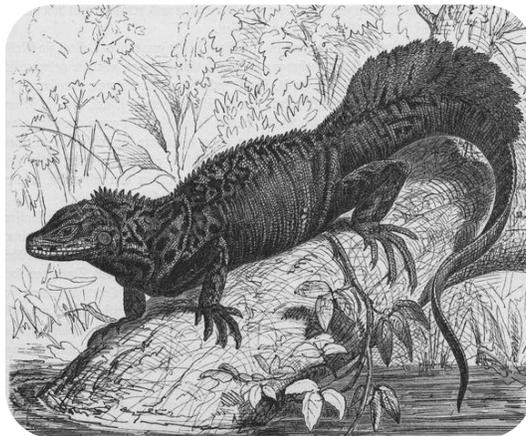


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Page 1 – HALFSIE by N. D. Coley. Mr. Coley, of North Huntingdon, PA, writes, “I currently serve as an instructor of English composition at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, Community College of Allegheny County, and the University of Phoenix. I was trained at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg as a literature major (2005), with a minor in writing. I furthered my studies at the University of Pittsburgh's main campus, earning an MA in English (2007), with a specialization in literary analysis. In my spare time, I lament the human condition, play old school video games, read dark, depressing literature, and try to keep a smile on my face.”

Page 9 – DOOR-TO-DOOR FAE by Stephen Heuser. Mr. Heuser, of Tonawanda, NY, writes, “I've been published previously in publications such as *Isotropic Fiction*, *Kzine*, and *Schlock Magazine*. I've also self-published two novels (*Strange Tenants*, and *Clockwork Chronicles*), and other short stories in the Amazon Kindle store.”



HALFSIE

by N. D. Coley

Tara sat at the edge of her porch and looked up into the darkening sky. The clouds were black and thick and they swirled around the city and the outskirts and the edges of the outskirts. The air was wet and filmy, but there was no rain. There wouldn't be any rain today, just the swirls of black clouds and the wet, sticky film.

Tara reached into her pocket and pulled out a cigarette lighter. It was translucent green, with a crack in it. A cigarette bobbed up and down between her lips, like rotted timber in the waves of the ocean. The cigarette moved up and down as she twirled the lighter. She looked at it curiously. She idly wondered about the number of things that she could burn with it. Her bills. The rug. Her sofa. The house. For a moment, she thought that everything in her sight was rolled into a single, massive cigarette. Her home, the quaint bakery around the corner, the cemetery across the street; the one with all of the jagged, staggered, crooked stones, like rotted teeth in a rotting mouth. She imagined that the sticky air was kerosene, and that all she needed to do was slide her finger down the wheel of the lighter and watch the black sky turn to red and orange and blue, and then black again. Fire and smoke and nothing.

She stopped bobbing her cigarette and lit it. Today was going to be a good day. The black clouds were no bother to her. They

were cool and welcoming. They didn't burn like the sun did. They let in just enough light to see well enough and no more. Tara sat for just a minute or two, taking long, warm puffs. She imagined that the smoke was invading her body, digging up caves and setting up barracks. There were small little commanders and small little men in the barracks, giving their own orders to the tiny men, who smoked tiny cigarettes and drank out of tiny coffee tins. They were poised to strike at any moment.

Tara took one last puff, and more reinforcements entered her body. She looked at the cigarette. It was half burned. She snubbed it out, but gently, saving the rest for later. She never smoked a full cigarette. She had never smoked a full cigarette in her life. She wasn't quite sure why she did this. Habits, maybe. It went along nicely with her half written novels and her half painted walls; a mix of tan and avocado green. She had always been meaning to get rid of that avocado, but the thought of painting over it in full— she could never quite accept it. It seemed like painting over the memories of someone else, perhaps another Tara from another time, who sat and smoked her own cigarettes and cooked meals and tucked children into bed. Tara wondered it would be like to have children.

Tara did not want to paint over anyone's children or dinners or cigarettes.

Every two or three months she would slide into denim overalls, swish a few strokes up and down, dropping goops of paint over the memories that did not belong to her. Then she would stop, go outside, smoke another “Halfsie,” as she called them, and think about another story that was headed for half of a final product.

The sky seemed to rumble a bit, though the noise was almost certainly in her head. She put down the halfsie and went inside.

The little girl sat on the edge of her porch and looked out on the horizon, out past the rows and rows of corn stalks that had long since been sucked of their life, left to dry and rot. They were like pieces of crushed origami now. There was something beautiful there once, crafted in patience and humility. And then the machinery of the harvesters came by, the clanging and the roaring. The crunch of wheels against the ground. The smell of oil and the friction of violent, metal parts. The corn was picked and the ground was dead and the origami was all that was left.

