the last I heard of him." Jerome had to pause to dab the tears from his eyes.

The next day Rex's picture joined the tapestry of fliers around the neighbourhood.

The final, and most harrowing, incident occurred a few weeks later, during a family barbecue at the Lance house. Some time between Jerome's hamburgers and Alice's homemade apricot pie, Ella, the Lance's three-year-old granddaughter, wandered off from the picnic table.

It was Carrie, Ella's mother, who first noticed the child toddling toward the garden.

"Carrie was calling for Ella to come back to the table because she didn't want her tearing up any of my flowers," Alice recalls. "When Ella didn't respond Carrie got up to fetch her. That's when she said she heard Ella talking to herself. Just saying one-word answers like 'Yes', 'No', 'Maybe.'

Then it happened."

The 'it' Alice referenced was the opening of the garden gate.

"No-one touched it, nobody was even near it," Jerome assures me. "But we all heard the latch pop open, and we all saw the gate just swing open all by itself. Once it did that, Ella took off running straight for it.

"Luckily Carrie went running after her and caught her right before Ella stepped inside the garden. Carrie started screaming.

She kicked the gate shut and kept shouting 'Leave my baby alone!'"

"We all went to them," Alice adds, "and I looked through the gate, but for the life of me I couldn't see what had gotten Carrie so upset. All she kept saying was that there were all these . . . well, deformed people standing inside the garden. And they were all trying to pull Ella inside with them."

Jerome removed the corroded gate that very evening. The next morning Alice awoke to find her beloved garden in ruins.

"Everything was all black and brittle, like it had been burnt," Alice told me in a slightly defeated, if bewildered, tone. "Not one plant was salvageable."

MISCELLANY

There are many other instances of Shroud House's perpetual haunting of humanity. I could detail the legend about the enormous black cat that is thought to be the totem of Gabrielle Shroud. Rumor in the town of Chatterton claims that the cat still roams the streets on overcast days, studying the townsfolk, plotting vengeance. It is said that at night Gabrielle shapeshifted into teratisms that defied description.

I could tell you of the phonograph records that contained dozens of voice recordings made by Shroud ancestors, long deceased. According to one of my informants, who claimed to have listened to these discs, the recordings are actually a form of soothsaying: omens of the terrible kingdom that awaits us all upon death.

Then there is the old woman in England who sold her story to local tabloids. Apparently (if one can trust such lurid journalism) the old woman began receiving a regular flow of postcards with her daily mail. Each card contained a blurred photograph of what the old woman thought to be an extraterrestrial life-form stepping through a half-open door. The cards were inscribed with brief and cryptic messages like "*Find the Well & Wait for the Visitor*" or "*The Cellar has become the Chapel. Come.*"

Indeed, I could go on with a great many tales. But time is of the essence, so I will instead move on to the final two items that close the circle around my involvement with this phantasmagoria.



THE SPECTACLES

Phineas Shroud lived to be eighty-nine. A mysterious disease had rendered him an invalid for the final arc of his life, and he spent his twilight years holed up in the musty attic of Shroud House, with its crooked beams, its groaning mortises, its ghosts of generations gone. During the few hours when he was well enough to leave his bed, Phineas would perch his gaunt body in a wheelchair and sit before the large attic window. One can only speculate as to the weird visions that could have entranced the old man night after night. . . .

The spectacles came into my possession during an otherwise uneventful business trip overseas.

"These were designed according to Phineas' specifications," the proprietor explained as he held a small tin case out to me. We were standing inside a small boutique called Visions. The store was overstocked, claustrophobically small, and poorly ventilated. Most of the tiny showroom was cluttered with boxes of varying sizes. Many of the cartons were labelled, but even without reading their tattered decals the boxes' contents were obvious to me: eyeglasses. Thousands, or perhaps even tens of thousands, of unusual eyeglasses, many of them antiquated or just discarded. Visions was a specialty shop. Their exclusive stock-in-trade was spectacles, particularly antique ones or ones that possessed queer aesthetic qualities.

As I watched the little shopkeeper pop the tin case open I wondered how one could ever earn a living off such a peculiar trade.

"He planned to be buried wearing these," the man explained as he carefully lifted the delicate glasses from their tarnished container. The lenses were not circular, but were slightly oval in shape, and they were set in a very plain wire frame. The lens glass was the colour of brandied wine.

"These lenses are not prescription." He pointed at the shimmering egg-shaped glass with his pinky finger. "They were actually cut from the attic window that Phineas loved to stare through. Legend has it that Phineas had hoped to take that beloved view with him to the grave."

I was reaching for the spectacles as the shopkeeper made this statement. I hesitated.

"To the grave? You don't mean . . ." I trailed off, unsure of the most genteel way to phrase my question.

The shopkeeper intuited my ghoulish suspicions and began to chuckle.

“No, no,” he said, “you needn’t worry. These eyeglasses weren’t swiped from a cadaver’s face. Phineas was never buried with them. In fact, he was never buried at all. Supposedly the old man simply vanished one night, just disappeared off God’s green Earth. I was told that the Shrouds searched for many months, but the only trace they ever found was these spectacles, which Phineas had commissioned a local craftsman to make. Merwyn, one of the younger and more mischievous of the Shroud children, discovered them sitting on the attic windowsill in front of an empty wheelchair. The fate of Phineas remains a mystery to this day.”

When I reached for my pocketbook the shopkeeper actually licked his lips with greedy anticipation.

My hotel room was on the fourteenth floor (which was in actuality the accursed *thirteenth* floor; it is titillating when superstition overpowers logic). It was inside that immaculate little room that I first prepared to try on the Shroud House spectacles.

Night. I was standing before the room’s large window. A harvest moon flung a ghost-sheen over the tight cluster of distant buildings. The spectacles were resting on top of an oak desk. A small lamp shone down upon them like a spotlight. This dim cone of light was the room’s only source of illumination. The open tin box and the hand-written receipt from Visions both sat outside the lamp’s halo, for the light was meant for the spectacles alone.

I stood before the window for some time, waiting for some cosmic or internal cue to instruct me. When none came, I waited until everything felt suitably calm and serene.

Then I reached for the glasses.

I hesitated when they were halfway to my face.

The peripheral details of the room still appeared normal, but the small portion of the room that was filtered through the brandy-coloured glass was anything but.

I believe that what I stared at through the spectacles was the armchair that was set in a corner of the room, but through the lenses the chair’s contours seemed fluidic, its edges blurry. The entire chair had been reduced to a bewildering storm of wood and coiled steel and fabric stuffed with padding the colour of gunmetal.

Of course when I peered over the rim of the spectacles, the chair was as it should be; an inanimate, tidy furnishing. But once I glanced through the glasses, the very concept of “chair”—as a distinct, inanimate *thing*—felt wholly alien to me. I could not separate myself from the chair. The furnishing seemed as sentient and as much a part of me as that strange neurological spasm we reverentially call “the soul.”

This feeling of dislocation led me to conclude that the spectacles were not suited for the chaos of a modern urban setting. I returned them to their tin case and carefully packed the case in with the rest of my luggage.

My choice as to where I would first try on the spectacles? There really was no choice to be made.

Eleven days later, when I was back on my native soil, I made a pilgrimage to the ruins of Shroud House.

With a sack containing all my Shroud tokens (the gallery guidebook, various news clippings, and, of course, my spectacles) slung over one shoulder, I stumbled through the chunks of smashed foundation until I was situated roughly in what used to be the centre, the diseased heart, of the house. Once there I slid the spectacles onto my face...

