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Table of Contents:

Editor's Note	3
Sum Quod Eris, Christopher Lee Kneram	4
Gate Night, Ally Malinenko	10
A Shirt of Bears, Robert Buswell	17
Seven Minutes in Heaven, Christine Reilly	21
Mermaids at St. Abbs Head, Gwendolyn Edward	27
The Magician, Stephen James Price	34

Editor's Note:

"There are three things I have learned never to discuss with people: religion, politics, and the Great Pumpkin."

— Linus Van Pelt

The good news is this special Halloween Issue doesn't have very much to do with religion or politics; you can probably get your fill of both elsewhere these days. The bad news is the Great Pumpkin doesn't make an appearance, but we do have plenty of great stories to keep you company while you wait in your favorite (and most sincere) pumpkin patch on Halloween night. We've got a couple of ghost stories, some creepy Gaelic dog people, a really sad Scottish mermaid, one surprisingly sweet (for us) story about first kisses, and a Halloween magic show unlike any other.

No rocks here, folks. The October issue of *Jersey Devil Press* is all treats.

— Mike Sweeney

Sum Quod Eris

Christopher Lee Kneram

The clock struck midnight and I was still hard at work in the bistro. We had closed hours before, but the paperwork involved was tremendous, and this was neither the first nor the last night I would be there so late. A silence had descended upon the place, broken only by the scratch of my pen, the turn of a page, and a gentle swish-swish as time I had allocated for sleep vanished into the night.

The restaurant was dark. An intermittent, unreliable light streaked through the front window, the half-hearted work of our defective streetlamp. Each burst of light cast monstrous shadows upon the wall—only the chairs, upturned onto the tables. Only the salt shakers and the pepper grinders. Only the—

A man was outside the door. I glanced upon him only briefly and from a distance, for my office offered a poor view of the front of the house. I put down my pen and went to see who it could have been. The floorboards creaked slightly.

At the front I found nothing. No one. The street was abandoned in both directions. The pub to our right was silent, near empty at this hour, the music store to our left closed and vacant. Across the street, the graveyard peered out from within its envelope of darkness, watching quietly, unmoving. Outside, the sign of the Sleeping Duck groaned in the breeze.

I closed the shades and checked the door to make sure it was locked.

KNOCK. My heart seized, my stomach churned, my blood froze. Impossible! I had been looking out the window only seconds before. For someone to have come up to the door so quickly and quietly was—

KNOCK. Hand trembling, I opened the door a crack.

"Hello?" I called out, head tilted down, eyes averted. "Can I— can I help you?"

"Hello my good sir might I inquire about a drink?" A voice, pleasant but slurred, came through the crack. A friendly neighborhood drunk, nothing more. I opened the door wider.

It was a ghost. He was a rather disheveled man, past middle age but not elderly, unlike any other man walking the Earth. He was at once translucent and incandescent, and the eyes beneath his sooty bowler hat glowed blue-white. He was dressed for an occasion, though his suit had seen better days and a handful of worms crawled slowly in his waistcoat pocket. He carried a neatly folded newspaper under one arm and clutched a tattered umbrella in his hand. Despite the heavy chains draped and wrapped around his body, he floated neatly half a foot off the ground.

"Er...Maybe you want the pub next door," I said. "We do sort of a rustic continental menu here."

Chains jingled as the spirit floated past me into the restaurant. He seemed to shuffle lazily despite not really having to move his feet. "Many's the long night I've dreamed of cheese, toasted mostly," he said with a hiccup. "And I think, I think, maybe you didn't neither. Where's my hat? Have you taken my hat? I were buried with it an' I'd like to keep it with me if only the, the...You know. Where are we on that cheese?"

I was glued to the spot by the door. It was ludicrous to think that I might choose to be alone in the dark with this specter, yet his slurred speech and the way he wobbled slightly as he moved evoked feelings of pity. Also, I couldn't shake a feeling of familiarity, as though this ghost were known to me somehow. The apparition continued on straight through a table and chairs and then after three or four attempts sat at the counter. I stuck my head out the door and looked each way. Nothing out there but the slight

pitter-patter of the rain as it started to fall. I shuddered involuntarily and shut the door.

My stomach growled.

"I suppose I could do us up a little fondue. I haven't had a bite to eat all day," I said.

"There's a good lad. What've we got to drink around here?" the ghost said, waving an arm and a chain.

He began to sing as I went in the back, though what song it was I hope I'll never know. It was horrible, discordant, hellish, but at the same time not really well-coordinated or even well-remembered, seemingly. I rubbed the goosebumps from my arms and grabbed a bottle each of Neuchatel wine and brandy, a couple of chunks of cheese and a head of garlic.

"Here," I said, taking a place behind the counter, where there was a row of burners. I opened the brandy and poured a glass, then gave him the rest of the bottle.

"There's a good, a good, a... there's a worm in my pocket have you met him?" The ghost let out a quiet burp. "That's the ticket," he said, holding up the bottle and squinting at it with one bright white-blue eye.

"So what brings you to, er, the mortal realm?" I asked by way of small talk as I busied myself grating the cheeses.

"S all about the haunting," he said. "Can't go about not haunting things my good man, Lord, that's fine brandy." The ghost drained half the bottle. I wondered where the drink was actually going. "I reckon life wasn't all that, all that, you know what? You know, you work hard, all your life, only to fall off a pier an' drown, like some...what kind of a pub is this?" He glanced about, his glowing eyes casting an eerie light wherever he looked.

I poured some of the wine into a pot to boil and chanced a look up. I could see straight through him, all the way through the bistro. If I were a drinking man it would have been a great opportunity for a large whiskey.

"This isn't a pub, it's a bistro. Like a cafe."

"Ah, a ristorante. Back when I was young and fit I used to like a little place like this. Toasted cheese, like they say, it warms you up—" he stopped to hiccup. "It warms, it...because sometimes it's so cold on the other side. People think it's hot, but what do they know anyway? They don't know, they don't...because of the cold."

I selected a nice loaf of Tessiner bread, Swiss, very authentic, and started to cut it up.

"And they just let you come back here any time you want?"

"Well," the spirit said with a wobble, "'s not that easy. You have to have, to have business, you know I really miss the legs, women have such nice legs, and sometimes on the other side everyone just floats around, you never see the legs. Unfinished. That's the business. Have to have some reason to wanna haunt a place. Usually if you wanna haunt a place it has to be you haunted it when you were living, you know?" He chuckled, a warm, jovial, ominous, hellish sound.

"Excuse my saying then, sir, but I've never seen you here before," I said.

"No, no." The ghost finished the bottle, and his chains clinked as he tossed it aside. I only just managed to catch it as he continued. "But yes! I come to this pub all the time! It's, well, the decor has changed, but how long have I been gone? Ha! I'm always gone, you know. Gone right now. 'S the only way to forget. Where can I find some nice legs this time of night?"

The bread went into the oven to toast and I started to add handfuls of cheese to the wine. "I think you're haunting the wrong place, sir. The pub's next door."