She looked at the sky so curiously. Why was it so orange? Why all of the sudden? It was too early for a sunrise. Behind her, the screen door clanged gently and her mother, the kind woman in the apron who bathed but was never clean, sat next to her. Her appearance was worn and tender.

Persephone, you should come inside.

Why?

It's best that you do.

Why is the sky colored right now? I don't understand.

This happens.

When?

Eventually.

What happens eventually?

We had better go inside and talk.

I don't want to.

Alright then.

Can we talk here?

Sure. We can talk here.

Where's papa?

In town, getting your favorite meal.

Dumplings?

Yes.

We don't have any money. You said that.

Yes, I did.

How he is he getting the food, then?

He just is.

He's stealing?

He might be. I don't know. I guess that he is.

Why? He would go to jail, right?

He could.

He doesn't care?

Come here, dear. Listen.

Tara picked up the halfsie, brought it inside, and sat at the kitchen counter. She looked back outside and out the window. It was still black and grey, but not quite as black and grey, as if there were a hint of color in the clouds, growing, just a little. She turned her eyes back to the counter. Out of place, and next to the coffee pot that was always full and always cold and always a bit too strong, was her typewriter. A heavy, metal, sharpened edged box with a sticky Q key. She didn't mind typing her manuscripts on it, as there was hardly ever a need for the letter Q.

There were three unfinished manuscripts before her. Things that she loved, but

would never be loved for; there were also texts that she hated, and would be adored for. One such manuscript was a piece of dystopian teen fiction. It had the brooding teenage girl and the elderly mentor and the landscapes of barren mounds of dirt and huts filled with children who would salivate for a bowl of broth. It had an unexpectedly handsome boy. He was so handsome and chiseled, and his hair was as reflective as his pupils, and his eyes had the irises as clear as the crystal water in the gulf. Tara had gotten to the point in the tale where the brooding teenage girl was caught in the jaws of a crocodile, its teeth inches away from piercing her organs and spilling bile and blood and other fluids into the rest of her body. And the girl had been that way in her text for months, pierced and waiting to be poisoned. At the end of the last page were the words, "And then," and nothing. Tara had no idea what to do. She set the manuscript down and poured another cup of cold coffee.

Persephone ran, dashed, and zig-zagged through the corn field in the direction of town. The corpses of the dead stalks crackled underneath her feet. The cries of her mother were distant now. Persephone threw her arms out, as if swimming, and tossed aside dead crop. Her foot caught a tiny ditch, and she slipped and a stalk caught her in the eye. She winced and jerked her head and kept running, trampling, frantically cutting through the cemetery of corn stalks that had fed her so faithfully for so many years. It may have been a few minutes or a few hours. It was probably the latter, but time was a strange thing, and despite all

of the clocks and the regular sunrises and the crows of the roosters, she never did have a good sense of how time passed. She had a feeling that nobody did, but she never asked. Nobody ever talked about it. She burst out of the field and onto the dirt road, a road that should have been jammed with horses and wagons and travelers with their belongings strapped to their wagons. Canteens and pick axes and barrels of gun powder. There should have been drunkards on the side of the road, clutching to bottles of wine like holy relics, sniffing the fumes of the bottle for a high, and then another high. There should have been men in spotless suits and top hats, arguing with other men in spotless suits and top hats. But the road was clear.

Ahead of Persephone, the town sat on the horizon, like a worn Christmas tree village, left out too long, after the snow had melted and the world had changed again. Quaint and small and chipped around the edges. Here she could see the orange of the sky all the more. She stopped and shielded her eyes. The sky flared up, meshed into a deep swirl of reds and soft tones, turned black, and went dim again. Now the sky was black. Suddenly, coldly, dark.

Tara slid her dusted overalls up over her shoulders stood at the avocado wall; that ugly green. She gritted her teeth as she looked at it. Tiny fragments of enamel rubbed and cracked and made faint squeaking noises. She suddenly hated the wall. She didn't want to paint it, and before her was a paint brush, and next to that, an old, rusty hammer that she meant to use to fix the light fixture that was not quite straight

