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Page 1 – EXTRACTING DRAGONS by Cody Nowack. Mr. Nowack currently lives in southwest Montana where he and his wife own and operate *Bookies*--a franchise of bookmobiles and literary-themed bakeries. He has sold multiple short stories to a variety of markets, including *Every Day Fiction*, and has been represented by the Cyle Young Agency. When not barricaded in his office or running one of the book buses, he can be found hiking to the tops of mountains and, occasionally, on Twitter and @CodyNowack.

Page 8 – LINGERS by Arnaav Bellani. Mr. Bellani, second year engineering student at University of Toronto, is as fascinated by the magic of the universe as he is with the magic of words. One day, he aspires to be a published author and space researcher, with his feet grounded in science but head exploring galaxies unreachable and unimaginable.

Page 10 – HOW THE WOMEN BECOME LEMON TREES AND ALL YOUR DAUGHTERS BECOME LEMONS by db mcneill. Ms mcneill writes, “although I have not been prolific, over the years, my short fiction has been published in *eMuse*, *Powder Burn Flash*, *the Ranfurly Review* and *Bright Flash Literary Review*. One of my stories was a finalist for *Glimmertrain’s* Short Story Award and two others received *Allegory e-Zine* Honorable Mentions. I am also a proud recipient of Writing the Other’s Sentient Squid scholarship. My middle-grade science fiction novella, “The Pied Piper of St. May” is available on Amazon. I live and work in Colorado, just east of the Rocky Mountains, where I spend my days wrangling human children, other mammals, and most recently, a tortoise. If you look west, you can see me waving at you.”

Page 17 – HORIZON by Clint Stevenson. The author writes, “A native of San Antonio, Texas, I reside there with my wife, Sarah, heir, Cliff, and a retinue of furry companions. I write primarily science fiction, fantasy, and horror stories.”

Page 27 – ONE FOURTEEN AM by Edward. N. McConnell. Mr. McConnell writes flash fiction and short stories. To date his work has appeared in *Literally Stories*, *Terror House Magazine*, *Mad Swirl*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Rural Fiction Magazine*, *Corner Bar Magazine*, *MasticadoresIndia* and *Refuge Online Literary Journal*. His story *Where Harry’s Buried* was selected for inclusion in *The Best of Mad Swirl v2021*. He lives in West Des Moines, Iowa with his wife.



“EXTRACTING DRAGONS”

by CODY NOWACK

Those who deny the existence of dragons are often eaten by them. From within.—Ursula Le Guin

The smoke fidgeting inside the glass was a breath of moonlight, silver and bright. Thorne planned on starting with that one.

“Girl?”

Startled, Thorne dropped the pail at the sound of Stane’s voice, spilling snow. She was in the Rainbow Hut, which had earned its name because the jars—the globular bottles with bellies pumped full of every color of smoke imaginable—were stored there.

“Sorry,” said Thorne, righting the bucket. She pushed back a dark, messy curl, then she blew into her hands. Her fingers were numb. As was her face. As was her everything since it was winter and she was required to keep the Rainbow Hut full of snow.

“You clumsy, *clumsy* girl. You so much as scratch my property and I’ll chain you outside until the wolves find you.” Stane’s scalp flickered from white to red as he muttered how he regretted purchasing Thorne’s contract from that drunken sailor. “Now, come. We have an extraction. I have already sedated the patient and his mother is growing querulous.”

“Another? But I have plenty to get through yet. Some will soon be big enough to crack their jars. I can’t risk falling behind.”

Stane cocked a brow, causing Thorne to flinch. As with her previous masters, she was accustomed to his warnings.

“Are you disobeying an order, girl?”

“No.”

“No what?”

“No, sir.”

“Then come.”

Thorne dumped the pail’s contents into the pit that took up the center of the hut’s floor, then followed the healer. As she exited, the dragons, the colorful, fire-bright fumes imprisoned inside the glasses, twirled.

#

“Please, *please*, Healer! Start working on my son. He’s not well. I can’t have him waking up the same. Not after what he did to his father!”

Stane raised a hand to the pleading woman, his palm inches from her face. “I have corrected some of the most heinous individuals and not once was it because their mothers begged me to. So, if you wouldn’t mind, hold your tongue until I’m through.” The healer, unfazed by the woman’s venomous gaze, flicked his stare

to Thorne. She was standing near the fire, thawing her fingers. "What are you waiting for, instructions? Get moving."

Obedying, Thorne deposited the spherical jar on the table near the boy tied to the chair. He was shirtless, unconscious, gagged, and had dried blood spattered across his chest. The blood obviously wasn't his, though the scars, the dozen or so jagged lines crisscrossing one another from his clavicle to his nipples were. They reminded Thorne of her own disfigurements and of the monsters who gave them to her. But to avoid thinking about *them*, she glanced at the boy's face.

Targon.

Thorne knew him. He was around her age, fifteen or so, and was one of the many who hurled names at her whenever she walked through the village.

And now you're here, thought Thorne.

"The sage, girl, start burning the sage." Stane placed a thin clear hose by Targon's feet, aiming the sharpened side at the boy.

"Excuse me," said Targon's mother. Her stare crawled over Thorne. "Would it be possible for the girl to leave? It's known that people from the mountain islands can't be trusted."

"They can when they're my property," said Stane. He pulled on an ox-hide glove, a luxury he never extended to Thorne. "So, again--" He pressed a leather finger to his lips.

Hag.

After lighting the sage, suffocating the room with smoke and spice, Thorne took hold of her end of the tube, the smooth

end, placing it into the jar. As it *clinked* against the glass, Targon shifted. He moaned as though trapped in a nightmare.

"He's waking," cried Targon's mother. "See, Healer, you must begin this instant or--"

"Enough!" interrupted Stane. "One more outburst and I'll see to it you wind up in the chair next. Understand?"

Huffing, Targon's mother crossed her arms. Thorne thought she'd enjoy someone else being the cause of the healer's frustration for a change, but instead, she found herself on the verge of cowering. Stane was agitated. Incredibly so. Usually, that didn't bode well for her.

With the knife-like edge of the hose clamped between his thumb and forefinger, Stane moved toward the boy, then paused as he glanced at the bottle. "Where's the stopper?"

Thorne flushed. Dashing across the room to the fireplace, she picked the cork off the mantle.

"Sorry."

Raising his brow--giving Thorne her second warning of the morning--Stane crouched, pushing the sharpened rim of the hose against the meaty patch at the base of Targon's sternum, right beneath where his ribs connected. It lingered there a moment before he forced it through the skin. As blood seeped from the hole, wetting the outside of the tube along with Stane's gloves, the boy's eyes snapped open. He began screaming and writhing. His bindings bit into his flesh every time he jerked and, eventually, they split the skin at

his wrists and ankles.

“When I say so,” shouted Stane, inching the hose in deeper as Targon’s gag-diluted cries grew louder, “insert the cork!”

“Yes, sir.”

Thorne tightened her grip. Half a heartbeat later she watched as smoke blacker than a crow, brighter than obsidian, slithered out of the boy’s chest and into the tube. Like water the smog swam through the line, then splashed inside the glass, filling it.

“Now!”

Jamming the stopper in place, Thorne trapped the dragon at the same time Targon gave one last jolt, one final scream, before slumping in the chair.

“There,” said Stane. He ungagged the boy, transferring blood from his gloves to Targon’s chin. “Better?”

Targon drooled. His eyes dimmed like a pair of candles at the end of their wicks. Loose-lipped, he slurred something indecipherable. Stane called the impaired speech, heightened saliva, and darkened eyes side effects and swore they were temporary, but if they were, Thorne never witnessed improvements. Even Rorticia, whose dragon had been the first removal Thorne had assisted Stane with, still walked around with shadows clouding her gaze and a slur tattooed on her tongue.

“He’ll come around,” said Stane to Targon’s mother. Roughly, he plucked the tube from Targon’s chest as the boy slipped in and out of consciousness, then began applying a salve over the coin-sized hole. “But the good news is, his dragon has been

removed.”

“Oh, thank you, Healer! Thank you, thank you, thank you! You’re a gift from the heavens.”

Rolling her eyes, Thorne grabbed the bottle off the table. She had work to do. And her smile was getting harder to suppress. Something about Targon’s extraction . . . eased her.

#

Outside, the wind whipping, the snow slapping her face, Thorne cursed as she walked the wooded, uphill path between Stane’s home and the Rainbow Hut. She damned the healer first, then Targon’s mother, the hag, then Targon, and lastly Targon’s dragon.

“You’re lucky fresh extractions are warm,” said Thorne, the cold smacking her teeth. She squeezed the glass to her chest, the black ball of exhaust squirming. “If they weren’t, I’d start working on you now.”

It took Thorne another five minutes of trudging through the snow to crest the hill. From there, she decided to run the rest of the way. She often did so, for the last stretch sloped in her favor, only, this time, it ended up costing her dearly. As she ran, her breath producing clouds, she slipped on a patch of ice, then tripped on a tree root. Tumbling, she lost her handle on the jar. The chime of glass shattering came next.

“No!”

Ankle throbbing, Thorne scurried to her feet. She immediately spotted the pile of broken shards. The smoke once trapped inside the globe was now free, winking

above the breakage as it moved through the air like an eel in water.

“No-no-no--”

Thorne lunged at the dragon, but the insignificant, smog-made beast darted, then disappeared into the sky. All it left behind was the stink of burnt hair and wet stone.

#

Work hard, keep your head down, and hold your tongue.

That had become Thorne’s mantra since the incident. No way was she going to speak the truth, not when doing so ultimately meant she would have to answer to Stane. As her garden of scars and collection of fresh bruises attested, the healer’s punishments were severe. Besides, as far as Thorne knew, this had never happened. And if it had, none of the storytellers spoke of wild dragons.

“If someone saw,” said Thorne, dumping a fresh pail of powder into the Rainbow Hut’s pit a day later, “I would’ve already been disciplined.” Though her logic was sound, it provided little comfort. So, to stay in line with her advice, Thorne became a whirlwind, attacking her duties.

“You’re next,” Thorne said. She reached for a bottle. The smoke inside was gold. Once it was taken from the shelf it puffed, zigging and zagging. If her memory served her correctly, the dragon had been removed from a traveler last spring, from a man who assaulted a local farmer. Thorne remembered him well for both of his eyes were stitched shut, a choice he said he’d made after seeing the truth of the world.

Thorne scooped a handful of snow out

of the pit. She wished she could simply place the container into the powder and have that suffice, but she knew better. The process required a deliberate application. “Intention is required” Stane had told her. “You must *want* the dragon dead.”

Smearing the ice against the jar, Thorne gave all the intention she had. She inflated her mind with poisonous thoughts, envisioning the gold dragon suffering in every way possible. She repeated this for an hour, imagining and scouring, before peering into the glass.

“Another gone,” she said. The smoke was still there, of course, but it was motionless. It lay at the bottom of the sphere, its sparkle erased.

Thorne grinned. The sight of a deceased dragon never pleased her before, so why did it now? Was she starting to enjoy her duties? She wasn’t sure. But she could tell something was changing *inside* her.

Wishing to pocket as much of that feeling as possible, Thorne spent the rest of the day hungrily applying snow to jars, refusing to quit even when her fingers purpled. And since it also allowed her to forget about the dragon that had escaped, she carried the same pace into the next month.

