

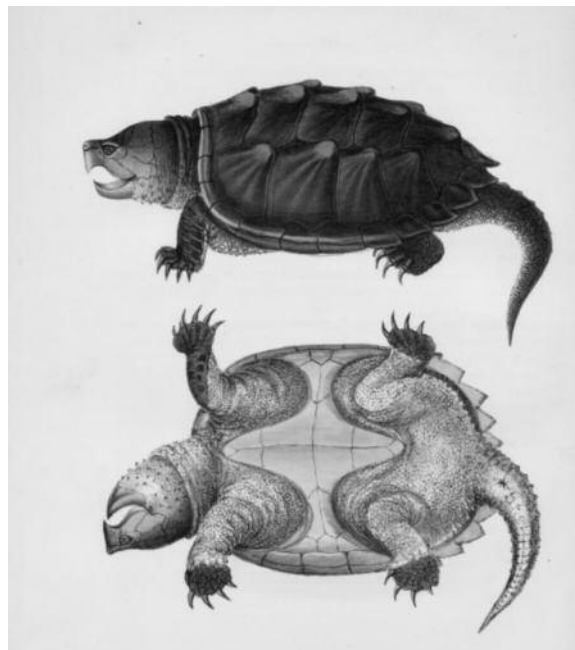
# Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 4 Number 4

Page 1 – THE REALITY GUN by Mark Joseph Kevlock. Mr. Kevlock (see our 9/21/2018 issue) has been a published author for nearly three decades. In 2018 his fiction appeared in more than two dozen magazines, including *365 Tomorrows*, *Into The Void*, *The First Line*, *Toasted Cheese*, *Literally Stories*, *The Sea Letter*, *The Starlit Path*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Terror House Magazine*, *Yellow Mama*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *The Mystic Blue Review*, and *Friday Flash Fiction*. He has also written for DC Comics.

Page 3 – THE AGENCY by David W. Landrum. Mr. Landrum writes, “I teach Literature at Grand Valley State University in Western Michigan. My speculative fiction has appeared widely, most recently in *Fiction on the Web*, *Fantasia Divinity*, *Pilcrow and Dagger*, and *Psalter & Lyre*.”

Page 17 – GRANDMOTHER by R. E. Hengsternan. Mr. Hengsternan is an award-winning writer and photographer. He lives in North Carolina with “the family” and occasionally wears pants. His work can be found at [www.rehengsternan.com](http://www.rehengsternan.com) and the occasional tweet @robhengsternan. This particular piece was submitted to *The Blotter Magazine* (our sister publication) but we all thought it was a perfect fit for displaying here, which he graciously acquiesced to permitting. It was previously published in *X - RAY Literary Magazine*.



# “THE REALITY GUN”

by MARK JOSEPH KEVLOCK

“It represents a metaphysical breakthrough of the highest magnitude!” Professor Armen Dovall heralded his latest invention for all to hear.

The Peace and Prosperity Council took it under advisement.

“But, Father,” Raymon spoke to him afterward on the way home, “could you truly have expected more from them than this? After all, no one has invented a gun of any kind in more than two hundred years...”

Janna echoed her brother’s sentiments: “You are always so fragile, Father. Excited about your work one moment, disappointed with the world the next.”

Armen tried to be kind and patient with them.

“My children, you just do not understand the scope involved in this endeavor. I am not attempting to change reality; rather I say that I have changed it, for good and all, with this device.”

Dovall could see that it was no use. The best way to convince them was, tonight, to leave his laboratory unlocked. So he did.

Raymon and Janna crept from their beds, leaving all traces of young adulthood behind, becoming children again, embarked upon yet another wondrous

adventure.

“The lab is unlocked,” Janna reported. “Surely, Father won’t mind if we take just a peek at this so-called Reality Gun of his...”

Raymon, the older of the siblings, hefted their sought-after prize down from its shelf. “We’ll take it outside,” he said, “and test it there.”

The Dovalls lived on a mountaintop where no one else lived. Snow glistened over the landscape. Raymon and Janna stepped outside the protective dome covering their property.

Raymon, in the moonlight, examined his father’s invention. “It has no trigger!” he exclaimed.

Janna snatched the gun away. “That’s ridiculous! Every gun has a...” But she could find none.

“Let’s try it, anyway,” Raymon suggested. “I’ll just point it toward the sky...”

Nothing happened.

Janna took the gun back yet again. “Well, what were you expecting, dear brother, butterflies...”

And as she aimed, there they were: dozens of butterflies shot from the barrel into the snowy night.

“Quick! Capture them!” Janna shouted in panicked tones. “They’ll freeze to death outside the dome!”

“Capture them how, exactly?” Her brother scurried to the task. “We don’t have a net!”

Janna was still aiming the gun, absently, when again it fired. This time a butterfly net sprang from the barrel into full-blown reality.

“My lord!” Janna stumbled backward, almost tumbling to the ground.

