Hell Itself

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What We Do Here:

There's a bit of advice we give to writers: "Keep submitting your story until hell itself won't have it." The unfortunate truth is that there are more humans out there producing great short stories than there are venues to publish them.

And, thus, *Hell Itself* was born.

Most editors will tell you that they reject far more good material than they accept. A great story may simply not be a good fit for the current issue. Or it could be great but the wrong choice for the publication's tone and style. It might be about something that the venue's core readers wouldn't like to read about. Or there may just not be enough slots in the magazine to take everything the editor loved.

Well, sometimes those great stories can rack up a lot of rejections, leaving the author feeling like hell itself won't take it.

We wanted to let go of those reasons why great stories don't get published. We don't have a fixed number of stories we can take, a proscribed tone or style for the magazine, or a core readership we need to keep happy. If it's a great story that no one else would take, we want it.

Welcome to *Hell Itself*.

https://hellitself.com

Lightning Cellar Publications

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Reaping Whirlwinds

by Deborah L. Davitt

The rusted metal roof on the Larson barn had been patched with lighter silver rectangles so often that it had the appearance of a rumpled quilt. Every building on the farm had some of that unkempt look — the fence posts had sunk in different directions, bending the barbed wire. The house leaned towards the sunset, its white paint peeling away.

The fields, however, looked as neat and trim, wheat stalks glowing gold in the last dim light of day. Down the road, Ava Larson could see the Carter farm — and Tom Carter climbing into the seat of his combine. She frowned. Tom had been working the fields at night lately. A bad idea — you couldn't see the rows in the dark, and you risked injury. When she'd asked Betsy about it, Betsy had fobbed her off with how Tom's eyes bothered him in daylight. Cataracts.

But Ava had known Betsy for six decades, and Betsy was a rotten liar. *Doesn't take after her grandma at all — I remember Solfrid's tall tales about flapping her apron at tornadoes to shoo them away. Everyone laughed.*

Ava remembered laughter fondly, like a childhood toy. What spare time they had these days, her husband Eric spent listening to the radio — usually college football on an AM station. His hands limp in his lap, his eyes unseeing. As if he could *will* himself into some other life.

Ava finished the milking and headed back to the house, smelling the sweet odor of the cows' feed and wondering where the time had gone.

And how they'd lost so much.

Ava paused at the door, staring at the wheat waving in the field across the narrow, unpaved road. *Time was, that was ours. Passed down from Eric's father and grandfather. All it took was a single hailstorm that took our crop. The bank was all over us, and then the corporation bought us out. Three hundred acres gone, and then planted in SantAgra genetically-modified wheat.* Her lips thinned. *I've got no problem with "genetically modifying." Everything humanity's eaten since we started breeding plants and learned to graft has been 'modified.' It's the <u>company</u> I've got a beef with.*

To keep off the creeping sense of loneliness in the house, she turned on the kitchen radio. "This is 970 AM, KBUL all-talk out of Billings," the announcer's voice crackled. "Our top story tonight is the disappearance of another area farmer. James Johansen is in his fifties and was considering selling his land to agricultural giant, SantAgra—"

Ava twisted the dial to a music station. She hated listening to the news. "Next they'll be saying that someone killed him to keep him from selling," she muttered, working scratch-biscuit dough. "But he's the fourth— no, fifth man this year to go missing." Her lips turned down, pulling at her cheeks. *They'll find him in his truck in a week, and they'll rule it suicide, and it won't be anyone's fault at all. Certainly not SantAgra's.*

She'd gotten into the habit of talking to herself as she worked. As little as Eric spoke now, there were days when her own voice was the only one she heard.

She patted the biscuits into rounds, her touch gentle. "Of course, it *is* SantAgra's fault. Always pushing. But that's not something you can jail them for. Murder by inches."

As she worked, Ava looked down at her hands. Her wedding ring hung loosely around one bony finger, but the red and swollen knuckle above made it as impossible to remove as the roots of an old tree stump. *That's us. Stuck here. Can't move on, and don't even want to, because what else is there for people like us? There's just the fight — wresting crops out of unforgiving land in the face of nature's scorn and corporate greed. Taking artisanal cheeses and breads to the farmers' market once a month in Billings isn't helping to make ends meet.*

It made her laugh bitterly when she'd go into town to buy groceries — a single pack of English muffins cost just north of two bucks, when a bushel of wheat — some *sixty pounds* of potential flour — sold for a mere eight bucks off the farm. None of that store markup ever seemed to make its way back here.

By eight, dinner sat cold on the table, untouched. "Eric, where are you?" Ava muttered. He'd taken a job in town at the feed store to help with the bills, but he should've been home by now.

She checked the gun safe and relaxed marginally when she found their pistol inside. The antidepressants that were eating into their budget weren't helping Eric much. At first, he'd perked up. Almost been his old self, smiling and talking to her more often. And then he'd slipped back down into the well of his own mind. Lost in the endless battle, with SantAgra pushing in on every front that nature herself wasn't fighting. "Don't do anything stupid, Eric," she muttered. "Don't drive off the road. Don't be another '*disappearance*.'"

None of the men who'd disappeared had been located yet. Just their trucks, in ditches. And Ava couldn't even whisper the fears that knowledge evoked. *Maybe some of them saw something they shouldn't. Maybe they're out there under the prairie grass, waiting to be found. Or cemented into the foundation of the shiny new SantAgra building being built downtown.*

Easy to dismiss these thoughts as paranoia in daylight. Much harder at night, when the rain drummed on the roof and the house

creaked emptily around her, settling with the temperature change.

To banish her dark thoughts, Ava lifted the phone off the wall — their son had talked about getting them a fancy cell phone, but they couldn't handle another monthly bill — and called her neighbors. "Hey, Betsy. You seen Eric?" Determinedly casual.

"Saw his truck in town today. At that Dr. Martin's clinic." Hint of disapproval in Betsy's wonderfully prosaic, normalvoice. "He's a *psychiatrist*, right?"

They'd known each other since they were kids. Ava could read the nuances of Betsy's voice, and the scorn she heard also held undertones of concern and fear. The scorn was just a way to express the fear. To push the outsider away. "Yeah. Eric's been seeing him. Helps him to have someone to talk about things."

"Well, I suppose we can't all just rely on our families for that sort of thing," Betsy allowed. Unspoken words hovered behind the ones actually voiced: *We're self-reliant up here. If someone's having a problem — particularly a man! — we're supposed to keep it to ourselves. If you <u>have</u> to talk to someone about it, why not your spouse?*

And hard on the heels of that, Betsy added sweetly, "I know you're proud of your son, Brandt, off being a lawyer in Billings, but you'd think he'd come home to visit you two more often."

Ava silently rolled her eyes at the ceiling and counted to ten. When Betsy unstoppered her store of honeyed venom, you *could* confront her about it — and make it worse — or you could wait for it to pass, like the weather. So she didn't reply as Betsy chattered on, "Why, our three live just down the road. Such a help they still are." A hesitation, a false note in her voice. "Tom and I couldn't get on without them—"

"Yeah, and all three of them working for SantAgra now, I hear," Ava pointed out with false cheer of her own. "Guess it pays well." *Pays well to work for someone else, on land that used to belong to you. Like we're all turning back into serfs, and the company our feudal lord.* A mental image of the SantAgra building in town, like a castle of old, towering silver over the dilapidated buildings of Main Street, with their corrugated, patchwork walls.

"Well, at least they're close by," Betsy finally replied, as if that were the biggest victory imaginable.

The town just kept shrinking. Even the church had closed its doors two years ago. Too few congregants to stay open, and most of them over sixty. Most of the children moved away as soon as they turned eighteen. Heading for college, or jobs in Billings or Missoula. And Eric often muttered that they were right to leave.

The silence had gone on too long. Ava cast about for something to say that would keep things on an even keel between her and her neighbors. It wasn't that any of them were standoffish. It just seemed

like they all had less and less to say to each other. Each of them curling in on themselves like gnarled old trees. "Say, I was thinking of something today," Ava said, the words racing out of her. "Remember when we were working in town, and we rode in to pick up our paychecks?"

A sudden burst of laughter from Betsy, who sounded as relieved as Ava to have something else to talk about. "Yes! We couldn't have been more than sixteen—"

"And I gave you my reins so I could go inside—"

"And someone set off firecrackers, and both horses bolted!"

"Didn't mine slam into that truck—"

"She did! Moved it *sideways*, and then she ran straight into that gas pump and took it clean off its stand. Then she got caught in that barbed wire fence."