THE SKELETON KEY

The key materialised on top of a cinderblock just off to my right. I made several tests and discovered that without the spectacles the key was invisible, but with them, the key could not only be seen, but could be touched, and utilised.

Like the key itself (whose appearance can be likened to the skeleton of a fish, or perhaps that of a small reptile), the door it was designed to unlock could only be apprehended through the shards of attic glass.

The door stood in the middle of the woods; a dark monolithic slab with a handle that glinted like a jewel.

The key slid easily into the door’s complex lock. Once the lock clunked free, the door autonomously opened.

Can you fathom my reaction when I saw the alien door open to reveal the interior of my own apartment? That is to say, the apartment I looked into certainly *resembled* my home in every conceivable way. Perhaps it was this veneer of familiarity that pushed me across the threshold so swiftly.

I closed the door behind me and immediately began exploring each of the rooms. In doing so, two facts became clear

to me: The first was that the similarity between this apartment and my Earthly home was purely superficial. Something, a current or invisible force, was seething beneath the skin of apparent normality.

The second realization did not crystallise in my mind until much time had passed.

And that was the fact that I was not alone.

This second observation began as nothing more than an uneasy feeling that there was someone (or something) following me. And no matter how quickly I moved, my stalker always managed to lurk right behind me. I was never able to catch so much as a glimpse of that which pursued me.

I carefully inspected the apartment, but my investigations turned up nothing. My uneasiness blossomed into fear, and that fear fermented into dread. The passing of time drew the stalking presence nearer to me.

I gradually came to intuit that my stalker's intentions toward me were anything but benign. This was not the result of any overt act on the part of my stalker, but was due more to a growing sense of my impending extinction.

But I created a stalking game of my own, a feeble form of retaliation against an enemy I cannot see.

There is no doubt in my mind that my attempts to discover the identity of my haunter merely amused him or her. For every time I crept into the soft darkness of a vacant room, I could sense my stalker looming over my shoulder. Try as I did to ignore the raising of my hackles and the quickening of my pulse, my terror always overpowered me and sent me back to the half-comforting stillness of my armchair.

By this time I had grown so accustomed to the spectacles that I no longer removed them. The one instance where I did momentarily peel them from my face, the details of my strange new home immediately mutated into the bewildering chaos I had experienced *with the spectacles on* when I was in the hotel room.

I wondered if my eyes were beginning to fail me. Perhaps the Shroud spectacles are the only lenses I need to see inside this inverted world.

So I keep the spectacles on, and I wait.

My stalker is becoming more daring. Just today I was awakened from a much-needed nap by the sound of a door slamming shut. I leapt up in time to see a small cloud of steam, a

kiss of fog, evaporating from the surface of the mirror that hangs above my chair—the chair where I now spend all my time. The residue of my haunter’s breath was the first tangible proof of its existence that I have seen. But this too was fleeting.

My thinking now is that if this entity comes while I am sleeping, perhaps it will return if I create the illusion of sleep. And so I have decided to remain motionless in my chair in the hope that I might learn the truth behind this nightmare; a nightmare so vast I now realise that the Shroud family is but a small facet of it, their house is only one gate amongst many.

This will be my last entry. This journal will be placed in a small wooden chest along with all the Shroud House memorabilia I collected during the course of my life. I will open the door one final time to toss the chest back to your world. Once this task is completed I will destroy the skeleton key, and I will perch myself in this chair. I no longer need the relics of Shroud House, for my investigations have led me much closer to the source of this horrible phenomenon.

I hope the clues I’ve bequeathed to your world serve to inspire you to continue to unravel the mystery of the endless haunting of the human race. For myself, I feel that I am very close to revelation. Day by day I can feel the truth seeping into this strange realm. In this chair I remain as still and as receptive, just as Phineas did before me.

I wait.

I wait to hear the secret behind the haunting of our species, wait to discover the hidden intentions of the grand Haunter, who alone holds the key to our shadow-laden fate.



RICHARD GAVIN'S latest collection, *The Darkly Splendid Realm*, is soon to be released by Dark Regions Press. His previous books—*Charnel Wine*, *Omens*, and *Primeval Wood*—have all been widely lauded by critics. Gavin's unique work, which has been called "genre-defying," "outré" and "highly literate," has also earned him a cult following among aficionados of weird horror. Richard lives in Ontario, Canada with his beloved wife and their brood. Visit him online at www.richardgavin.net.

THE TATTLETAIL

IAN ROGERS

“DAD, I NEED a demon.” John Smith put down his copy of *The Paranormal Times* and looked at his son. Twelve years old but small for his age; soft blue eyes magnified by outsized horn-rimmed glasses; thin, almost feminine lips, carefully neutral, nothing like the petulant frown Lizzie used when she wanted something.

“A demon? Whatever for?”

“The school’s putting on a talent show for pets. Demons, bogeys, familiars—as long as they’re not classified as dangerous with the Registry, anything can be entered.”

John folded his paper, crossed his left leg over the right, and steepled his fingers thoughtfully under his chin. “Well, a talent show certainly sounds like fun; and while I’ve encouraged you to take an interest in the Academy’s extracurricular activities, I’m not sure owning a demon is a good idea.”

“Why’s that, Dad?”

John smiled inwardly. Ever the judicious debater was his son. “Owning a pet is a big responsibility,” he explained. “And a demon! Your mother would throw a fit!”

“I’ll feed it and take care of it,” Tad said. He removed his glasses and calmly wiped them on the hem of his dress shirt. “I’ll keep it outside. You and Mom won’t even know it’s there.”

The Demonology Department at Blackloch Academy looks more like an aisle in a library than an office. The walls are top-to-bottom bookshelves, the lighting is virtually nonexistent, and the air is so still that to the casual observer the room seems to exist in a total vacuum. The only furnishings were a small roll-top desk and a straight-back chair, over which a Blackloch Owls varsity jacket was draped.

When Tad entered, Professor Dandridge was standing in the middle of the room with his hands behind his back, almost as if he were expecting him. He was certainly an odd man, both in looks and demeanor. One of those unfortunate people who is both very tall and very skinny, with rails for arms and stilts for legs, his head seemed to float in a nimbus of silver hair that some students opined made him look like a mad scientist. According to the Blackloch rumor network, that hair had been as red as a fire-engine until Dandridge spent a night in the Ivy-Lesper mansion in Lotusville. And that was just one of the many stories floating around about Blackloch's demonology professor. Another said that Dandridge got his suits at the local mortuary. . . with a spade and shovel. Tad didn't think that particular yarn was true, despite the Demonology prof's admittedly fresh-from-the-grave wardrobe.

"Young Tad Smith!" Dandridge beamed. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Hi, Professor," Tad slipped out of his backpack and took out a hardcover book with a frayed binding. "I came to return your book."

"Capital!" Dandridge's hands emerged from behind his back and came together in a hollow clap. "*Sea Serpentry and the Bermuda Triangle*."

"I liked it," Tad said, handing it over. "Dr. Cody has some interesting theories on migratory habits. Was he ever able to prove any of them?"

"He tried," Dandridge said with a dark grin. "Oh how he tried! He used to teach here, you know. Advanced Biology, aquatic species, of course. He went on sabbatical—oh it must have been three or four years back—to the Fuqua Islands."

"In the North Pacific?"

"Yes, that's right. He was about to start a year-long study of the Marianas Trench." Dandridge patted the book with one of his long, cadaverous hands. "He believed there was a portal

located at the bottom. If true, it would've gone a long way to proving a lot of the theories in this book."

Tad gave this what he hoped was a respectful amount of consideration. Then he said, "Professor, I was wondering if I could borrow another book?"