“Reality gun, indeed!” Raymon enthused.

After they had captured all two dozen butterflies and placed them in the greenhouse, the siblings raced back to their experiment.

“It seems triggered by willpower,” Raymon deduced, examining the sleek exterior surface, finding no safety switch nor any access to the interior.

“By wishes,” Janna amended, possessing the more fanciful imagination of the two.

“What shall I wish for, then?” Raymon aimed the gun toward the sky.

“Something extravagantly impossible!” his sister replied.

“So be it,” Raymon decided. “I shall wish for night... to turn to day!”

And so saying, he fired the gun upon the helpless sky. Daylight shot from the barrel, arcing wide, expanding as it filled all before it, racing across the horizon, brightening the world!

Raymon and Janna wept at once. They fell awestruck to their knees. They hugged one another and kept up this embrace, otherwise ill-equipped to celebrate such a miracle.

Armen Dovall awoke and stepped outside to join them, yawning as he would on any morning more naturally achieved.

“Father, what a genius you are! This gun... will change the world!”

Armen smiled upon his daughter. He knew beforehand the Council’s response. The established scientific laws must be abided. All else resulted in chaos. Magnificent chaos, perhaps, but chaos just the same.

“You two should be in bed.” He attempted to corral his adult children, knowing they in spirit would forever remain so.

When all was calm and restored and the true daylight cast upon them, Dovall took the reality gun and placed it back upon its shelf, right between the universal panacea and the Rosetta Stone. ❖

# “THE AGENCY”

by DAVID W. LANDRUM

A school friend named Evan had given Claude a tip on The Agency. He had called it by that name.

“Women,” he said. Evan tended to be taciturn.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s three women.”

“They run the Agency?”

“They *are* the Agency. If I put you on to them and you go to them, be sure you plan to make a deal. They don’t like people wasting their time. And they don’t like exposure.”

“What do they charge?”

“I don’t want to say anything about them. They’ll tell you all you need to know when you contact them.”

“Is it safe? It doesn’t sound like it is.”

“I wouldn’t say *safe*. Fair. Just. If they think your’ trying to pull something over on them – not good.”

Claude Holdridge only wanted justice. A beautiful young woman was dead, and the killer had walked free. He did not want revenge. He wanted justice.

“I want to talk with them.”

“Okay.”

“How do I contact this ‘Agency’?”

“I’ll arrange it.”

Claude blinked. “Can’t I call or text them?”

“They don’t give out contact information.”

“They don’t?”

“They’re extremely secretive. You will understand why. They’ll get in contact with you.”

He licked his lips nervously. “You’re sure this is safe, Evan? I mean, it sounds like the Mafia or some gang I don’t want to get mixed up with.”

“Working with them is safe as long as you’re on the level. It’s the safest way to go, given what you want. They’re committed to the concept of justice—and they’re good at what they do.”

\*\*\*\*

Claude met up with a representative of the Agency two days later. After a quick lunch, he always went to the River Walk, a secluded board walk that followed the bank of the Grand River downtown. The cold weather left the walkway deserted that day. Claude liked cold. He enjoyed chill wind and pale winter sunlight. Ice had accumulated in the pools and still places on the banks of the Grand. The sky, clear and sunny, radiated as only a winter sky can. As he walked through Ah-Nab-Awen Park, he noticed a tall woman with dark brown skin,

a retro-style Afro hairdo, an athletic build, and an energetic walk. He smiled as she approached him. The woman stopped abruptly.

Claude Holdridge?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, wondering if he knew her from some place then realizing she might be from the Agency.

"Yes."

"My name is Alexis. You said you were interested in working with us. Is that true?"

He nodded.

"I think we might be interested in helping you."

"You understand what I want?" he asked, careful to use a euphemism because he thought she might be from the police.

"I do. And you must understand, sir, that we don't do hits. We're not Murder Incorporated. We have ethics."

"What do your ethics compel you to... shall we say, *address*?"

"When justice fails; when crimes slip through the system of law; then we consider taking action. You can present your case to us. We respond to egregious crimes."

A gust of cold wind blew. Claude shivered. Alexis did not flinch.

"What sorts of crime?"

"We have our definition."

"I think this fits under the category of 'egregious,'" he said. "I have a file I can mail you."

"We don't need to see the evidence you have. We'll do our own investigation and decide if we want to take your case. We'll talk to you tomorrow."

He felt miffed at her curtness but tried

to mask his irritation.

"Okay. Will we meet here?"

"We will contact you," the woman said.

With that, she turned on her heel and walked briskly toward the entrance to the Gerald R. Ford Museum.

\*\*\*\*

The meeting took place at Sazarac's on bar on Plainfield Avenue. When he walked in, he saw Alexis sitting with two other women at a table near the bar. A poetry reading was going on in the next room and the place was packed.