Ava winced at the recollection. The horse had needed stitches. She'd turned over her entire paycheck to her parents, and the next one after that, to cover the insurance deductible. "To this day I wish I knew who'd set off those damn sparklers—"

"My grandma always said those weren't firecrackers."

"Oh? What'd she say they were — Native American spirits?*"* Ava didn't feel in the mood for one of old Solfrid's tall tales.

"*Landvættir* cracking rocks, she said." Betsy didn't sound enthusiastic, however. "Come up from the Black Hills because the summer was too warm for them down there."

"Uh-huh." Ava rolled her eyes. "What were those again? Old-country spirits?"

"*Wights*, or elves. Dwarves, brownies, whatever. I know, sounds all cutesy. Kid's stuff. But in the old stories, they were guardians of the land that could rise up and protect it from invaders, draining the life out of them."

"Too bad we don't have any of those. We've got *invaders* aplenty."

The joke hung there for a moment. "Yeah," Betsy replied, her voice tight. "Too bad."

At least the conversation had set things right between them. Reassured Betsy that despite Eric seeing a psychiatrist, the Larsons were still the same people she'd always known. One of *us,* not one of *them*.

Now Ava spotted headlights through the rain. Her shoulders eased. "Hey, I think I see Eric. I've got to go. Thanks, Betsy." She meant it. Sometimes, you just needed to hear another human voice, to keep the crazy at bay.

She met Eric at the door. "Sorry," he mumbled as he limped in, removing his hat. His plaid shirt was worn but clean — he kept an apron over it at the feed store — but his jeans were filthy to the knee. The limp itself was a souvenir from a combine accident thirty years

before. “Got talking with Ted Mason. SantAgra is suing him.”

Ava gave him space. Let him slump at the table, seeing how his face had thinned into a series of vertical lines, bracketing his mouth spreading along his cheeks in wrinkles that looked like ripples in a pond. Sometimes she could still see in him the boy she’d loved. But most of the time, he seemed like some gray, diluted ghost of himself. He rarely spoke, and she usually feared to break the silence, lest the anger that boiled under the depression explode out with cataclysmic force.

She waited for him to fuel up, eating the cold food without interest. And then asked, “Ted’s the seed-washer, yeah? How can they be suing him?”

A seed-washer collected wheat from his own property, or used wheat brought to him by neighbors, and cleaned it of chaff and debris with industrial equipment. And then turned it back around and used it as seed, so that a farmer didn’t have to waste money *buying* seed the next year from a supplier.

Eric stared at the table. “They claim he’s got SantAgra strain in his seed stock, and no one can sell that but them. ‘Cause they’ve got a patent.”

Ava frowned. “No one’s gone into their fields to steal—” Realization hit. “The crops cross-pollinated. Damn.” She paused. “That could happen to *us*.”

A vision crawled through her, of their wheat somehow being infected, stained. Of it growing up between the bones of dead men, feeding on their blood. *Stop that. He’s home, you don’t usually get the creeping horrors when he’s here…*

But he wasn’t really *here*. Not really. His eyes locked on the window past her ear, and he muttered just one word in reply: “Yep.”

“But that’s stupid! You can’t control how the wind blows pollen, or what path the bees take between fields. The only thing they could do to prevent that is to not have anyone else plant wheat for twenty miles around them—” She shut her mouth with a click.

Eric’s head lifted, his pale eyes filled with fury. “Guess that’s what they want. All of us just *gone*.”

Her lips quivered. “Well, they don’t get to tell us what to do.”

“Yeah, they kind of do.” The fury leached from his eyes, replaced by the blank, inwards-turned expression she hated to see.

“Has … has Ted noticed anything *off* about the seeds he’s washed?” Tremulous hope in her voice. “If they’re genuinely putting something off in there … using cancer-causing chemicals in the soil—”

“What, you think he has a lab out behind the washer?” Eric’s voice became a lash, scathing and cold. “Think he’s picked up a degree in genetics, or can identify glyphosate by smell all of a sudden?”

Ava raised her hands, trying to slow the sudden, explosive torrent of words. "I— I just thought it could be something. Something we could use against them—" *There has to be a reason men have gone missing. Something they know. Something that might let us take it all back—*

His voice dulled. "There's nothing we can do." A pause. "You know how many days I go to bed, and wonder what difference it makes, if I wake up or not in the morning?"

Her throat closed. "It matters to *me.*"

He never seemed to hear those protestations. Spoken softly or shouted, her love wasn't enough reason for him to live, and it killed something inside her every time he failed to respond. And she withered again as he looked away, muttering, "Some days, the only thing that keeps me going is spite, Ava. It ain't healthy."

A rush of words. Struggling to pull him back from the abyss. "We can call Brandt. Get some use out of his law degree. Get him to help Ted — countersuit or something—" *Maybe then you won't feel so helpless. So hopeless. Fight back, damn it!*

"Won't make any difference. SantAgra's got a lot more lawyers."

He stood, patted her on the shoulder — oh, that brief human moment of contact, so rare these days! — and shuffled towards the bedroom.

Ava put her face in her hands, trying not to cry. It would do no good. So she stood and washed the dishes — by hand, because electricity was expensive. Turned off the lights, and went to bed. By the time she got between the sheets, Eric was already asleep.

She listened to the drumming of rain on the roof, her eyes locked on the dark ceiling, anger welling up within her. *He walks around like a ghost. If there were any justice in the universe, if tales like old Solfrid's actually were true ... then all the ghosts of the farmers who've lived here for the past hundred years would rise up. Find the SantAgra executives and give them heart attacks. Those land-spirits would rise up and suck the life out of their crops, their workers. Except ghosts and spirits don't travel in any of the old stories. Bound to their lands. And I bet SantAgra's CEO lives somewhere in New York or Los Angeles.* One of the big cities that sneered at the "fly-over" states and didn't care where the food came from, so long as it never ran out.

She had a mental image of the rest of the country sometimes as a gaping maw. A bottomless, black pit, lined with teeth, chewing and chewing, devouring everything that they gave, everything that they had, and giving nothing back.

Maybe the food should run out. For a day. A week. A month. To make them understand where it comes from.

But she chastised herself for the thought. It felt *irresponsible*. If people like them didn't tend the crops, harvest them, the whole world would break down. Every time they sent off grain to the market, it had

always felt to her like the moment when her family sat down at the table and bit into her hot, fresh bread: *I made this. I give this part of myself to you, in love.*

Except no one in the cities valued that love, and companies like SantAgra were out to steal it all.

She drifted off at last, dreaming of dark, billowing spirits rising up from between stalks of golden wheat. Of white bones in the black prairie earth, and red blood running in the furrows.

A loud *blam* woke her. She lurched upright in bed, her head pounding. Her first thought was *gun*, and then she reminded herself that it was probably a transformer blowing — but when she turned to touch the bed beside her, Eric's warm form wasn't there to reassure her.

She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and flicked on the bedside lamp. Padded through the old house, which creaked like her own bones, and caught the sound of the screen door flapping rhythmically open and closed in the breeze.

A prowler? Ava thought of going back to the bedroom for the pistol, but figured that Eric would've grabbed it already. Instead, she took a frying pan from the counter and made her way to the door. Stood there, feeling her heart race, painful and tight in a way that made her worry about cardiac arrest, and peered out onto the rain-slick wood of the porch.

Saw Eric, sitting slumped in the old rocker, head bowed and unmoving. "Honey?" she whispered. Not wanting to think the thought. "Sweetie?"

And then she saw the dark stain across his shirt, and the dull metal of the gun that had fallen between his feet, and she screamed.

It took nearly twenty minutes before the sobbing passed, the blank incomprehension, the denial, the pleading with him in broken sentences *not to have done this*, not to have left her alone, not to have abandoned her. Then a kind of numbness, a fog, rolled in to replace it, and she dully made her way back indoors. Looked at the phone. *I should ... call someone. The police? I mean, he did it to himself. Do I need to call someone?*

Another belated thought hit her. *Oh, god, how am I supposed to run this place without him?*

She slumped at the table, feeling cold into her bones. Then picked up the phone and dialed. Got the answering machine. "Betsy? I'm sorry … I know it's late. Please pick up. Eric's…" A sudden, overwhelming rush of anger. Rage. *Gone and left me alone to handle everything! Left me to have to sell out to SantAngra! Left me to handle the bills and the funeral, left me alone, God, Eric, why did you have to go and do this?*

How was it that love wasn't enough? It was supposed to be. All the songs and stories said so.

And yet, it wasn't.