"Oh? Did you have one in mind?"

"Yes. *Demons, Deities, and Demi-Gods.*" He coughed into his hand. "The advanced edition."

Dandridge folded his arms and leaned against one of the book-lined walls. "That's a serious book," he said evenly. "Would this have anything to do with the school's talent contest?"

Tad looked down at his shoes.

"I thought so. Well, I don't see the harm in lending you that particular volume. It's not as if it were part of the Restricted Collection. But I don't think I need to tell you that demons classified as 'dangerous to humans' are strictly verboten in the talent show. And only a handful of Portentas are—"

"I know, sir. And yes, I was planning to enter the contest. I just . . . I wanted . . ." He frowned. ". . . I didn't want to use something out of the primer, sir. That's what everyone else will be doing. I wanted to be different."

"You wanted an edge." Dandridge's colourless lips spread in a vulpine smile.

"Yes," Tad admitted, "I wanted an edge."

"I would never keep a pupil from learning—" As he spoke he turned to the shelf he had been leaning against and selected a volume bound in dark red leather. "—especially one as bright as you, Smith. And as I said before, I can't prohibit you from borrowing it. But I will remind you to stay within the rules of the contest—"

"I will, sir."

He offered the book to Tad.

"—and don't even contemplate purchasing anything dangerous—"

"I won't, sir."

Tad took the book.

"—and above all else, be sure to have an adult present."

By the following evening Tad had gone through the book six times and kept coming back to the same entry—*Cordovian Tattletail*. The book described it as a mimic that takes on the characteristics of whatever it eats. Tad didn't know exactly

what that meant; like many of the books about demons he had read, vague descriptions seemed to be the rule rather than the exception. But he figured that as long as he kept its diet simple, then there shouldn't be any possibility of a gruesome bloodbath.

There was only one place where he could purchase a demon locally. The Mall, as it was called in most circles, was a pocket portal not unlike the one Dr. Cody theorised was at the bottom of the Marianas Trench. Quite literally a tear in the dimensional fabric of reality, which in this instance also happened to be the most popular hub of commerce in magic artifacts in the Tri-State area. Tad had been there with his family a few times. One of those trips had been to Heads and Tails, a pet shop that specialised in rare demons. They had gone for Lizzie's birthday, and she had picked out a sinister-looking fish, called a Striped Shadow, which had lived for about one week. (At the toilet-side service, Tad pontificated aloud on the health and safety of Lizzie's kids, should she have any one day, and was summarily sent to bed without his dinner.)

Tad was confident he would be a better pet-owner than his sister. And because the talent contest was being sponsored by the Blackloch Academy, he was able to convince his mother and father to foot the bill for the Tattletail in the interest of his budding education. "But you know the rules," his father said from behind his newspaper. "If it turns out to crave human flesh, you have to banish it." Tad agreed. But as long as he kept the Tattletail on the vegetarian diet he had planned out, it wouldn't be a problem.

No problem at all.

"It smells," was John Smith's first and only comment on the matter of Tad's Cordovian Tattletail. And, to be fair, there wasn't much more that could be said. In comparison to some of the other entries in *Demons, Deities, and Demi-Gods*, the Cordovian Tattletail was no great shakes—at least, not in the looks department.

It was the size of a large puppy, with smooth, gray skin and a long slim body. Its eyes were the colour of dull rubies and stared out from beneath a thick precipice of brow. One moment it appeared to be scared; the next it seemed decisive, thoughtful. It was a Lesser Demon and a Portenta, the latter meaning it

could turn into something more than the former. If given the proper motivation.

Tad named it Dennis. Not because it looked like a Dennis or because he thought Dennis was a good name. Dennis was merely the first one that came to mind. That was how Tad's thinking worked most of the time. On those very few occasions when his projects resulted in failure—like the time he brought the futon to life and it went through the big picture window in the living room, never to be seen again—he invariably gave his father the same answer: *It seemed like a good idea at the time.* Tad was not aware that these seemingly random decisions were in actuality communicated from his subconscious, and that his decision to purchase a Cordovian Tattletail and name it Dennis came from the same place as the decision to enter the talent contest in the first place. Nor would he have cared. If Dennis turned out to be a Great Old One, one of the unspeakable deities that can destroy entire galaxies by blinking, and inadvertently brought about armageddon, Dennis would have offered up the same explanation.

It seemed like a good idea at the time.

He took Dennis out to his mother's greenhouse. The vegetarian diet was to begin today, but first he needed to pick up a few groceries. As he escorted Dennis to a huddle of potted ferns, he made a mental note to secret the veggies off his own dinner plate. Waste not, want not.

A week later, Dennis had doubled in size. He was now as big as a Shetland pony and as green as the Incredible Hulk. He had eaten five ficus trees which were Betty Smith's pride and joy, and Tad had been forced to relocate Dennis to a chained post behind the wood shed. He mowed the lawn twice that weekend and fed Dennis the clippings. The demon grew and grew.

The following week a series of thunderstorms rolled through town and Tad learned something about his Cordovian Tattletail. One of those things they neglected to mention in the text books.

He had gone out to the wood shed around eight that morning, as had been his routine since becoming a pet-owner. He had put on his slicker and galoshes and went out to the chopping block where Dennis liked to sleep. Usually the demon was awake and waiting for him, red eyes gleaming, mouth open and salivating. But not today. Tad found Dennis lying on his side with his back to him. He didn't appear to be breathing.

Tad ran over, his boots squishing and squeaking on the wet ground, and crouched down next to Dennis. He felt for a pulse and located it—both of them, in fact—but it was low, very low. And his breathing was very shallow; Tad timed it on his Casio as only two or three breaths a minute.

“Dennis! Dennis, wake up!”

He grabbed the demon’s long, scrawny arms and shook it. Two red pinpricks of light appeared in the deep hollows of his eyes. Tad untied him and carried him back to the house. Despite his size, Dennis was all arms and legs; it was like carrying a bag of sticks. Tad’s dad remarked that Dennis smelled worse wet than he did dry and disappeared back behind his paper. Tad’s mother told him to take Dennis out to the greenhouse.

Tad did as he was told, carrying the demon out to the greenhouse and placing him on the workbench. He turned on the heat lamp his mother used for the few tropical plants she grew and trained the glow onto Dennis. He wasn’t thinking about the talent contest. He just wanted Dennis to be okay. He never had a pet before and hadn’t expected to feel so attached to it. It wasn’t a bad feeling.

“Photosynthesis,” Tad said for the third time. He said it in the tone of someone who associated the word with festering wounds and putrescent corpses. He bit his lip. “Photo-stinkin-synthesis.”

It was Monday. The thunderstorms had packed their bags and moved on. Dennis was on the mend, but Tad’s prospects of winning the Blackloch talent show were not good.

It had transpired that the Cordovian Tattletail took on more characteristics of his diet than just its colour. One could go so far as to say that feeding on plants had turned Dennis into a vegetable. Literally. As such, Dennis was subject to certain biological requirements. Like photosynthesis. Without sunlight, Dennis became slow and sluggish. The previous week’s thunderstorms hadn’t been enough to kill him, but they had instilled a coma-like state. Dennis was also growing what appeared to be a set of branches out of his back.

Life was funny sometimes. Tad had a demon that needed sunlight to live, while his sister Lizzie, who had been turned into a vampire this past summer, would be reduced to dust if she so much as stepped outside to get the mail. Oh yes, life was just a laugh-and-a-half.

Dennis looked like a skinless pony—a *green* skinless pony—and compared to some of the demons the other kids would be

bringing, that was about as scary as a game of patty-cake. If Tad was going to make Dennis scarier, he would have to feed him something a bit more exotic than ferns and ficus.