"Is there? What has happened to my hat and to the brandy? Have you met my worm? I think he's around here somewhere..." Chains rattling, he looked around. "I had dreams, you know. Mostly of trying to give a speech while in my underwear."

I popped a bit of Gruyere in my mouth. "So what's your unfinished business?"

"Dunno, never finished it. Could be I wanted one last drink, could be I—you know, it was all going fine until it stopped. Started I mean. Started with the drinking, that was the problem. Any of that wine left over?"

There was still half a bottle of Neuchatel. "Here you go," I said as the specter unfolded his newspaper.

"Looks like market's taking another bloody dive," he said.

"Er...I think this is about ready," I said. "Let me just finish it off." All it took was a dash of brandy and a quick stir. I took the bread out of the oven and put it into a bowl, then retrieved two fondue forks from the back. Sliding the bread and the cheese to his side of the counter, I sat down next to him.

"*En guete*," I said. "It won't stay melted for long." The ghost folded up his newspaper and speared a bread cube.

"You're out of wine again," he said. "An' I don't reckon I like the way that salt shaker is looking at me. I mean, you work, an' you work, an' you... for what? It all falls apart, and you never have time to talk to that woman, what was her name? She had a graceful what-do-you-call-it, neck..."

We ate in silence for a moment, the pure cheesy goodness of the fondue overwhelming the last remnants of my terror, which had mostly been chased away by the spirit's easy demeanor.

"I had it, used to be I had it all once you know," the ghost said. "And this cheese is really, is really good. You're great. The food is terrible on the other side. 'S all eye of newt an' tail of bat an' wing of dog. Lemme ask you this," he took a grimy and decayed handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped the corners of his mouth. "Did you ever have a bacon sandwich that was ether—that was see-through? Or a haunted leg of lamb? Had a, a, a nice job. An' a income. But what did I spend it all on you ask well I'll tell you it was booze. An' cheese now an' then, have you priced a good Sbrinz lately? It's criminal."

Sbrinz. My favorite. My mouth was suddenly very dry. I got a glass and turned my back to the ghost to fill it up at the tap.

"Yeah," he said, "I had a good ol' time running the place. But then it all started it all went downhill. Lost everything. Had half my liver stolen by the mob, took a beating from the mayor, an' in front of everybody that one. Spent a couple o' years in a third world prison cell and never did wind up feeling up a really good pair of, pair of...where's my drink?"

"I'm afraid," I said, a knot growing in the pit of my stomach, "well, I'm afraid of many things at the moment, but chiefly I'm afraid it's time to cut you off. How about a hot cup of coffee?"

The ghost looked around. "I say man, this isn't the pub. Supposed to be haunting a pub, do you know where I can find a pub?" He dug through the pocket of his waistcoat, dislodging a number of ghastly translucent worms, which hit the ground and faded into nonexistence. A grubby scrap of paper, as insubstantial as thought itself, drifted from his pocket and landed on the stool next to him.

"There's a pub next door, sir, I think you mean to be haunting them."

The ghost finally succeeded in taking his watch from his pocket. "Ah, yes, I've always loved the pub next door. Started going there roundabouts when I was your age. Speaking of haunting, I think I'm a bit early," he said, squinting at the watch. "Quite a bit early, now I look, nigh on fifteen years! Why've been haunting the wrong place and the wrong time." He hiccupped again and wobbled to his feet. Lifting his hat, he said, "Good day to you my fine sir." Under the glow, there was a look in his eyes which I recognized, having seen it in my father's eyes, and in my grandfather's eyes.

The apparition, booze-addled and sad in all the wrong ways, dragged his chains back through the restaurant and straight through the front door without stopping. I glanced at the scrap of paper; even as it began to fade I could make out the writing on it.

It was a to-do list. Among other things (howl at the night, lament a life of regret, endure an eternity of torment), there was this one item: “look up tombstone inscription: SUM QUOD ERIS.”

More than scared, or frightened, or terrified, I was stricken, completely immobilized in both mind and body. The terrible implications of the spirit’s existence pummeled, crippled my nervous system. My extremities were pins and needles, my stomach a tiny ball of fear.

Glancing out the window, I could see that the pub next door was still open.

I needed a drink.

CHRISTOPHER LEE KNERAM is much like you, but from Ohio. In his spare time he reads, he takes walks, and he teaches underprivileged children to speak Chinese, which is something they don’t really need, and hate doing, besides. When no one is looking he pens absurd fiction, some of which can be found around the internet.

Gate Night

Ally Malinenko

This is like Christmas Eve, only instead of waiting for presents I think I might be waiting to die.

I don't know why I'm writing this down. I guess because I have to. Maybe it will stand as some sort of testament. Some record of what happened. I guess it's the least I could do for Steve and Jake. God, I don't know. I'm so scared that this is like one of those stories, where the bullies get what they deserve and everyone in the theater cheers when it happens. Except this time, I'm the bully. Even if I didn't mean to be.

I have no idea what time it is though it's been dark much longer than any single night could be. I'm still waiting on the sunrise, the moment when the night rolls over, even unwillingly, into day and the bleaching sun reminds us that there was never really anything to be scared of. When it washes away all the witches and the ghosts, saying it was all one long silly dream and I will wake up, back home, with sweet memories of mischief and Vicky and my little sister begging me to take her trick-or-treating in her stupid Dora the Explorer outfit. That's what was supposed to happen. Not this endless goddamn night.

The plan was to light up the neighborhood and then head over to Vicky's. She and I had been talking lately and I figured there was a good chance something could happen. I liked her, I really did. Still do, I guess, if I ever get the chance to see her again, to tell her that I'm sorry for not coming to her party.

Instead I'm hiding out in this cabin, hoping for the best. I have candles here, in the cabinet. I saw them when I went looking for a weapon. The candles might make me feel better—like a little fake

sun before the real one ever comes up but I'm too scared to light them. Too scared to perhaps give away my location to...*them*.

I need to start with last night. No wait, that's still tonight. Christ. Okay, I need to start with earlier tonight. The night before Halloween. Most people call it Mischief Night, or Devil's Night. Here, it's Gate Night. I always assumed it had something to do with the Gates of Hell being thrown wide open, letting the demons out, but now I'm thinking it might be the other way around.

They let us out of school early. Half day. Mostly I think the teachers just don't want to bother with us. It was Friday night. We were going just go raise a little hell as my father likes to say, and then off to Vicky's party. But instead we ran into Killian and that was when everything changed.

This was Killian's first year in school with us. He was a small thing, a mop of red hair, sort of ugly. He was all twitchy and awkward. We called him Ginger when we were feeling nice. Worse when we weren't. Look, I'll admit now we were kind of assholes to the kid but it wasn't serious—that's the thing you need to understand (whoever *you* are). It was never serious. We didn't have anything against the guy—not really—we just teased him. It's fucking high school. That's what happens right? Everyone gets it. Hell before Steve and Jake, I used to get it in middle school for being smaller than the rest of the guys. I took my fair share –

Shit, I just heard the noise again. That keening cry. Fuck, I wish there was a gun here. I've never fired a gun in my entire life but at least it would be something, you know? Something better than hiding. They're looking for me, I know they are. I didn't throw the bone. They came right out of the fire...shit I'm getting ahead of myself.