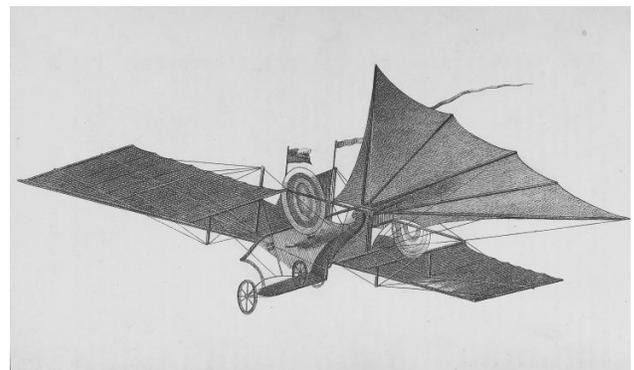
enough. Tara thought about the hammer but snatched the brush, opened up the can, and began to goop paint wildly over the green. The paint came in splashes and globs, dripping sloppily over the floor and in her hair. It felt more like demolition than painting. Tara panted and gasped, dropping to her knees. Bits of sweat mixed with bits of paint. Her eyes stung, and she was thirsty. She wanted nicotine. She stood up, picked up the halfsie, and looked around for her lighter. There was nothing. She took the halfsie over to the stove and turned on the gas. The putrid smell came out quick and strong, with a rhythmic click click click, but there was no flame and she put the halfsie back into the pack of cigarettes, a bright green box with the stern face of an American Indian, and closed the lid.

Persephone paused at the entrance to town. It smelled like burning sulfur, and for a second, she felt weak. There was no one, and in her awe of the absence of people, she failed to notice that the sky had grown suddenly, deeply, inexplicably darker. For the first time in her life she felt afraid. Not the emotion that creates a small pit in the stomach, but the deep, crushing sensation that makes it difficult to move. The kind of fear that makes the raising of a single finger feel as if it is trapped under a heavy stone.

She pushed through this like thick brush. She had no idea that she was panting and sweating. The sweat stung her eyes terribly. In a moment, she was in front of the saloon. The doors swung gently, oh so gently, but nobody had been in or out. The doors were just old and brittle and they tilted on crooked hinges. Persephone pushed

her way inside. A few candles on the chandelier were still burning from the night before. A hot drop of wax fell and nearly landed on her nose. She winced and pulled back. Empty bottles and cigarette butts and shattered and spilled shot glasses littered the tables. The place felt more like death than emptiness. The player piano, which nobody had bothered to turn off, was still going; playing a celebratory drinking song that repeated over and over. The piano was not meant to play this way. Or maybe it was. She had never heard the player piano before. Persephone suddenly felt cold, and without even thinking about moving, she was suddenly backed up into the street again. And it was then that she noticed the darkness that was darker than before.

The avocado wall was gone. Tara sat down, looked at the soft tan that covered the walls now, and the splotches on the floor and her hands and her face, and she started to sob, uncontrollably. She pulled herself up other knees and rested her paint caked finger tips on the counter. Her tears came down on her manuscripts like rain. Drip. Drip. Drip. Her arm swung angrily, and she tossed all of the manuscripts off the counter top and into the air. They flew



about as if carried by a microburst, resting randomly on top of each other. To her it was no matter where the pages fell. She let out a scream and ran her fingers through her hair, ran the paint through her hair, and her long strands were soaked and they stuck to her neck. She grabbed the typewriter and heaved it, denting the refrigerator, and keys flew off of it like confetti, but the Q key didn't move. Then Tara sank, curled up, and continued to weep. Dread was an actual thing, she thought. She needed nicotine.

Persephone walked away from the saloon and, to what she guessed, was the direction of the bank or the general store. She could not remember. Papa would be at the general store. It had been some time since she went to the store. She took a few steps before a hand reached out and grabbed her arm. She couldn't see, but she knew that the hand was large and dirty, that the finger nails were rough and untrimmed and that this was a hand that had never been washed; a hand that had worked and prayed and toiled, but without a wash. The grip tightened and she could feel the bruise coming, the blood rushing to her skin in a dark, blue, misshapen lump. It felt sore and she pulled, but the grip tightened. She yelped and heard no sound, and she sank, a single tear falling from her cheek. She spoke, though it seemed that the darkness had swallowed her voice. She was not sure if she was dreaming. She did not think so.

Hello? She called.

A thin voice penetrated the darkness. It was sad and afraid.

Can you see me, girl?

No. Who are you?

Does it matter?

Sure it does. You could be a robber. Or thief. Maybe you escaped from the jail.

I didn't.

Why did you grab me?

Because you're here. At least. For now.

I'm scared. Let me go.

I'm scared too.

What's going on?

Nobody's told you?

Told me what? That my papa is in town, looking for food. That's all.

Food. what for?

For dumplings. I love dumplings. Papa said he was going to make dumplings.

Is that what he said?

No, mother said that.

Mmmm.

What? Is she lying?

I don't know.

Then let me go.

Aren't you wondering? Where everyone has gone?

Yes.

Do you want to know?

Yes. No. I don't know. Let me go.