A click on the line. "Ava?" Betsy's voice, suddenly much more concerned than it had been a few scant hours ago. "What's wrong?"

"Eric's shot himself." The words sounded unbelievable. Tasted wrong in her mouth. "He's dead. I don't know what to do."

"You stay right there."

Ludicrous words. "Where would I go?"

"Hush. We'll be right there."

Ava put her head on the table. Grateful for once that Betsy, with all her officiousness, was close at hand. Grateful that there was someone *else* to pick up this intolerable burden, if only for a moment.

Twenty minutes later, the rain let up, and another pickup nosed its way down the drive. Betsy slipped from the driver's side, her frame dwarfed by the battered red-and-white Ford F-150, and then ran to put her arms around Ava. "I'm so sorry, Ava. You have any idea what set him off?"

Ava stumbled through a litany of woes. Accounts close to overdrawn. No end to the work, *ever*. No appreciation for what they did. Antidepressants that didn't work, or left him feeling like a zombie when they did. Their son having left the farm for the city. No way to pass on what they had. And SantAgra threatening to sue Ted Mason—"I guess he might've thought that we'd be next. I mean, we're right up against their fields, too." *Their fields. Which used to be ours.* Her voice sounded leaden as she added, "God damn it, Eric."

Betsy sat down with her, right on the steps, and chafed her hands to get warmth back into them. "You're mad at him right now?"

Ava let her head fall down. "I guess."

"That's going to go on for a while. I know." A world of weariness in Betsy's voice now.

"How?"

"'Cause Tom killed himself last December." Empty voice.

Ava's head snapped up. "This isn't the time to joke—"

"I'm not. Shrink in town said that it happens a lot close to the holidays." A snort. "What does he know, anyway?"

Ava blinked repeatedly. "Betsy! I— I didn't know — I'm so sorry—" And then the words spoken earlier this evening, about how the kids were such a comfort to her and to Tom. The false note there — a lie, yes, but … "But I've seen him! Out in the fields! I mean, not often, and he's been working at night… " She stared at Betsy in confusion. "The kids are picking up the slack, after working all day, or something?" Her head and heart were a muddle of despair and confusion. "Betsy, we've known each forever. Why didn't you *tell* me? Why hasn't there been a funeral?" *Is this like … a fraud thing? Collecting on his disability payments … no, that doesn't sound like Betsy…*

Betsy's voice tightened. "I don't know how it all happens. Hap-

pened."

"What are you talking about?"

Betsy stood, pulling Ava to her feet. Took her to the passenger side of the truck, and made an imperative spinning motion to whoever was still seated inside. Ava's mouth fell open as the window rolled down, revealing the pale face of Tom Carter.

Except, this wasn't a Tom Carter that Ava recognized. His gray hair remained concealed by a tractor cap; his shirt remained clean plaid. But his shoulders slumped, his mouth hung slack, and his eyes, as he slowly turned his head towards her, were blank.

"For Christ's sake," Ava muttered uneasily, pulling away. "What … you said he'd killed himself—"

"He put the barrel of the shotgun in his mouth out in the barn. The hat covers up a lot." Betsy's voice sounded detached. Emotionless. "I… found him out there." For an instant, her tone wavered. "I shook him and shook him and *shook* him. I told him that I needed him back. And then he … opened his eyes." Betty's voice dropped to a whisper. "It's not really him. Just … magic holding his body up."

Ava stared at her. "Magic isn't real."

Betsy raised her chin. Half-proud, half-ashamed. "Grandma Solfrid told me about the *landvættir.* And more. Stop looking at me like that. I *know* how it sounds." She cleared her throat. "They're not how we've been taught to think about them. Cleaned up for children and Disney. For the sterile, shiny modern world."

Ava's mouth fell open, but she turned and stared at Tom's gray face. She wanted to deny *everything*, but it was difficult with him looking at her with glassy, empty eyes. "The SantAgra world."

"Yeah."

"So … saying that it's true, that they exist … what are they, then? Is one of the *landvættir …. inside* him?"

Betsy's face crumpled. "I don't know. But I see them at sunset, sometimes. Shadows billowing up—"

"—from between the rows of wheat. From the blood in the earth." The words fell from her, a shadow of her dream. She didn't want to believe. But here, in the dark… she did.

"And the bones in the ground." Just a whisper in the dark. A cold hand took hers, and they held hands like when they'd been children. "You've seen them, too."

"Maybe. What *are* they? Where do they come from?"

"I really don't know. But I wonder if… if they're *us*. If you live generation after generation on the same ground, giving of yourself to the land, and the land nourishing you. Maybe you become it, and it becomes you." Betsy's voice sounded singsong. "All the atoms from the soil passing through into the wheat, from the wheat into the bread,

and the bread becomes flesh—"

"Like *communion?"*

"Yeah. Maybe."

Ava shivered. Forced herself to look at Tom in the car, staring at them lifelessly. "So he's a *zombie*?"

"No. A *draugr.* Someone who died with unfinished business. Well, he was finished, but the business wasn't, and neither was I." Betsy sniffled. "I needed *hands*, Ava. Needed someone else to run the farm with me. He's…" She closed her eyes. "The real Tom's gone. But I called his name and I begged, and his body woke up." Her voice tightened. "There's not much difference between before and now. He still sits in the kitchen after working, and I turn on the radio so he can listen to the game. If there's anything *really* left of him … I hope it makes him happy."

"He's … not really in there?" Ava felt a wrench inside her heart.

She felt Betsy's headshake. "If there is … maybe he's one of the shadows out there at sunset. I don't know what would make me feel better. It being *him* in there … or one of *them*."Ava shuddered. "So that's why he's working after dark."

"Yeah." Betsy exhaled. "So people don't come over and try to talk to him. And, well. Sunlight makes the rot go faster." She sounded sick.

Ava poked Tom's arm. It was cool to the touch and oddly flaccid, making her recoil. She could remember him chasing her and Betsy around the playground when they were eight. He'd fallen and cried, and they'd laughed as children did, because he'd deserved it for chasing them.

Flickers of memory, fleeting before her eyes. Baseball games, sitting next to Betsy in the stands. Tom had been a catcher, Eric their team's starting pitcher. Young and confident. Ready to take on the world.

Their first double-date, back in '74, all four of them crammed into a tiny booth at the diner where she and Betsy had worked. Laughing and eating ice cream and listening to something sappy by John Denver on the radio — what had it been … *Sunshine on my Shoulders.* Eric wrapping an arm around her shoulders and whispering that she was his sunshine. That she made the whole world better. *But love isn't enough, I wasn't enough, I failed him, somehow or he failed me, or …* "Oh, god, Betsy. You want me to do that to *Eric?* I mean, I don't even know *how*—"

"It's about blood. And need. And love. You have enough of all three and … they come. Whether you want them to or not, I guess." Betsy's voice wavered. "It would mean that you could keep working this place. And what's the other option? Sell out to SantAgra? Go live in a retirement home in Billings and slowly turn into a potted plant? Living for the days that Brandt comes to visit. Except, of course, he won't."

Brutal words. Devastating. Except … they were true. Ava licked her lips. Couldn't turn to look at where Eric still slumped in the chair. *What kind of a choice is that? I can surrender, or I can keep fighting. Keep trying to win crops out of the land and raise a great big middle finger to the company that pushed my husband to his death. The company that took the light out of my life.* "There's always a catch in the old stories, Betsy. What is it?"

A pause. "They need to eat. I… did mention the blood part, right?"

"*They?*" Ava repeated blankly. "Are there others?" Then, her heart hammering against her ribs, she yelped, "All the disappearances! Elizabeth Anne Nilsson Carter! How many other *draugr* are there?"

"I don't know! Some of the disappeared, yeah, I've visited their families, and there they are. Just like Tom. Sitting at their kitchen tables, deadalive. But the rest?" A pause. "I don't know." She shuddered. "People keep dying. Or killing themselves. Newspaper in Billings called it an *epidemic of depression* that's being ignored by the rest of the country."

That vision of the cities and the coasts as a chewing maw flashed back into Ava's mind. "Of course they ignore it. They care more that their coffee beans are *ethically-sourced* than about paying their own farmers here at home a living wage."

"I know, Ava. Christ, how I know."