#

“Your work’s improving.”

“Huh?” Thorne, on her knees, cramming snow into the pail, found Stane standing over her, the sun glinting off his dome.

“You’re moving faster, girl, more efficiently. At this rate, you’ll have the

Rainbow Hut cleared well before the end of winter. And that's even if we have an influx of extractions."

Thorne blinked. Was the healer . . . *complementing* her?

Without another word, Stane turned, pulling the wolf fur that lined his cloak against his neck, then stalked off into the trees.

#

Day in and day out Thorne worked well past the time her fingers felt like icicles. Two of them had even become frostbitten. The tips of her left pinky and right pointer were now plague-black. She likely would've suffered more, but because of her tremendous output over the last several weeks, and because Stane wished for Thorne's production to continue, the healer awarded her by treating the affected flesh and by loaning her a pair of tattered gloves. Also, he allowed her to head into the village to retrieve an assortment of herbs from Mallum, the herbalist, something he'd only trusted her with twice before.

#

"I'm here for Stane's order," said Thorne. As she had to, she craned her neck to the man warming his hands by the fire outside of his tent, flashing the tattoo that branded her as Stane's property. The inked image, which covered up the previous one of the rose, was of a thumbnailed moon.

Mallum, big of belly, broad of shoulders, scratched his beard. "What, the ol' healer afraid the cold will blacken his scalp? Oh, well. Has to make use of his pet somehow." He tossed a palm-sized sack at

Thorne. "Don't get any ideas about pinching any either. Mountain isle rubbish like you are always thieving."

Thorne bit her tongue. A petal of anger blossomed in her belly. She wanted to lash out at the herbalist, to burn him with what was boiling in her gut, her chest. She almost did, too. The words were perched on her lips, sharpened and ready, but after considering what Stane would do if she made a scene while dealing with a supplier, she swallowed her rage.

Slipping the bag into her moth-bitten, unfurred cloak, Thorne jammed her fingers into her armpits, then started on the trip back. She made it a quarter of a mile before spotting Targon. The boy sat with his arms wrapped around his knees near the tavern called *The Drowned Mountain*, rocking and humming.

Thorne increased her speed in hopes of avoiding Targon, but his dull, slurry voice stopped her in her tracks.

"He's coming, you know."

"Who is?"

Targon smiled, drool silvering his chin. "You'll see. You'll *all* see." He started laughing. His deep, throaty chuckles gurgled as the darkness rimming his eyes thickened.

#

That night, Thorne tossed and turned. The room Stane allowed her to use was drafty. And it had mice. An entire family of them lived inside her straw mattress. But the root of her late-night fits wasn't caused by cold air or rodents. It stemmed from a dream--a nightmare involving Targon. Every time Thorne closed her eyes

she heard a voice slurring in her ears, whispering the same thing over and over.

“He’s coming.”

“He’s coming.”

“He’s coming.”

#

Weeks slipped by, as did the rest of winter. Nearly all the snow had melted, including what was in the Rainbow Hut. Thorne had finished icing the jars a week ago, ridding the village of the extractions from the previous year, and now she was at the pond in the woods behind the healer’s home, rinsing the bottles so they could be used again. It wasn’t until she swiped a cloth through the last one, collecting red dragon soot, that she heard someone screaming.

Stane.

Dropping the container, the glass shattering against a log, Thorne bolted toward the commotion. Stane’s screams needled her ears as the woodland thinned. His house was on fire. Flames ate at the structure, its many, serpent-like tongues licking it on all sides. And whirling above the inferno, its black, smoky mass the size of a mountain, was a dragon. . . . *The dragon.* The monstrosity that had escaped had returned. Only now it was equipped with wings, a barbed tail, a spiked back, and a maw wide enough to swallow the sun.

Staggering, Thorne nearly fled but froze as the dragon bathed Stane’s already-burning home with a river of flame. There was something liberating about listening to the healer’s pain, hearing it steam off his tongue.

No one will help you, thought Thorne,

repeating what Stane used to say to her whenever she cried out during a punishment. *Because you’re not worth it.*

After another blast from the dragon, Stane’s roof collapsed. His cries drowned as embers shot into the air, rocketing through the belly of the beast. The view caused Thorne to shiver with ecstasy. It felt like the weight of the sky had slipped from her shoulders and that she could now fly, *fly* away, just like the dragon was doing.

Climbing higher and higher, the beast was nearly out of sight when its stare landed on Thorne, stealing her ability to move, to think. Its eyes were red, bright, and sloshed within their sockets.

He’s coming, rang in Thorne’s ears.

Flapping its wings, its body expelling waves of exhaust, the dragon growled, lurching forward. It arrived above Thorne faster than she could blink.

“Please--” Thorne choked on the smog, on the overwhelming stench of burnt hair and wet stone. Lightheaded, she fell to her knees. *“Don’t--”*

The dragon roared, shaking the world. The smoke making up its chest thinned as the ball of flame buried within its torso brightened.

Coughing, the fumes squirming inside her nose, her mouth, Thorne shielded herself. She could hardly see, let alone breathe, but she could hear. And just as she heard what she thought was the dragon gulping air, preparing for another fiery onslaught no doubt, her world turned completely black.

#

The blaze in her lungs woke her. Along with the smell of smoke.

Wheezing, Thorne coughed until her ribs felt ready to break. She still couldn't see. She thought she had gone blind, that maybe the dragon's fire had melted her eye-balls, but then she noticed movement. The darkness shifted here and there, thickening and thinning. It continued doing so until it cleared. That's when Thorne saw she wasn't near the woods anymore. She was in the village or, rather, what was left of it.

Rising, the sky choked with crimson clouds, Thorne took in the wreckage. Everything had burned. All that was left were smoldering piles of rubble, the blackened remains of villagers, and the unnerving rot of burnt--

Thorne retched.

"He didn't destroy everyone."

Wiping her mouth, Thorne whipped around. Targon stood a short distance away, nearly naked, his hands behind his back. Crouched beside him, its smoke swirling around the boy as though Targon himself were a doused flame, was the dragon.

"People like me were saved," said Targon, taking a step forward. His voice lost its slur, and his eyes had regained their glow. "People who've had their dragons ripped from their bodies were spared. People"--Targon cackled--"you thought were cured. But guess what, Thorne? They weren't and still aren't and never will be. Their dragons will return. Because that's the thing about monsters. They don't stay away for long."

Thorne shook her head, backing away as Targon's laughter spewed.

"What, scared?" Targon snapped into seriousness. A tangle of smoke curled off the dragon's skull. "You don't need to fear us. We won't burn you like we did the rest. Unlike them, you have something we want."

Targon took another step. Then one more. "You see, Thorne, dragons grow in the hearts of the mistreated, the misunderstood. In here"--he tapped his bare chest, his finger *thumping* against the field of scars, including the one from his extraction--"they eat our pain. That's why they're so powerful."

Bringing his hands forward, Targon let dangle the hose Stane had used for extractions, pointing the sharpened edge at Thorne. ❖

“LINGERS”

by ARNAAV BELLANI

The stars here are so pretty.

When I wake up, that’s what I think. I feel last night lingering on. I remember my soul singing at the sight of those sparkling gemstones against the blanket of darkness. It has been ages since I have caught a glimpse of a sky like that. So devoid of floating sand. So devoid of nightmares. So filled with dreams.

I swallow, testing my throat. It was still bad. I try to clear it, but like the night, my cold lingers on. I stagger to the bathroom. My mom is asleep on the couch. In her sleep, she looks even more tired. I haven’t been giving her the best of times. But at least I am better than my abusive father.

God, I hate him so much. The occasional slap had been fine. But he crossed the line when he came at us with the knife. That fear lingers on too. I cough up some phlegm. My head pounds. My eyes burn. My heart weeps. We are so far from home. Just me and Mom. In my dad’s vehicle. Lots of distance separates us now, and not all of it physical.

“Do you want breakfast?” Mom is awake now.

“Please,” I beg pathetically. “Let me go out-

side today. I will stay hidden.” That was vital. We were on the run, after all.

“No,” Mom replied angrily. “Shut up and EAT.”

Oh yes, I hate her too.

#

“You look funny,” Gaia says.

She is pretty. About my age, which is not a lot to most adults. But to the cosmos, it’s an even more insignificant blip. Funny how we think we matter so much.

“Just the cold,” I say, coughing. Unknown to my mother, I had been sneaking out to see the stars everyday. A few days ago, I found a companion.

“No,” she giggles. “Just in general. You look funny. Different.”

She is smart. I *am* different. “In a good way, right?”

She smiles and grabs my hand. “There are 200 sextillion stars. All slightly different. But gemstones just the same.”

I leave her hand. “I am sick. Infectious.”

She chuckles and grabs my hand again. “If I fear a tiny cold, how will I visit the stars?”

“That’s probably not all it’s cooked up to

be. Once you get there, they will lose their magic. Novelty wears off.”

“Only if you stop stargazing. And...star-hopping.”

#

When I get back, Mom is waiting. She looks at me sadly. “We can’t stay here anymore.”

When a star dies, it explodes in a brilliant flash of light. They call it a supernova. That’s how my heart felt. “No, Mum. I am not leaving.”

She doesn’t listen to me.

As our massive saucer lifts into the air, I think about my time on this blue-green planet. It’s so beautiful. There is nothing quite like it. If only Gaia realizes.

“You didn’t meet anyone, did you?”

I don’t answer.

“Good,” my mom says. “I liked these people. I wouldn’t want them to die because you infected them with something they have zero immunity for.”

I look at her in horror. But our planets were so similar. Yes, ours was choked with pollution. Yes, the stars were permanently hidden from us. But, apart from that, we were decently similar. Perhaps it wasn’t so bad after all. Just a cold, that’s what she had said, hadn’t she? That’s right. I would see her when she came star-hopping.

Fear lingers, but hope lingers longer and harder than all. ❖



“HOW THE WOMEN BECOME LEMON TREES AND ALL YOUR DAUGHTERS BECOME LEMONS”

by db mcneill

You climb the hill where the old man sits and tells stories. You come here every day. The boy comes every day too. The boy sets up his table, his water, his ice. He stirs honey into the water. You think about the ice. Someone somewhere still has electricity. Maybe it's the boy. Maybe he steals the ice. You don't care. It's less lonely to spend the day here than at home. The boy squeezes a lemon into the sweet water. You wince.

“Why do you do that?” you ask the boy.

“I miss my mother,” he says softly.

#

The old man begins to speak. He is talking to the boy. You listen. The old man says:

“Maybe you've heard the story before. The one about the women born from lemons? No? Once I might have said to ask your mother, but well, you know. It's an old story. Yes, I know, all my stories are old.”

The old man sighs and continues.

“This is a story about a prince who traveled across the seasons in search of a wife. All of the seasons were like women, but also like gods. Winter turned him away. Fall turned him away. Summer turned him away too. But Spring gave him three lemons from which three women were born

when the rind was cut away”.

The boy leans toward the old man and whispers.

“What?” asks the old man.

The boy speaks again, softly.

The old man shakes his head.

“No, Spring did not give him three brides. Yes, it was easy to imagine three women in the days of the story. No, it is not absurd. I mean, maybe it is, but not for that reason.”