He came up to their table. The red and green lights that illuminated the barroom reflected on the shoulders and hair of three women—a diverse trio. Alexis was African-American. In the middle of the trio sat a blonde woman, Nordic/German — or perhaps from the substantial population of Dutch emigres who lived in his town. The third woman was Chinese or Korean, her dark hair long, also reflecting red and green light. They all looked solemn, even a bit grim. As he came nearer, Alexis stood. She smiled—a very tiny smile, but welcoming and reflected in her eyes as well.

"Welcome, Mr. Holdridge. Let me introduce my colleagues to you. This is Megan." He shook hands with the blonde woman, who gave him an appraising look. "And this is Trisha." He similarly greeted the Asian woman, who also seemed to evaluate him, as if deciding his worth or his truthfulness. After greetings, he sat down at their table. The waitress brought him a

Bacardi's white rum on the rocks, his usual drink.

"Thank you," he said, tipping the glass in a toast to them and sipping it. They all were drinking wine.

"Do you have any questions for us, sir?" the blonde woman, Megan, asked.

"I have lots of question, but I think in this it case it would be better to let you do the talking."

They seemed pleased at this, though their reaction only rippled a moment through the solemnity they radiated.

"What do you want from us?" Trisha asked.

He started to give an elaborate answer, thought better of it, and said, "Justice."

They reacted positively and, he thought, with surprise — though they expressed this in a guarded and subdued fashion.

"A good answer," Alexis said. "Your cousin, Michelle, died at the hands of a thief."

"Yes." He felt anger rise at there mention of the incident. "She was walking across the Blue Bridge. It was during festival. People everywhere. He came up behind her, stuck a gun in her ribs, and told her to come with him. She turned around. He shot her. Some cops were nearby. They subdued him in a minute. Michelle died at the scene."

His cousin had been a saint. He had never known a young woman more kind, considerate, and loving. If the universe harbored a shred of justice, her death would be requited.

The case went to trial but something about failure to follow legal protocol in the arrest, (which rendered some of the evidence inadmissible) resulted in a mistrial. The killer went free.

"Will you take us to the site of the murder?" Trisha asked—the first time she had spoken.

"Sure. It's the Blue Bridge, down by Eberhart Center."

"Can you take us there now?" she asked.

All of them were looking straight at him. He felt the intensity of their gazes. It caused a small panic in him.

"Of course I can."

"We'll finish our drinks and you can drive us over there."

They solemnly drank their wine. Claude finished his rum. The four of them left Sazarac's and crossed Plainfield Avenue. He had parked on Quimby Street near the old library building. As they walked, he noticed how well-dressed the women were. Alexis wore a tight-fitting body suit — it reminded him of how Diana Rigg dressed when playing the character of Emma Peale in *The Avengers*. Trisha had on a dark-colored minidress and harlot boots. Megan wore a short black skirt and pink blouse. She also sported boots. They piled into his Buick, drove to the GVSU parking lot at the Devos Campus, walked beneath the US 131 viaduct, past Eberhart Center, and on to the Blue Bridge, an old railroad span that had been made a into a walking bridge.

"Wedding," Trisha said.

Sure enough, a wedding party had assembled at the edge of the span for pictures. It was cold, but, like many in the city, they had chosen the scenic site for their photographs. Claude saw a small crowd, a clergyman in a robe, photographer, and flower girl and ring-bearer standing to one side, shivering, waiting for their photographs to be taken. The bride stood out, white-clothed among her magenta-dressed bridesmaids. Michelle would never be a bride, he thought bitterly. A religious girl, she had undoubtedly been a virgin at her death. Life, the pleasure of intimacy, the possibility of bearing children — all of that had been denied her. He diverted his thoughts.

“Do you want to go somewhere and come back when photo shoot over?” he asked. “Maybe we could go to a bar and get

a drink then return they’re finished. It shouldn’t be too long.”

“I know a good place,” Trisha said.

Something like a flash of light came — but *flash* was not the right word. It arose suddenly but without force, surprising and Claude, disorienting him, but not stabbing his eyes or causing pain by its brightness. And the radiance that surrounded him was not white but soft purple. He felt whirled, spun around, tumbling end over end. Then he found himself in a dim room filled with tables bearing small oil lamps. He smelled incense, roasting meat, and baking bread. A murmur of talk filled the room. He looked over a Trisha.

She no longer wore the dress he had first seen her in. She wore a long white garment that left one shoulder bare and fell to her ankles. He noticed numerous women,



similarly dressed, sitting at the tables. The men with whom they sat wore what Claude eventually realized were tunics. He looked over at her. Trisha smiled at the alarm showing on his face.

“You asked for my favorite place to go for a drink and some pleasure,” she said.

He could only stare. As his eyes adjusted to the dark he saw her hair, braided on one side; the cleavage her garment revealed; a gold armband above her left elbow.

“I’ve taken you back in time, Mr. Holdridge. This is, truly, my favorite place. I work here when I chose to dwell on earth.”