Ava put a hand over her face. "Is there anyone left in the county who's *alive?*" Another shift of her inner vision, showing her farmhouses peopled solely by shadows and the dead. Fields worked by the dead in service of the living…

Betsy made a shushing sound. "Don't be overdramatic. We're alive. Missy Baker. Edith Sorenson." Misery in her voice now, clear and true. "But yeah, as I said, there's a price. They need feeding. A gift of human blood mixed with their native soil, once a week. My kids … they know. They donate in shifts with me. But you… " A wave to encompass the emptiness of the farm. The fact that Brandt hadn't visited in a year. "We could spell you a bit, give a little blood now and again—"

Ava's eyes drifted to the SantAgra land over the fence from her own. To where their silos towered like sleeping giants. To where their corporate office building stood in town, cloaked by darkness and distance. "That'd be kind of you," she whispered. "But maybe we could find some *other* donors."

"Ava." Betsy's voice turned stern. "My kids work for SantAgra. So do a lot of other folks who've had no other choice—"

"I know. I wasn't saying to make us *serfs* the donors." Ava lifted her face, feeling her expression harden into stone. "I meant our corporate overlords. The SantAgra management building in town, for instance."

"We can't—"

"They've been eating *us* alive all this time." *They chew and chew and spit us out—*

"We've got to keep this quiet, Ava."

Ava closed her eyes. "For now, yeah. But what happens when *all* of us are dead, Betsy? When every last one of us gives up and becomes … this?"

Betsy's face tautened. "I don't know. I'm not giving up. And neither should you."

Ava closed her eyes."If Eric wakes up … I'll give him my blood. Though I don't know how…" She closed her eyes, her throat going tight. "I don't know how I'm going to *look* at him." *He's not even there, it's not him anymore, but I can't…*

"You get used to it." Betsy's voice roughened. "You can get used to anything. But the question might be … if you really want him back. If you need him back."

Her friend stood and walked away. Giving her the time to think about what she wanted. What she *needed*.

Ava went indoors. Found a red ball cap, and, trying not to cry, slid it over the ruin of her husband's head. Looked for a clean shirt, one that wasn't covered in … everything. Tried to dress him.

But she couldn't. She sat on the steps. Betsy approached and took over, giving her shoulder a squeeze.

In a dazed mumble, sitting on the splintering stairs, Ava whispered, "Eric, if your ghost's around, I hope you can forgive me. 'Cause I'm going to *fight*. I'm going to remind everyone out there that while the earth comes into us through the wheat and through the bread, transubstantiated … that the bread we give *them* is our flesh. Made of our toil, our sweat, our blood. And that while we've given it to them in love, there's no love left in us for them. They've eaten it all. And while we loved each other … it's not enough. There has to be more. There has to be *fidelity*. No running off ahead without me."

Her eyes opened, fixed on the SantAgra fields. An image formed in her mind — an army of farmers walking out of the golden fields, skeletal and pale. Some carrying rusted old scythes left by their great-grandparents. Flanked by shadows rising up from the earth like tornadoes, a thousand faces blurring into one. Marching towards the gaping maws of the cities.

She didn't want that apocalyptic vision. Denied it. Knew that it was born of grief and rage. But part of her yearned for it. Could see her own shadow sliding over the dark earth beside Eric's, her shambling body walking beside his.

Ava covered her face. *God, don't let it come to pass. But if it does … let them know that what they've sowed, they'll also reap.*

"Come back," she whispered, tears caught and channeled by the

lines on her face, spreading like bitter irrigation. Falling to the black mud at her feet. “Come back, Eric, I need you. I can’t do it alone.”

Betsy’s hand touched her shoulder, and Ava turned her head in time to see Eric’s body sit up. Even in the dim light filtering through the screen door, she knew it wasn’t her husband’s soul behind those eyes. Something else filled him now. Something older, and far more inimical. She jabbed her hand on one of the wooden splinters of the porch, letting the blood well up, and then picked up a clod of earth, softened by the rain and her own tears. Let it mix with her blood, and then lifted her hand towards whatever now dwelled in her husband’s flesh.

He licked it from her palm like a horse, blood and earth staining his face. And then stood there, waiting patiently. Waiting for her instructions. Ava licked her lips. “Well, don’t just stand there,” she told Eric. “We’ve got work to do.”

And her eyes lifted past the fence-line once more, towards SantAgra’s land.

Deborah L. Davitt tells us that this story was rejected at least 30 times, which makes it exactly the sort of piece we wanted to introduce you to with Hell Itself: a beautiful story that just isn’t what anyone else publishes. For more about her poetry and prose, see www.deborahldavitt.com.

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The Tell-Tale Pump

by Christopher R Boltz

There was a small thud as Aileen's other red low-heeled pump dropped on top of its mate. Edgar checked his watch, 11:30 PM. He shut the small trunk, and looked around his cramped shed. Edgar was a planner and he had planned this excellently, even if he did say so himself, which he wouldn't. Aileen would have said that once, but not anymore.

Edgar dug the hole in the earthen floor of his shed Sunday night. And now it was Tuesday. Last night he carried out the empty trunk and placed it in the hole. Since efficiency was important, he filled in as much of the hole as he could so that once the trunk was packed, once Aileen was out of his life, it would be short work to restore his shed so that no one would ever know.

Aileen had told all of her friends at the bar that she was going away. She wouldn't be missed there for a while. Edgar shut the trunk and started shoveling the dirt back on top. He was fairly certain that his neighbors in the cul-de-sac would suspect nothing. Aileen only left and arrived at Edgar's house late at night. Once she had encountered Mrs. Next-Door-But-One- On-The-South-Side, but that conversation had been brief. Mrs. Next-Door asked Edgar about Aileen once but that was months ago.

He was a bit more concerned about the family on the east side. Edgar's backyard, well really a side yard, held his shed, and his shed was right by the fence. Edgar liked to spend time in his shed tinkering and experimenting with his hobbies. He poked one eye through the curtain and saw Mr. East through the chain link fence. Edgar was sure he wasn't there earlier. Mr. East was shirtless, swigging a beer and gently bopping his head to the music through his giant headphones. Edgar enjoyed the eye candy. Hairy dad-bods were his thing. Plus Mr. East seemed like a perfectly fine guy, once you allowed for the fact that he was a hetro construction worker from Alabama or something.

Edgar patted the dirt down. His watch said 12:30. He pulled the artificial grass rug across the recently turned earth and sat on his stool. That was it. Aileen was out of his life forever. Edgar was thrilled there was a full moon and a cloudless sky. Last summer he had installed a skylight in the shed and that was providing enough light that he didn't need to use the electric lights. It was better that way. A fitting end to Aileen.

Edgar wasn't sure how long he was lost in his thoughts when he heard the tick-tick-tick of a ten-speed bike slowing down and the crunch of someone quietly walking on the gravel. He chanced another look through the curtains. Mr. East was gone. Good. That meant that Poe, Mr. East's only son, would get to keep his secret one more night. Edgar heard Poe's text message alert coming through the kid's open window.

Ka-Thump.

Edgar looked around. What was that sound? Maybe a ripe apple falling off a tree. Maybe it was just his imagination.

Edgar heard the click of the bike lock and looked out the window again. A teenage boy was clambering over Mr. East's locked gate. Poe's head poked out of his bedroom window and whispered "Clemm." Edgar saw that Clemm, for that must have been the clamberer's name, was removing his football jersey. The sweat glistened off Clemm's chest. Poe reached through the window and kissed Clemm. Edgar had observed the sneakings in and sneakings out of Poe's room for a few months. He had guessed at the story, but since they usually waited until they were both inside for any affection, he wasn't previously certain.

Ka-Thump.

Ka-Thump.

What the hell was that? It certainly wasn't a falling apple. Edgar carefully poked his nose out of the door. He saw nothing. He raced back to his window. Clemm had climbed in through Poe's window. Mr. East still seemed to be gone from his bench. Edgar carefully stepped out of the shed. It didn't look like anything was falling on the roof. Nothing seemed out of place. He stepped back into the shed. Maybe it was his nerves.

He worried about Poe. Poe seemed a nice kid: Played soccer, sold popcorn for the boy scouts. Nice kid. But when Mr. East found out what was going on… Parents can be so upset when their children challenge the parents' expectations. Mr. East was a nice enough neighbor, but he had had a NASCAR bumper sticker on his car.

It was just two weeks ago that Edgar attempted to introduce his own mother to Aileen. Edgar planned it so well. At least, he thought he had. Edgar was a planner. He had plan A, and if things went wrong Plan B. He was worried about his mother meeting Aileen. Edgar had written out plans A through Q. Edgar was sure that was enough contingencies.

Edgar was wrong.