Go where? There's nowhere to go, girl.

My name is Persephone.

Persephone?

Yes.

I like that.

I like it too, now hands off. You're hurting me.

I don't want to let you go.

Why? Do you want to hurt me?

No. I'm afraid.

Persephone sobbed, and the grip softened. Beside her, she heard a meek grunt, and then the faint sound of footsteps, and

then nothing. Then darkness.

Tara slipped out of the overalls, grabbed her pack of cigarettes and put them loosely in her front pocket and went outside to her porch again. The sky had brightened up a bit, and dark, resilient, thin rays of sun pierced the clouds. It was a bit warmer, or perhaps a bit more humid. Tara couldn't tell. She looked around for her lighter, but with no luck. She pulled out the halvesie and looked at it, longingly, as if it were the only thing that she needed. Just a few hits. That's all. A few hits to dull the tension and anxiety. She took the halvesie out and put it back in the pack again. There was no light for her cigarette and Tara rushed back into her kitchen, tossing knives and cups and forks, and she swore and breathed heavily and she threw the coffee pot against the plaster wall and it shattered into hundreds of fragments, and the coffee splattered about, coating the wall and her face and the floor. Tara stepped forward, stumbled, and landed palms down, forcing the shrapnel from the pot into her flesh. She screamed as the blood oozed, and that's when, in the hole in the wall from the pot, she noticed a photograph. She crawled towards the photo, crushing the corner of the cigarette pack with her knees. She dragged herself to the photo, leaving smears of blood in her wake.

Persephone moved forward in the darkness, looking over her shoulder as if she could see, waiting for the strange hand to grab her, waiting for the grip to squeeze and bruise her again, but there was nothing, and then there was a stiff and sudden rumbling. In front of her, behind her, she could hear

the sounds of structures of collapsing, of boards splintering. Timber cracked and windows shattered, and the smell of dust and rubble came in one thick, stifling, invisible cloud. The ground shook and she fell and scrambled to get up, and the ground shook again. She sobbed and wished she was back in the cornfield and up the path, on the porch, in the warm arms and stained apron of her mother.

The rumbling stopped, save for the faint, final thuds of stones rolling and timber cracking. She could not see and she knew that the town was gone or close to it. Her hands were bleeding. She knew that, but could not remember anything cutting them. The smell of her blood was strong and it made her afraid, and as she crumpled on the ground and pictured her mother and her papa and a fresh bowl of dumplings, she noticed a faint light in something that used to be a window. She crawled forward, dripping blood in her wake.

Tara pulled the photograph from the wall. It was a faint brown and it was faded and still fading, the memory disappearing while the paper aged. It pictured a family, at her house, so long ago, sitting on the porch. The date in the corner was almost gone. 19 something. There was a man and a woman and a little girl. One girl held a lollipop, the giant kind that would have looked like a brightly colored pinwheel, if only the photograph had not been black and white. The father's eyes shined and looked unassuming. He was filthy and he was happy. Dirt caked the cheek where he seemed to have recently kissed his wife, whose hair still shined, despite how the photo was cracked and

crumbled and faded. Her hair glistened and so did her eyes and she was happy, too.

Tara set down the photograph and wept, using her arm to shield it from her tears, but her arm caught the tears and the photo caught her blood. In the midst of her half smoked cigarettes and her half-finished manuscripts, she bawled. This is what she had painted over. The family had lived in the avocado green house, and she had painted over it, painted over them, painted over the girl and the lollipop and the mother and father who were dirty and happy.

Persephone was barely towards the light when a voice came out from the light. It resonated from behind a candle— so faint, the flicker of a flicker. The voice spoke and she knew the voice.

Sephie. That's you? I would think you'd run this way. You are your mother's child.

Papa!

Yes, Sephie.

I'm scared. So scared. Where is everyone?

South of town. In the shelter.

Shelter? Why?

They think it will save them.

From what?

Forget about that now. Did you talk to your mother?

Yes. She said you came to fetch me dumplings. I. I was so hungry for them.

Do you want them?

Yes! Oh yes!

Come here, then.

I can't see.

I can see you. I'll catch you.

Papa. Why the shelter? Why is everyone hiding?

Do you remember when you were smaller? When we looked at the stars?

Yes.

Do you remember when some of the stars went out? One by one.

I. Maybe. I don't know. Why?

Sometimes they go out. Just like that.

Are we going to go out, Papa? Like those stars?

I think so. I'm not sure, but I think so.

Do all of the stars go out?

Yes.

Are you scared, Papa?

Yes.

I'm scared too, Papa.