He still could not speak. He saw that she was becoming irritated at his behavior. Her mouth looked drawn and cruel, her eyes narrow, glaring with anger. Did her fingers look like talons? He knew he had better speak.

“Who are you?” he asked. Then, because he wanted to shake off the fearful astonishment that had struck him, he asked, speaking articulately as he was able. “What time have you taken me to?”

Her face softened into a smile.

“Marvelous. I hate it when tongue-tied humans gape at me. If I took you down to Tartarus, you would be pissing your pants by now.”

“Who are you?”

“Trisha – a modernization of Tisiphone, my Greek name – much more beautiful and melodic, don’t you think? This is the city of Corinth. You’re in the New Star Tavern, a place where you can get good wine and where a great deal of dis-

crete business goes on.”

He looked around at the men and women at the tables. As he watched, two couples rose and went off, hand in hand, through one of two curtained doors at the back of the main room. He looked back at Tricia.

“Yes,” she said. “When I come to earth, I work here. When you’re in the underworld and when your job is tormenting sinners, you don’t get much of a chance to enjoy a good little romp in bed; and when you’re tracking some fugitive, it’s a good place to get information; and to get back in touch with some of the more pleasurable aspects of human existence.”

Just as she finished speaking, two men bustled up to Claude.

“Who the hell are you?” one demanded.

They were not speaking English, but he could understand them. He did not want to seem tongue-tied and afraid.

“What do you care?”

He could not only understand their language, he saw, but also speak it.

“When someone starts flirting around with Tisiphone, we make it our business.” Noticing how he was dressed, the one who had been silent up to now, spoke.

“Where did you get those garments? Are you a German? Or one of those damned Scythians?”

“None of your business, really.”

He saw their hands jerk. They were going to jump him. Trisha intervened.

“Marius, Philemon, really! You’re both late. He paid for me and we’re going to my



room. You should have been on time.”

They cast him a resentful glance. Obviously, neither of them meant to gain-say Trisha. They sputtered and grunted but returned to their table. She smiled.

“Well done, Mr. Holdridge. You backed them down. They paid for a *ménage a trois*, but that was supposed to be an hour ago. Come with me. I’ll show you the room where I ply my trade.”

She took his hand and led him through one of the curtained doors.

Claude found himself in a long corridor lined with doors – all open, none sealed off in any way. As they walked it, he saw men and women locked in every imaginable form of sexual embrace. Groaning, swearing, the creaking of beds, shouts of ecstasy, noise of slurping and gagging, purrs of ecstasy, and varieties of sweet talk filled the hallway as they walked. Tisiphone led him into a small room. He pointed to a bed, low to the ground, made of leather straps stretched across a wooden frame and a puffy mattress.

He knew what she wanted him to do and knew he had better obey her and obey her without questions or any other kind of talk. He quickly undressed as she undid a jeweled clasp that held her garment at the shoulder. She let it fall to her feet. She wore no undergarment. The sight of her beautiful breasts, trim, muscular body, the small, neat triangle of hair between her legs made his heart pound so hard he could feel it in his temples. He touched her breasts, feeling their smoothness, rubbed her nipples with his thumbs and kissed her. He

had not had it since he split up with Carrie, three months ago.

Trisha responded with unaffected and unreserved pleasure, gasping, making little moaning noises as he caressed her. She nodded for the two of them to climb into bed.

“There’s some ointment on the bed stand,” Trisha said, voice quavering with passion. Her eyes closed. “Use just a little.”

He dipped his fingers in the container, reached down, and applied it to the velvety flesh of her opening.

Claude had thought she would lie down, but she scooted over and indicated he should lie down and, when she had, straddled him and lowered herself onto him. She began to move. Pleasure dominated him so much that he could not think through the unbelievable things that had happened in the last few minutes. Trisha – Tisiphone – moved up and down rhythmically, gasping and purring until she got her joy. He followed her quickly.

She sank down and lay beside him. He could hear, faintly, the sounds from the other rooms. Trisha fell asleep but woke up after only a few moments, smiled, and kissed her.

“You are a wonderful man,” she said. “You need to wash, dress, and go back into the inn. I need to entertain Marius and Philemon. Go tell them I’m waiting for them. Have some wine. I’ll join you later.”

He wanted to ask her if it was safe but decided he had better let her call the shots. After washing off with a cloth in a basin of

water on a table by the bed, he got dressed. He walked down the corridor of passionate noises and back into the serving area, immediately spotting Marius and Philemon. When he walked up to their table, they started, as if they thought he might attack them. He made a gesture he had never made before – a wave of the hand – that seemed to put them at ease.

“Tisiphone’s waiting in her room for you two.”

They looked him over, got up, and headed for the corridor. Philemon nodded curtly as the two of them left. He went to a window where he saw people ordering drinks (like in a British pub) and bought a glass of wine. He had only modern American money in his pocket, but the man handing out the drinks accepted a quarter. Claude went back to the table.