“The prince was supposed to go home, sit by the palace well, and cut the lemons open one at a time. He was told to offer water to the woman as soon as she sprang from the lemon. If he did this, the woman born from the lemon would become his bride. But he was so overwhelmed by the beauty of the first woman that he could not move. He could not speak. He certainly could not offer water. The woman evaporated like mist.”

“The same thing happened with the second lemon. So, before he opened the third and final lemon, he closed his eyes, so it didn't happen again. The beautiful woman born from that lemon stayed and was meant to become his bride.”

The old man looks to the boy who speaks so softly you cannot hear him. The old man responds in an oddly loud voice.

“No, I don’t know why he didn’t get the water ready before he cut the lemons. Yes, I agree that would have been wise.”

“After he offered the water, the prince opened his eyes and saw his bride. She had lavender eyes, and pale, pale skin that sparkled like diamonds. Her hair shone like the sun.”

“Eager to display his bride to the world, he told her to wait by the well while he ran to get her fine clothes and jewels. She did not want them, but he insisted. As the bride waited alone, an ugly woman came along and in a fit of jealousy, killed his beautiful bride”.

The boy speaks to the old man again, still too quiet for you to hear. The old man chuckles.

“Why didn’t the prince take his bride with him? I don’t know that either. Yes, I agree that would have been wise too. Perhaps there’s a version of this story that makes more sense. Maybe the bride is naked in some versions. But that’s not the story I know”.

“When the prince returned, the ugly woman told him that she was his beautiful his bride, but in his absence, she had been bewitched and he believed her, though she was ugly and cruel”.

“But in the time it took to prepare for the wedding, a lemon tree grew from the blood of his true bride and when he cut open a lemon from that tree, his bride was reborn. This was how the ugly woman’s treachery was revealed. The beautiful bride did not allow the ugly woman to be punished, but still she sent the ugly woman

away”.

“And here is something I know for sure,” said the old man, waving his hand to signal that his talking nearly was done. “I know this story isn’t an honest one, but like many dishonest stories, it isn’t entirely untrue either”.

The boy whispers again, and the old man shakes his head.

“What do I mean? Well, I’ll tell you. When women are born from lemons to lemons they must return”.

#

After the story is done, you stand. You stretch. You incline your head to the old man and the boy. The boy inclines his head to you. A tear has traced a track down the boy’s dirty face. The old man stares into the distance, neither speaking nor moving.

You walk back down the hill to your home. The garden is overrun with weeds, but it is still a garden. You reach through the weeds to pull a cucumber from the vine. You bite through the rind to where the flesh of cucumber is soft and watery. The cucumber tastes like lemons.

The asparagus and wild strawberries taste like lemons. The peppers taste like lemons too. There’s a strange sweetness under the flavor of lemon. The sweetness makes your stomach spasm and water runs from your eyes. Or maybe those are tears. It’s hard to tell. It’s not just the boy. You cry so often now, you don’t notice anymore when it happens.

#

The next day, you climb the hill again. You hear the old man talking to the boy.

You sit on the ground behind them. The old man says:

“You tell me I am not your grandfather. You tell me to stop telling stories, that the stories don’t matter anymore. You are wrong. I am everyone’s grandfather. And stories are all that matter”.

“I told you about the women born from lemons, remember? Remember that ugly woman in the story? She wasn’t really ugly. She was just a woman, an ordinary woman. Her beauty would not have dazzled you till you were unable to speak. She did not have lavender eyes. She did not have skin that sparkled like diamonds. Her hair didn’t shine like the sun.”

“She had big brown eyes and back then, her dark brown skin was smooth and soft. Her reddish-black hair curled around her face and fell to her neck and shoulders. She had hips wide enough for a small child to rest comfortably and she had strong, busy hands. She wasn’t a princess born from a lemon. But she wasn’t ugly either”.

“She had been the beloved of the prince, or so he had told her and so she had believed. She was heavy with his child when he ran away, telling all who would listen that he was in search of a bride. She cried over his betrayal, but she was too kind and too curious to be angry”.

“When he returned, she went to the palace to see his bride, to see who the prince had chosen to love in her place. She met the bride beside the fountain when the prince ran to the palace in search of finery and sparkling gems to adorn his bride”.

The woman and the bride sat together

by the fountain and the woman told the bride her story. The woman told the bride how the prince had deceived and betrayed her, how the woman would soon give birth to the prince’s son, the son she had foolishly believed would be his heir”.

“Fragile, and distraught that her betrothed was a dishonest man, the bride plunged a knife into her heart, and died there beside the fountain”.

The boy murmured to the old man. The old man shook his head.

“No, I don’t know where the bride got the knife. Maybe it came from the lemon too.”

#

That night, you sit in your darkened home. You think about the boy and his ice. Maybe everyone’s electricity didn’t go off. Maybe you just didn’t pay the bill. Why would anyone be paying bills? You look at the pile of laundry in the corner. The last time you spoke to your wife, you argued, and she’d thrown the laundry down in frustration.

You remember how her lavender eyes flashed in that day, how her hair shone like the sun, how her skin had sparkled in the morning light. You don’t remember why you argued, only that you were both very angry. You think about your wife, and you think about your three daughters. A pit opens inside you. You begin to cry. Again.

You walk outside to the garden and look at the moon. It looks like a big yellow lemon hanging in the sky. The air smells of lemons. You lay down on the soft soil of your garden and weep yourself to sleep.

#

When you awake the next day in the garden, you are dirty and sore. You wonder how long you've been wearing these same clothes and realize you don't care. You pee into your cucumbers. You weren't going to eat them anyway. You put your clothes in order, more or less, and walk up the hill. You are grateful that the old man is there every day now. You don't remember him from before. But you are so lonely, and his stories are soothing, even if he's really only speaking to the boy.

He is still telling the story and about the women born from lemons. The old man says:

"The woman was afraid and hid in a tree. It wasn't easy to climb because she was so very pregnant, but she was young and healthy, so up she went. When the prince saw the bloody body of his betrothed beside the fountain, he wailed and pulled his hair. He smeared her blood across his face and screamed to the heavens".

The woman in the tree cried too, but silently. She cried for herself, for her son and for the woman born from the lemon. She must have moved when she was crying, even though her tears made no sound, because the prince saw her there. He called her a murderer. She never claimed to be the bride. That part of the story is a lie. The prince was always a liar".

"Hmmm?" the old man leans towards the boy

"Oh, I know because I know," the old man replies.

"The woman did cry out that she was

pregnant when they threw her in a fetid, stinking cell, although it was obvious to anyone with eyes. She begged her guards to take the baby somewhere safe and clean when he was born on the dirty prison floor. She told them he was the prince's own son. The prince did not confess the truth of her words, and no one believed her. This is often the way with princes. No one took the baby somewhere safe or clean. They left him with her in the cell".

"She nursed the baby and wrapped her body around him to keep him warm when the cell grew cold. She shooed the vermin from him and nearly starved to feed him as he grew. She somehow kept him healthy for years in that awful place as time crawled ever onward".

"And as I said before, a tree had grown from the bride's grave. It was a lemon tree, of course. When the first lemon grew ripe on its branches, the prince rejoiced, plucked and cut the lemon, and his bride was reborn. They finally were married and had many, many children."

"And they lived happily ever after?" you ask.

The old man coughs and turns to glare at you. The old man says:

"The prince did not deserve happiness, or children, or a beautiful bride, but he had them all. He had them all until the day his bride learned about the woman and her baby in the prince's prison. She demanded that they be freed, but first that they be brought to her rooms so she could feed and comfort them. Everyone praised the kindness of the lemon bride, as if the woman

and the prince's son didn't simply deserve some comfort after their long, unearned imprisonment".

"Because the bride was created by Spring, she was from the gods. Her primary power was beauty, but the seed in her heart granted her power to grant power. She gave the woman and the prince's son the gifts of wishes and long life. She gave them food, and a home that was far, far away. People claimed it was banishment, but really, the bride couldn't bear to see them because they were an everlasting reminder that she was married to a terrible man".

"As generations passed, the beauty of the lemon bride spread throughout the land. Eventually, the woman and the prince's son were the last true humans in the land. Everyone else carried the blood of the lemon bride. Everyone was bright and beautiful, but the sons never shone quite as bright as the daughters. It wasn't the sons' fault. They were only children".

"What?" the old man leans toward the boy and goes on.

"No, no one knows why. Not really."

The old man stops talking for a moment, turns away from the boy and turns to look at you. You feel self-conscious and attempt to brush the dirt off your wrinkled clothes. The old man says:

"Things were good, really. The lemon bride's beauty and kindness spread throughout the land with her children, her grandchildren, and their grandchildren. These qualities outshone those of the prince, and the people were better for it. But some people appreciate nothing. Some

people wish for too much."

The old man stares at you for a long time, and slowly realization dawns. You think of a day by the river, further down the hill, far behind your house. It was the day you met the witch by the river and made a wish. You leap up, away from the boy and the old man. You run and you run and you run.

You run down the hill, past your house, through the groves of lemon trees, all the way to the river to where an old, old witch sits on the rocks beside a waterfall. It had once been a beautiful, mysterious place, before the women became lemon trees and all your daughters became lemons, but now it smells of citrus and the sun shines too bright.

Your wife and daughters used to come here to listen to the witch sing and to ask her questions, but until the argument with your wife, you and the witch had never spoken.

"You did this!" you shout, waving your arms at the trees. You think about that day when she'd given you a pure white rock to throw in the river, a rock to wish on, a rock to make your dreams come true.

"No," she says gently, shaking her head. "I did not. You did this. It was you."

"What?" you demand angrily. You are surprised at the beauty of the old witch, sitting in the sun with the water swirling around her toes. Strangely, her beauty makes you angrier.

The witch smiles at you sadly, her dark skin crinkling around her deep brown eyes. She nods and turns towards you. "You

wished that you and your wife did not quarrel," she said, "did you not?"

You don't respond.

"You wished for all women to be more giving, to be better listeners?"

You say nothing but your mouth opens as you realize what the old witch means.

"Does a lemon tree not give you lemons? What makes a better listener than a tree?"

She spreads her hands out on her lap, and continues, "When did you last quarrel with your wife?"

You take a deep breath as she turns away from you to contemplate the rushing water. It sparkles as it splashes over the stones. The air smells of lemons.

"You twisted my wish," you say.

"I did not," she replies. "I didn't think much of your wish at all. Some people wish for too much," she says, echoing the old storyteller on the hill.

"I am too old and too tired for such deviousness, even if I think it's earned," the old witch says, turning back to watch the water. She continues speaking so softly that you can barely hear her. "I do think it was earned."

"Take it back!" you cry.

"I cannot," the old witch replies. You notice her fingers. What you thought were rings were leaves, shiny and green, sprouting from her knuckles. She smiles at you as she stands and begins to change.

"Wait! Wait! I don't want this," you cry, "Who can help me?"

"My son, maybe," she says, "You can try to convince him, but," she trails off and

shrugs. "He is not young. He is young enough for wish magic, but maybe not young enough to be here, in this lemon grove. Not anymore." She waves her branch-like arms to indicate the trees around her.

"Your son?" you ask, hoping for more before this woman becomes a lemon tree. She is the last to change, perhaps, but she is changing. Still, you are angry. "What son should be so lucky to still have his mother?" Surely it isn't the boy. The boy has said as much.

"Yes, my son," says the witch, "my son and the prince's."