That's when the aroma hit her. Gone was the scent of her blood and the rubble; it was lovely; the scent of warm dough and chicken gravy; it was rich and salty, with hints of pepper and spices. She wanted them so much, and she cried with joy and threw herself towards the candle. It flickered and went out and she stumbled and was caught.

Tara sat at the counter, piecing together pages from the manuscripts that would work, going through each one, page by page, stacking the right ones where she needed them. The typewriter was dented and some of the keys were missing, but it would do. She would know where to press, and it might hurt a little, but she knew. She kept the photo next to the typewriter and told the family in it that she loved them and that she would finish their story. Gone were the tales that she told because she had to tell them. She typed the story that she wanted to type, and there would be no brooding teens or love triangles, and she would finish

the story and not leave anyone in the jaws of a crocodile. She picked up half of a story and she looked at the photograph, and right there, next to the typewriter, was her lighter. Tara sighed deeply and pulled the halvesie from the box and she slowly ran her thumb down the starter. She put it down and continued to type and she had never typed so quickly in all of her life.

Persephone didn't talk as she collapsed into her papa's arms. She curled up against him and into him, burying her head into his shoulder, folding her legs into his lap. His body was soft and alive, and she only felt what could be felt while she was curled up against her papa. He kissed her cheek softly and his kiss was moist and she knew that he had been crying, and before she could talk he lifted a spoon full of dumplings and found its way to her; she had never felt anything so lovely or tasted anything so warm. He fed her and she ate and tightened their embrace. They held each other, and then the light filled room. It was yellow and then orange and bright red and hot, and in their embrace they did not feel any pain.

And then the star went out.

Tara snuffed out the rest of the halvesie and discarded it in the yard. Behind her was the fully finished manuscript. The little girl with the lollipop grew up and married the man she loved, and he was killed in the second great war, but she found love again and had girls of her own, and she gave them lollipops, and they were brightly colored too, just like pinwheels. There was so much pain in the story and that was ok because all

good stories have pain, and the man and his wife lived long and become brittle and died in their own way, but they weren't buried behind the wall anymore or painted over, and for just a moment, Tara, her finger tips rough and blood stained, had managed to finish the story. The manuscript was done.

Tara stepped outside and lit another cigarette, though she figured she would just smoke this one all the way through. Why not? She closed her eyes and took the flame to it, and when she opened her eyes she saw that the sky above was no longer a swirl of black and grey. It was orange and bright red. It suddenly felt hot, and in the distance, Tara thought, or perhaps knew, that she could hear the screams of hundreds, if not thousands. Men. Women. Kids. People walking their dogs or carrying groceries, and in the distance the buildings of the city began to melt like wax, and the heat hit her so hard and so fast that she did not have the chance to think that she was burning.

And then the star went out.

Somewhere, far away, a man sat on a park bench, smoking a cigarette and reading a newspaper. He smoked it quickly, all the way down to the filter, and crushed the butt with his shoe. He idly looked at the stocks, and then the sports pages, and then he realized that he didn't care. None of it mattered that much. It was a nice out, though a bit cloudy, and the air felt moist and he was sure that it wasn't going to rain. His phone vibrated in his pocket and he opened it up and blankly stared at a new message: Hurry up, daddy. We don't have all day, you know.

❖

DOOR-TO-DOOR FAE

by STEPHEN HEUSER

The slamming door echoed down the street, rebounding off the windows off the cookie-cutter houses. Foster rubbed his nose, and tried not to take too much offense at how quickly it'd been thrown shut. A hand settled his tie back against his chest, thrown askew from the force of the rejection.

"Have a good day, ma'am," he mumbled to no one in particular as he trudged past the immaculate lawn, and cherubic statues of animals. Forced and vaguely unnerving, he nonetheless kept a smile on his face as he continued on. People were less likely to wonder about a suited man wandering about the suburbs if he was at least happy, he'd learned. As if to prove him right, a pair of joggers smiled and waved as they shot by. Foster returned it in good cheer, wondering what would possess anyone to willingly go outside on a day like this.

The heat rose off the sidewalk in waves, making each breath he took feel like it was from an open oven. Above, the clouds that had once been a beacon of hope, seemed to make way for the wretched sun just enough to bake Foster's path, and only his. The air was just as merciless; it teased the grass, and made flowers dance, but all day it'd failed to penetrate his suit. For the hundredth time, Foster looked about, idly wondering when the ice cream trucks would be coming by.

His face twisted in frustration as he only saw yet another wood sign proclaiming the home was already under protection. Which, of course it was. Most of these idiots signed up over the phone, or on-line, something that, in Foster's humble opinion, his employers should've started years ago.