Tad checked the chains for the seventh time, confirmed that they were fastened tightly, and returned to the chopping block where a pair of boxes were stacked one on top of the other. Dennis blinked questionably at his master with his large, expressive eyes.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Tad said. He felt bad about chaining Dennis up, but it was in lieu of adult supervision.

He opened the first box, which was full of frozen porterhouse steaks Tad’s parents had bought from the Price Club. He took one out and tapped it against the cordless phone sticking out of the waistband of his pants. The steaks were for Dennis; he needed a new diet if he was going to make an impression at the talent contest. The phone was for Tad, in case the New and Improved Dennis decided he wanted something more to eat than frozen steaks. Like Tad, for instance.

“Okay, buddy. It’s magic time.” He raised the steak high over his head, which Dennis had quickly learned was the signal for dinnertime. “Open wide!”

Tad tossed the steak and Dennis made it disappear. They repeated the process until the box was empty. As Dennis was downing the last steak, the transformation began. *It’s happening faster now*, Tad thought distantly as he watched, fascinated and a little frightened, as the demon’s long limbs grew even longer. His teeth were growing, too; it looked as if knitting needles had inexplicably grown out of his gums.

Tad touched the phone with a reassuring hand, ready to punch in 911 if Dennis showed any sign of biting the hand that had fed him. But Dennis wasn’t making any such motions. In fact, he wasn’t moving at all.

“Dennis? *Dennis?*”

He reached out and gave him a slight shake. The demon’s skin (it had changed colour from fern-green to the pinkish-red of raw hamburger) was cool to the touch. Cold.

Frozen.

Tad bit his lip.

“Oh damn.”

On the day of the talent show, Tad and his father secured Dennis to the roof of the family station wagon with bungee cords and drove him to Blackloch. The demon was still a gruesome thing, John Smith opined, and he still smelled like dead fish set on fire, but he commended Tad on a fine job of raising Dennis and keeping him docile. Tad almost told him that if anything should be thanked it was the frozen porterhouses, but then figured his mother and father could find out about that in their own time (and if he won the talent contest and was able to replace the steaks with the prize money, they needn't know at all).

After they had unloaded Dennis at the rear of the school gymnasium, where the contest was being held, Tad walked his dad back to the station wagon.

"Make sure you get him inside before he thaws."

"I will, Dad. And thanks for driving us."

"You're sure you don't want me to stick around?"

"No parents allowed. You remember what happened at last year's Science Fiction Fair?"

John smiled reflectively. "Oh yes. I forgot about the non-parental-influence rule. It's probably for the best."

"I'll call you after it's over."

"Good luck, son. And good luck to Dennis." He stuck out his hand.

Tad shook it. "Thanks, Dad."

The judge was Mr. Farley, one of Blackloch's art teachers. His area of expertise was still-lives, but he wasn't impressed with Tad's frozen Cordovian Tattletail.

"Master Smith," he said in the lofty cadences that only art teachers can reach, "you should know better than to try and pass off this ... this *model* as the real thing."

A few of the other student-contestants snickered. One of them was holding a scraggly, red feline—a were-cat, as it were—with the unfortunate name of Hexxy. Its owner had trained it to fetch sticks.

"It's not a model," Tad protested. "Dennis is a real Tattletail. But he's also—"

"Dennis?" Mr. Farley said. "What kind of name is that for a demon?"

It beats Hexxy, Tad almost said.

"I'm afraid the only tattletale here is you, Master Smith. But if you'd like to submit *Dennis* as your art final, I'm sure something could be arranged."

This time the students laughed openly. Hexxy the were-cat hissed and took a swipe at one of the other contest entries, a Bolo Jumping Spider; it leaped up onto one of the basketball nets and glared down balefully.

"I assure you Dennis is very much alive. But he's so ferocious I have to keep him in this frozen state or else he might ... well, he might run amok."

"Run amok, huh?" Farley said, grinning wryly. "So why don't we take him outside into the sun and see what happens?"

Tad said, "I wouldn't recommend that."

"Come, come," Farley said, clapping his hands for emphasis. "We can bind him to the megaliths on the grounds. Just so he doesn't 'run amok.' "

The students laughed again. Tad seemed to have no choice. He maneuvered the push-cart on which Dennis stood outside, into the sun. Mr. Farley and Tad tied Dennis's arms to a pair of the runic pillars that were scattered across the grounds of Blackloch like strange stunted tree trunks. He seemed to take great pleasure in hamming it up for the students—tiptoeing around the inert demon, binding its arms in a mincing burlesque of fright. The students snickered and laughed, but it was clear to Tad that most of them thought Farley was pouring it on a little thick. On the other hand, if this is what it took to prove that Dennis was truly a flesh and blood Tattletail, then so be it.

"So here we are," Farley said in his rich and mellifluous voice. "Just you, me, your classmates, and your demon. Are you ready to confess, or shall we waste more of everyone's time?"

Tad was feeling the pressure of being the subject of attention. Dennis seemed to be feeling it, too, because he appeared to be sweating buckets.

The Bolo Jumping Spider had come out with the students and hopped onto one of the pillars to which Dennis had been tied. Now it leaped onto the wide, football-shaped head of the demon and made as if to scamper down its quickly thawing body. It was skittering across Dennis's chest when the demon regained its *savoir-faire* and plucked the spider up in one enormous hand and deposited it in his mouth.

"Gross out!" cried a red-haired girl named Tart Williams. In her hands was something that looked like an octopus spliced with a Brillo pad.

Dennis let out a thunderous growl that heralded the fleshy explosion of another four limbs that sprung out of his sides. His voice degenerated into a loud insectile buzzing that sounded

to Tad like the hum of high-tension wires cranked up to a deafening volume.

Despite Mr. Farley's shortcomings in the personality department, he was no coward. He leapt between Dennis and the students, picking up one of the ropes that had bound the demon's hands, and pulled it so hard the cords in his neck stood out.

"Down! Down! Hie!"

He jerked the rope, but it might as well have been tied to an ocean liner. Dennis gave a jerk of his own and Mr. Farley was suddenly airborne, waving his arms over his head in a manner that appeared as burlesque as his show of tying up the demon.

Tad watched as he landed in a crumpled heap, and thought: *If I don't get expelled for this it'll be a miracle.*

Joey Lawson, the kid who had trained his were-cat to fetch sticks, was standing a few feet away from Dennis, staring at the demon with an expression that could have been total amazement or paralyzing terror. Hexxy hissed at the demon, leaped out of Joey's arms, and bolted into the Avebury Woods.

"Joey!" Tad called. *"Get out of there!"*

Joey turned to Tad, dropped the sticks in his hand, and ran screaming after Hexxy. Into the woods.

The woods.

The wood.

Tad ran over and picked up one of Joey's sticks. Dennis had managed to free his other arm, and was now looking at the kids running helter-skelter across the school grounds. *Fast food*, Tad thought crazily. He had to hurry before this really did turn into a bloodbath.

He gripped the stick tightly and raised it high over his head. *"Dennis! Over here, boy!"*

Whatever metamorphosis the demon had undergone, it still recognised the voice of its master. Its eyes (there were eight of them now) regarded Tad with alacrity.

"Open wide!"

Dennis opened his mouth; Tad threw the stick. It tumbled through the air, end over end, and even before it had left his hand, Tad knew he had thrown too high. It went over Dennis's still-changing head, missing his mouth completely . . . *and landed in one of the demon's extra hands.*

He stuffed it into his mouth and swallowed it without fanfare.