She gestures up the hill. "He likes to sit up there and tell stories. But I am done with stories. I am tired," the old witch says, her voice creaking. "I am too tired for more stories. I am too tired for anger. I am too tired for you."

She seems as if she is about to say more but instead, she sighs and stretches to her full height. She spreads her arms, her branches, as if to embrace the river. Her leaves shiver in the wind, scattering light, as she grows taller and taller, reaching towards the sun. You turn and run up the hill.

#

You run as fast as your body allows, past your garden, past your house, up to the top of the hill. But when you arrive, there is no one there but the boy. The boy with his honey water and lemons.

"Where is the old man?" you demand. The boy stares. You are crying again. Your tears run into your mouth, not salty, but lemon-flavored and sour.

“Where is the old man?” you ask again.

The boy shrugs and points to the sky.
He squeezes another lemon into the cold,
sweet water. ❖



“HORIZON”

by CLINT STEVENSON

Horizon continued to burn.

Jutting from the King’s Tower in the mountainside, Markolyss bent his neck over the balcony and looked down upon the tiny figures below. They hurled stones and other pieces of rubble at His Majesty’s soldiers and screamed for the king’s head. On every street, buildings emitted dark smoke and flames. Here in the main keep, where the king himself lay ill, the chaos hadn’t reached them, for now. Judging from the vicious pandemonium he watched below, Second Markolyss thought it to only be a matter of time before they fell victim to the citizens of Horizon.

Better than facing the hooved-folk again. He’d sooner hand himself over to the bloodthirsty crowd before facing the hordes of those monsters again.

Gazing upward, he studied the world above. The sky was in disarray, the colors of dark pink and gray littering the world above, a beautiful sort of chaos. Off to the west, the sun was falling fast. It’d be dark in a few hours. Then, the *real* chaos would begin. Peasants would leave their homes as they’d done for several weeks, eager to roam the streets like hungry packs of wolves, searching to prey on anyone loyal to the Damaris bloodline, or, for the thrill of wreaking havoc upon those in their way.

Markolyss chuckled, shaking his head at the absurdity of it all. Every uprising was the same, he’d been through a couple of them now. Another rebellion, another king to make false promises until His subjects had endured enough of the lies, the taxes, enough of the starving, of war and death. But Markolyss thought a terrible ruler was only the *excuse* for violence.

The stronger their numbers had grown each night, the more feral the packs had become. The night before, they’d overran the army’s barracks in the very heart of Horizon, within the mountain of which the main keep itself sat upon. Markolyss had friends there, or acquaintances at least. By now, they were either burnt to a crisp, hanging off the city walls, or torn to ribbons as the queen had been only two nights before. But then, Markolyss thought, perhaps she should’ve stayed within the walls of the keep, if she was so wise as she’d proclaimed herself to be when Markolyss advised her not to leave the confines of the keep amidst the havoc, then maybe she’d still be alive. Markolyss had been tired of the nagging Patraean slut the hour he’d first set eyes upon her. Certainly, no peasant wished to see and hear the false pretenses of the tyrant’s wife, the same tyrant who’d ravaged their land to claim its

throne. Markolyss had laughed at her stupidity in his cups that same evening. Too long had his accent *offended* her grace's ears. He had no quarrels with maintaining a silent satisfaction at her death, and so now, as he watched the bloody rabble below, he chuckled some more for good measure.

"Second Markolyss," came a formal tone. In the doorway of the King's Tower stood Old Himby. Markolyss liked to call him that mainly for his age at such a low rank, being little more than an orderly in the Damaris household guard. Regardless of his lowly status, he wore a tabard of black and sunburnt orange, the colors of the Damaris banner, and carried a sword at his hip.

Behind the old man stood a fellow around Markolyss's own age. Skinny for a member of the High Council, Lord Corrotto was immediately recognizable.

"Have we been called to the gates for a final stand?" asked Markolyss.

"Quite the opposite, Second Markolyss," began Corrotto. "The remaining council members have decided to move His Majesty to his holdings in the far north, within the fortress of Oakenfor."

Markolyss raised an eyebrow at the orders. Not at the decision, but the fact that Commander Eyenard had *obeyed* such an order in light of the dwindling High Council's seizure of power over their ill king. Eyenard could have easily refused any order coming from remaining members of the High Council still within the keep's walls. They truly must be afraid the keep

would fall this night, or even they wouldn't have considered the extreme option.

"Where is Commander Eyenard?" he asked.

Mustache quivering, the orderly was about to speak when the councilman placed a hand on the old man's frail shoulder.

"I fear our dear commander was last seen making haste from the city under the guise of a peasant woman. The High Council has taken the abandonment of His Majesty as a sign of treason and forfeit of his title."

Markolyss didn't bother to question his superior's abandonment any further. In a way, he wasn't surprised. The man had always come off to Markolyss as a dull-headed sot.

Just another peacock in His Majesty's service. More prone to gaining a promotion through his family name than his deeds, quite unlike the Second's own humble beginnings. "Ready my patrol then Old Hi—" then corrected himself, "Himby. And see to it that th—"

"If I may!" interjected Himby. His mustache was so big it appeared to wriggle with every word, something Markolyss had always found amusing. It might've been the only reason he liked the man. Of course, he'd had lesser reasons for hating a man. Looks could be devious.

The old man gave an uneasy glance to the younger man behind him, as if he were asking permission to share a secret. "There were...further orders," Himby continued.

"Go on," Markolyss said, and brought a

half-empty goblet of wine to his lips. One of the king's own, he noticed, looking at the thin inlay of gold that wrapped around the goblet like vines. He took another sip. It wasn't as if the king would miss it when his fever finally took him. *Only a matter of time.* That is, if his own council did not depose of him first.

"The council," Himby began. "Wishes you, Second Markolyss, to find a...a bastard within the walls of the keep in order to fill in the place of our late prince, Umathor."

Curious, Markolyss thought. To his knowledge, the king had never taken a mistress before, despite the hag he'd shared a bed that'd been called *queen*.

"What heir? Is there some well-kept secret I am not privy to?"

"None, Second Markolyss," replied Corrotto. "The council did not further the message, nor did we relay it. Swift action must be taken at once, sir. So says the council, the word of our king."

Then, Corrotto handed Himby a piece of parchment.

When Markolyss took it, he saw the ink was still wet. All of this urgency was beginning to rub Markolyss the wrong way. He wasn't even sure he wanted to read the words on the parchment. This was all getting too serious. The king, deathly ill in his bed, the riots, the need for an heir to appear from thin air...all of it, it was far too much. He'd need another drink.

Once he'd finished scrolling across the page a few times, he let loose the parchment, allowing it to float near the crackling hearth.

"Fuck," he muttered

"My Second? Did you say something?" asked Corrotto.

"Mm," he said. "Nothing."

Not only was he to escort the king, ill in his bed, which might become his deathbed at any moment, but he also must snatch a babe from his mother's breasts. The parchment had the signatures of all remaining twelve members of the High Council, so it must be true. When he thought about it, it did make some sense. If the king was to die without issue, then who would further the Damaris line? There wasn't an ounce of Damaris blood still pumping within the kingdom or the city of Horizon, aside from the king's own of course.

"Himby," Markolyss said, and then turned his attention back to the peasant mobs who continued to pelt merchants, nobles, and soldiers alike. Himby stood at attention waiting for the Second's orders.

"Take two men with you and go into the servant's quarters. When you get there...pick a boy."

A long pause passed between the two men as they no doubt were contemplating whether this action would damn each of their souls. Forever was a long time to suffer for the sins one commits while living, and Markolyss couldn't help but agree with the god's assessment that perhaps there *were* actions too damnable in which to achieve redemption. Markolyss considered himself beyond it. What was one more sin added to the list of horrors the Second had carried out himself in his

days. He'd killed prisoners, women, the old, the sick, the poor and the noble. Never had he stolen children though. *There's a first for everything I suppose.*

Markolyss thought he noticed one tearful eye in the old man's tormented stare, but at that moment, Himby shaped up and nodded. "Yes, my Second. It shall be done."

As Himby turned to leave, Corrotto stepped inside the king's chambers. As if he hadn't taken notice to the king before, he sauntered slowly beside His Majesty's side. Placing a hand on the king's sweaty, pale face. His eyes met with Markolyss's own, and for the first time he saw fear there. Trembling fear. This man was scared to death.

"The king will die," said Corrotto.

Markolyss wanted to punch him in his nose for stating the obvious, but the man was a member of the High Council for a reason. To strike a man of the High Council would win him no favors, and if the rumors he heard were true, Corrotto had enough coin to last his future bloodline a dozen generations over.

"Perhaps, but not this night. The surgeon has assured me."

Corrotto gave a short, unstable laugh as he rubbed his hands across his chest, as if he were brushing away some ugly truth from his conscience. "Hear me, Second. The keep will fall tonight. Last night, when armed peasants stormed the barracks, they stole siege equipment." The rich lord sighed heavily. "They have battering rams, Second Markolyss, and they are rolling to

the gates as we speak."

"Ah," mumbled Markolyss, quickly understanding the urgency. "Where are the other members of the High Council? Sinking down with the ship are they?"

Corrotto smiled weakly. "I fear none of them, nor I, are *that* noble. No, I wish to serve in my king's escape, as useless as my skills in arms might be, perhaps my coin purse may serve in one way or another."

"Try lying to me again," he growled, "and I'll stave in your face. You pay me once we get to Oakenfor, and you say *nothing*." He was sure to make his last word sink in. "Not to my men when they get here, not to anyone."

"What is your price?"

"A fortune," said Second Markolyss, and this time, the rich lord really did smile, wide and full of understanding.

"Finally," he said. "A man who speaks my language. You will have what you ask. Keep me alive, you will have all you desire and more."

Markolyss nodded, then stared down on the city once again. From the tower, everything was visible, even the port. A long way off from where they stood now. In the back of his mind, there was real doubt there. But as always, he kept it to himself and soldiered on, fighting away the constant fear. There was no place for it this night.

#

Markolyss stared at the wriggling infant with disbelief. At first, he thought it was looking up at him until he realized it was looking at nothing. Its clouded, white eyes

said it all.

“It’s blind,” he said, not knowing to either be stricken more with utter bewilderment or anger. “How the f—” he began to say, but instead just stood there, shaking his head with a hand over his eyes. Incompetence was something Second Markolyss had been accustomed to, but this...it appeared there were levels of incompetence.

They stood outside one of the many mountain passes leading close to the port of Horizon. Torches lined the sides of the passageway, but none led to their destination. A door of hidden stone cracked open a mite as several men under his command grunted as they used the limits of their strength to push the door open inch by inch.

Lucky bastards.

The six fellows he’d brought along had been allowed to abandon their posts at the soon-to-be rubble of a keep in order to serve their king as his escort, half of them serving little more as pack mules. In a way, Markolyss thought, he’d saved their lives by ordering them along.

Behind four men pushing the door, two more of the escort stood beside His Majesty. The king lay still, sweating profusely in the bed he’d been carried down from his chambers in. The whole bed was soaking wet, and the smell of the king might’ve rivaled that of a latrine. The two men assigned to carry His Majesty stood testament to the smell as their faces contorted and turned away from the stench from time to time, trying their best to catch

a breath of clean air.

The Second of His Majesty’s household guard inspected the infant again. It cooed softly. Both eyes shone as gray as the stone walls within the great mountain-keep. There was no denying the babe’s condition.