Oh, but not for Her Majesty, he thought bitterly, scowling as someone's ankle-biter yelped at him from behind a window. No, every damned contract had to be signed face-to-face, and with a firm handshake to seal it. The last time he'd suggested setting up an office (let alone a *website*), you'd have thought she'd have him skinned and hanged from a tree. So here he was, turning down yet another street, with yet another line of beige, white, or (if they'd been especially daring) cream with red shutters.

It was, appropriately enough, a dead-end. Asphalt turned to yellow dirt and grass, before leading into a forest. Well, as much of a forest as you could find in the middle of suburbia, anyway. Foster knew that it was maybe a couple hours' walk through, and ended abruptly at a golf course. Still, it was a tremendous show of will that he didn't immediately charge into the thicket, and take a nice, leisurely stroll home.

His reverie was broken by a delighted shriek, and the loud click-clack of toy guns. A pair of children charged about the lawn near the tree-line, armed with foam-dart

weapons, giggling and screaming. The older of the two – a boy just a summer or so shy of finding his first job – loped behind the younger, who dashed to and fro with energy only children have. Yellow darts were scattered behind them, showing their haphazard trail. A sharp whistle from the garage made them turn their heads as a man in an orange polo and cargo shorts sauntered out to smile and gesture towards the lawn with an expectant stare. Shrugging sheepishly, the older boy jogged back, retrieving the fired darts. By the time he was done, his arms overflowed with ammunition, which he dumped into a large blue bin.

Foster had slowed somewhat, attempting to appear just out for a stroll, while keeping an eye on the trio. He was too far away to hear what was said, but the younger boy seemed delighted by something their keeper said, running over to tug at the older's shirt. Exasperated, but charmed, he kept pace as the boy ran off down the street, leaving their guardian to smile, and turn back to clean up the chaos the boys had left in the garage. Foster adjusted his tie, having loosened the cloth noose several blocks back, and attempted to make himself presentable.

"Good afternoon!" he called out from the end of the driveway. He waved cheerily, but approached slowly. One too many encounters with overprotective gun-owners had taught him the benefits of staying close to the property line. "Do you mind if I come up? Promise I won't take much of your time."

He didn't seem to have a gun, but the way he gripped the broom... Foster kept trudging up the driveway, smiling all the

way. "I'm Foster," he said, extending a hand, after being sure it wouldn't be torn off.

"Jerry," was the terse reply. He idly swatted a few action figures, and a soccer ball back into the tidy garage. Suspicious eyes looked him up and down from a handsome, thin face. "May I help you?" he asked, as he continued to pick up the garage.

"Well, hopefully *I* can help *you*. We're, ah, we're required to say that," he added, seeing Jerry's face turn to stone. He cleared his throat, and shifted awkwardly as he pulled a card from his jacket's inside pocket. It was, by some miracle, crisp, and free of sweat. Jerry took it as though a cat had brought him something particularly foul.

"Tierny and Oran Home Security," he muttered, twiddling the card. He scratched his damp, salt-and-pepper hair, and wiped the sweat off his widow's peak. "Not interested."

"You say that now, but - "

"I said I'm not interested." The card was crumpled, and tossed into a nearby trashcan.

Foster shrank, noticing very acutely, the man's broad shoulders, and good four inches more of height. He felt relief when Jerry, assuming he'd said enough, turned back to his chore. Foster sighed, and licked his lips.

"If I - "

"If you don't leave," Jerry said, a discarded, bright orange foam bat in his hands strangely intimidating, "I'm calling the cops."

Foster's lips twitched with suppressed mirth. It was far from the worst threat he'd gotten today. He pushed the laugh down, shoving his face into exhausted frustration

(which wasn't that hard, all things considered).

"I just need one more house for the day," he pleaded, clasping his hands in front of him. He rubbed the silver leaf charm that dangled from his watch; an old habit when he was in a pinch. "My boss isn't what you'd call understanding," he added, letting a bit of a giggle slip through. "Please. Just...Ten minutes. A brochure you can toss as soon as I turn around."

Jerry sighed deeply, his shoulders sinking at Foster's haggard face. He blinked a few times, and rubbed his face, as though arguing with himself.

"Ten minutes?" he said, finally.

"Ten minutes."

"Ah...Fine. C'mon inside. You want something to drink?" Jerry held the screen door open for him

"Water would be lovely," he said gratefully, edging carefully around the iron frame, pushing it with his foot.