Edgar had planned his mother's favorite food for luncheon. The house had been carefully vacuumed so there would be no cat hair. He even locked Raven, his cat, in the spare bedroom before his mother

arrived. Edgar filled his mother's glass with her favorite Amontillado port. It was old-fashioned even for his mother's generation, but everything at lunch had been prepared to his mother's exacting standards.

Edgar had extracted a promise from Aileen to be on her best behavior. Edgar understood that the sharp tongue, catty banter, and salty vocabulary which made Aileen so popular Lenore's Tavern would be the very things that would upset his prim mother. Aileen was in a simple black dress with a white lace collar. Edgar's mother should have loved that. The only concession made to Aileen's true character were those red low-heeled pumps. Those pumps.

Ka-Thump.

Ka-Thump.

That sound was coming from inside the shed. No, that's impossible. Edgar was tired. It was all in his mind. He should go into the house. Go to bed.

But something made him stay.

"Edgar what is the meaning of… of… of…" his mother cried. Aileen hadn't said a word. All she had done was walk into the dining room where Edgar's mother sat sipping her port alone.

There were a few seconds of silence.

And then…

Edgar's mother released a flood of words. Some loud, some soft, some angry, some sad, some tinged with tears, and others with stone cold fury. Edgar was instructed to get rid of Aileen. Mother demanded to know if Edgar had introduced Aileen to anyone else. Aileen was unacceptable. Aileen was a disgrace. Aileen was an embarrassment. Neither Edgar nor Aileen spoke. And Mother went on. And on. No son of hers and a… a… No. Not possible. And Mother continued. It was not up for debate.

And Mother left. Her food untouched. Most of her port untouched. And Edgar knew that was the end. He didn't have the strength to stand up to his mother, even for Aileen.

Ka Thump.

Ka Thump. Ka Thump.

That was inside the shed, no doubt about that. What the heck? Edgar moved the artificial grass rug. He felt the freshly turned earth. There was a vibration, a sound.

No, that was outside. Edgar peeked through the curtains. Mr. East was laying on the ground a few feet over from the bench staring at the sky. The sound came again. Not the thump, the other one. Mr. East sat up, removed his headphones, and pressed his illuminated touch screen.

"What's up L.J.? Awful late isn't it?" Mr. East said to the phone. "Yup, he arrived a few hours ago. He's perfectly safe." Edgar won-

dered what Mr. East was talking about. "In the hospital. No, I'll tell him. Your mother?"

Ka Thump.

Ka Thump.

Mr. East walked in the back door. Edgar heard a knock through Poe's open window.

Ka Thump. Ka Thump. Ka Thump.

Mr. East's voice called through a door "Clemm?"

Edgar heard a sudden intake of air from two teenage boys. Looking through his window into the window next door he saw the bedroom door open. The light from the hall was almost blinding. "Clemm."

"I'm sorry Dad, please…" Poe cried.

Ka Thump.

Ka Thump.

Ka Thump.

Ka Thump Ka Thump Ka Thump Ka Thump.

Mr. East may have been a construction worker, but he could have a kind note in his voice if he wanted. "It's ok son. Well, it's bad, but not this, it's just. Clemm, your dad just called."

"My Dad! You didn't tell him? Please, sir, I'll…"

Edgar could see Mr. East put a hand on Clemm's shoulder. "Your Dad has known for months. Me too. We love you, both of you."

Ka Thump

"But Clemm," Mr. East continued, "Your grandma fell. It looks bad. Your Dad says she is in the hospital, and they are going there. They want you back home to go along. Do you want me to drive you?"

Ka Thump

"No," Clemm croaked, "I've got my bike. My clothes"

"I'll go," Mr. East said. "Poe, come out to the back yard once you're decent." Mr. East turned to the door. "I'm guessing you need this." There was a small rustle, and the door shut.

"Are you OK?" Poe asked.

"Did your dad just throw me my jockstrap?" Clemm asked. This is the first time Edgar heard his voice as anything above a whisper.

"I love you."

"I love you too." Clemm said. "I guess I can use the front door?"

Ka Thump

Edgar's mind was spinning. Young love next door. Mr. East reacted well. A parent could love.

Ka Thump

Edgar grabbed the spade.

Ka Thump

The dirt was cleared. The lid was opened.

Aileen's clothes were out. Aileen's wig was on the work bench.

Edgar found the wig cap at the bottom of the trunk. The black dress with the lace collar? No. The gold lamé. Yes, it sparkles. Edgar fitted the wig cap over his messy hair.

"Dad, are you mad?" Poe's voice floated through the window.

"No. I love you." Mr. East said. "And Clemm's a nice boy."

"How long have you known?"

"Clemm's dad saw you sneak into his house one night. We just want you boys safe. And figured you'd tell us when you were good and ready."

Tap Tap.

Edgar slipped on the chest piece and pulled up the Spanx.

"Dad?"

"Shhhhhh… You're loved. Your mom and I just want you to be happy."

The lamé dress floated effortlessly over Edgar's body. He zipped up the back.

Tap Tap

"But," Mr. East said, "Now that the secret is out, I want Clemm using the front door. And to have dinner with your mother and I once in a while."

Tap Tap

Edgar was sure he just saw those red pumps move on their own, but that's impossible.

"And tomorrow," Mr. East said, "I want you to wash the scuff marks off my gate."

Edgar looked at the red pumps. "They don't go with this dress," he said.

A small squeak sounded as the cat door to the shed moved, and Raven hopped up on the work bench. The cat was quietly purring.

Edgar picked up the wig. Placed it on his head. Aileen looked back from the mirror. She was alive again. "You know, I'll decide what shoes to wear," Aileen told the cat, slipping into the darling, red pumps, "and these go with anything. Don't they, Kitty?"

This story is what we call a "Market Killer." It was solicited for an anthology called Fantasy is a Drag, and then the publisher cancelled the project. Christopher R Boltz mostly writes for and about theatre. He lives with a dog and four cats who have less fashion sense than Raven. He can be found at crboltz.bsky.social and www.setsandlights.com.

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Float

by Rachel Ashcraft

My ma says I did cartwheels in her uterus. Ever since then, I've been floating and free only between gaps of waiting. The desert makes you wait. Dries you out, cracks your skin and your lips. Keeps you for itself.

When John asks my first memory, I tell him it was underwater. I show him a photo of me, curly brown hair full of soap, big grinning cheeks, gums pink and toothless in my family's bathtub. I awoke here in this hazy bathtub water, suspended and free and weightless. In John's arms there was still a weight. I don't think he understood why I had to leave. There's a truth in the polaroid, an embryonic reconnection to what I was before or as I know now, would one day become.

In Arizona people have pools, but not my family. There is always a pool though in my memory. The house with the pool is haunted by too many eyes. A deer's glass eyes follow me from where it is mounted on the wall and a classmate's dad. A wiry man with a ponytail spits tobacco into a Styrofoam cup. He looks small to me in the middle of the room, all these dead things watching him.

I slip into the pool. My hands stretch out. My head is shoved under the water. I want to thrash, but my limbs stay calm. There is pressure against my head, little kid fingers in my hair. It's so blue and clear and quiet under here. I know this feeling. I grip at it. My fingers tingle, my nose feels numb. I open my mouth. I draw the water in, but I can't pull it into my lungs. I imagine gills in my throat, see it expel in jet streams out from me. My head breaks the surface. It's bright and loud. Water streams from my mouth.

"Don't do that," an adult admonishes. "She won't be able to breathe." The skin at my neck itches from the chlorine. It itches and itches and the teacher puts band-aids there to keep me from scratching. Under my nails are scales. I wipe them on my shirt and for most of my life, I think I dreamt it.

• • •

I'm a thing that came from the water. I belong here. Everyone else has forgotten, but I haven't. I swim out to meet the thrashing man and by the time I get to him, his movements are weak. I drag him to-

wards the shore. One arm over the other. My arms burn, I can barely see, the sunlight beating in my vision with my heart. But the water doesn't betray me, pushes us up onto the sand. This is where I met John. I closed my mouth over his and pushed air into his lungs and he coughed up Lake Michigan all over my legs. I saved his life. They write an article about me in the paper. I think it must have been a slow news day. Turns out we're the same age. For a while I think he was meant for me because he doesn't remember how he ended up in the water, almost as if he'd surfaced from below. I used to believe in signs like that, now I think he probably just hit his head.

• • •

In space I recapture that feeling. I've left John below as well as everyone else. There's solitude, my body magnified, and I'm made to listen to all the gears whirring, encased in my suit. The illusion of solidity comes apart. This air carried with us from earth that I am always tethered to passing through my lungs, the carbon dioxide filtered from the suit. I float secured for a moment; catch the stars out of the corners of my eyes through the open window of the shuttle. They burn a little brighter freed from the hazy atmosphere of earth. They've never been this clear. So few of us have seen a thing like this.