Tad tossed the rest of the sticks and Dennis ate them as well. By the time Mr. Farley had regained consciousness, Dennis had

devoured three of the trees on the edge of the woods and was halfway through his fourth.

Farley thanked Tad for saving his life and the life of Tad's classmates. Then he disqualified Dennis for eating one of the other contestants. First prize went to Tart Williams and Nilo, her oven-cleaning octopod. Tad didn't mind much. Mr. Farley had helped him to see the positive side of not being expelled from Blackloch for bringing a dangerous demon onto its grounds. Tad saw it very well.

His parents let him keep the Tattletail. Tad didn't tell them about the incident at the talent show, only that he had lost; he suspected it was their feeling sorry for him that prompted them to let him keep the demon.

Tad kept Dennis on a wood diet—*All that you can chop*, his father told him brightly—and he soon developed a smooth oaken coat. Once a week Tad polished him with Pledge.

His dad no longer complained about the smell.



IAN ROGERS is a writer, artist, and photographer. His short fiction has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Cemetery Dance*, *All Hallows*, and *On Spec*. He has stories coming out in two best-of collections, one in *Can'tLit: Fearless Fiction* from Broken Pencil Magazine (ECW Press) and another in *Best New Tales of the Apocalypse* (Permuted Press). Later this year, Burning Effigy Press will be publishing Ian's longest story to date, a chapbook called *Temporary Monsters*. Ian lives with his wife Kathryn in Peterborough, Ontario. For more information, please visit him at www.ianrogers.ca.



PINHOLES IN BLACK MUSLIN

SIMON STRANTZAS

STEWART LOOKED UP at the night sky, at the single northern star around which everything rotated. Whenever he felt uncomfortable, Polaris was the one place to which he knew he could always turn, the one constant in his life.

But to stargaze was not why he had travelled four hours northward from Toronto. Philip had dragged him along on a weekend getaway. Stewart had initially resisted, not because he did not know Philip well, but because he had long ago realised that though he had lost many friends over the course of his life he had done little to gain any. Perhaps, he thought, it would do him some good to be in the company of people rather than stars. Perhaps he might learn to forge new bonds and replace those that had long since broken.

He sat around the campfire while the others talked and laughed, and wondered how he could infiltrate their connection. It was as though there was a thick wall protecting them from him, but in that wall there was a tiny hole between the bricks, just large enough to see through and observe the warm life existing beyond. Even the sound of the loons on Lake Tyson, and the crickets in the grass around him, seemed distant, as though they too were beyond that great barrier.

"Aren't you going to eat something?" Philip asked, and Stewart looked at the fire and the others surrounding it. No one else was turned his way, yet he could feel them watching, deciding what to make of him.

"I guess so," he said, and picked up the long skewer he'd been issued and went to the cooler. Inside, a package of meat floated on a sea of ice and water, beer cans bobbing around it.

"Hey! Pass me one of those," Daniel said, and his windbreaker rustled as he held out his hand. Stewart reached into the frigid water and retrieved the can for Philip's friend. "Thanks . . . Stewart, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"So, Stewart, how do you know Phil again?"

"We work together. At the bookstore."

"He works in the Science department," Philip added. "It's the section right next to mine."

"Oh yeah? Wow. I failed science class, myself."

Stewart put on a smile and nodded. He had no idea how to respond. Should he ask what Daniel did for a living now? Was that the right thing to say?

Before he decided, Daniel was speaking to his sister again. About what, Stewart had no idea, so he returned to his seat and fed the sausage for which he had no desire into the flames.

It was hard for him, having an interest in something no one knew much about, and being so disinterested in anything else. It made small talk difficult for him. He didn't understand the mechanics of it. Philip made it look easy, which might have been the reason he and Stewart had formed any sort of connection—Philip did all the work. It was a marvel sometimes to behold him, speaking to the bookstore customers as though they each were important to him, listening to their stories with what appeared to be genuine interest. Stewart's own rare attempts felt stilted and awkward, and he worried his face betrayed his disingenuousness. How much easier the stars were, with their predictability and their silence. That far up north, he had seen lights he had never seen before—not past the blinding glow of the city—and he wished he could have spent time there alone with only his telescope and astral charts.

It was interesting, though, in a way, to be there with others, when the rest of civilization was so far away. If he thought about it, he could almost imagine they were the last life of earth, just six people on an empty planet. He wondered what would happen if he were to indeed pretend that. Would he then find it easier to

interact with them? To befriend them? He had to do something, because as it stood he had nothing left in his life but the sky.

"You're pretty quiet," said Claire, Daniel's sister. Stewart had trouble looking at her. "What are you staring at?"

He stammered. "The constellations. I'm trying to find Cygnus. I can't usually see it when I'm in Toronto."

The whole group looked up.

"Which one is it?"

"It's that cluster of stars, obviously," Trevor said, and Stewart tried to modulate his voice to keep it sounding friendly.

"Actually, that's not it. It's the one that looks like a giant cross." He looked at Trevor for a reaction. The man said nothing, but looked bored by the answer. His girlfriend though, did not. Annie looked fascinated, an effect intensified by her blonde curls being lit so brightly by the fire.

"I'm amazed we can see it," she said. "There's so much pollution in the air it's a wonder the sky isn't permanently covered with smog."

"That's why we have a hole in the ozone layer." Trevor smirked at his own joke.

"Actually, there isn't really a hole," Stewart said, but even as he spoke he wished he hadn't. No one could possibly care about what he had to say. "The layer is thinning, but not completely gone yet."

"Yet?" asked Philip.

"Give it time," Claire said. "Pretty soon, there's going to be nothing left alive on this planet."

"Who needs ozone anyway?" Trevor's laugh was interrupted by Annie's punch.

"It protects us from the universe, you jerk!"

For the first time that night, Stewart's smile was genuine.

Still, as the evening wore on, he didn't find making friends of the people any easier. They were so unlike him, so gregarious and full of life, and as they progressively became drunker, he felt increasingly alone.

Stewart heard the fire hiss as it began to burn out, and the breeze he had barely noticed before became suddenly chilling. Annie wrapped Trevor's arm around her and squealed. Stewart caught Claire's eyes roll.

"We should get inside," Trevor said. Somewhere over the lake there was the distant sound of thunder. A loon cried once in the darkness beyond them, and then went silent.

Trevor's cottage appeared smaller once the lights were turned on, its two bedrooms squeezed together along the western wall.

"Are you sure you and Stewart don't mind sleeping out here on the couches?" Annie asked. Philip waved his hand.

"I've slept in plenty of worse places, with plenty of worse people."

Stewart could think of nothing to add.

"We'll switch tomorrow," Claire said. "Dan and I can sleep out here and you two can get the beds. Stewart shouldn't be forced to stay on the couch *both* nights." She looked at him as she spoke, and he was keenly aware of how warm his face had become.

After everyone turned in, Stewart lay awake in the darkness. The windows were open, their curtains pushed aside, and he could see the tiny points of light that made up the Milky Way. There was no noise but that hiss he had earlier thought had come from the fire. He wondered what animal made that noise, and why it was the only animal he could hear.

He was unsure if or when he had fallen asleep under the blanket of darkness, but he awoke at some point in the night with the strange sensation of being watched, as though eyes he could not see were surrounding him. He tried to convince himself it was not true, but he could not dismiss it. Then, he heard the floorboards creak. He sat up, his throat so dry he could barely speak in a whisper.

"Who's there?"

There were more footsteps, now less cautious. Stewart shrank before he was seen.

"It's Trevor," a voice whispered back, but in the darkness Stewart could not be sure whose it was. "Who's that? Philip?"