As Trisha had said, the wine was excellent. He looked around at the room, the tables, the men and their dates for the night. He could not imagine what had happened to him. The thought that all of this constituted some sort of hallucination or that he had gone insane or was dreaming crossed his mind. But it was not dreamlike; if he were insane he would not be evaluating the matter; it looked too firm and real to be a hallucination, and it had lasted too long to be that; and what he had done with Trisha a few minutes ago had been real beyond any sort of doubting. After a moment, someone pulled the chair out beside him. Startled, he turned.

“Megan?”

“Megaera,” she said, “since Tisiphone

has put you on to our real names. I am Megaera and prefer to be called by that name.” He stared at her. She smiled. “I got tired of watching the wedding photographs. Allecto likes weddings and everything connected with them, but I got bored and decided to come here.”

“You work here like Tisiphone does?”

She laughed. “Yes and no. I have a little farm up at the top of the hill. I like living more quietly, but when I need information or need to trap someone, I come here and enjoy myself.”

“Who are you? – I mean, the three of you?”

“Allecto, Megaera, and Tisiphone. We are the Furies, chthonic deities of vengeance. We’ve taken an interest in the case of your cousin.”

He could only gape.

“We avenge crimes that cry out to heaven to be punished. In the earliest times of human civilization, we vowed to Athena that we would allow crimes to be avenged in courts. But when justice is not properly dispensed by the courts, we act as we did before the time that agreement came about. In the case of your cousin, justice miscarried.”

“*The Eumenides*,” he said, remembering the play by the Greek writer Aeschylus. He had read it in high school and acted in it in college.

“You’re a most literate man. Yes. We return to our ancient function as avengers when justice miscarries and the courts are irresponsible.”

“My cousin,” he began, but could not

finish.

“You need not weep,” Megaera said. “She is in Elysium, among the blessed souls, and will dwell forever in bliss, though I know the loss of her has been heavy for you. You will be avenged.”

He thought a long moment and then asked, “Why do you need me here if you already plan to take vengeance on him?”

“The point of vengeance isn’t just easing of pain. It is the dispensation of satisfaction. There would be no point in doing justice if we did not see a heart satisfied by the justice we bring. You will feel satisfaction when the murderer of your kinswoman is punished for the deed he did.”

She wore a coarse garment made of animal hide. She had tightly braided her hair. Its gold shone in the dimness of the room.

“How?”

“I can’t take you to Tartarus, and it would be tedious to demonstrate what punishments we will inflict upon him. But I can give you an indication of what sorts of things he will experience.”

He nodded, not knowing how to respond. She indicated the door.

“Come with me.”

The two of them walked out of the tavern. Claude gasped at the sight of the sky. Rivers of stars filled it, along with the effulgence of the milky way; and the stars were not merely white. They were red, blue, green, yellow, and silver. A half-moon rode in the sky torn by meteorites, twinkling with light such as he had never seen.

“In your time, the skies have dimmed,”

Megaera said. He noticed she did not wear a full-length garment like Trisha but a tunic that came just above her knees. She was barefoot. Walking under a sky such as Abraham had seen when God promised him his descendants would be more than the stars of heaven, the two of them climbed a hill to a log house with a thatched roof. He heard the snoring grunts of pigs and saw small fields of grain near Megaera’s dwelling. He smelled manure and wood smoke. They went inside. He had to bend down to get through the door.

“Tisiphone will meet us here after she is finished with her customers.” She spotted the question in his eyes. “I entertain my men here. They like the rustic look of the place and the exotic sense it lends to the fact that they’re sleeping with a German. I entertain their fantasies and make more money than Tisiphone at it. And get more information as well.”

“You both say you gather information. About what?”

“Deeds that might merit our vengeance. Remember that time does not exist for us. Most of the crimes we punish take place in this day and age. We don’t venture into the future very often, so it makes more sense to have our ‘office,’ as you might call it, in this location and in this time.” She looked about at the rustic but cozy house they sat in. “It gets boring in Tartarus,” she said. “We like to come here to the upper world from time to time and enjoy some of the amenities mortal life offers.”

She poured him beer. It was thick and

strong, different from the beer he was used to drinking, and, he admitted, delicious. They drank and did not talk. He enjoyed the silence. The rough but comfortable dwelling, the smells of the forest and of animals, even Megaera's rustic appearance, charmed him. She noticed his reaction and smiled.

"I like the simplicity of it. I dwelt among the Germans for many years. They

are honest and direct — traits I enjoy."

He remembered what she had said.

"You said you will show me what Michelle's killer's punishment will be."

"I can't do that. But I can give you an idea of what he will experience."

"How?"

"I can show you what we will look like to him, once he is captured and taken into our keeping. Stand."



He got to his feet. Megaera also rose. She closed her eyes and stood perfectly still. Her flesh began to quiver and undulate — a sight so horrible he thought this in itself would be the punishment. Then her appearance completely transformed. Her hair became a mass of writhing snakes, her now-naked flesh dark green, eyes blazing like malevolent rubies, nipples dripping blood, her intimate parts covered not with hair but with black, writhing insects.