The air conditioning was a blessed relief, and Foster barely kept a moan from his lips. His belly was another story, gurgling lustfully at the smells of meals past and future lingering in the paint, and floating in from the kitchen. He followed Jerry through a hallway cramped by shoes, laundry machines, and a pair of trash cans. Simple frames decorated the wall with a lifetime of memories, from weddings, and vacations, to sports, and school. It led into a dining

room, the adjacent kitchen revealing a slow-cooker, filling the room with the smell of pork and spices. As he leaned against the table, he saw drawings and report cards decorated the refrigerator, surrounding a white-board calendar that'd been used for so long, it almost didn't qualify as white anymore. He thanked Jerry, who handed him a bottle of water, and glanced into the living room. A smile crinkled his eyes as he waved at someone; a baby's content gurgle answered it. His joy evaporated when he turned back to Foster, nodding as he opened a soda can.

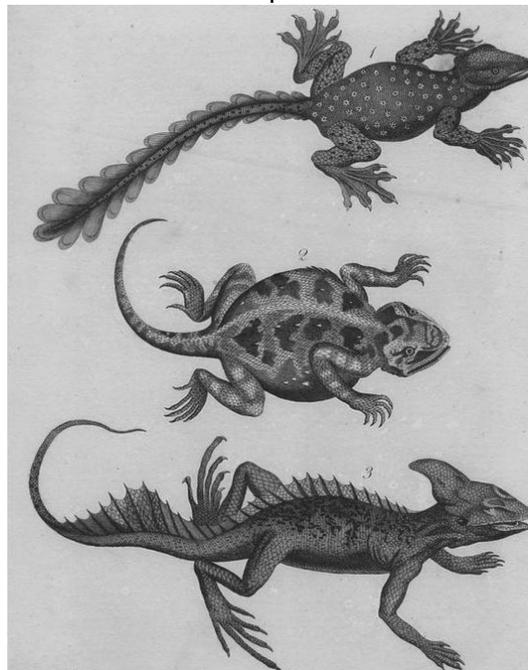
"Ten minutes," he prompted, shrugging, as if to ask what else Foster wanted from him. He couldn't help but notice that despite his nonchalance, a set of kitchen knives were within easy reach, and one hand brushed his pocket idly, as though checking to make sure his phone was still there.

"This is a lovely house - "

"And it'd be a shame if something happened to it?"

Foster's polite laugh shriveled at Jerry's cold expression. "No, we don't do anything so brutish - anymore," he joked, to no avail. "I more meant...You have insurance in case the worst should come to pass, right? Homeowner's insurance will help replace that which was taken, or damaged, so on, so forth, but what if you could prevent the theft in the first place?"

"If someone's going to break in, a sign and an alarm isn't going to stop



them,” Jerry said, exhaling irritably. “My buddy one street over pays out the nose for his, and it did *jack* to keep someone from cracking a window, and walking out with half his house.”

“Brighten Alarm Company?” Foster asked, smirking, and rubbing his nose. “Established in 1983. Tierny and Oran have been around significantly longer.”

“How long?”

“To hear them tell it, they’ve always been around, in one form or another,” Foster snorted, and rolled his eyes. “But in the 1920’s is when they officially set up shop in Seattle. I’ve been with them for my whole life,” he added. “Apparently I come from a long line of proud door-to-door salesmen.”

He pulled out a small, folded contract as Jerry impatiently checked the clock hanging above the stove. “The thing that makes us different,” he said, sliding it across the counter, “is we’re always around. By phone, yes, but we also have people who patrol our covered areas.”

“And if someone’s breaking in, they’ll what? Kung-fu them into submission?” He’d pointedly ignored the contract, like a sleeping rat.

“You’d be surprised how easily people spook when they’re seen doing something illegal. If they’re not though, they’ll notify the proper authorities. Anything that’s damaged while covered by us,” he smiled, tapping the contract, “will be covered in full. No fuss, no muss.”

“I thought you said you’d prevent it?”

“Well...” Jerry bobbed his head bashfully. “It never hurts to make sure we’re prepared for the worst. Sort of the point of all

this.”

They both looked to the living room, where the baby could be heard fussing gently in its blanket. Jerry pushed away from the counter, and checked his watch. He sighed, and ran a hand through his hair.

“Time’s up.” He motioned gently towards the front door. “It was nice meeting you, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to decline.”

“I understand,” Foster said, disappointment washing over him as he retrieved the contract. “Thank you very much for your time.”

“Not a problem,” Jerry assured him, smiling broadly, now that the salesman was leaving. “At least your quota’s done for the day.”

“True,” Foster chuckled. “I can cool my heels someplace out of the sun ‘till tomorrow.” He grinned, brushing his charm as he adjusted his sleeves, and prepared himself for the sweltering heat. “What do you do? Just curious, not trying to sell you on anything.”