"No. It's Stewart." He wondered if the name would mean anything.

"Sorry, buddy. Did I wake you?"

"No," he lied, then struggled for what to say next. "I don't sleep very well outside my own bed."

"Yeah, that whistling is keeping me up, too." What whistling? Stewart thought. "I'm going down to the lake, in case anyone else wakes up."

"Okay, I guess."

There was a heavy sigh, though Stewart could not be sure if it came from Trevor or the sleeping Philip, and a moment later there was the sound of the door opening. A faint rectangle of

stars appeared in the nothingness. Then, Trevor's body filled the hole, and the room fell dark once again.

When Stewart next awoke there was light, but it came from a clouded sky, and he could not tell for a moment just how early or late it was. His face felt swollen, his eyes sticky, and for the briefest moment the anxiety of being so far from home was intense.

Philip was still asleep on the other side of the room, and the doors to both bedrooms were closed. Stewart recalled his encounter with Trevor in the darkness, and wondered if it had been a dream of his sleep-deprived mind—there was no way to be sure. He checked his watch. It was just past ten.

He always hated the morning, hated knowing the stars were out there, up in the sky, but too hidden to see. In his apartment in Toronto, he would have spent the night looking at those heavenly bodies, tracking their course on his map, then sleeping-in the next day. At the cottage, he could not keep that schedule—he had to follow that of the others, and as a consequence he found himself with nothing to do but listen to the others sleeping.

It all felt eerily still. The sounds that should have been so clear during the day were muted, as though everything but he were submerged beneath the murky water of Lake Tyson, and all he could hear were its waves lapping the shore. He shuddered in the stillness, and felt its oppressing weight. Perhaps everyone's dreams were seeping into the air, accumulating to form clouds overhead that erased the stars from the sky.

The first of the others to wake was Daniel, but the sound of him opening his bedroom door roused Philip as well. The former appeared no different than he had the night before. Philip, however, looked as though he'd been beaten by his dreams, and his face looked as Stewart felt.

"What time is it?" he asked, the last word becoming the beginning of his yawn.

"It's half past ten."

"Christ! I wanted to get out on the lake before it got too warm. Do you think we should wake the others?"

"No, let them sleep," Daniel said. "Trevor will get angry if we interrupt him."

"Um—I think he's already gone."

"Gone where?"

Stewart shrugged.

"Probably for a swim," Daniel said. "That's all he could talk about on the way here. Should we go down, boys? We can leave a note for the girls to join us when they wake up."

"Sounds good."

The three men walked down the tree-covered hill toward the lake. It looked much different in the daytime, and Stewart could scarcely believe it was the same lake they had spent hours beside the night before. The remnants of the campfire were still there, right where he remembered, but everything else seemed wrong. The lake was rougher, and there was an electrical smell in the air like that after a thunderstorm. Wind was shaking the trees, and he thought for a moment he could hear the whistling Trevor had mentioned in the night.

"It's quiet this morning," Philip said. "And cloudy. I can't even see where the sun is."

Stewart looked up and Philip was right. Not having anything in the sky extended the sense of being trapped in a timeless limbo. Daniel, though, seemed to be adapting.

"You can still feel the heat," he said. "Do you guys see Trevor anywhere?"

Stewart looked but saw nothing on the empty beach except the canoe that was tied-down between two trees, just beyond the fire-pit. From somewhere above there came a strange hum, like an engine running far away, though its intensity wavered. At times it was so faint he wasn't sure he was still hearing it and not just the memory of it.

"I don't even see any footprints," Daniel said. "Stewart, was it still raining when Trevor left?"

"Um . . ." he stalled, trying to remember the night before, but every second it took increased his nervousness, until he couldn't speak words at all. Philip intervened.

"Look at the ripples in the sand." He pointed. "What *does* that?"

"I don't know," Stewart said, and he did not. There was only so much he knew about the earth sciences, and even then only how it related to astronomy. What he *did* know was the patterns in the sand had left him uneasy for a reason he could not fathom. He watched the sand creep across the beach under strong gusts of wind. It made the water roar, yet behind it that same hiss, that same whistling, continued, though now loud enough he was *sure* it was there.

"Can you guys hear that?"

Philip looked back quizzically, but Daniel seemed too distracted.

"I'm sure Trevor's just taking a walk. Last time we were up here, he spent half a day walking around in the woods. Right

now, I'm more worried about getting that boat in the water. I don't know how much longer the weather is going to hold out, boys. Stewart, you want to go on the water, right?"

"Okay. Sure." Should he have said more?

"That's the spirit, I suppose." Daniel chuckled. "Philip, help me flip the canoe over. It looks like some sand got into it during the storm." Philip grabbed the other end while Stewart watched, and the two shook the small boat. Sand fell out, and was blown across the beach.

The canoe did not appear large enough to hold three people at once, but Stewart said nothing. He could only assume Daniel and Philip knew what they were doing, as he understood virtually nothing of the world of camping and cottage living. So many others he encountered spoke that outdoors language though, and it was not the first time he felt excluded by his ignorance.

Perhaps he could learn it, if he tried harder to understand.

"Do we . . . um . . . don't we need oars or something?"

"Actually, we need paddles. Oars get locked into the side of a boat." Philip made circular motions with his hands, mimicking rowing. "But you're right. Where are the paddles?"

"They can't be far." He started kicking the sand around where he stood. "Maybe they're buried? Split up, boys, and help me look."

The three walked away from each other, Daniel into the trees behind, Philip and Stewart on the sand. It didn't take long for them to find something.

"Stewart, come here and look at this," Philip said.

He was standing over a dark shape, about ten feet or so from the water. Stewart approached.

"What is it?"

"I think it's a towel."

It looked like it had been in the water for ages. It was covered in dark dead algae, and its balled shape suggested it was wrapped around something small, about the size of a cantaloupe. He could not bear the thought of touching it to see what was inside.

"It must have washed up on shore."

"But it's so far from the water."

"Hey, I found them!" Daniel's voice carried from the trees. Philip looked at Stewart with a moment of concern, then forced a smile and clapped him on the shoulder. "Let's go!"

He ran to Daniel while Stewart rubbed his bruised shoulder. Somewhere above there was a wide field of stars hidden behind the blanket of clouds.

Philip and Daniel came across the sand, canoe held above their heads. They looked excited, and Stewart couldn't help but feel infected by it.

"You'll love this, Stewart. Last time we were up here, I wanted to spend the whole day on this thing. Okay, ready Phil? We'll flip it on three." He counted off the numbers, and then they flipped the canoe over and placed it on the edge of the water. "Okay, we'll push it out and then—"

Someone behind them was shouting. Stewart could barely hear it over the waves in the lake. The three of them waited and listened. The shout came again. He saw a shadow move among the trees at the top of the hill. Stewart squinted, but could not tell who it was.

"Hang on, boys. I'll be back in a second."

"If you're not back in five, I'm taking him out without you."

Daniel smiled broadly, then turned and trotted off, stumbling up the hill and into the trees. Philip watched him go, and then turned back to Stewart with a worried look on his face.

"What's wrong?"

"Hm? Oh, nothing. Help me carry this boat out. We aren't *really* going to wait for him."

They each took a side and waded into the lake. It was colder than Stewart had expected, and murkier. He supposed he was used to the water from the municipal taps.

"Okay, put it down. Now, get in while I hold it." Stewart climbed in awkwardly. When he did, water shot up in a small jet from the bottom of the craft.

"Damn it!" Philip said, and Stewart looked down at the water streaming in through the tiny hole, filling the otherwise empty boat. "Come on, we aren't going anywhere. Let's carry this thing back and go see where the hell everyone is."