Claude felt faint. Megaera changed back to her Germanic appearance with blonde, braided hair and fair skin. And clothed in the rough garment he had seen before. He sat down in the chair. She came over and put her hand on his shoulder.

“So you see.”

He looked up at her, relieved she had reverted to her prior appearance. It took a few minutes for his heart to cease pounding and his breath to fully return. When he felt stable enough to speak, he said, “You’re disguising your appearance.”

“Not exactly. I allowed you to see us as he will see us. He has poisoned his soul so it can only behold us as avengers of the offense he has committed. He is seeing what we are to him. He is seeing through the eyes of his tainted soul. You are seeing the beauty we possess and the good we do through avenging evil deeds. You are seeing us through your soul. Of course, besides the condemned beholding us in our horrific form, there will be other more *direct* things he will learn at our hands.”

He sat there, unable to respond.

“I’ll get you more beer,” she said.

As the two of them drank, Tisiphone retuned. Megaera got her a mug of beer. She joked about Marius and Philemon — “They’re funny. If it wasn’t for all the silly things they want to do, if they just got down to the business of laying me, we’d be done in no time.”— and the three of them transported back to the Blue Bridge.

\*\*\*\*

The photo shoot had ended. Allecto was talking with the bride and groom. The three of them smiled and laughed as they spoke.

“There she is,” Tisiphone said.

Claude look up. Allecto chatted happily. She and the bride embraced; she shook hands with the groom, and the knot of participants and onlookers broke up. The wedding party and the guests piled into various vehicles (the bride and groom into a white limousine) and drove away. Allecto joined them. In a moment, a figure appeared on the other side of the bridge. It was Michelle’s killer.

He walked an easy jaunt toward them. Tisiphone turned to him.

“Now justice will be done,” she said. “You can go.”

“Go. Don’t I get to see it?”

“You don’t want to see it,” Allecto said.

“I *do* want to see it.”

Megaera stepped toward him. He remembered how hideous she had looked when she transformed to her primal, hellish form.

“You need to go.”

He began to protest again. Megaera touched his shoulder. Claude found himself in his apartment. As he stood in the kitchen, blinking in surprise, the phone rang. It was Scott Pfitzner.

“Claude,” he said, “I’m throwing a party tonight. I think you ought to come.”

Scott had helped him through the depression that descended on him when Michelle was murdered; and when he broke up with Liliana – also a result of his depression.

He hesitated but then, knowing Scott would not allow him to say *no*, agreed. Things had been too unreal of late. He needed to plug into some normalcy. He dressed up and drove over to the party. He came home and fell into bed, exhausted and having drunk too much, at 1:00 a.m.

\*\*\*\*

He woke up in his bed. He was fully clothed. He heard a knocking at the door.

Still half in sleep, Claude stumbled to the door. When he opened it, he saw two men in suits and ties standing there. One of them held up a badge.

“Mr. Claude Holdridge?”

He nodded, still half-asleep.

“I am Detective R. Burghardt from the Grand Rapids Police; this is Detective Kimberly Parkening. We would like to ask you to come down to the station and answer a few questions about your whereabouts last night.”

“Whereabouts?”

“Sir, you need to come with us,” the

woman said. “It’s only for questioning.”

From her look, he got the idea refusal was not an option.

When he got to the station, the two of them took him in a small room and asked him where he was last night after 8:00. He told them he was at the party. They asked him if he knew a man and named Michelle’s killer. Had he seen him lately? Claude said he had not. They asked for the name of the man who threw the party. He gave them Scott’s name and address. After that, they both left the room. After maybe twenty minutes, Parkening asked if he would like some coffee. He said he would, and when she brought it back he asked why he was being held.

She mentioned that the man who killed Michelle had been murdered last night.

He wanted to say he was happy to hear this but knew better than to cast suspicion on himself.

“Well, that’s interesting,” he said.

“Very brutal murder.”

“I haven’t heard about it.”

Burghardt came back after about twenty minutes.

“Thank you for answering our questions, Mr. Holdridge. You can go now. We’re sorry for the inconvenience. If we have further questions, we will contact you.”

A uniformed officer drove him back home. He got on the internet and found the details of the murder.

Michelle’s killer had been stabbed to death – stabbed repeatedly, the reports he

read noted, and all over his body; the killing suggested he was tortured to death. Autopsy results said he had died from shock of blood loss. A lousy way to die, Claude mused. And the women from The Agency – Tisiphone, Allecto, and Megaera – would know how to make it excruciatingly unpleasant. Claude had not much believed in the supernatural. Now he knew it existed; and there was a place called Tartarus, the permanent home of the trio of Furies he had met lived. The torment of the man who had killed his cousin would become an ongoing thing.

Soon after he got home, Scott called.