We ran into Killian on the street and I want to say it was Steve's idea to take him up on his offer but I'm not sure if it was. It could have been any of us. Memory is a slippery fucking thing isn't it? He rounded the corner down at Main and Maple, right when we were coming back from the A&P with our stuff.

“Hey guys,” Killian said, nervously shuffling. He was always like that. Never stood up straight—never spoke clearly. Everything about this guy was rumped. I can’t remember what Steve said to him, something funny and we all sort of laughed. Jesus, it was just a joke. I swear to God, it was just a joke. We were just messing with the kid. And then he starts telling us about some Gate Night party he was going to—something called Samhaim or Samhain. I don’t know how it’s spelled. He told us it was some Gaelic thing, a party out in the woods. He wanted us to come.

And that was it—that opportunity that life gives you—the choice. If, when Killian lifted the six-pack of beer out of the bag, I just shrugged, told him to fuck off? Did we deserve this? Steve and Jake and I? Is this really a fair payback for a little high school teasing?

There was something in the beer. I know that. I’m not sure how he got it in. When he held up the six-pack the bottles were all closed. Maybe it was when he opened them and handed them out. Truth was I wasn’t paying attention to what Killian was doing by the time we got to the clearing in the woods.

Everything else I’m going to say is going to sound insane. I don’t care. I know what I saw in the fires. I know what happened to Steve and Jake. I know that the woods have changed. When I ran for the road, where the car was, it kept getting farther away. The faster I ran, the more woods there were. And yes, there was something in the beer that Killian gave us, I admit that, but I’ve drank before. Hell, I’ve been loaded before and there is no way I ran in the wrong direction. I was headed for the car. I could see the break in the tree line where the road was. The harder and faster I ran, the farther away the car was. I know that doesn’t make sense and I don’t care.

Shit, I think I heard them again.

Killian told us Samhain (however it’s spelled) was this Gaelic tradition, has to do with the light half of the year ending the dark

half beginning. He passed us each a beer and I sat on the hillside, watching the field. There had to be about a hundred people there. No joke. There was music playing somewhere. They were dancing on the other side of these two huge bonfires. It was just past twilight and the darkening sky was starting to dot with stars. Killian was telling us it's about cleansing. It's a ritual for the new year. Steve said something about it not being the new year and this, this I remember really clearly, when Killian looked at us again, lifting the bottle to his lips, and he smiled, he didn't have normal teeth anymore. They were like dog teeth, a jumble of incisors, black gums. And as quickly as it happened, it was gone. But I can still see it, each time I close my eyes, the moment when Killian went...wrong.

He led us down the hill and said we had to walk between the fires. We had to get to the other side where all the other people were. I could hear them, egging us on, laughing. There were women there too and I knew they were beautiful, real women, not high school girls. I could hear them calling us but I couldn't see their faces. I just *knew* we had to get to them.

Jake asked what was going on. I remember that too. I remember watching the way his mouth moved so slowly, the way the words hung in the crisp air, like laundry on a line. I remember thinking that was funny too, the way things seemed frozen. I think that was the point where I realized I was drugged. Except I wasn't scared. I should have been. I should have been terrified, but I wasn't.

Killian pointed down to the bonfires—two huge roaring things, twice the height of a man—and he told us we had to walk between them. He pulled our shirts off, I think this is where Steve protested a little—he said something about going home now. But no one moved. And then Killian stood before me, lifting my shirt over my head. I should have stopped him but I didn't. It was then that I noticed that Killian was the same height as me now—we were nose to nose. That kid was always at least a foot smaller than me but now we were the same exact height. He placed his hands on my

chest and whispered something in my ear but it wasn't a human sound. It was like when a dog sniffs you.

He gave me a bone like a club—the thing had to be some deer thigh bone or something. It was huge, picked clean and gleaming white. I held it up against the fire light and saw that it had symbols carved all over it. I even recognized a few.

"It's a symbol of sacrifice," Killian said. "Pass between the flames and throw the bones in."

"Why?" one of us asked, though at the time it felt like we all shared one voice then.

"It is for the hounds. Pass through the fire, toss in the bone. Then we party." I saw the teeth again when he said that, jagged things shoved into blackened gums. The heat from the fires pulsed through the night, the space we had to pass through about twenty feet long and four feet wide.

We walked in a line, not speaking, shirtless and carrying our bones like clubs. We must have looked like fucked up cavemen. Then Killian, or what used to be Killian, appeared on the other side of the long stretch we had to pass. He called to us. He was taller still, his arms unnaturally long. A woman had wrapped herself around his leg, gazing up at him.

We stepped forward, began the long walk between the fires. I heard something howl and a scream. A guttural voice said to throw the bones. When I looked into the fire, I could see them clearly. There were dozens of them, standing in the flames, some crouched and ready to spring, some stoic and watching. The only way I can describe them is that it is exactly what a dog born of a woman would look like. Or maybe a child born of a wolf. They were a perfect blend of human and canine. Their chest and bellies were smooth white, like marble, but the rest was covered in a coarse hair. Limbs were elongated and the elbow joints stuck out, almost as if their bones had been broken and reset backwards. When they

opened their mouth, more black gums, more jagged teeth and their eyes were a piercing red, a red you could see even in the fire.

Jake cursed and started to cry. I remember that. I remember thinking we needed to get the hell out of there, that the worst thing we could ever do in our entire lives is walk towards Killian, who stood at the other end, beckoning us.

"It's the end of the light half," he yelled. "It's the beginning of the dark. Throw the bones. Give the hounds their sacrifice." He kept saying it over and over again and Steve did it first. He hurled that leg bone with all his might into the flames, Jake following suit. Two of the hounds caught the bones in their mouth and that was when the howling started and those things, they...

I can still hear them screaming. It was so quick. I can still hear them screaming my name.

And that was when I ran. I dropped the bone and ran hard and fast back up the hill, back the way we had come, back to the car, but the harder I ran the harder it was to get there. Like I said before, I could see the break in the tree line, but each step I took it got farther away. Until finally it was gone and there was nothing but more woods and this cabin.

I don't think this night is going to end. I've lost track of time here and now this is the end of the paper. I keep telling myself when the sun comes up it's going to have just been a dream and I'll wake in my bed. What a joke, huh?

There was another howl just now, that low keening noise. It means they're coming. I know it does. I can feel them out there, waiting for their bone.

ALLY MALINENKO writes poems and stories and occasionally gets them published. Her second book of poems entitled *Crashing to Earth* is forthcoming from Tainted Coffee Press and her first novel for children, *Lizzy Speare and the Cursed Tomb* (Antenna Books) is available on Amazon. She currently lives in Brooklyn with her husband and wishes it was Halloween every day.

A Shirt of Bears

Robert Buswell

And behold it came unto pass in those days that Val and Kenneth drove home from a celebratory function upon a moonless Halloween night. Now Val was something of a cautious person, but Kenneth was not so wary of potential dangers. The rural roadway they traversed homeward had been constructed with the inclusion of multiple curves, leading Val to question Kenneth regarding his ability to drive.