“Oh, software engineer,” Jerry said, hesitating with his hand on the doorknob. “It’s nice, being able to work from home when the kids are off.”

“I don’t suppose you’re hiring in sales?” Foster joked, bringing a genuine smile to Jerry’s face.

“Well, I could always forward your resume, see what pops up.” He reached into his wallet, and handed him an embossed business card. Elegantly plain, the cream face had his name, contact information, and “BSG SOLUTIONS” in bold letters. As he handed it to Foster, his eye twitched, and he chewed his cheek. “Could I see that con-

tract again?"

"Certainly." With a flourish, Foster spread it atop the clothes dryer. "Monthly fees tend to come to this, or, if you'd like annual payments, this." He circled the numbers, and stepped back for Jerry to look it over.

It didn't take long - it never did, really. After the first few paragraphs, his eyes seemed to glaze over, darting back and forth to the fees, what was promised, contact information, and the like. Most of the contract was filed away as "standard legal gobble-gook", and ignored. He only looked away at the sound of the infant, now fully awake, calling for his attention, and even that distracted him only for a second. Soon enough, he was engrossed in the piece of paper laid out in front of him, tilting forward with lidded, dazed eyes. Foster stroked the watch charm absently while Jerry read, a professional smile on his face at all times. Jerry's hand slid on the dryer when he stood up, almost sending him into a stack of detergent.

"Man...The price *can't* be this low." His eyes were bright and alert again. His fingers stayed on the contract, unthinkingly caressing the paper.

Foster tilted his hand, as if he never thought of it. "Tierny and Oran always preferred that their customers never noticed it missing. No one should have to think about home security constantly. Tell you what," he said, drumming on the dryer, before fishing in his pockets for something. "I'll leave you this," he said, placing his own business card on top of the contract. "You can call me any time if you have questions, concerns...Job offers," he added, chuckling along with

Jerry.

"Actually..." Jerry fell quiet as he continued reading, and re-reading, the contract. Foster waited patiently beside him, a polite smile resting on his face as the other man mumbled to himself, occasionally nodding, or puffing out his cheeks as he read. "I think...I think I'd like to sign up."

"Excellent!" Foster produced a pen, beaming as Jerry left his signature in all the right places. "If you have no concerns, we'll send someone over to install a few things tomorrow, and drop off your copy of the paperwork. Or answer any questions you might have." He folded the paper back up, slipping it into his pocket.

"Tomorrow would be great." Jerry shook his hand firmly, an enthusiastic, if slightly confused, smile spreading across his face. "If they don't mind the dust. Sorry about that, we just cleaned in here..." He wiped at his eyes, blinking and cursing slightly.

"Oh, it's not a bother," Jerry assured him. "Just give me a call if anything should change. Other than that...Well, it was a pleasure to meet you."

The night was hot and moonless; only the faint light from people too stubborn to fall asleep trickled out to illuminate the sidewalks and yards. Even that was fading to nothing, as more and more fell asleep, leaving the neighborhood awash in darkness. Silence reigned, aside from the occasional pet, or car crunching quietly by on the road.

Not that any of that mattered to Foster, who waited motionless by the rose bushes that dominated Jerry's backyard. Even had the moon been fat and bright, and a carni-

val blaring up and down the street, he would still be there. He had to be - mistakes at this juncture were few, but even one would earn him a fate he preferred not to dwell on. The wind stirred the nearby swing set, putting him even further on edge as he waited, staring at the house. He could see Jerry walking through the kitchen, putting away dishes, and getting ready for the morning. His boys had been put to bed well over an hour ago; a brunette with a long braid, and a thick book in her hands, had retired to the living room soon after. Panic gripped Foster when Jerry left the view, a hallway light flicking on upstairs.

He relaxed when a second-floor window slid open soundlessly. A hunchbacked figure carrying something in its arms clambered down the side of the house with barely an effort. Cloaked in filthy robes, it loped towards Foster, who took its burden with palpable relief. He pushed back a fold of the

cloth to inspect the baby human that lay within. It slept soundly, none the wiser of its travel.

Above, Jerry could be heard moving about his child's room, singing a lullaby to soothe the changeling in his arms. He didn't seem to think the open window too strange, sliding it close with only the barest glance out into the yard.

Foster slouched, glad that it was over with. He hated these long days away from home, but, such was the price of service. His companion scurried off into the night to the trees at the end of the street, and he followed swiftly. *Finally*, he thought, as his eyes grew, and the fur spread across his face and arms. Stubby antlers blossomed from his head to poke through a shaggy mop of hair that fell across a face that was more cervid than man the further he ventured. The last house was always the worst. ❖

END TRANSMISSION