“What the hell is going on, Claude?”

He told him about the police.

“They think you killed this guy?”

“I can see how they would suspect me.”

“Well, you have an alibi. We’ve got thirty people who saw you at the party, and you were until after midnight.”

Claude got cleaned up, sat down, and began to tackle the file of texts and emails he had received asking about what was going on. His phone sounded. It was Liliana.

“Claude, I heard. I’m so sorry all of this happened.”

He thanked her for her call. He had seen her last night at the party. They had talked a lot, though he had been too rattled by his encounter with the women from the Agency that much of their conversation had not sunk in.

“Look,” she said, the tone of her voice changing. “I’ve felt bad about our break-up. I’ve had a lot of time to think about it and

shouldn’t have walked out on you. Can we get together and talk about it? I really want to see if we can patch things up.”

He had begun to love Liliana and thought they might eventually marry. She had abruptly cut the relationship off. Now he saw some hope it might be restored. He talked more with Liliana. After she hung up, he answered the scores of texts he had received and then fell asleep from the stress of the last few days.

Even though he felt weariness, peace – peace because the right had prevailed – filled his soul. Justice had been done. He could rest once more.

\*\*\*\*

Claude woke. He sat up quickly because he heard noises. His eyes focus on Allecto. She was in the kitchen.

“I made some coffee and toasted myself a bagel. Hope you don’t mind,” she said, smiling.

He got up, still a little groggy. “No, it’s fine. And thank you...”

“Don’t talk about it,” she said, cutting him off. “It’s not something for which to be thankful. If a young maiden had not been murdered, we would not have had to do it at all.”

He nodded as he sat down at the kitchen table. Allecto looked as beautiful as ever. Today she did not wear her body suit but had on shorts and a tank top. She poured Claude a cup of coffee and toasted a bagel for him. It amused him that an ancient goddess was making him breakfast,

but he decided it would be best not to express the thought. When he had his food, she sat down across from him.

“I’ve come to discuss payment,” she said.

Tension arose in his chest. He had tried to find out how much the women would charge, but they had always obfuscated. He had no idea what he would have to pay them.

“Okay,” he said. And then, to ease the anxiety he felt, he added, “I hope it doesn’t clean out my bank account.”

“Your bank account won’t be affected at all. The payment we ask will be ongoing.”

His mouth felt dry. His anxiety rose even more.

“Ongoing in what sense?”

“In the sense that you will be compensating us for our service for the rest of your life.”

“How? How much do you want me to pay?”

She laughed. “You mortals think too much about money. Service means service.”





You served Tisiphone very well when you visited her in her favorite era of time. We don't have a lot of contact with human men, but when we do, and we find a man all of us like, we exact payment in a manner of exchange that is a little different from what they might expect."

His eyes got big. Allecto laughed again. She came around the side of his table, scooted him over so he only took up half the chair, and sat down on the other half. She put her arms around him and kissed him.

"Tisiphone liked you, as I said. And for her to like a man—given the line of work she enjoys when she isn't exacting vengeance on someone — says a great deal for you, Claudius. Megaera is eager to spend some time with you, but I drew the lot and get you first."

He licked his lips.

"You're dumbstruck, so I'll answer the question you're not able to articulate. This will go on as long as we enjoy it and as long as you're attractive to us. If we really like you, we might even grant you immortality. As for Liliana — what a lovely name — she will be good for you. She will never find out your occupation with us. We live outside of time, remember. So any liaisons will be concealed beyond detection — by mortals, anyway."

He felt her warmth. The he did what he had wanted to do from the moment he saw her. He reached up and touched the sides of her bristling old-style Afro hair-do. She laughed in delight and kissed him. Involuntarily his hands moved from her

shoulders downward to her sides. He put his thumbs on her breasts. She sighed with pleasure.

"Wonderful," she said. "Wonderful."

The two of them kissed, laughed, and hugged for time. At last, she leaned on him and breathed out a sigh.

"Let's go," she said.

They got up out of the chair and made their way to the bedroom. ❖

# “GRANDMOTHER”

by R.E. HENGSTERMAN

A low metal growl rises, and I leap from the bed.

Ten... nine.

By seven, she’s reached the rise and the intersection of Fletcher and Fields. Her brakes protest with a tinny squeal. By five, I’m half dressed. At three, the throaty rumble of the eight-cylinder engine grows.

By the time I reach zero, Grandmother has arrived. She slides from the bench seat of her station wagon and navigates the piles of dog shit left by our beagle. She is equal parts squat, heavy and gray. Her pink, black-strapped handbag drapes her forearm. Her coifed hair is motionless. She has pressed her clothing into fine lines of order.

Mother, Father, and Grandmother have a silent, transitory meeting on the lawn amongst the shit.