“Ken, do you consider it prudent to text message while navigating these curves at this speed?”

“Fear not, my love,” Ken replied. “I am an accomplished driver and therefore cognizant of my responsibility to deliver us home safely.”

Now Val believed these words to be untrue, but she also realized that the time was not appropriate for an extended discussion upon the topic. Therefore, she wrapped her passenger restraint device about her person and hoped that, of all the possible outcomes given the situation, she would experience the outcome most conducive to happiness.

Not long thereafter, she screamed.

When Ken perceived that a scream had occurred, he focused his full attention upon the highway. He caught a momentary glimpse of something white as he struck the object, causing it to fly headlong from the roadway. He then soundly applied the vehicle’s braking system. When the vehicle had completely ceased forward motion, he queried Val upon the nature of the object he had struck.

“It was undoubtedly a child,” she said.

Now Ken trembled within upon hearing her words, saying, "Does it seem feasible that a child would be trick-or-treating way out here?"

Val, weeping, said, "We are ruined, for we have killed a child."

When the police arrived, Val supplied to them her best-remembered description, saying she would never forget the child's face. Nor, she opined, would she ever neglect to remember the expression the child wore in the instant prior to impact.

The law enforcement officers first examined the vehicle, finding a small area upon the front which suggested a recent collision. They penetrated the woods and searched therein. They visited the residences within walking distance of the area, inquiring whether children were missing. They administered tests upon Val and Ken to determine if either person showed signs of the influence of intoxicants.

Yet after hours of labor, the entire efforts of the police yielded no results.

The police person in charge finally released the two with a stern admonition about the hazards of texting while driving and drove them home, for the police had elected to retain their vehicle for further forensic testing.

During the time which consisted of the following month, the police saturated the area of the collision with their investigative efforts. The police laboratory's employees found that, contrary to expectations, no evidence from the impacted object had been transferred to the vehicle's bumper, causing the lab's employees to return the vehicle to Val and Ken. No person in the immediate area, nor even anyone in the extended area, could fail to account for their own progeny.

And there the matter rested for all but Val, for she alone saw the child's face and was unable to cleanse her psyche of the specter of the child's horrified look as the car bore rapidly towards it.

* * *

Years passed. During that time, Val and Ken copulated, such copulation being the event antecedent to the birth of their own child. And verily Val, with her considerable unease concerning the Halloween holiday, was unduly concerned that some misfortune should befall their child. For that reason, Val never let the child trick, nor did she allow the child to treat. On every Halloween night, Val and Ken could be discovered within the safety of their four walls.

Now Ken supposed this a harmless quirk in Val's personality, but only supposed it so because Val could not bear to present her thoughts to him. For the truth was that as their offspring grew, Val became steadily more frightened. As the child's face elongated and filled out, Val believed that she recognized it. She doubted her suspicions, not wanting to believe them, and hoped that she was only falling prey to imagination.

But in her heart, Val knew.

In the year their child turned five, Halloween found Val and Ken at home, as was their custom. And Val was strung very tightly, but Ken was relaxed. The child played with building blocks as Ken watched a television program. Val, however, sat in a nearby chair in a state of near panic, for there was no mistaking that face.

Now after some length of time had passed, the fullness of Val's bladder caused her to visit the bathroom. When she returned, the child was gone. And she moaned in such a way that Ken's veins iced and his hair unaccountably rose from its customary position on his neck.

Val demanded to know where the child had gone, but Ken urged her to relax. He told her the child had merely gone to prepare for bed. And the child chose this precise moment to reappear in the doorway.

Val experienced the urge to cry out.

For the child wore a white nightshirt. And the shirt's front side presented a depiction of two cuddly bears locked in embrace. Val belatedly recognized the shirt, realizing too late that she had suppressed the memory of the shirt in favor of the memory of the child's face. She ran toward the child with the intention of stripping off the shirt by force. And Ken was briefly concerned for her sanity, but only briefly.

For as Ken and Val gazed upon the child, it looked beyond them with an expression of surprise and terror. Val knew what the child could see, but Ken knew not.

Val had nearly reached the child when it was suddenly lifted straight up, as if by an unseen hand, and flew rapidly backwards down the hallway. The child lay quite still after that.

Val, when she saw this, experienced permanent loss of function in a vital organ and slumped to the floor. Ken, supposing her to have fainted, ran to the child and saw that it had been struck with a very solid object, for there was significant blunt trauma. There was no possibility, Ken knew, that the child had survived the impact, for the child had massive head injuries. He nonetheless began to dial for emergency services on his cellular telephone as he returned to Val and discovered her condition.

He stopped dialing and panicked then, for he was alone in a home with two recently-deceased persons, having no explanation for their cause of death. And his psychological health was unusually poor when the police arrived several days later in response to a neighbor's complaint about the odors of decomposition.

ROBERT BUSWELL is a volunteer railroad employee who is employed full-time in the aeronautics industry. He also writes stories featuring dire warnings about unsafe driving practices. These stories further his fulfillment of a judicially-imposed community service obligation for unpaid traffic fines. His stories have been published recently in *Traffic Cautions Literary Magazine*, *Avoidable Wreckage Review*, *Semi-True Stories of Irresponsible Driving Behavior*, and *Jersey Devil Press*. He owns two bathtub stoppers, is fascinated with ash, and collects discarded light bulbs. He lives and works in Houston.

Seven Minutes in Heaven

Christine Reilly

Natasha attended her first Halloween party dressed as a French kiss. She wore a beret with a piece of crepe paper labeled *Hershey's Kisses* on it, and made a dress out of aluminum foil. Underneath, she wore a black dance leotard. Molly had come over and they got ready together. Molly wore braids and carried a mug of hot chocolate. She was Swiss Miss, from the hot chocolate box.

Natasha's sisters lived in the awkward phase of being too young to attend pubescent Halloween parties, but claimed to be too old to go trick-or-treating. They planned on spending all night watching *Hocus Pocus* on ABC Family and eating Reese's Pieces from the neighborhood CVS. They helped her and Molly get dressed.

I'm so excited for you! You're going to kiss a cute boy! crooned Lucy.

A girl in Natasha's grade named Tatiana hosted the party. Natasha played her first game of seven minutes in heaven. She christened *heaven* as the backyard. A boy named Ben Shmirker picked her out. She had barely even noticed him before. He told jokes about everyone else's mother and made obscene gestures with his mouth and fingers during class pictures. The way Natasha's mind worked was that she typically noticed quiet people more than people who relished in the center of attention.

Earlier in the night, Natasha had left her remains in the bathroom: all of the aluminum foil had fallen off at that point, thin and shiny layers. She was left in her dance leotard. Ben grabbed her hand by the wrist. His thumb and pointer finger overlapped. He was almost two full heads shorter than she. He called her *honey*. Natasha thought *me*? They kissed.

Take off your shirt.

Pardon? Natasha asked. Her first kiss felt like nothing, like bumping into somebody while taking public transportation, any setting when she would neither want to thank someone for touching her nor feel violated. She didn't want to take off her shirt. She felt like she was in class, or in church. Anywhere where it would be inappropriate.