Stewart got out cautiously and the two of them carried the boat back to where they'd found it. Philip tied it down again, and then they began to walk back up the hill towards the cottage.

"I wonder if Trevor's back, yet," Philip said as they climbed.

Stewart said nothing.

At the top of the hill, Daniel and Claire stood talking. They both turned, and then looked disappointed when Stewart and

Philip emerged from the trees. It hurt to see, especially from Claire. Then, she spoke, and Stewart did not know *what* to feel.

"Annie's gone."

"She and Trevor probably went off somewhere," Daniel said, rolling his eyes. "You know what they're like."

"I wonder how we missed Trevor," Philip said. "How did he get past us?"

"I didn't see him, either," she said. "Annie was still in bed when I left to take a shower. When I got back, she was gone."

Daniel did not seem concerned. "I've been telling her; I'm sure they're going to show up later, all full of smiles."

Something about it did not seem right, but Stewart couldn't put his finger on what was wrong. Perhaps it was the lingering smell of ozone in the air, or maybe the feel of the sand underfoot though they were so far from the beach. Or, was it that damned noise? The sound of wind rushing past? Surely *it* was the cause of all the strange things he'd heard.

"Let's go inside. It looks like it's going to rain any minute. Trevor and Annie can take care of themselves."

But Stewart didn't join them. Instead, he sat on the deck of the cottage for the next few hours beneath a sky that grew murkier with each moment and watched the trees for sign of Trevor and Annie. He could hear the other three inside as they spoke, though the words seemed distant. Even the sound of the wildlife had diminished, and he wondered why he could not hear any birds with so many trees around him. Any indication of the world beyond the cottage had gone, leaving an oppressive cloud-filled void in its wake. But he could see a break in that cover, a small hole in the sky through which light shone. That had to be some kind of hope, didn't it? Something to indicate things were going to be okay? Even the rushing sound of the wind picking up could not take that from him.

Claire's sudden appearance at his side startled him. He felt clumsy, and fought his body's urge to flee.

"What are you looking at?"

"Oh, um, the sky, I suppose. Just at the clouds."

She looked up and he saw for a moment the spot where her long neck touched her chest.

"Phil tells me you're into astrology."

"Astronomy," he said, and she laughed.

"That bugger. I *knew* he was lying to me."

Stewart smiled as well, and struggled for words, but she did the work for him.

"Do you think there are other people up there? Like us?"

"You mean like aliens?"

"I suppose so," she shrugged.

"No. Not really."

"Why?"

He took a breath and held it while he considered lying to her.

"In order for life to have formed on earth, there first had to be hundreds of millions of protein molecules shaped the right way. Do you follow me so far?"

She nodded.

"Given the size of Earth, though, do you know how long it would take for a *single one* of these to appear? Roughly, ten to the two hundred and forty-third power billions of years. Not only is that older than Earth, it's older than the whole universe. The odds of it happening *twice* are too astronomical for me to imagine."

"So, you think we're alone?"

Stewart hesitated.

"Go on. You can tell me."

"I think there's nothing out there but cold darkness. Nothing but an endless vacuum, and it's only by a freak chance we're alive to know it."

"Do you think it's jealous of us?"

Words caught in Stewart's mouth. Claire laughed again and touched his arm. "It's okay. I'm messing with you!"

Philip and Daniel emerged then, wondering what the laughter was about. Claire just looked at Stewart and smiled. "He just told me a joke."

Stewart felt strange inside, as though a wall were crumbling.

"Well, maybe he can tell us later. Right now, I'm getting worried about Trevor and Annie."

"I still think they're okay," Daniel said. Philip shot him a look. "Well, I *do*," he murmured.

"They've been gone too long, and that sky isn't getting any better."

"There's a hole," Stewart said, but when he looked up it was gone.

"Do you really think something's happened?" Claire asked.

"I think we should go look for them."

"But we don't know where they went."

"We'll find them. I don't want to wait until it's too dark to see. When it's no longer safe."

The wind had cooled in the last few moments, and Stewart rubbed his arms. Then, he was outside himself, watching as

he stood there on the deck of a summer cottage, surrounded by people who were joking with him, preparing to step off on a walk through trees and beaches. How far he was from the bookstore, from his field-guides and telescope. He felt a million miles away from his regular life, and he could almost hear it spiralling away. He wanted to reach out, but did not know if he wanted to catch it or push it away.

"I think maybe we should go now," Stewart said, ignoring his doubts. Then, stronger, "We should go now."

"You boys are wasting your time."

Claire put her hand on her brother's shoulder. "Don't be long," she said, and Stewart tried to smile.

The two men made their way down to the beach, then up again through the trees surrounding the cottage, yet they found no sign of Trevor or Annie. It was as though the couple had lifted both feet from the ground and vanished. Neither Stewart nor Philip spoke much as they walked, the sound of the forest preparing for the storm making it difficult to be heard. The animals *must* have known it was coming, for at no point did Stewart see a single hint of wildlife. It was as though they had all gone, and what was left was less a forest and more the *representation* of a forest—as though he and Philip were walking through one of the displays he saw so often in the department store windows along Queen Street on his way to work.

The wind returned with strength beyond anything Stewart had ever experienced, moving through the trees and throwing branches up into the air. The two of them stopped as grains of sand flew like tiny missiles into their faces, and Stewart closed his eyes to protect them. The sound the wind made was terrible—like a scream that would never end. Stewart's heart raced with the noise, and then he reached out for Philip to assure himself that he too would not disappear.

When the wind died down, Stewart slowly opened his eyes. Philip was rubbing his own, and looking ahead in the near dark.

"We should turn back," he said, though it was clear he did not want to do so. "It's six o'clock, but it looks more like eleven."

"Maybe Trevor and Annie made it back."

"Maybe," Philip said.

The two men made their way back through the woods, moving quickly to avoid the rain they were sure was coming. Through the canopy, Stewart could see the hole in the clouds had reformed, and beyond it a star shone brightly. For a moment, he

thought it was Polaris, but its position in the sky was wrong. He looked down when he realised Philip had stopped. He was pointing, and at first Stewart saw nothing.

Then, something up ahead moved.

Was it Trevor or Annie? he wondered. Just before Philip called out, Stewart knew it was neither.

“Claire? What are you doing out here?”

“I don’t know,” she stammered, visibly upset. She looked as though she were about to fall, and Philip ran to hold her up. Stewart was ashamed of his own inability to act. “I was inside, and then I thought I heard you two coming back. I went outside to check on you, and then there was this sandstorm or something. I think it cut my face,” she said, and Stewart could see the tiny drops of blood that had formed there, like a lattice of wounds. “I couldn’t move—I could barely breathe. Then, I went back inside—”

Claire burst into tears, and the sound filled Stewart with dread. He did not want to hear the rest.

“I went inside and he was gone. Daniel was gone!”

Philip held her, and tried to reassure her with calm words, but as she continued to sob he turned and looked at Stewart with confused terror. Stewart did not doubt he looked the same.

The cottage door was open when they returned. Stepping inside, the first thing Stewart noticed was the sand—the floor was covered with it, as were the counters and the furniture. The windows were wide open, and the sheer drapes hanging before them waved wildly. Philip closed each in turn, excluding all but the loudest howls of the heavy winds. Claire’s sobbing had lessened, and Stewart led her to the couch while Philip checked each bedroom. When he returned, he looked at Stewart and silently shook his head. “Don’t worry, Claire. I’m sure he’s just gone looking for the others.”

She sniffled. “What’s going on? Where *is* everybody?”