\*\*\*

In the kitchen, Grandmother unpacks her handbag: Kleenex, three pieces of bread, Pop Tarts®, a small change purse, cheese and crackers, a sleeve of thin mints, and a handful of peppermint candies. She is squat, heavy and gray but determined to ignore the angry pop of gas trapped within her arthritic joints as she prepares my

breakfast. On school days, Grandmother feeds me Pop Tarts® or Thomas’ English Muffins® slathered in butter. On the weekends, without Grandmother, I resort to sneaking dry oatmeal from the kitchen cabinet.

While I am at school Grandmother tackles the laundry and cleans the house with meticulous care. In the afternoon, with her chores complete, she appoints herself to the living room couch to watch *General Hospital*. After school, Grandmother chatters nonstop. She’s upset that Mikkos Cassadine has a plan to freeze the world using a weather machine.

\*\*\*

The following Monday, Grandmother was ill. There was no rumble. No tinny squeal. No announcement. Just Mother heavy-footing her way around the kitchen, slamming cabinets and cursing.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Grandmother is unreliable. I’m going to be late for work.”

Mother tells me Grandmother had visited Grandfather in the Army when they were dating and never left.

“Hung around,” Mother says. “Like a stray dog.”

Father says Grandmother is the reason he gets angry. But I believe Father enjoys being angry.

Mother tosses crackers in my lunchbox and says years back, Grandmother drove a red convertible, smoked cigarettes and killed her unborn baby in a car crash. My wrinkled and kind Grandmother is not a baby-killer.

Mother talks all the way to school.

The next day, when Grandmother is feeling better, I tell her what Mother told me. Grandmother says Father is an asshole and Mother is clueless. I've never heard Grandmother be foul-mouthed.

Grandmother never missed another day for the entire school year.

\*\*\*

In the summer Grandmother and I take the old, ugly wagon everywhere. I sit in the rear-facing, third-row way-back seat and watch the faces of terrified drivers who follow too close behind Grandmother, and her sudden, unplanned stops. I lip-read as their blood drains. Sometimes a smile jostled by fear escapes my lips. Most don't smile back. Instead, they honk, shake their fists and flip me the bird. Grandmother flashes a wolfish grin in the rearview before tapping the brakes again.

"Keep them off my rear," Grandmother says.

\*\*\*

Today we have lunch at the Apple

Knockers on Pawling. Grandmother and I are regulars. They have the best battered, deep-fried fish in town with large pieces of naked cod poking from the tiny bun. Apple Knockers should buy bigger buns.

Grandmother likes the house-made tartar sauce with her fish. I order the semi-sweet tangy chili sauce, a milkshake, side of homemade cinnamon-flavored applesauce and unsalted fries (you have to salt your own).

We sit in our favorite corner both varnished with a permanent layer of vegetable grease. As Grandmother wipes tartar sauce from her lips, I realize how ordinary we are.

After lunch, we shop at the Price Chopper. For Grandmother, it has the better coupons. For me, the better toy aisle: filled with jacks and paddle balls and weird gum that you stick to the end of a straw and blow into lopsided, ugly bubbles.

On the way home, Grandmother and I pass the Pentecostal Church. Grandmother says I attended daycare there when I was younger and she still worked at the department store. There's sadness in her voice. I search my memory but have no recollection of daycare or God or Grandmother working.

"I don't remember," I say, and her face brightens.

\*\*\*

We arrive home in time for Grandmother to settle into her soap. As *General Hospital* demands her attention, I

sneak into the basement and unlock the metal door housing the water well pump. The pump sits in a small stone room cut into the earth. The air inside is dank and reeks of musty dishwater. Using my father's wrench, I loosen a valve and let water spill onto the dirt floor.

When my parents return home from work that evening and Grandmother has darted from the house, I ask why they are so mean to Grandmother. Mother brushes me aside, and Father swats at the air above my head.

They prattle. Work this. Work that. There's no mention of the spotless house, the folded laundry or waxed linoleum floors. I wait several minutes and then interrupt.

"I think I hear water in the basement. Come quick," I say.

Father rushes into the basement while Mother grabs a handful of laundered towels. It's the most excitement our house has seen in weeks. Standing at the top of the stairs, I hear wet cotton socks slapping the concrete floor.

"Where's my wrench," Father yells.

I say nothing.

Mother and Father submarine into the low-slung pump room. The stone tomb muffles their cursing.

"Come here," Father screams.

I slip to the threshold of the pump room door, and Father tosses me a flashlight.

"Shine the light here," he says.

I position the light. "Not there, here!"

As Mother and Father scramble to stop the water, my hand hovers over the brass lock.

\*\*\*

Days later, Grandmother and I are on the couch. Mikkos Cassadine and his brothers, Victor and Tony, are held up at Wyndemere Castle on Spoon Island. Luke, Laura, and Robert Scorpio are in a desperate battle to stop the weather machine.

Grandmother sends me a look. She pinches her eyebrow into a curious arc, smiles, and turns up the volume as Mikkos is seconds away from flipping the switch and destroying the world. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**