You heard me.

I'm not comfortable. Natasha had always been taught that whenever you're in a situation where you aren't comfortable, you should let people know. The other person might not know this. Though, Ben seemed like he knew this. How could he not? Natasha was blinking twice the amount she usually blinked. She kept brushing her sleeves, like she had invisible beetles and crickets on her.

Come on, said Ben. *You know you want to.*

Not really. Natasha felt how chilly it was in the backyard. Why did they name heaven the backyard? Why was heaven so cold in October?

This is what you're supposed to do.

I don't feel good. When Natasha was a baby, every time she was embarrassed, she would tell her parents that she had a stomachache. *I can't go to school today. I have a stomachache. I can't play with Lucy and Carly. I have a stomachache.* Natasha would never admit that she didn't want to do anything, just that she was physically incapable of doing it because of her stomach. In reality, Natasha's stomach worked quite well. She had a fabulous metabolism and great digestion.

I have a stomachache.

Yeah right. You're a dyke, and everyone knows it.

Oh really? She left the backyard and went back inside, through the sliding doors of the basement. It seemed like all teenage saturnalia occurred in people's basement, as though they had to

retreat to those depths in order to explore themselves with sex and drinking at their grandest capacity.

Molly put an arm around her best friend. *How was he?*

He was all right, said Natasha. She didn't want anyone to think she was a prude. Or a dyke. But what was so wrong with being gay? Uncle Sawyer and Uncle Noah were gay. Maybe it's different for girls, she thought. But the more she thought about it, the more she knew that it wasn't.

She thought to herself, *am I gay?* She didn't think she was. She had thought she liked boys, but at this point couldn't really picture liking anybody. She thought that maybe she was asexual like the fungi and plants they studied in science class. People were probably asexual, sure. It was most likely a birth defect. Oh well.

With the luck she carried for the night she did not want to continue the game. She'd had enough. Instead she went into the living room upstairs and watched *It's The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, with an Sri Lankan immigrant boy in her class named Ajay. Ajay hadn't wanted to play either, but he had been invited. *A pity invite*, Natasha thought. Natasha sat with him, not speaking, waiting for her father to pick her up at eleven.

The American culture was so different from Ajay's home culture, which nobody had ever asked him about. Natasha and her peers convinced themselves that they had nothing in common with Ajay. Even sitting next to him on the couch that felt stubbly like kitty litter, Natasha believed that she could not be friends with him. Did Ajay get homesick? Last year, Natasha went to astronomy camp for two weeks and cried into her pillow every night, thinking about how much she missed home. She made lists of all the things she missed. *Lucy's hair. Eating pineapple in Tupperware on the kitchen counter. The sculpture of Adonis in our bathroom.* She realized that this feeling of homesick granted her an identity that she had never realized in a finite sense before. Leaving home allowed her to

understand who she was. Maybe Ajay was the most self-actualized person her age, with regards to his personal Diaspora.

At 10:00 p.m., she pictured herself kissing Ajay because she was bored and kissing was on her mind. So maybe she wasn't asexual.

What's Sri Lankan food like? Natasha's breach of silence was abrupt, like a sandpiper swooping down to grab lunch.

None of your fucking business, said Ajay. Two months of being ostracized at an American school left him hardened and suspicious of anyone who asked him a question that had a purpose other than transactional. He yawned very loudly, accidentally. Natasha studied his mouth. The way he yawned was human adjacent with the intensity of his words.

Claudio had been listening to old Halloween music loudly in the car ride home. The B-52's.

Turn it off, Daddy.

Something wrong?

I hate you. Why did you have to pick me up so late?

You could have called me. Mommy and I were just at home watching movies with the girls. Did something bad happen?

I had a stomachache.

Claudio reached into his pocket. *Want some Pepto-Bismol?*

Natasha paused. She didn't want her father to know she had been lying, but didn't know what would happen if she took medicine on a perfectly healthy stomach. No.

With his eyes on the road, Claudio reached over to dishevel Natasha's hair. She ducked.

Don't touch me anymore, Daddy. I'm too old to be touched. Besides, you're going to have an accident.

Penguin, I used to drive a stretch limo all over New York City, said Claudio. *You don't need to worry about me driving.*

Accidents happen all the time, said Natasha. *That's why they're called accidents.*

When Natasha got home, Lucille and Carly ran to her. Their tongues were blue and their hands had ring-pop residue. Carly asked her, *did you kiss a cute boy?*

I kissed someone, but I can't remember if he's cute. Natasha could not picture his face. She remembered how his breath felt waxy, like parchment paper, but she couldn't even remember if he had freckles or the color of his eyes.

What was he dressed as?

The Monopoly man. Actually, Ben had been dressed as a vampire, but Natasha didn't want to think about sucking or nighttime. Vampires seemed too sexual to her. She wanted to picture Ben as a fat old man with a monocle and two giant bags of money that he carried over his shoulder like a tramp and his bindle.

One week after she had her first kiss, Natasha volunteered at a retirement home. She had to complete ten hours per semester as a requirement for her middle school's National Junior Honor Society. She was matched with a ninety-year-old man named Roy. Roy didn't want to play checkers, and every thirty seconds or so he kept turning to Natasha and telling her that she was the prettiest girl he had ever seen.

You're so sweet!

I love you.

You have pretty hair.

You have beautiful lips...I'd love to kiss 'em!

Roy was persistent but harmless, so Natasha let him have his fun. She noticed that he had a wedding ring on.

Samantha, he told her. We were married for fifty-two years. She was my first kiss, you know. First and last.

Do you ever get lonely? asked Natasha.

Once in a while. Then I think about being buried with her. It's not so bad, thinking about that. Samantha used to bite her lip all the time. We

didn't get to have children, which maybe would have made it a bit easier. I could've remembered her in the way our son could've laughed or the way our daughter's chin could've looked. My memory's not so great now, you know, and every time I think of her she gets fuzzier and fuzzier. A pretty girl here and there like you helps spark the old memory. Would you believe that sometimes memory can be the best medicine?

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Mermaids at St. Abbs Head

Gwendolyn Edward

It was overcast and the world had thrown a thick, sodden blanket over the Scottish village of St. Abbs, though by now, the fishing families there were used to the that type of weather. However, being accepting of their lot at St. Abbs didn't mean that they had to want it. They all wanted something else, something more. At night children spoke in rabbit whispers to their mothers about the trains to Edinburgh and Glasgow and even London, where there were halls devoted to musicians and universities where people learned things other than fishing. In these places, the stink of fish didn't permeate the skin. But the children's dreams of cities became only hushed hopes, and were buried under blankets so fathers wouldn't hear, or were blown away in the wind that carried the boats to sea. This was because the children of St. Abbs had learned never to speak of dreams, ever since Finlay had carried one in his mouth all through the village only to spit it out along the way to St. Abbs Head when his too thin body couldn't contain the excitement anymore. "There's mermaids!" he cried, breathless and red, wiping his hands mechanically on his pants the way all the children did, as if they could wipe away the smell of their futures. "There's mermaids at St. Abbs Head!"