“My Second, it was all the maid servants had. This one was born several months ago. Also...it is my duty to correct my Second...”

Markolyss looked up as the man’s mustache flinched once again. “Yes?”

“The babe is blind in only *one*...eye. If you look closely, its right eye is a light bluish hue. Other than the minor defect, I am told the child is healthy.”

Corrotto spoke up from his place in the darkness. “It’ll serve for our purposes.”

Attaching a dagger to a small sheath in his belt, Markolyss smiled wide. Maids, tavern wenches, and noble ladies alike might have found the Second rather handsome if it hadn’t been for the mouthful of blackened and brown teeth. Only half of his teeth had survived his rise to Second.

“Don’t look so glum, man!” Markolyss rejoiced as his rotten breath splashed moist spittle onto the old man’s face. “This small act of evil will keep the kingdom united under one banner.” But he knew it to be a lie, as four noble lords still held keeps in their own name. But *only* four. Their holdings would fall quickly if this Damaris king survived, or his new heir. Markolyss could see it now...

If the king did indeed pass, Corrotto would form a new High Council along with

the other councilmen who'd abandoned Horizon. They would put down this rebellion in the Damaris name until this infant came of age. A puppet king, one whom the councilman could form to their own liking, adhering to each of their own desires, thanks to their wise tutelage.

A good man might slaughter Corrotto, here and now, and leave this dying king to his fate. But then, Markolyss wasn't still alive because he'd lived as a saint. No longer was he the youth he once was, the dashing warrior hellbent on keeping the king's peace. No, the glory and honor it was to serve had been struck from his heart long ago, leaving a bloody path of friends and foe along the way. The best he could hope for now was to survive this task, take the gold, and live out his days in relative comfort.

Markolyss continued, "Our misdeeds are carried out with honor intact!" *Blasphemy.* Markolyss wanted to laugh aloud at his own reassurances. When action required work that put aside one's honor, the reward was often a hefty pile of gold. Markolyss hadn't a doubt that gold weighed more than honor. Spotting the council member in the darkness of the passage, he guessed this man knew that too. Anyways, what use was gold if you were too dead to spend it?

#

The door opened to a long tunnel of darkness, a cavernous path that would lead them to safety. Markolyss instructed a few of the men to make a final sweep of the nearby corridors and stairways, making

doubly sure that the inhabitants and noble refugees taking sanctuary in the keep would not follow them to the port.

The orderly remained vigil in his demeanor, unsure whether he'd be invited along. After all, he was slow of foot, and not too keen on battling the mobs he'd witnessed murder His Majesty's soldiers in the streets. "My Second, may I inquire my place in our king's escape?"

"Defend the passage, Himby. When the city falls, your sacrifice will be among those we sing of in the days to come." His words came out so sincere even Markolyss almost believed them. There was some remorse there, behind the coils of snakes that wrapped around his heart, but not near enough that he'd sacrifice his own life for that of an elderly man he'd only known through a quick nod or smile as they passed each other within the keep. The man was dispensable, and they both knew it.

Standing to attention, the old man said dutifully, "With my life, my Second, I shall defend the passage with my life."

"There's a good man."

His orders were to save the king and his heir from the deathtrap of a keep, not the rest of his subjects living lives of luxury within its walls. Besides Corrotto, of course. No remorse, and no regrets. Second Markolyss had no place for it. Not when a fortune was within his grasp.

Far beneath the keep, they could still make out the roaring above ground as thousands of violent and hungry mouths screamed for the king's death.

“From tyranny deliver us!” he thought he heard.

“Damaris is death!” another shouted.

“Noble blood is traitor’s blood!”

And from more than a few, “Bastards!”

A stout man by the name Cronsby itched at a scab on his neck, one of the two men Markolyss had assigned to carry the king, and turned to the other man carrying the king’s bed from the back. “I’ll have a wager if you’ll have it...”

Yanne, a grizzled veteran by the scar he bore across from one side of his face to the other, yawned aloud. “You haven’t the coin. Trust me, I know, I won our last wager.”

“It’ll be a chance to win it back! Double or nothin’! I’ll pay your greedy hide the first chance we get in Oakenfor. My word,” said Cronsby. Solemnly, he placed a palm against his heart.

“Your word,” said Yanne.

Cronsby shot him a wolfish grin. “I wager, when the stones start flying, I’ll come out unscathed. Not a drop of blood will be spilled from my body!”

Markolyss shook his head at the folly. “Do you see the future, boy?”

Cronsby shot up a finger. “Ah! Alas I am without the gift of foresight, but...” and he looked around at each man so that he was sure to catch their eyes, “A year prior, I consulted with a woman who claimed I would die at ninety, without ever losing a drop of blood to ill will. A year later, and I have suffered nothing more than bruises in the practice yard.”

“Did you happen to pay for the whore’s

advice as well as her company?” asked Yanne, and the other men laughed as they threw cloaks around their chainmail; weak disguises considering they’d soon be entering a city in riot carrying a sick man in bed. Despite the pointlessness, Markolyss handed Corrotto a ragged cloak before wrapping his own around his shoulders.

#

They must’ve been walking for half an hour before slowing to a halt. It had to be near freezing as Markolyss saw his breath through cracks of light coming out of another hidden door of mountain-stone that would lead them into the city.

With the city lit from the flames of rebellion, there was no need to carry their torches any further. Markolyss dropped his torch to the wet, stony floor of the mountain path where it sizzled as it rolled into a deeper pool of water. The others followed suit.

Before pushing the door outward, Markolyss held up a hand. “Sshh,” he hushed them. They waited in silence as a chattering mob came marching by, waving torches and a plethora of weapons above their head as they advanced towards the keep. Corrotto put a hand over the baby’s mouth as it wriggled in its blankets, not releasing his hand until the last of the mob was out of sight.

“Follow,” Markolyss told them all, making sure to catch the eye of Corrotto, the man who would soon come to be the city’s last member of the High Council still drawing breath. “Stay close, and stay quiet,” he hissed.

Out into the streets of Horizon they went. They trekked slow, but only slow enough to be cautious. Too long in these streets and it would be the death of them, each man knew it to be true, judging what they'd seen of late. Any man harboring the king would be a dead man.

With Markolyss and Corrotto in front, the king lay sandwiched in between them and his men. They walked through twisted, blackened streets where just days ago merchants had haggled goods, and noble men and ladies wandered unmolested. Now, the bodies belonging to every class of citizen lay scattered about, some hanging from rafters inside half-burnt homes, and others, their intestines hanging from their abdomens. The city stank of vomit, of shit, and death. Aside from the sizzling of flame, and the far-off screams of peasants as they battered down the mountain-keep's gate, all that could be heard was the occasional gurgle or short cry of the babe.

"Keep him quiet!" Yanne urged.

Corrotto had taken it upon himself to carry the so called...*heir*.

Taking out his water skin, Corrotto forced down a little of whatever liquid he had in there down the heir's throat.

#

Not far ahead, part of a stone building lay in ruin across their path.

"Shit," said Markolyss. Frantically, he searched around them, up at the buildings, in corridors, and in windows as shadows passed like several stalking demons. It hit him at once. He'd walked them into a *trap*.

"Everyone follow!" he cried.

First, spit rained down from above, then it was rotten food, and then buckets of piss drizzled with floating turds at the top. His retinue trudged forward, swatting fruit and vegetables out of the way as they made it through a small opening through the rubble. Then the rocks began to fly.

Corrotto shielded the baby and looked behind them just in time to see a fist-sized rock bounce off the king's bed.

"Protect the heir! Protect the king!" yelled Cronsby.

Markolyss's eyes widened at the mention of the king. The fool had just given them away! "Come on!" beckoned Markolyss.

Fingers pointing and rocks flying, the peasants began to mass in greater numbers, now casting debris from rooftops and from around every corner.

"The king!" screamed a boy, no older than ten Markolyss thought, judging by his frame, bone-thin in rags. He screamed himself hoarse, "On the bed, look! The king! The king! The king!"

Every voice cried out, those of his men and what must've been a hundred peasants.

Markolyss unsheathed his sword and sliced the boy who'd given them away as the newly formed peasant mob charged.

Markolyss tried to scream over the roar of the mob, "Run!" but his voice fell on deaf ears as his men hacked and slashed their way forward. Looking behind him and Corrotto, he saw that the king's bed was now tipped over on the ground.

The rest of the escort had already fled or lay dead in the street, their corpses

getting continuously stabbed and stamped down upon by groups of peasants. Yanne lay on the ground beside the king, looking at nothing with dead eyes. It was hard not to notice the bloody holes sticking out of his face, made by a pitchfork or something like it.

Large rock in hand, a man was about to bring it down upon the back of the king's head, but before he could bring the stone downward, Markolyss stuck his sword through his guts, throwing him aside as he tore the blade free. Picking up the king over one shoulder, he groaned at the extra weight. The king was not a small man, sick and frail as he was. A life of ease and slothfulness had seen to that.

"Yagh," he panted as he turned and ran. Corrotto ran beside him.

"Don't leave me!" Cronsby begged after them. From the corner of his eye, just as Markolyss turned, their eyes met. Cronsby's eyes explained all Markolyss needed to know. *You're killing me by leaving me. You're evil. You're treacherous.* What his eyes didn't say was, *you'll soon be rich, and if I was in your place, I'd leave me too.* So, a worthy sacrifice. With so much gold at stake, it was hard not to see his men as expendable.

They kept running, panting, sweating, and bleeding from rocks that'd pelted their bodies. Everything ached as Markolyss caught a glimpse of the river, and a small boat. Of all things...a boat. They were all but saved. *At last!*

With the king slung across his shoulder, Markolyss ran for all he was worth. Then, he threw the sword aside. All

that mattered was getting to that damned boat, and he needed all of his strength if he was going to make it.

Far ahead of him, as he had no body to carry, Corrotto already had the boat untied from the dock and was climbing in. "Faster!" Corrotto cried.

Markolyss dared not look back. He already knew what was behind him. The army of peasants were gaining on him with every step made slower by the portly king weighing him down.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he breathed the words over and over. Reaching the boat, he unslung the king down none too gently as he too collapsed into the tiny vessel. With a push from Corrotto's oar against the dock, they began to float away.

"A-ha!" Markolyss victoriously said, but too soon.

He hadn't noticed the hands of several peasants hanging onto the king as they pushed off. Almost dead from his fever, still, King Damaris found the strength to emit a flurry of blood curdling screams as his citizens tore him to pieces.

Corrotto screamed, "No!" and reached after the king, but as the boat drifted away Corrotto lost his grip.

Together, both men watched in horror as their king was ripped apart on the docks.

With trembling lips, Corrotto managed to say, "The heir is still with us."

Turning away from the carnage, Markolyss looked at the bundle at the other end of the boat where Corrotto had placed the baby.

"He's no heir," he was about to say, but

the clink of metal on metal stifled him. Seeing the dagger poking through his cloak, it was stuck in the armor he wore beneath. Markolyss looked on incredulously as Corrotto struggled to twist his blade free, but only for a moment.

“Little bastard!” Markolyss cursed, and he swiped the dagger away as they watch it fly into the air until it hit the water with a soft *splash*.

“Wai—” Corrotto whimpered. “Please I...the gold...I’ll get it to you I swear, I... please!”