“I don’t know.”

No one spoke. The only sound was of the outside world spinning around them. The air felt heavy, weighing down as though they were under water. Stewart went to the window and looked at the dark world. The sky was filled with clouds, and they all seemed to swirl around that tiny patch of empty sky in which hung that tiny light. Was it Sirius, perhaps? Could he somehow be mistaken about where it should be? The trees below swayed wildly, their dark shadows like dancers against the night, trying to call down some ancient god.

Then, the unearthly howl returned and grew louder, as though a dam had broken, and something large and vast was rushing towards them. The walls of the cottage shook, and the windows rattled as though they were about to break. Then something rained down upon the roof, striking so hard Stewart thought it would break apart. He put his arms around Claire, as did Philip, trying to protect each other from whatever was trying to get in. The storm continued to push at the windows and at the door, but somehow the small cottage stayed standing, and eventually the wind and sand that had raged like a river eased. Claire slowly lifted her tear-swollen face and looked at Stewart.

"I want to go home," she said. He would have kissed her if he were not so afraid.

"But the others—"

"The others aren't coming back," Philip stood, and brushed the sand off his clothes. "We can't stay. We need to go before it's too late."

There were no arguments. They packed their belongings quickly, doing their best to ignore the whistling howl as it built again in the background.

Philip led them out of the house and toward his car parked a few metres away, while Stewart watched the horizon closely, hoping for some warning. The wind coursed around him, and he could feel its pull, but he held tight to Claire, sheltering her under his arm. When they reached the car, Stewart froze in disbelief. The car was buried to its doors in a drift of sand, like some relic from the past.

"Come on!" Philip said, and was kneeling, digging the drift away with his hands. He worked with a crazed frenzy, and when she saw him, Claire joined in the effort. Stewart continued to watch the sky, watch the dark clouds swirling overhead around that one empty space that framed the universe beyond. He had to squint to keep the sand and the wind from blinding him, but the stars he saw there bore no resemblance to anything he knew.

"Okay! Let's go!" Stewart barely heard Philip's words over the din, but the car door was open, its interior light insignificant in the dark of the storm. Philip and Claire were already inside, and Stewart got in. When the door closed, the pressure in his head eased somewhat.

"We'll come back in the morning. Maybe the others will be back at the cottage by then." Philip did not sound confident,

but Stewart and Claire nodded, and Stewart tried to convince himself he agreed.

Philip turned the ignition key and the engine revved to life, but only for a brief instant before it sputtered out. He turned the key again and there was the awful screech of metal against metal. "What's wrong?" Claire said, an hysterical edge on her voice. Stewart and Philip looked at each other, and then Philip silently pulled a release beneath his dashboard and stepped out of the car. The wind blew his hair wild as he lifted the hood, and Stewart watched Philip's ten fingers appear over the top of the metal slab. Then they flexed. Philip disappeared behind the hood as Stewart looked at the strange cloud coming towards them. Then, Philip slammed the hood back into place and climbed back inside the car. For a moment, all he did was stare at that same cloud.

Then he turned.

"The engine has seized. It's full of sand."

The three of them sat quietly; wind pushed against the car. Outside, there was a sound so deep Stewart was not sure at first it was there, but he felt the vibrations in his chest. The entire car rattled.

"What are we going to do?" Claire asked.

Before he could answer, the air became denser, as though under a great pressure, and through the window Stewart saw the tree branches pulled upward. Sand moved wildly through the air and pounded into the glass of the car windows. In the darkness, the debris looked like a hand with too many fingers, long tendrils waving. They closed around Philip's car, and then the vehicle started to rock back and forth in its grip.

"It's going to roll us over," Philip said. "We have to get back inside the cottage!"

"It's too far!" Claire screamed, her hands pressed against the sides of the car to keep from falling.

"We can't stay here," he said. "We can't stay here!"

Stewart tried to open his door but the wind pressed it shut. He kicked it repeatedly until it opened, and the wailing sound filled his head. Claire reached her hands out and Stewart and Philip yanked her free just before the door slammed shut with a crunch and the entire vehicle buckled as though squeezed. Philip screamed something Stewart could not hear, and then the three of them ran towards the cottage without looking back at what chased at their heels.

They were inside the cottage in seconds, its door closed and Philip and Stewart's weight pressed against it. The noise was behind them, racing towards the door. The walls of the cottage shook worse than before—the door shaking until splinters fell, the glass beginning to crack in the panes. Stewart was sure this time it would all break apart around him. He closed his eyes tight, and did not open them until Philip said the words Stewart feared most: "Where's Claire?"

Philip slowly slid up until his face was at the small window in the door, and then Stewart followed. Through the broken glass and into the windstorm, he saw Claire struggling, being dragged by unseen forces. Then, she fell backwards and was yanked into the dense shadows of the towering trees. The air filled with debris rising into the sky.

"She's gone towards the lake!"

Why, Stewart thought, does everyone keep leaving?

"We have to go help her!"

Stewart opened the door and it flung inward, smashing into his knee. He crumpled, but the gale did not stop. By the time Stewart could move, Philip was gone, racing towards the trees and the beach beyond.

"Wait!" Stewart called out, and then started to give limped chase after the last of his friends.

The blasts of wind and the airborne debris made it hard to see, but Stewart continued toward the spot from which he had seen Claire disappear, following as close behind Philip as he could manage. The dark clouds overhead spun faster and faster, all being drawn into the small hole in the sky. He could feel the pull even from the ground, that sense of lightness to his step as though he weighed less the further he went. The pull was almost unbearable, and as long streams of sand crossed in front of him like clenching fingers, he recoiled, allowing Philip to travel further into the darkness. Then, as Stewart watched horrified, Philip was lifted off the ground as though he were nothing.

At first, he did not seem to notice; his legs continued working, trying to push him faster and further. Then, he began to tumble, and realised something was wrong. Stewart tried to run to him, but the swirling winds prevented anything more than a few steps, and by then Philip was far out of reach. He began to spin in the air, as though caught in a funnel, and he circled faster and faster in ever tightening circles, moving towards the one bright spot in the sky. Over the roar of the storm, Stewart

heard something, but did not know if it was Philip screaming, or something far worse.

There followed a cracking noise, deep and thunderous, and one by one he saw the trees along the ground ripped free of their roots, pulled upward by an impossible force. Beyond that, from the lake, a giant funnel of water rose into the sky and it too circled the small opening in the clouds. Stewart turned away, unable to watch what was happening, and ran. He ran as fast as he could, but even as he did so, he could feel the cold hunger of the universe behind him, peering through the hole it had made in the barriers protecting the world. It was insatiable, wanting its fill of life, though Stewart understood it would not be enough. It would *never* be enough to fill the vast emptiness. He ran as hard as he could, driven by the knowledge that if he stopped it would be the last thing he ever did. He ran despite the pain that shot through his knee with each step. He ran until his breath tasted of blood, and his body was screaming for relief. He ran until his knee cried out for him to stop, and then until it decided to stop on its own, throwing him forward.

But he never hit the ground. Instead, he ascended slowly towards the stars to meet his friends once more.



SIMON STRANTZAS is the author of two collections of nightmares and weirdness, *Beneath the Surface* (from Humdrumming Ltd., 2008) and the recently published *Cold to the Touch* (from Tartarus Press, 2009). His work has been selected multiple times for *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror* (ed. Stephen Jones) and is due shortly in the pages of *Cemetery Dance* and *Postscripts*. In 2009, his work was nominated for the British Fantasy Award. He still lives in Toronto, Canada. He invites you to visit him at www.strantz.com.