Finlay wasn't known to lie. He was actually quite an unimaginative child, and so the others called him "Fish head." "Fish head" because his head was too small for his body and his neck too thick. There were never any thoughts swimming between his ears, his eyes always seemed a tad glazed over, unseeing, and he followed the others with a silent, slightly gaping mouth that drooped at the corners. And he smelled like fish. They all did, but only Finlay was ridiculed for it. He never pointed that out. Maybe

he didn't notice that the others smelled just as bad as he did, or maybe he didn't care. He took abuse well, and everyone knew his father was a drunk. Insults flew like a mallet at the fish head during the night when peat burned heavily in wood plank cottages, and Finlay covered his bruises with wool.

Finlay wasn't anything worth noticing, and when other children played at marbles he always accepted that he would have to collect the glass balls at the end because he knew his station and didn't dare to rally against it. He couldn't have played anyway. He didn't have any marbles and no one ever bothered to lend him some. When Oliver caught a fish with the patch-worked net he stole from his father, and the children played lord of the castle and feasted upon small bones over a hidden fire, Finlay served them as befitted his rank. When the others spoke of gold and swords, he took what little flesh was left and sat meekly, listening to their tales, inwardly making them his own.

When Finlay declared that there were mermaids at St. Abbs Head, the others believed him. Perhaps it was because Finlay couldn't possibly imagine anything fantastic, and so the manner in which he heaved and squealed had an intuitive truth. Maybe it was because the boys needed something else other than clouds and rain and poverty.

"What do you mean, mermaids at St. Abbs Head," Angus said cautiously, running a calloused hand through dark unkempt hair, as he too had squashed his dreams into a hard ball of lead that sat in his intestines, waiting to be expelled. "Everyone knows there's no things as mermaids." But his voice betrayed him.

Bean looked upwards through greasy red bangs at the oldest boy. If Angus thought there might be mermaids, then there really might be mermaids. He remembered nights when the wind howled and the water was fierce and his mother sat beside him, telling him about the mermaid wife. She had been beautiful and the fisherman had been smart enough to catch her. A lucky man. Like the other boys, even Bean had forgotten the end of the story, but what he did

remember was that mermaids looked like sun and sun shone on their scales whether there was any sun or not. They lived under the sea in a place where sun streamed down and blessed altars where flowers grew and they sat on stools made of weathered stones and the king of them all sat, so old, that parts of him had turned to coral.

Bean ate these stories like oat cakes, and there was never enough of whimsy or food, so when Finlay waved his arms and demanded that the others follow him to see the mermaids Bean jumped up and ran and didn't even notice the hard rocks poking through the thin soles of his shoes. Dirty hair in the wind. The sound of labored breathing. The dream held on the tongue and in the eyes. No one dared to say another word until they saw the mermaids. Five pairs of feet thudded along the downward sloping path towards the beach in an awkward rhythm, with Finlay in the lead, his own footfalls like a drum that the others followed for the first time.

When Finlay stopped abruptly at the base of St. Abbs Head, the rocky promontory with the white-washed lighthouse, Bean smashed into him, sending them both onto wet earth where grass gave way to grey stones. There were fishing boats on the water, their fathers' boats, and they could hear their fathers yelling and screaming and the boys didn't know what was happening. Bean helped Finlay to his feet and the boys raced to the edge of the water.

"The mermaids," Finlay whispered, broken.

Even from where they were standing, boats inaccessible because of space and water, the boys could see.

One mermaid was strung up from Finlay's father's mast. Hung by a tail that was longer than any man's legs, purple like heather decorated with wreaths of sea leaves, the mermaid spoke in some intelligible tongue and trashed like a fish in a net. But those

gurgling words didn't come from a mouth the shape of a heart, and there was no sun shining of scales.

It might have been a man or a woman, Bean couldn't tell. But it didn't matter because the mermaid was horrible. The heather scales didn't give way to milk flesh and soft hair. Scales upon scales with no breasts to nuzzle and no neck to kiss. Scales on its entire body and head and pointed razor teeth that cut the dragon tongue so that its mouth was a bloody cave. It twisted and heaved and tore at where its tail was tied, desperately trying to free itself, but when its hands touched the hempen twine, Bean's father, Eumann, lopped off one of its arms and sent it into the water, the mermaid howling and chocking on blood and air.

"You promised," Mac, the youngest, cried at Finlay, hurling a clump of sod at him. "You promised there'd be mermaids!"

"It is a mermaid," Finlay responded miserably, not even bothering to wipe the dirt from his face. It stained him, marked him as a liar. "There were seven of them and they were singing and splashing in the waves and one waved at me." His voice broke when he said *waved* and he felt tears in his eyes. Beyond, the mermaid's terror continued, and Bean couldn't look.

"That's not a mermaid," another spat.

Angus nodded, shaking. "Mermaids are beautiful and..." Angus couldn't describe what he thought he'd see anymore, and so he walked up to Finlay and pushed him to the ground. "You're so stupid, Finlay." Then, he began to walk off with the other two boys, all of them swallowing back cries so fiercely that their chests hurt.

"It's an ugly mermaid anyway. Who cares if they kill it," Angus said, even though none of the boys had mentioned the lynching.

Finlay stayed on the ground on his back where he had fallen, stunned. "They're beautiful," he said softly. "They were beautiful and smiling."

Bean forced himself to look at the mermaid again. It wasn't beautiful. It was grotesque and streamed in blood and was just a

fish. It had stopped moving, and their fathers stood around it, arms loose and hanging like the mermaid.

"I wanted you to see," Finlay began, but Mac cut him off.

"We saw. We saw alright. You're worthless Finlay." Mac trudged away and Finlay let him.

"Come on, Finlay," Bean said, trying to get the other boy to sit up. "There's nothing left to see."

"I wish you could have seen them like I did," Finlay whispered, making the first wish he had ever dared to.

Bean finally sat down beside him when Finlay still refused to move. Finlay looked at the sky, grey and expansive and Bean looked at the wretched, dying mermaid.

They stayed like that for far too long, even after the fishing boats sailed away with their catch and there was nothing left to look at.

Cold crept into Bean's feet and he stomped them on the ground. "Getting dark soon," he said to Finlay, who lay like a wounded fox curled on the grass.

"I don't care," he mumbled. "I can't go back."

"You want to freeze out here?" Bean asked.

"I don't care."

There was a long silence.

Then Bean saw the arm in the water, lapping, almost to the shore. He got up and brushed his hands on his pants and waded into the water, freezing water like ice picks pricking his feet. He picked up the mermaid limb and felt it almost weightless in his hand. The scales were soft, not hard like the fish his father caught. And the purple sheen shifted to blues and greens at the edges of the tiny circles. Bean noticed a pattern and saw that the colors formed a picture of a lobster crawling on sand. The nails were long, and thick, not uniform like his but thicker in some places than others making staggered ridges, pearlescent like the inside of an oyster. He carried it back to Finlay.

"Look," he said, standing above the broken boy. "It's the arm my father cut off."