Then, before he could utter another word, Markolyss had his hands wrapped around Corrotto’s neck. He squeezed and squeezed as tears and mucus fell from the man’s eyes and mouth, fighting for just one breath more, for life. Pointless. At one moment he was purple, eyes bulging so far out from their sockets that Markolyss thought they’d pop free, and the next he was dead.

After struggling to push the man overboard, Markolyss gazed through the

dark water as Corrotto’s dead face seemed to stare back before disappearing into the liquid black. It was like watching a chest full of gold sink away, and in a way, it was.

Finally relaxing his body, Markolyss slouched forward until he found the infant. Cradling it in his arms, he considered tossing it overboard. He was no caretaker. Instead, he set it down gently and the infant smiled at him. Then, he grabbed the dead man’s oar.

Dipping the paddle into the water, he paused. The tower he’d stared down upon Horizon from just a few hours before burned gloriously in the night sky, along with all the other towers jutting from the ancient rock. It was a *true* mountain of flame.

Markolyss then turned to the infant, and back at the city one last time. Moving the oar, he began to paddle away from Horizon, using its flames to light their way.



“ONE FOURTEEN AM”

by EDWARD N. McCONNELL

Andy Cimerra’s phone kept ringing. Hoisting up his large frame on to one elbow, he snapped on the light near his bed and took the call. The numbers on his LED alarm clock read 1:45 a.m. Scribbling down some notes he thought, “Christ, can’t guys murder their wives during the day?” Once dressed, he headed to Sally Jumps, a local watering hole. There, he met the deputies already putting up crime scene tape. He took their initial report, then went upstairs. Next to the lifeless body of Rosie Swift Parks, was an overturned table and broken mantel clock. Andy, the senior Niagara County Sheriff’s Detective, had been to scenes like this before. He thought, “I can guess what the murder weapon is and what happened but I’d better start checking all the boxes.” Soon, he would find there would be things about this case that did not fit into any box. A deputy interrupted his thoughts.

“Excuse me, Detective; the husband is downstairs.” Andy said, “Good, at least we don’t have to chase around to find him.” He descended the stairs.

Six Months Ago

Ransomville is an unremarkable rural crossroads town in western New York. It sits close to Lake Ontario, about halfway

between Youngstown and Lockport. Its main attraction is a successful dirt track racing speedway. The money the big crowds spend during the season helps the local businesses survive all year.

Sally Jumps is the most popular bar in town. The name came from the original owners, Sally and Buck Jensen. The stories have it they were a quarrelsome pair. When it came to running the bar, Sally had to jump to grab any cash or coins left by a customer before Buck got them. If she failed to snag the money, Buck got it and would drink or gamble it away. That’s how the bar got its name.

Like the name, the lay out of the place had not changed either. There was a large barroom and two apartments. Gene Carver, the current owner, rented out the larger upstairs apartment. He lived in the small one behind the bar on the main floor.

Billy Parks, a part-time mechanic and full time dirt track racer, was a frequent patron of Sally Jumps. It was there he met a young server, Rosie Swift. His dirt track racer, devil may care attitude appealed to her sense of adventure and danger. It was not long after they met; Billy and Rosie married. Rosie wanted to live in the upstairs apartment Gene was remodeling.

Because he was doing the work himself, progress was slow. Little things remained undone. The apartment lacked baseboards and floor grates to cover the open heating ducts. Some of the dry wall needed painting but the rent was cheap. Billy and Rosie were fine with that and moved in.

Living there meant Rosie did not have far to go to work. For Billy, it was ideal, too. A walk downstairs and he could engage in his favorite activities, bragging, fibbing and card playing. For him, holding court at Sally Jumps was more fun than fixing cars or risking his neck for prize money. While Billy mangled the truth, drank and gambled, Rosie worked hard waiting tables. She made what money they had. It did not take her long to notice that fact.

Sally Jumps has a feature that exists nowhere else in the world, a mural of the Niagara River. Beck Donner, bar patron and gifted local artist, created this masterpiece. Because Niagara Falls is two cataracts, the mural starts at the corner of two walls on the far side of the barroom. The American Falls is on one wall, the Horseshoe Falls, at the corner of the adjacent wall. Everyone refers to them as The Falls.

The mural offers a vivid display of the river as it snakes as its way across the walls of the barroom. Its details are what make it unique. The Falls, from its corner wall location on the far side of the barroom, cascades into the Gorge. From there the waters travel a short distance to the swirling vortex, known as the Whirlpool. On the other side of a misplaced dartboard, the

churning waters become the ferocious Niagara Rapids. They continue until reaching the Niagara Escarpment, point of origin of The Falls. Once in the Lower Niagara, the waters settle down and pass the village of Lewiston heading for Lake Ontario. The mural ends at Old Fort Niagara in Youngstown where the mighty Niagara merges into the lake.

The bar patrons loved the depiction of this local natural wonder. For Beck, it was a source of pride. He wished he could make a living as an artist but that was something he had to pursue on the side. His family business, Donner's Heating and Cooling Company, sat north of town at the T-intersection of New and Ransomville Roads kept him busy. Beck serviced most of the furnaces, air conditioners and cleaned ductwork in town. A skilled HVAC worker, Beck made a prosperous living.

He also had a huge crush on Rosie Parks, whom he once dated. Heartbroken when she married Billy, Beck learned the hard way; women seem to love bad boys. He did not understand what she saw in him but kept his feelings to himself. Hoping one day she would see the light; he always went out of his way to be nice to her. Rosie liked Beck but not in the same way he felt about her.

By contrast, no one who spent any time around Billy liked him, especially Beck. Because the bar patrons liked Rosie, they put up with Billy. So did Gene Carver, but he would not have minded if he left town. Billy knew how Beck felt about Rosie. Every chance he could get, he reminded

Beck that Rosie was his wife.

For good measure, Billy needled Beck about the mural, telling him it “looked like the work of a second grader”. The two had been in the same grade school class and disliked each other from that time on. Beck, being the cooler head and not wanting to look bad in front of Rosie, never reacted to Billy’s jibes. He bided his time, hoping, one day, he could pay Billy back for all his insults.

The one thing Billy took the most pride in was his silver pocket watch. Whenever he could, he cornered some bar customer and droned on about his watch. He would say, “It’s silver, real silver, not gold. Gold always looked cheap to me. This watch even tells if it’s a.m. or p.m.” He would hold it up and point to a little window near the numeral three on the watch face.

“I wear it everywhere. You know, most people don’t have pocket watches anymore because you can get the time on your cell phone. I prefer my pocket watch; it keeps great time and is never wrong. I keep the time set the same as a mantel clock we own.” Left out of his bragging was the fact the watch was a gift from Rosie. She had to work a long time to get enough money to buy it.

Each night she worked, Rosie suffered through Billy’s antics. Realizing she had made a mistake marrying him, they argued more, sometimes in front of everyone at the bar. Her family and friends encouraged her to get away from him. For his part, Billy did not talk about his troubles with

Rosie. He did not want people to know, but in Ransomville, word gets around. It got to Beck who thought he saw an opening with Rosie.

Three Days Ago

Before Rosie’s killing, Gene Carver contacted Beck to do a seasonal check of the furnace. He worried when it turned on, the dust from the renovation would blow through the bar and the apartments. He asked Beck to clean out the ducts.

Before Beck started, he asked to get in the building to see the best way to approach the duct cleaning. One of the places he needed to inspect was Billy and Rosie’s apartment. He went to the door and knocked. Rosie opened the door, Beck entered. Billy was not home.

“Hi, Rosie, Gene hired me to clean the ducts before the heating season. I’ll bet there’s a lot a dust in them since he started work on the apartment. If I don’t get to it, when the furnace turns on, it will blow dust all over. Can I look around?” She nodded but seemed upset. Beck said, “Rosie, is anything wrong?”

“Beck, you’re so nice. Billy isn’t who I thought he was when I married him. He’s lazy and will never amount to anything. I don’t know how he could ever be a ‘good father.’” She said nothing more. He completely missed the “good father” reference.

This was his opening. He took it. “You know Rosie, I’ve always loved you, why not come and stay with me? It will be like old times.”

Rosie smiled and said, “You’re sweet,

but this is my problem, I have to work it out.”

Feeling rejected again, he did not get that she was pregnant. He thought, “What’s it going to take for her to dump this guy?” Then, trying to hide his feelings, he got back to the reason he was there, “I’ll likely start work in a couple of days. I have to finish two other jobs. I’ll need to get in here to clean the ducts. Will that be okay?” Rosie nodded then went into the kitchen.

As he was about to leave, Beck noticed Billy’s pocket watch on the table next to a mantel clock. There was a note under the watch, it read, “Thompson Jewelers, \$35.00 for cleaning, two days”. Beck picked up the watch and the note. He stuck both in his pocket, thinking, “This will serve that jerk right, when he can’t find his watch it will drive him crazy. He’ll accuse everyone in the barroom of stealing it. That’ll be fun to see.”

When Beck went back downstairs, Gene gave him a set of keys to the bar and the apartments. With those, he could start anytime and get into the all the areas when he needed. As he was leaving, that thing Rosie said about Billy being a “good father” came back to mind. His heart sank, “Damn, is she’s pregnant?” Angrier now, he got in his truck and drove away.

Two Days Ago – Between 11:45 p.m. and midnight

Billy was in the bar annoying the patrons, making Gene angry and embarrassing Rosie. She asked Gene if she could get off early and headed upstairs. She final-

ly decided that she had enough of Billy. He followed a few minutes later. It was then Rosie told him to pack up and leave. Billy’s protests were loud but she would not change her mind. Their fight ended with Billy making a quick exit.

For him, packing up to leave was not hard. Not having brought much to the relationship, filling his duffle bag did not take a lot of time. Billy was so upset, he did not check to see if he had his pocket watch.

Sitting outside in his truck, across the street, Beck had come back to keep a watch on Rosie’s apartment. He could see them arguing in front of the window and saw Rosie get knocked down. He did not do anything. Instead, he watched as Billy left around midnight with his duffle bag. Stopping at Rosie’s car, Billy tried to get in and could not. Beck watched as Billy headed east toward the road out of town.

Beck could not see Rosie through the window. He wanted to go in right away but drove around for a little more than an hour before returning. Sure that Billy was gone; he put on gloves and let himself into the building. Not knowing if Gene was awake, he tried to be as quiet as possible. He went upstairs; he did not stay long, then left.

About the same time, Gene, in bed in his apartment, thought he heard the back door open. He did not pay much attention and tried to go back to sleep until he heard some more noises. Not sure if there had been a break in, he called the Sheriff. On their arrival, they checked the barroom and the upstairs apartment. The door was ajar, like someone left in a hurry. It was there

they found Rosie's body. Billy was missing. A search got underway to find him.

Two Days Ago – About Midnight

It was a little after midnight when Billy got outside. With no friends and no place to crash in the village, he only had one place he could go, his brother's farm near Ridge Road. Located on the other side of a large thicket, southeast of Ransomville, it was about a five to six mile walk. He started heading in that direction.

Given the time of night, getting there would be slow going. He would have to take the Youngstown-Lockport Road out of town to the path, which was a short cut to Ridge Road. It was unlit and included walking on train tracks and crossing a bridge. After that, the path started again on the other side of the bridge. From there, it was about a mile to Ridge Road. His brother's farm was not far beyond.