The lessened gravity on Mars buoys me and all around is red sand. I collect the soil and spend the next five years studying it.

• • •

Earth is more water now than it's ever been. I know it always and always will be my planet, but I don't tell this to anyone, not when people are being displaced, not when some choose to stay and their bodies wash out into the sea. I will die when this planet dies, I think, when it's obliterated, but not when there's still water.

We leave the planet for the final time and something shifts in me. My skin grows strange, shimmers in the dim light of the transport vehicle. We helped colonize mars. Forty percent of earth's population are now Martians. My hair is white, but behind my ears I can see the scales. There are nubs along my throat that flutter with each breath I take. On Mars we pull our water from the air, and I feel like I'm drowning.

I steal the ship, but can barely drive it. My webbed fingers slip over the controls. They pursue me for a while, but apparently decide to save their fuel. I slip into the water chamber and wait to return home. Arizona is no longer a desert, what used to be the Pacific Ocean

abuts it. I gasp at the rank air, smelling of fetid rotten things, and look at my own body as much an aberration as the rest of the planet. I slip into the tepid water and pull it in through my mouth, it bubbles up and around my head, and I dive deep. Everything that will die has died and no one returns home anymore. I think about them on the red desert of Mars. I wonder where John is. I crave the things in the water around me, the things left behind, because they thrive with their strange mutations and sometimes the brave ones come close and swim with me. I no longer look to the shore where my old ship rusts.

Rachel Ashcraft tells us that this story racked up at least 17 rejections before coming to us. Rachel is a librarian in the rural midwest of the US. She has short stories published in Grendel Press' More Than a Monster Anthology, Apex's Strange Locations, Even Cozier Cosmic, Malarkey Books and elsewhere. Follow her at rachiea.bsky.social.

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The Case of Kilts: A Colm Ramirez Mystery

by James Ipse

Most people think Fresno is about as fashionable as a pig in a hand-me-down flannel nightgown.

Actually, Fresno has contributed a surprising amount to the fashion scene. In fact, one of the leading designers of men's underwear is a local. Most Fresnans point to that as a way of denying the truth about Fresno fashion, which is that we're about as fashionable as a pig in a hand-me-down flannel nightgown.

Personally, I never paid attention to the local community of designers, models, and photographers panhandling on the internet. That was their world. Mine is the supernatural.

My name is Colm Ramirez, and it's my job to deal with it when supernatural things cross over into our world. And when it did, I found myself thrust into the fashion world.

November. The midday gloom cast a shadowless light over the alley as I rang the service-entrance bell of a seedy bar in a rough part of downtown, not far from where I live. I don't go to bars as a general rule — I'm only 19 — but this was work.

The door opened a crack and an enormous gangbanger with a Mohawk and a leather jacket peered out at me.

"I'm Colm Ramirez. I'm the new model." Undercover. Gotta love it. My client insisted. My most frequent client. I'd already exorcised poltergeists from her last two homes and tracked down a so-called "psychic" who had made off with a couple thousand dollars in cash he'd insisted he needed to "borrow" to cast a spell for her.

The gangbanger flashed a broad smile. He had gorgeous teeth. "Oh, hey, come on in. I'm Julio." He held out his hand for me to shake as he opened the door to admit me.

The room I'd been let into was a small storeroom, now taken over with five portable makeup stations — like T.V. trays with mirrors surrounded by lights trying to get cozy with the cases of napkins and straws — and a half dozen wheeled garment racks. The door to the lounge stood open, propped with a crushed Styrofoam cup, showing a half-installed runway cutting across the blue carpeting beyond.

So far nothing seemed to have a supernatural vibe to it.

My client, Lisa, poked her head in from the lounge. She's about

40, slightly round, and tends to dress in flowers and lace. That day she sported a frilly blouse with daffodils on it over a utilitarian dress skirt. She grew up in Clovis, our suburb to the East, and has the standard Clovis hairstyle of bangs with a bump on the top of her head. I've never quite understood that hairstyle. For a while there was a company in Clovis selling a product on television to help women create the look. Only available by calling 1-800-somethingorantoher. See if you can explain it. I can't.

"Ah, Colm, you're here, good," Lisa gushed. "Rahim, Colm's here!"

Rahim was a heavy Middle Eastern man with salt-and-pepper hair, moustache, and a personal style that seemed to have jumped the tracks somewhere between golf pro and circus clown. He swaggered into the storeroom from the lounge and flanked Julio, as both of them studied me up and down.

"Isn't he a bit thin for your stuff, Lisa?" Rahim asked.

"Hey, with every other male model in Fresno sick, I do what I can," Lisa said.

That's why I was here. The other models kept coming down with a mysterious illness, and Lisa didn't think it was natural.

"Tell you what," Julio said, "I'll let you have Ian if I can have Colm for the underwear show." It was only then that I realized that Julio *was* our famous underwear designer. He doesn't look the part.

"Works for me," Lisa said. "That good for you, Colm?"

Great. Just what I needed. Walking a runway in November in nothing but underwear. "Sure," I said, "whatever you need."

Julio and Rahim nodded to each other, and then Julio said, "Then let's get you measured."

• • •

The models arrived one by one as Lisa, Julio, and Rahim tried desperately to teach me how to walk on a runway. Turns out, there's more to it than just walking. I guess I should've realized that. I get snippy with people who think my job is easy — why I should I think modeling is easy?

"Spot your turn!" Lisa kept screaming at me.

I still don't know what that means.

A slightly chunky guy about my age came in through the storeroom, clinging to the doorjamb for support as he struggled for air. I didn't care how white he was normally — he clearly had no color in his face.

I jumped off the runway and jogged up to him. "Shit, you O.K., bro?"

He nodded, then shook his head.

"Ian?" Lisa said, walking up to him.

"I'm all right," the guy gasped. "Just… food poisoning."

Lisa shot me the look that told me that this was what the other models had. I closed my eyes and centered myself so I could turn on my supernatural senses.

Ian collapsed into my arms before I could do anything else.

• • •

Turns out one of the models — a tall and improbably thin redhead named Kris — is an E.M.T. in her real life, and she took over monitoring Ian almost as soon as he fell, improvising a bed for him on the catwalk.

I hovered nearby, acting like I was worried about my new best friend. "Is he going to be all right?"

"He'll be fine," Kris said. "He's the eighth guy to come down with this. We never did figure out what it is, but they've all got really low blood pressure, like they lost blood. You taken any drugs recently, Ian?"

Ian shook his head. "Claritin."

"Allergies," Kris explained to me, as if I didn't know.

"What else causes low blood pressure?" I asked.

"Age, usually," Kris said. "Heat stroke. Dehydration. Not usually a problem in November. Of course, you can self-induce it if you know how. Lots of Munchausen cases do that, because it makes them faint and causes people to make a fuss."

"But this is happening to several different guys. It's like they're being attacked. How would you do that?"

"I wouldn't," Kris said. "It's probably a virus. So no kissing him."

"Straight," Ian gasped.

"In that case, go away and let him rest," Kris said, flipping her hand at me.

Lisa sat in a booth in the far corner of the room. I slid onto the bench opposite her. "Is that what the rest of them were like?"

"Yes," Lisa said.

"Any other symptoms?" I asked.

"Headaches. They've all got headaches. Is it supernatural?"

There was a residual tingle around Ian, but it was impossible to tell if it had something to do with the illness or if he'd used a tarot deck or something recently. I shrugged. "Too early to tell. So who might want to sabotage the Fashion Series?"

Lisa scoffed. "We're not exactly a threat to Milan here."

"Well, if it's supernatural, it has to be someone with some sort of ability, so that narrows it down." I glanced over and noted that Rahim had taken over my spot grilling Kris on Ian's well-being. "Been pissing off any of the local ritual magicians?"

"Not that I know of."

"What about Rahim and Julio? It's weird that it's only hitting the

guys."

Lisa shrugged. "Can't speak for them. Julio's more hurt by it than I am. I mean, I have some ladies' stuff I can show, at least."

"What about Rahim?" I asked.

"Women's sleepwear," Lisa said.

"You the only designers in the shows?"

"Yes." Lisa fiddled with a saltshaker on the table. "The Thursday and Friday shows are the local boutiques showing stuff they sell, not really fashion shows. We're not in those. They're not showing lines, they're selling dresses."