Finlay looked and sat up. Wordlessly, he reached for it, and Bean gave it to him.

Finlay sat there for a long time looking at it. Bean waited, shaking, even though his feet were frozen.

"It's beautiful," Finlay said, looking hopefully to Bean.

Bean nodded.

"The others won't see it," Finlay said.

"They won't," Bean agreed.

Finlay tried to wrench the nails from the fingers.

"What are you doing?" Bean asked.

"Taking them with me," Finlay said, set at his task. He picked up a flat rock and began to hack the flesh from the hand.

Bean helped him, and they put the hand on the grass between them and with make-shift knives they carved the mermaid hand open and detached the mother-of-pearl nails. Afterwards, with pockets that smelled like blood and dead fish, they threw the meat into the sea and watched it sink.

The mermaid was hung at St. Abbs Head, near the lighthouse. The people came to look at it, though by then the gulls had been at it and crabs crawled in its mouth and sea worms had eaten its eyes. Everyone agreed that the fisherman did the right thing by killing it. Finlay's father sang about the beast around the fire when he was heavy with beer and the song spread like whispered children's dreams until everyone had heard it, but Finlay and Bean never sang the song, though they knew it by heart.

Months later Bean found Finlay in the spot where they had seen the mermaid. All the boys went there at one time or another, but they never talked about it and never went together.

"Are you looking for them?" Bean asked, knowing the answer.

"No," Finlay said, pulling the shell nails from his pocket.

Bean knew he was lying.

Finlay threw them into the water, but they only floated on the surface.

A fish snagged one curiously, and for a second it disappeared into darkness, but then it bobbed back up to the top and wavered in the water.

"Why did you do that?" Bean asked, thinking about the five nails he kept hidden between his mattress and bed frame.

"They were never mine to keep," Finlay responded, walking off.

Bean watched them float around and thought that Finlay was stupid for throwing them away.

And Finlay might have been stupid, because he forgot about the mermaid. When the corpse was rotted and only fish bones were left and the village threw it into the ocean, it rained for four days, so badly that the boats couldn't sail out to fish. After that, no one spoke of the mermaid and the song they all sung about it died in the mouth before a word was uttered. Finlay's father still sang it, but Finlay never heard it. He let the song be carried away before it ever reached his ears, before he could hope anymore for something else. Everything he ever buried was dug up and tossed into the ocean like the shell nails, and when Bean tried to show him the mermaid treasure he kept hidden, Finlay only asked what they were.

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The Magician

Stephen James Price

Autumn temperatures in southern Arkansas are unpredictable at best. Last Halloween, it dropped to near freezing levels, but this year, it was almost eighty degrees, and it wasn't even noon yet.

The two young boys had already stripped down to their undershirts, and the wet stains under their arms were growing as they worked.

Billy Evans slung the noose around the hay bale and pulled it tight. As it lifted off the ground and disappeared into the loft above him, he turned and stared at the mountains.

"Hurry up with the next bale, Billy." Charlie yelled as he looked down from the open doors. "We ain't never gonna get done with our chores if you keep day dreaming like that."

"I'm not dreaming. I was just thinking about tonight. I can't believe they got the Magician for this year's Halloween show. Do you think we'll get close enough to see anything?"

"Ma still hasn't said you can go," Charlie reminded him. "You know she thinks you're still too little."

"I'm not too little," Billy whined, kicking his feet in the dirt. "I don't want to stay at home and carve those durned pumpkins again. I wanna go with you."

"I know but, I had to wait until I was eight before they let me go to my first one."

"It's not fair. I'll be eight in two months. I'm bigger then Jonas Manchester and he's almost nine," Billy said proudly.

"It's not how big you are, Billy. The Halloween shows can be pretty scary. They give some kids nightmares."

"Yea, but you said you weren't even scared."

"I wasn't," Charlie said quickly. He paused for a few seconds and then added, "Not really. They had some gypsies on stage, but they weren't scary. Not too much, anyway."

"Well, I know I won't be scared. I sure hope Ma lets me go this year."

"Not if you don't hurry it up she won't. We still got all these bales to get up here, the chickens gotta be fed, and we promised Pa we'd get them sacks of seeds stacked in the barn. And you know Ma's gonna make us take a bath before we go into town."

"A bath?" Billy frowned as he looped the noose around the next bale. He thought about it for a second and said, "Seeing the Magician will be worth it. Worth a whole month of baths, and then some."

"Who'd ever think he would be coming to our little town?"

"Why not our town? What's wrong with Trinity?" Billy asked defensively.

"Nothing's wrong with it. I just mean that the Magician is probably the most famous person I ever heard of. You'd think he would be doing a show in Little Rock or some other big city." Charlie lost his grip on the last bale, and it swung out ominously over his little brother's head before he caught the rope again.

"Now who's day dreaming, Charlie?" Billy asked as he laughed.

It took just over two more hours for the boys to get the loft full of hay. They pulled one bale around back and spread it out for the horses to eat.

"I'll get the eggs while you feed the chickens," Charlie said.

"Can't I get the eggs, Charlie? I always gotta feed the chickens, and they try to peck my legs."

"You break too many," Charlie told him. "Last time, there was more on the ground than you had in the basket."

"I'll be real careful," Billy pleaded. "I promise."

"Okay, but don't break any this time."

They finished their chores in record time and went into the house just before three o'clock.

"Wipe your feet and mind the clean floor," their mother told them as she fed their baby sister, Mary, from one of the store-bought bottles Pa had brought home last month. He got it from Mr. Drummond, the owner of Drummond's Mercantile & Dry Goods, in trade for three-dozen eggs. "You two are covered in dirt and hay. Get your baths before your pa gets home."

"Ma, I got the eggs today," Billy said as he set the basket on the table. "There's thirty-two of them and I didn't break any this time."

"That's good, Honey."

Billy kept standing next to the table, looking at her.

"What's wrong," she asked.

"Nothing," he said, shuffling his feet. "You look real pretty today, that's all."

"Oh, I see," she said, smiling. "Does this have anything to do with the Halloween show tonight?"

"Can I go, Ma? Please, please, please?"

"Honey, I still think you're too young for such a scary show, but me and your pa talked about it last night and he thinks it'll be fine."

"Did you hear, Charlie?" Billy shouted. "I'm going to see the Magician!"

"Now go get your baths and we'll see about getting y'all a little spending money for tonight," Ma said. "And wash your hair, too."

The boys rushed into their bedroom and began preparing for their bath.

"You go first, and I'll get the water," Charlie said. He went into the kitchen and picked up the old wooden bucket from beside the sink. He went outside to the well and drew the first bucket of water. It took both hands to carry the water back into their room where Billy was already naked and sitting in the large metal basin that they used for a bathtub. Charlie poured the water over him without warning and Billy screamed and jumped up.

"Gosh darn it, Charlie. The water is freezing!"

"Shhhh. Don't let Ma hear you cussin' like that," Charlie said, trying to hide his smile. "She might wash your mouth out with this here bar of soap ... or worse, make you stay home whilst we go see the show tonight."