Billy was more than an hour into his walk when a drizzle started. It was pitch black. The wet and cold nipped his nose, ears and fingers, but the walk seemed to calm him down. Billy would go back tomorrow and patch things up with Rosie.

The cold drizzle blanketed the thicket with an eerie, misty darkness. The deeper in he got, the more it seemed the path was narrowing. As he moved deeper in, the thicket became darker. He thought he could hear rustling noises and animal sounds but did not see anything. Billy's imagination started to work overtime. The conditions put all kinds of fears into his head. At that time of night, a person's

imagination might conjure up anything.

From behind, a light started to appear. It was dim at first but grew in intensity. The glow came from the direction of the village but it was not the source. Neither were there houses near the trail. This light came from a different place; it sat higher in the sky, surrounded by darkness. At first, Billy thought it was the moon but the light did not come from a ball in the sky. The flickering reflections were more like what he had seen in movie theaters. As it grew brighter, Billy could see the trees and underbrush in the thicket. Until then, both had formed a dark black void on either side of the path.

The wind picked up causing rustling noises and whipping the low hanging branches on the path. The shadows cast on the ground were sharp and elongated. Billy feared he was not alone. It was at that moment that he thought someone was coming up from behind. He stopped and turned, but there was no one there. The odd illumination projecting the apparition, proved to be his silhouette. He let out an uneasy laugh.

He then noticed his jacket, pants and shoes were glowing in the strange reddish, yellow light. It was bright, like a sun lamp, Billy could feel it on his face. Movement in the lighted area of the sky caused him to look up. What he saw unnerved him. He needed to know the time and to get back to his apartment.

With this light, he would be able to see the hands on his watch. He reached inside his coat to pull it out but it was not there.

He felt his other pockets but there was no watch. He then realized he must have left the apartment without it. He was sure it was there and felt compelled to go back to get it.

At that moment, the sky darkened; there was a bright flash, like lightning but at ground level. Then, it was pitch black again. Billy found himself north of the village at the T-intersection of New Road and Ransomville Road. Standing in front of Donner Heating and Cooling, he saw the lights of the village but they were to the south. When, he was in the thicket, the lights had been to the northwest. He started running as fast as he could toward the lights. He realized he was coming into the village from the opposite direction he had been walking. He was no longer in the thicket but he could not remember or understand how he got there.

When he arrived at his apartment the Sheriff's deputies were there putting up crime scene tape. There was an ambulance waiting for the paramedics to complete their work. Confused, Billy approached a deputy. "I'm Billy Parks; I live here, what happened?"

"You are, huh," said the deputy. "We've been looking for you. Please wait here, our detective would like to talk to you."

A few moments later, a man in a suit approached Billy and said, "I'm Andy Cimmera and you're Billy Parks. I'm the detective handling this investigation. Call me Andy, everybody does. I'm trying to understand what went on here. I hope you can help."

"So you live here, huh?" Billy said, "Yes."

"Where have you been?" Andy said.

"I was on my way to my brother's on Ridge Road. Rosie and me had a fight. I left. Is she alright?"

"I'm sorry to tell you, she's dead." Billy said nothing.

Studying him, Andy said, "We got a call from the owner about a possible break in. What time did you leave here?" Andy knew the 911 call came in about 1:35 a.m. but did not tell Billy that.

"Look, I left about midnight to go to my brother's house. I took the path that cuts through the thicket outside of town. I was part ways there when there was this bright light in the sky. In that light, I saw Rosie standing by the window, holding up my pocket watch. Then it looked like she was raising her arm to block something. There was another figure, a man, I think. After that, she was gone. It was then I remembered I didn't have my pocket watch. The strangest thing, though, I could see the time on the watch, 1:14 a.m. That's why I came back, to get my watch."

"You saw a time on a pocket watch in the sky?" Andy shrugged his shoulders. "Did you see the time on any other clocks in this 'light in the sky'?" Billy said, "No, only the pocket watch."

"So you walked to your brother's? Why not take your car?" Andy said.

"My car's in the shop. When I left, I didn't have keys to her car. I didn't want to go back upstairs after our fight," he said.

"Did you see or talk to anyone after

you left the apartment?

“No,” Billy said.

“It’s close to 3 a.m. now, how far do you think it is to your brother’s farm?”

“It’s about five or six miles.”

“How far did you get on that path?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t get to Ridge Road, not even over the bridge on the train tracks. I guess I was about halfway there. I stopped to look at the light in the sky. Didn’t you see it? You couldn’t miss it.”

“A light in the sky, no, I didn’t. Let me ask you this. Where’d ya get those scratches on your face?” Billy had not noticed he had any.

“I must have walked into a low hanging branch on the path. It was dark in the thicket; the wind was whipping branches that hung across the path. I don’t know but that must be it.”

Billy interrupted, “Can I go to the hospital? I need to see Rosie.” Andy knew there was a lot more to talk about with Billy, so he said, “Hey, why don’t I drive you over? We can talk more there.”

Andy had been in the apartment; Rosie’s body was by the window, near a knocked over table. A broken Endicott Mantel Clock was on the floor. Nothing was in Rosie’s hand, certainly no pocket watch. It was not next to her body or anywhere on the floor. The mantel clock had some hair and blood on one of its corners. The Sheriff’s forensic team took photos and gathered the evidence from the clock. That was about all they knew then.

Billy seemed to think the time on the pocket watch time was 1:14. Andy instruct-

ed the deputies to check around and look for it. His team looked under every piece of furniture and in every nook and cranny. They found no pocket watch anywhere in the apartment. He made a note to check the time on the broken mantel clock. Andy did not buy Billy’s “light in the sky” story or that he left the apartment at midnight. Further questioning might shed some light on this case.

Billy said nothing on the trip to the hospital.

Two Days Ago - 3:30 a.m.

When they arrived, Billy identified Rosie’s body. Andy decided to resume his questions. He said, “Billy, I’m very sorry but I need to ask some more questions, Okay?” Billy nodded in agreement.

“The deputy told me he saw you approach the apartment on Ransomville Road from the north. Is that right?”

“I was in the thicket heading to Ridge Road, south. The bright light happened, I saw Rosie. Then there was a flash. The next thing I knew I was north of the village on Ransomville Road, near the T-intersection. That’s nowhere near the thicket.”

Andy said, “How’d you get from the thicket path to north of the village on Ransomville Road?”

“I don’t know,” was all Billy could say.

Figuring he could revisit that matter, Andy said, “We found a broken mantel clock by the window with the table knocked over. Did you say you saw that in this bright light in the thicket?”

Billy stammered and said, “I don’t

know, the image was only in the sky for less than a minute or two.”

“You said you saw a pocket watch in Rosie’s hands. We can’t find your pocket watch anywhere in the apartment.”

“Maybe I had it and dropped it on the path. I couldn’t find it so I thought it was still in the apartment. I don’t have it.”

“We’ll send somebody out to search the path when the sun comes up. Tell me again, in this vision you saw Rosie had your pocket watch and then she raised her arm, as if to defend herself from ‘some figure, a man’. Do I have that right?”

“That’s exactly what I saw but I left at midnight, not one minute later”.

Andy paused, stared at Billy, said, “Yeah, I know, you left at midnight. Your argument with Rosie, what was it about?”

Billy looked at the detective before he said anything. “She came home, said she was pregnant and I had to leave. I didn’t understand why. I wanted her to explain things.” Shaking his head, Billy said, “I saw her in that light, I did and now I’m getting blamed for killing her.

“We want to find out who did this. Everything you’ve said is helping us.”

“I left at midnight. I don’t know what happened after I left. You’ll find my fingerprints on everything because I live there. I didn’t hurt her. Look, I’m tired. I’ve been up all night. My wife’s dead. Am I under arrest? If not, I want to leave now.” Andy knew he could not hold Billy on what they had so far. He let him go but told him not to go back to the apartment because it was an active crime scene.

“Don’t leave town. We will need to talk again. Can you stay with your brother?”

Andy asked. Using the detective’s phone, Billy called his brother. A deputy took Billy to his brother’s farm.

Yesterday - 8:30 a.m.

A search of the path in the thicket turned up nothing. Andy still did not believe that story about the “light in the sky”. He thought Billy was good for this, but the time line did not fit. The missing piece to this puzzle seemed to be the pocket watch. With the mantel clock broken in the scuffle, maybe the pocket watch was too. It might have the same or a little later time. He needed that pocket watch. It could confirm the time of death.

Yesterday - 10:00 a.m.

Being cold and rainy the last couple of nights, Gene Carver wanted to get Beck started on his furnace work. He approached the Sheriff’s office and asked if the work could go ahead. They told him it was all right. Beck could do the ducts but he was not to touch anything else. If Billy showed up and wanted to get in, he was to call the Sheriff’s office.

Beck got started. He first checked the furnace in the basement. It was working fine. Then he began the process of cleaning the ducts. Moving to the upstairs apartment, Beck noticed the heating ducts didn’t have grates. He started by pushing any dirt and debris in the ducts down to the basement clean out trap. Once done with that, he would then vacuum out any

loose dirt and dust from the clean outs in the basement. During this process, Beck found something.

He called Gene and said, "I found Billy Park's pocket watch while I was cleaning the ducts. My tool caught onto something. It took about ten minutes to pull it out. What I found was a silver pocket watch. I looked at it. I'm sure it's Billy watch, he's dangled it in my face enough times at the bar for me to be sure."

Gene called Andy who arrived to take possession of the watch. Beck turned it over, with the crystal broken and the hands stopped at 1:14. In the little window on the watch face by the numeral three, "a.m." was showing.

Yesterday - 11:00 a.m.

This was a big break. Rosie must have been holding the pocket watch at the time of her death but there was the chain of custody problem. Andy knew Beck could have cracked the crystal when he removed the watch from the duct. Beck claimed he had not but a lawyer could twist that detail at trial. Andy was not that worried. Beck had no way of knowing the time of on the watch or Billy's "light in the sky" story. Those details were not public.

Andy needed to talk to Billy again. He asked him to come to the station at noon.

Yesterday - Noon

Upon his arrival, a deputy escorted Billy to the interrogation room. Andy started by asking about the pocket watch.

"We got some new information but I wanted to make sure I understood what

you already told me to see if it makes sense. Okay?"

Billy said, "Sure."

"Did your pocket watch keep good time?"

"Are you kidding, that watch never lies, the time it shows is always correct."

"Would the same be true for the mantel clock?" Billy nodded in agreement.

"So, if your watch said a certain time, it's correct," Billy agreed. "My pocket watch and our mantel clock were always set to the same time."

"What if the watch stopped at a certain time? Would the time shown on its face have been correct when it stopped?" Billy said, "It should be."

"Why didn't you have the watch with you when you left the apartment?"

"Since the last time we talked I remembered I took it to have it cleaned. I mean, I was going to but I think I left it in Rosie's car. We only had one car; mine was in the shop, blown tranny. When I left for my brother's I was on foot. I didn't have keys to her car so I couldn't look in there. I was on the trail before I realized I didn't have the watch, so I figured it was in the car."

"Funny, we searched the car but didn't find the watch. Are you sure that's where you left it?"

"Like I said, I was going to have it cleaned. I'm pretty sure it was in the car."

Andy said, "You didn't have the watch with you when you left at midnight, right?"