"And what do the three of you get out of this?" I asked.

"Nothing really," Lisa said to the sky. "I show more as a courtesy to the organizer. We get maybe five or six local buyers and a handful of fashionistas. Honestly, we're a bit of a joke in the industry. If you want to be taken seriously, you need to get into Los Angeles or New York. That's what Julio does. Around here most of our tickets get sold to the models' families."

There was no way my family would be buying any tickets. The only thing worse than a gay son is a son who is a supernatural investigator. And the only thing worse than that is a gay son doing supernatural investigations in his underwear. Or, in this case, someone else's underwear.

"So where else do you show?"

"I do kilts and plaids, Colm," she said. "And I'm not really going to make a splash in Scotland. No, I've got a nice, little niche online. The Scottish revival community knows me. And, since I know you're going to ask, Rahim is mostly a subcontractor for department store house lines."

I hate cases where the guilty party doesn't walk up and announce what they're up to. Believe it or not, that's how most of my cases go. Something about the ability to work the supernatural makes people feel invincible. "Do you mind if I blow my cover to interview Julio and Rahim?"

"I'd rather if you kept it quiet," Lisa said. "Aren't you supposed to be good at this undercover thing?"

"My formal P.I. training never went that far." By "formal P.I. training" I meant quitting an internship program almost immediately after starting it.

She glared at me.

"Fine. I won't tell them what I'm up to. But if they decide I'm creepy, it's your fault."

• • •

"So, Colm, what do you do for a living?" Julio asked.

It was a simple question. Direct. Not out of line. But I couldn't

answer without blowing my cover.

Ian's mother had come to take him home, and the ladies were rehearsing the sleepwear show while I tried on Julio's underwear in the back room. This process involved me standing there, shivering, naked, as he fished around in a huge rollie bag for different cuts and colors for me to try on. He handed me a silver pair of sport briefs. "Oh, this and that," I said, slipping them on.

"That's a good cut," Julio said, "but now that I see it on you, your skin isn't as dark as I'd thought."

"Half Irish," I said.

"Let's try the blue."

I slipped off the underwear off and added it to the "reject" pile. "I work one night a week in a coffee house. My boss is a ritual magician."

"Really?" He seemed genuinely interested, even though he didn't look up from the rollie. "Never really got into that occult stuff myself. Here, try this one."

It was the same cut as the previous one, but blue with white trim. I had to admit, it was the most comfortable pair of underwear I'd ever worn. "Well, most people have friends who dabble," I said. "Or enemies." I really hoped I was being subtle.

He laughed. "Yes, that's a keeper." He started fishing out boxer briefs and comparing the colors to my skin.

Well, clearly that line of questioning was going nowhere. "So tell me about your business," I said. "What's it like working out of Fresno?"

"Oh, Fresno's great," he said, handing me a vibrant purple pair. "I get to put the 'Made in America' label on all my stuff, but the overhead's a lot lower than working in L.A. Put that in the 'keeper' pile, too, if it fits."

"What's the business like? I mean, is it as cutthroat as the T.V. says it is?"

He pulled out a handful of fly-front briefs — none of which seemed to be the standard white cotton — and began sorting. "Well, I don't get a lot of the personal drama," he said. "I think the whinier designers are scared of me. But the buyers don't buy clothes because they like you. They buy clothes because they can sell them. So I've always got to be on my toes."

"So, no one's poisoning male models to shut you down?"

He laughed again, his smile infecting his whole body. "Don't worry, I'm sure it's just a flu bug," he said, selecting the yellow pair for me. "I recommend Purell."

• • •

When it became clear that Rahim was going to be busy directing the

ladies until well after my meal break, I cut out to go home. Lisa had vanished a half hour before, a stack of papers under one arm and her laptop under the other.

I live in an old warehouse on H Street. As hot as it is in the summer, it's at least that cold in the winter. But as I entered the little brick building, the cold felt positively arctic.

That's never good.

I reached for the warding staff I keep by the light switch. It wasn't there. I flipped the light on instead.

The big, open room in the back of my warehouse looked like a tornado had passed through it. My weight bench lay on its back, free weights scattered across the concrete floor. My crash pad sat in a corner, scrunched up as if hiding its face behind its hands. The various weapons I keep displayed on the walls lay in rough piles on the floor. My warding staff leaned against one of the support columns, upside down, as if it had sailed, spinning, across the room and come to rest only when it wedged against the electrical conduit.

I crouched into a defensive stance and crept across the floor toward my warding staff. My whole body tingled reflexively as I crossed the threshold. Whatever had done this was supernatural, and it was still here.

Now, I know what you're thinking. But I don't work magick. And the various spells and stuff to protect a home are only so useful. Besides, it's rare for supernatural entities to come to my home. Keeping a warding staff by each door is usually plenty to turn them around before they enter. But those that do get past the warding staff tend to be nasty and tend to be grumpy at having had to deal with a warding staff.

I grabbed the staff, spinning it around upright. It's about six feet long and well-weighted, so it behaves a lot like a Japanese bo in a street fight, but also keeps away the various demons and monsters when used properly. "Who's there?" I called out, turning slowly.

The old offices in the front of the building serve as my apartment and official place of business. A shimmering creature emerged from the darkness there.

Demons are strange. They appear both completely tangible and real, and yet at the same time they're *not*there. Not see-through, like in the movies. Simultaneously there and not.

This one stood taller than me (which isn't unusual — I'm 5'2") with a catlike face and birdlike feet. It wore what I can only describe as a fleece skirt. It inclined its head to taste the air in my direction, revealing a set of fangs that would have made Dracula jealous.

"All right," I said. "What do you want?"

It cocked its head and narrowed its eyes.

With demons it's hard to know how intelligent they are. Some are dangerously smart. Some are just puppets of a higher intelligence. A lot of them don't speak English. "If you've got something to say, say it. Otherwise, move along."

Its feet lifted off the floor and it sailed towards me, fangs-first.

I swept with the warding staff. It roared like a lion and deflected toward the wall. Its body morphed, forming a sinuous tail that flapped behind it like a ribbon in the wind, and then the tail became the whole body, like a tadpole.

I turned to face it again. Demons are generally easy to defeat if you know what their weakness is. Problem was, I had no idea what sort I was looking at.

It flanked to the left and came after my ear. I ducked, waving the warding staff over my head. This time it smacked the staff with its tail. I struggled to hold on, but lost my balance. I slammed down onto the concrete. The demon came after my ear again.

Rolling, I got the warding staff between me and it. It backed off slightly.

Silver. In a number of pantheons silver is toxic to demons. One of my swords has a custom silver blade. I sprang to my feet and ran to the wall where it had been displayed.

The demon hit me from behind. My head jerked forward and I felt its teeth sink into my eardrum. Immediately, my head throbbed and I could literally feel the blood draining out of my body.

I spotted the jeweled hilt with the Celtic knot sticking out from under the shattered remains of my bamboo blowgun.

I hit myself on the head with the warding staff, and the creature let go. I dove for the sword. I came up with it still in its sheath.

The demon chuckled as it flitted around in front of me. I held out the warding staff with my left hand, sword in my right. The demon hovered in the air, flipping its tail and sizing me up. Carefully, I let the sheath slide to the floor.

The demon drew back immediately. Good. Whether it was scared of the silver or scared of the sword didn't matter. At least I had it on the defensive. I sidestepped away from the wall to give myself more range of motion, but the spilled free weights made the footing treacherous.

The demon charged again. I warded up with the staff, and then swept across with the sword.

The demon's head fell at my feet. Its body vanished in a puff of lightness. Its mouth snarled once more before it, too, faded from existence.

• • •

A quick phone call to my friend Will, the local expert on all things

demonic, told me it was probably an asakku that had attacked me. They're Mesopotamian blood-sucking demons associated with diseases of the brain. The standard way to defeat demons from those pantheons is, apparently, to trick them into giving away their powers in exchange for valuable gifts, and then double-crossing them and chopping off their heads. That works fine if you happen to speak one of the ancient Sumerian dialects. Brute force can be effective, too.

Asakku are part of a pantheon that nobody worships any more. And that made chatting with Rahim a priority, because people who call up a dead religion generally do so from their own cultural heritage.

I found him alone in the bar, sitting on the floor with a bunch of 3×5 index cards, each with a model's name on it, spread out in front of him. He was placing Post-it notes containing color-coded symbols on each of them in turn.

"Hey," I said, slipping in and sitting down on the runway. "How's it going?"

"I'd prefer if the lineup didn't keep changing," he said.

"Strange question for you." I studied his face. I'm not the best lie-detector out there, but hopefully he'd give something away with his reaction. "What do you know about asakku?"

He didn't look up from his cards. "I know you take a -8 penalty for ranged attacks against them. Makes your magic longbow useless, and if you send a bunch of them after a level-2 party, they don't let you be the Dungeon Master any more."

O.K., I'll admit, it was a week later before I got that one. I never got into roleplaying games. Both too much and too little like real life.

Rahim rearranged a bunch of his index cards and swapped around some of the Post-its.

"Huh?" I said at last. "No, I mean, like, the demons from mythology."

He looked up at me through his eyebrows. "You mean real world demons?"

"Sure."

He shrugged. "Not a lot. I was raised Muslim. We frown on fooling around with demons." He pounced suddenly, rearranging six Post-its with a dramatic flourish.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Trying to figure out the show order. Each Post-it is a different outfit. I've got to make sure each girl is wearing something that fits her, has time to change, and can actually get around the runway before she has to start taking it off."

His explanation, I had to admit, made a lot more sense than my first thought that it had been some bizarre New Age ritual. "Doesn't

just happen, huh?"

"Very little does," he said. "Except maybe entropy. Everything else requires a human hand in it."

• • •

I texted Lisa to tell her I had some information, and she invited me to come up to her house for dinner. She lives in a little Spanish-style house east of the 41 freeway that had seen better days. The house, not the freeway. The freeway's actually in great shape. One of the few things in Fresno that still is.

When I got there, the front door was open despite the cold, the security door shut but obviously not locked. Black smoke and a stream of obscenities came from the kitchen. I sometimes think the only reason Lisa isn't fatter than she is is because she's such a lousy cook. I knocked on the security door. "It's Colm!" I called out.

"Come in!" she screamed back from the kitchen. I stepped into the blasting heat from her wall furnace and locked the security door behind myself. Lisa's decorating style was, shall we say, eclectic, as if a discount importer had decided to use her walls as a backup showroom. She had masks from all over the world, furniture from at least five design movements, and paintings where the only common element was the floral theme. The house itself set off my supernatural-tingly sensation again, which was annoying since I had just exorcised it six months earlier. I looked around to see if I could spot a source.

A thick tile sat on her coffee table. It had been used for magick so many times it seemed to glow. As I approached it, I noticed the texture on it, which reminded me of chicken footprints. Belatedly, I realized it was Cuneiform. "Lisa, what have you been up to?" I asked.

"What?" She emerged from the kitchen, wearing a carbon-stained apron. "Oh, that! Found that in a second-hand shop. Thought you'd appreciate it."

"Lisa, do you know what this is?"

"Cuneiform tablet replica," she said, ducking back into the kitchen.

I ran my finger along its edge. I could feel the age. "I don't think this is a replica, Lisa. Do you know what it says?"

"No idea," she called back. "I just thought it was pretty."

I snapped a picture of it with my phone and sent it to my friend Will.

I thought about it for a while. Lisa had to be at least slightly supernatural-sensitive to have realized that all those problems she had called me about weren't just everyday weirdness. Anything putting out this much energy… well, she should have been able to sense there was *something* strange about it.

"So what have you learned?" she called from the kitchen.

"Your models are being attacked by something called an asakku," I

said. "Demons that feed on human suffering. From ancient Mesopotamia."

"How do you know that?" she asked, poking her head back out.

"Saw it. One attacked me."

She went back into the kitchen. "Wouldn't the rest of the models have seen them, then?"

"No," I said. "You have to be supernatural-sensitive to even have a chance of seeing a demon, and even then, it takes training. Have you been trying to read this Cuneiform?"

"Read it? I don't even know which way is up!"

"Lisa, I think this thing might be the focus," I said. "I'm going to break it."

"No!" She rushed in from the kitchen like a protective mamma bear and grabbed the tablet to her breasts.

My hackles went up. "Why do you care? It's a cheap replica. I'll make you another one."

She hugged it tighter and backed up a step.

"Shit, Lisa," I said. "Two exorcisms. A dozen emergency calls in the middle of the night. All this time, it was you, wasn't it?"

"What? No!" she protested.

But it was the only explanation that made sense. Magick-sensitive Lisa, secretly able to summon demons and poltergeists. And then getting to be the center of attention while the supernatural P.I. sorts it out. "Seriously," I said. "All this time I've been bailing you out, and you've been conjuring it all."

"Don't be silly, Colm."

"All this time!" I yelled. "And it turns out you're a classic case of Munchausen syndrome by conjuring!"

"Colm, how can you even think that?"

"Call off the fucking demons, Lisa."

She shook her head.

I took a step towards her, holding out my hand. "Give me the tablet."

"No!" Her face had grown red and she ran back toward the bedrooms. I jumped over the coffee table and chased her. She stopped in the arch of the hallway and pivoted back, muttering in a language I hadn't heard before.

"Lisa, stop!"

It felt like a gust of wind passed through the house, and six separate asakku appeared around her.

Well, fuck. And me without my sword or warding staff.

One by one, the asakku snarled in my direction.

I took two steps back. The rightmost asakku cocked its head, neck stretching, as it pondered my ear.

This was about to hurt. A lot.

"I'll tell you what," I said, backing towards Lisa's hall closet, where she stored her internet orders that have been completed but aren't ready to ship. "Would the six of you like something pretty in exchange for giving up attacking people?"

"What are you doing, Colm?" Lisa sounded genuinely interested. Munchausen cases are a special kind of out-of-touch with reality. They often forget they aren't actually the victim the instant help arrives.

I opened the closet. Sure enough, she had a whole case of her signature kilts in there — Irish tartans done with box pleats instead of knife pleats, a feat which I'm told is next to impossible to sew correctly and for which she gets over $2,000 per garment. "Here," I said, dragging the case out. "Would you be interested in pretty new man skirts to replace your worn-out sheepskin?"

All six asakku tilted their heads and studied the clothes. I laid a few out and held up two more. "There's enough for everyone," I said.

"Colm, no!" Lisa yelled. "Those are mine!"

The asakku closest to me, which had a distinctive mane around its head, looked at Lisa and then at me.

"Well, I'd like to trade these to you, but…" I said.

The lead asakku snarled at Lisa. The other five turned to look at her.

"Call them off, Colm!" Lisa's voice trembled and she backed towards the hall.

"How?" I asked. "I don't speak ancient Babylonian."

Actually, Will had tried to teach me the warding spell, but bad things happen when I try to pronounce ancient languages phonetically.

As if on an unspoken cue, all six asakku lunged at once. Two attached themselves to Lisa's left ear, the other four to her right. She grabbed her head and screamed. "Colm!"

"I can't take down six!" I yelled. "Offer them the trade!"

"All right! All right!" she cried. "A kilt for each of you!"

Six catlike faces suddenly turned in my direction. Their bodies had all morphed and become tadpole tails. They shot towards me, but I held my ground. Their trajectory was downwards.

Each of the six spun around a different kilt. The kilts seemed to shimmer, then vanished without vanishing. The asakkus' bodies reformed, each wearing one of the pricey garments. The lead one turned to me and spoke in a clicking voice, a forgotten language.

And then they vanished.

I have no idea if they fully understood the deal or not. I have no idea what exactly I agreed to. But I could sense the supernatural

leaving the house, leaving behind nothing but termite-eaten wood and plaster.

Lisa sat on the floor, crying.

Just then, my friend Will texted me back. *Yep, that's the one. Conjuring spells. Be careful.*

• • •

The other models recovered quickly. We wound up with six guys in the underwear show — which means we each walked the runway and then had just enough time to throw the underwear we were wearing to one of the girls backstage and jump into another pair before going back out again. Luckily there were only a dozen people in the audience to make fun of us, though they all had cameras. I'm sure I'm on YouTube.

And Julio asked me to model for his next print campaign. And, unlike the show, that's a job that actually pays. Which was good, since Lisa, obviously, never paid me for my time.

She's doing well, by the way. A supernatural-friendly psychologist I know has been treating her. And I've almost gotten to the point where I can forgive her. Assuming, of course, that that's the last time I have to face either a blood-sucking demon or a fashion show in Fresno.

I'd rather face the pig in the hand-me-down flannel nightgown.

James Ipse tells us this was written back in 2011 as part of a series of novelettes he was writing for Kindle, but deliberately shorter and targeted to a themed anthology. The anthology passed on it, as did at least nine other markets. He didn't feel he could publish it as a standalone, so it sat on his hard drive for over a decade. We're glad it finally found a home here.

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