"I guess so because I didn't have it on the path in the thicket. That's why I came back but I didn't get back till around 3

a.m.” Billy said, making the point about the time.

“And now you remember it was going to be cleaned, that’s why you didn’t have it. You didn’t say that before.

“I must have forgotten,” Billy said. Since this was not going anywhere, Andy changed topics.

“Now, going back to the light you said you saw in the thicket, that’s when you saw Rosie in some distress?”

“I saw her being hit by somebody but then she was gone, so I came back.”

“Think hard, Billy, you said you saw a figure of a man, can you describe anything about him?”

I saw the time, 1:14. I couldn’t make out anything about the figure I saw. It happened so fast.”

“I want to show you something. Sally Jumps was having its duct work cleaned and your pocket watch turned up.” Andy held up an evidence bag. It contained Billy’s pocket watch. Through the cracked crystal the time read, 1:14 a.m.

Billy looked at the watch. All he said, “Oh no, it’s broken.”

“Billy how is it your watch ended up in the ductwork of your apartment? There was no reply.

“How would you know that specific time unless you were in the apartment then? You didn’t leave at midnight, did you? It’s best if you admit it.”

Billy said, “No, I left at midnight. I didn’t get back until I saw you around 3 a.m.”

Andy continued, “Here’s what I think happened,” he paused and stared at Billy.

“You didn’t leave at midnight; you left a little after 1:14 a.m. after killing Rosie. You saw that time on the watch in Rosie’s hand. She had your watch, wouldn’t give it to you and told you to get out. You got mad and said no. There was a scuffle. When you hit her with the mantel clock, she tried to block you. The pocket watch flew out of her hand, slid on the floor across the room and it ended up in one of the open ducts. The crystal broke then. You had to escape and did not have time to fish the watch out of the duct.

“You came back hoping to get in to find it but we were at your apartment, so you couldn’t. You had to make up a story about why you came back. There was no ‘light in the sky’ last night; it had been raining since before midnight. You weren’t worried about her, only your missing watch. You didn’t lose it on the thicket trail. It wasn’t going to be cleaned. You hit her with the clock and knocked the watch into the duct. You didn’t see a ‘light in the sky’ with a figure and there was no man, other than you. Stop lying and tell me what happened. It will go better for you if you get in front of this right now, Billy.”

“No, that’s not what happened. When I came in from the bar, I asked where my pocket watch was. It had been on the table. I was going to take it to Thompson’s Jewelers for cleaning. When I called them, I made a note; Thompson Jewelers would clean it for thirty-five dollars. Didn’t you find that note?”

Billy continued, “She claimed she didn’t know where the watch was. Instead,

she tells me she's pregnant and I was useless and she was tired of doing all the work and making the money. She wanted me out. I had nowhere to go but I wouldn't leave without my watch. I said she must have been hiding it. I grabbed her to see if she had it. Then she scratched my face so I pushed her. She fell and knocked the table over. I picked her up and the clock too, it was working, and she was okay. She started that fight, it was all her fault but I didn't kill her. After that, I left. It was around midnight. Someone else did this. It wasn't me. I only wanted my pocket watch. That's the truth."

Andy was sure he had enough to support a murder charge. Billy's inconsistent stories all pointed to him. He had no alibi witness placing him outside the apartment after the time of the murder. He admitted he went to the apartment and fought with Rosie. Most important, Andy had the pocket watch; stopped at 1:14 a.m. Billy couldn't have known that time unless he had been there. Those bits of evidence seemed to seal it.

Andy had ruled Gene out as a suspect since he called in to report a possible break in. Fingerprints evidence was inconclusive. Billy, Rosie, Gene, Beck and various workers had all been in there over the last few months. The watch found in the apartment duct was key.

Still, something was gnawing at Andy. "Billy never came off that 'light in the sky' story. What if he was telling the truth. What if he did see 'some figure, a man' in a 'light in the sky' and it caused him to

come back to the apartment? What if the real killer is still out there?"

He felt he needed to keep looking for more evidence; just to be sure. Suspending the interview, Andy motioned for the deputy to put Billy in a holding cell. The Sheriff could hold him for forty-eight hours before arraigning him. Andy had to be sure.

He called the local National Weather Service office and talked to Tom Gray. He had responsibility for monitoring weather for western New York. Andy wanted to know about the night Rosie died. Was there any atmospheric phenomenon that would have lasted up to a couple of minutes?

"It had been raining and there was a flash or two of lightning, nothing for up to two minutes, though. I cannot rule out any other cause. The light could have been from the village, fireworks, or spotlights, like the ones at the racetrack. Those cast a glow in the sky," Tom said. Andy then got in touch with the racetrack manager, Roy Bradley.

"Roy, were there fireworks at the track last night?"

"Yeah, Andy, it was the last race of the season. We closed out the schedule with a brief fireworks show after dark. It was late, well after midnight. We shut most of the lights off during the fireworks show."

"Did you see Billy last night? Andy asked. Roy said, "No."

Andy concluded Billy must have seen the fireworks then made up the rest of the story about seeing Rosie in the light. Billy

could offer no proof about what he saw in the 'light in the sky'. It might have happened as he described but he was probably lying. He was the town liar. For a moment, Andy thought. "His lawyer can raise the 'light in the sky' story at trial. It would be up to the jury to sort it out." Then, he caught himself. "This has to be air tight. I need to look into something else, but I have to wait until after dark tonight."

Last Night- After Midnight

It was a long shot, but Andy decided to go out to the thicket path after midnight, retrace Billy's steps and see if he could see any light in the sky.

He had a deputy drop him off at start of thicket path. Then, on a hunch, told him to drive north of the village to the T-intersection of New and Ransomville Roads. The deputy was to park in front of Donner's. He was to wait there, in case Andy showed up. If he needed a ride from the thicket path, Andy would call. Although confused, the deputy headed over to the spot as instructed.

Andy stayed on the dark thicket path for about an hour. There were no fireworks that night and no other lights. As he was ready to call for the deputy, he saw the light, then he saw the image in the light. Following that was a bright flash, as Billy described. The next thing Andy knew he was near the T-intersection at New Road. That convinced him Billy's vision was real. When Andy knocked on the cruiser's window parked in front of Donner's at the T-intersection, the deputy opened the door. All Andy said was, "Don't ask."

Today - 7:00 a.m.

The news of Billy's arrest spread quickly. When Beck heard, he laughed. The whole time after he took the pocket watch, it worked fine, kept accurate time and the crystal was intact. Becks' girlfriend worked in the coroner's office. Before starting the duct cleaning work for Gene, she told him some information about the investigation she heard from a deputy. The broken mantel clock and the pocket watch stopped at one fourteen a.m. and Billy saw a "light in the sky".

Knowing that and wanting Billy blamed for the killing, Beck set the time on the watch at 1:14 a.m. and cracked the crystal. Then he had Gene call the Sheriff's office to tell them he found the watch. The fact he found it while cleaning the ducts would explain his prints being on the watch. The whole set up was quite easy.

As Beck held the flame of his lighter to the note he took when he stole the pocket watch, he thought about Rosie. He was sorry for what he had done to her. Distracted, he did not notice that the note had not burned completely to ash in the wastebasket.

When it came to Billy, he had a completely different outlook. Beck figured Billy's cockamamie story about a "light in the sky" ruined his credibility with the detectives. Beck couldn't imagine anyone would believe Billy. He was a lying jackass who was getting what he deserved.

Billy used to say Beck's mural painting "looked like the work of a second grader". It brought to mind a game they used to

play in grade school. Smiling Beck thought, "Some donkeys are easier to pin a tail on than others." He left for a small job and intending to return around noon.

Today – Noon

Andy slept in until nine o'clock. When he arrived at the station, he went to the evidence room and to the coroner's office.

Once done, he let two deputies know he was on his way to Beck Donner's. He asked them to follow along but stay back until he needed them. Andy caught up with Beck as he was finishing his lunch.

Andy said, "Hi, Beck, looks like you're on your way back to work but do you got a minute?" They went back into his the office.

"I'm tying up some loose ends. Do you mind if I record what we talk about for the record?" Beck agreed.

"This case involving Rosie Parks had me stumped. Everything seemed to point to Billy. So, last night, I took a walk on that thicket path off Youngstown-Lockport Road. Have you ever been out there?" Beck shook his head, no.

"I went out after dark. It rained again last night. You know why I was there?" Andy said. Beck pretended he did not.

Andy smiled, "Billy Parks told us the strangest story. He said he saw a figure of a man in a 'light in the sky' while he was walking along the thicket path, crazy isn't?"

Beck said, "Yeah, you know Billy, he'll tell a lie about anything."

"At first, I thought so too, but then figured I'd better check things out. You know, just in case. While I was out there the

damnedest thing happened, that light appeared again. It replayed what Billy claimed he saw." Beck was getting uncomfortable.

"I saw what he was talking about. Don't ask me to explain any of it, but there was a man in the light hitting Rosie with a mantel clock, that man looked like you."

"Beck said, "Oh come on, Andy you can't believe that crap."

"I still probably wouldn't have but there was a bright flash of light when the image in the sky faded. I found myself near your business at the New Road T-intersection, north of the village. The same thing happened to Billy. We know that because the night Rosie died, Billy came back to the apartment from the north of town."

Andy then noticed the partially burned ashes in the waste paper can. "Did you burn something? He said. Beck smiled and said, "No, I was testing the flame on my new lighter by setting a scrap piece of paper on fire. Everything is fine."

"You know, Billy claimed he wrote a note about having his watch cleaned at Thompson Jewelers. They verified he called but I couldn't find the note. You wouldn't have burned it now, would you?" Beck said, "No."

"On my way out here, I stopped at the coroner's office and talked to your girlfriend. She had some interesting things to say. She told you what she heard from a deputy about the pocket watch reading 1:14. What you and she didn't know was Billy set the time on his watch to the mantel clock. I hadn't paid attention to the

time on the mantel clock until this morning. When I checked it, the broken mantel clock read one sixteen not one fourteen. I expected the time on the pocket watch time would have been the same or a little later after Rosie got hit. It definitely should not have been earlier.

“Billy didn’t have his watch. We didn’t have it. You were the one who found it in the apartment. No one else could have set the wrong time on the watch or broke the crystal, except you.

“This morning I also talked to Gene Carver again. Only he had keys to the whole building. He remembered he gave you a set to do your work and you never gave them back. You used those keys to sneak in after Billy left. When we search here will we find the keys?” Beck said nothing.

“Putting all that together with what I saw on the thicket path and that weird flash of light transporting me to your

office, it all became clear. The truth was it was you, not Billy who killed Rosie.”

Andy stepped to the office door and opened it. He waived in two deputies and said, “Beck Donner, you’re under arrest for the murder of Rosie Parks. You have the right to remain silent.” He finished the warning as the deputies led Beck away in hand cuffs. A search of the office and his home produced the keys to Sally Jumps and the remaining piece of the note from the wastebasket, which Billy identified.

With Beck’s conviction, Billy left town. Beck’s girlfriend now waits tables in Youngstown. The deputy who disclosed information on the investigation works security at a big box store in Niagara Falls. Sally Jumps continued to be the town’s favorite local watering hole. Now, Andy gets to sleep most nights and he hasn’t seen any lights in the sky since. ❖

END TRANSMISSION