"I'm sorry, Charlie. It's just that the water is so cold. Can't we heat it up some?"

"It'll take a lot longer if Ma has to heat it up on the stove. Besides, I'm going to be using this same cold water when you're done with it. Now just start washing so you can get it over with. Unless you want to be late getting into town tonight."

Fifteen minutes later, both boys were dressed in their Sunday Best and had their hair properly greased down and parted on the right side.

"Well, ain't you two looking all dapper," their father said as they entered the front room. He sniffed the air, laughed and said, "And someone's been using my hair tonic."

"Hello, Pa," Billy yelled, as he ran up and hugged him. "We got all our chores done and I even got the eggs. How was your day, today?"

"Me and Moses, we got the back forty acres nearly plowed. That only leaves sixty more before it gets too cold and the ground freezes. You sure y'all two don't want to help your ole Pa turn the fields before winter sets in?"

"Now, Jed. You know I need them boys to do the chores around here and to help out around the house," Ma chimed in. "I can't do it all myself and still tote baby Mary around to boot."

"I know the deal. I was just asking my little men here if they wanted to help out their Pa." He lifted Billy into the air. Billy squealed as he put him on top of the table. Pa turned around and said, "Your turn, Charlie." He grabbed him and hefted him onto

the table next to Billy. "Land Sake's, Charlie. You weigh a ton. How old are you now, boy? Fifteen? Sixteen, maybe?"

"Pa! You know I'm only nine and a half," Charlie said proudly.

Both boys laughed. Ma gestured for them to get down off from the table so she could place the biscuits and gravy in the center of it.

"Pa, when are we going into town?" Billy asked.

"Town? Tonight? Why would we be going to town?" He kept a straight face as he winked at their mother.

"To see the Magician," both boys cried at once.

"The Magician? Is that tonight?" Pa asked. "I'm kinda tired today. I was thinking we'd just stay home and carve out a couple of those scary pumpkins." He tried desperately to look serious but ended up laughing at their shocked expressions.

"We'll go as soon as we're done with our supper," Ma said. "It's just biscuits and gravy tonight, unless you want me to cook up a chicken or something. I could do that in about an hour or so," she teased.

"No!" the boys shouted in unison. "Let's just eat so we can go."

Everyone sat down around the table as Pa bowed his head to pray. "Dear Heavenly Father. We thank you for the food you have provided for us and thank you for keeping the snow off me and Moses so far. We ask that you keep the weather warm 'til we're done plowing. Thank you for keeping this family safe and blessing us daily." He paused for a second, and then loudly said, "And we thank you for the Magician."

"Amen!" Billy yelled, and everyone laughed.

The boys ate quickly and put the dirty dishes in the sink basin.

"We can go now, iffing you boys promise to help your Ma with the dishes when we get back home tonight," Pa said.

"I promise," said Billy.

"Yea, promise," added Charlie.

"Then hitch the wagon, boys," Ma told them. "We'll leave as soon as we're dressed and the wagon is ready. And be careful of your Sunday clothes."

"Make sure you hitch up the fast horses, boys. We don't wanna be late for the Magician," Pa teased them.

"Pa, we only got two horses," Billy said as he laughed.

"And Moses the mule," Charlie said.

"Better let Moses be," Pa told them. "He's pretty tuckered out from plowing all day in this heat."

The boys got the wagon ready while their parents finished getting dressed. Billy didn't stop chattering about the Magician and the show the whole time they worked. The boys had just finished hitching the horses when everyone came outside. Ma wore her best bonnet, and Pa had actually tucked his shirt into his trousers and greased down his hair. Ma had baby Mary in her blue dress and tied matching ribbons in her hair. Everybody seemed to be excited about seeing the Magician.

As the boys climbed into the back of the wagon, Pa turned to them and said, "Now, I'll do my magic act for you." He clenched both hands tightly into fists and held them out in front of him. "Lookey here. Nothin' up my sleeves. Pick a hand, boys."

Both boys chose one of his hands.

"Abracadabra!" he yelled as he turned his hands over and opened them, displaying a shiny new dime in each one.

"A dime? A real dime? For each of us?" Charlie asked, as Billy just stared at the treasures Pa was holding.

"You both deserve it," he said.

"Jed, you're spoiling them," Ma said. "I told them we might be able to spare two or three cents each if they did the extra chores."

"My little men worked very hard this week," Pa told her. "And besides, the looks on their faces would be worth a whole dollar each to me. Iffin I had it."

Ma just smiled as the boys talked about how they would spend their riches at the Halloween show.

They were still a half-mile from town when they encountered the other wagons. They lined the dusty road and were moving very slowly. Kids were running alongside several of them. They were chanting "The Magician, the Magician," as they ran and played.

"This is going to be one hell of a show," Pa said to no one in particular. "I'll bet it'll be better than the show four summers back, when they had those three fellows from New York City up on stage. Most of these people, I never seen before. I just heard one fellow say St. Louis. Must have took them two days to get here. Some prob'ly come from even further."

They saw the tarps as they got closer to town. There were enough of the tents and make-shift lean-to's to practically start a new town.

"What's with all of the tents?" Ma asked aloud.

"Folks from other towns been camping out here," a teenage boy, who was walking with a group of other young people, volunteered. "My Pa said some been here nearly a week. They want to make sure they get to see the show."

"This is going to be one hell of a show," Pa said again.

Several men with lanterns directed the wagons into a field at the edge of town. As Pa settled their wagon into place and put on the hand brake, the boys jumped down from the back and began talking with several other boys.

"Has anyone seen the Magician, yet?" Charlie asked the small crowd.

"Not yet. They're saying he won't come out until they are ready to start," one of them answered.

"Charlie, keep an eye on Billy, and meet us back here after the show," Ma called out. Charlie agreed as the boys ran off into the crowd. The chants "The Magician, The Magician," were getting louder.

"I've never seen anything like this in my life," Billy said as he looked around.

There were lanterns everywhere. The whole town looked like it was the middle of the day. Several men were walking on stilts and women were fanning themselves with giant silk covered fans. Someone must have been selling balloons—the kind that floated in the air and were tied with a string—because the boys noticed several of the younger children carrying them. The roofs and second floor balconies were filled with chattering people. Everyone seemed to be dressed in their best clothes. The boys saw Reverend Morgan talking to the bearded man who ran the saloon. The Reverend's wife, Mary, was talking to a group of cowboys. They were all laughing about something. She was even wearing make-up. Charlie was sure of it.

Mr. Johnson, the banker, who was rumored to be the richest man in four counties, was talking to the heavily muscled Mr. Jorgensen who owned the Livery and Blacksmith shop. Two women Charlie thought must be dancers, because their dresses were short enough to show their bloomers, were laughing and talking with Mrs. Delonic, their Sunday School teacher, in front of the barbershop.

Several people had sacks of homemade candies and they gave fistfuls of it to any child willing to say "Trick or Treat."

"There's nothing like a show to bring everyone together," Charlie told Billy. Billy just nodded. He was too much in awe to speak.

Vendors walked through the crowd hawking their wares.

"Sarsaparilla! Get your Sarsaparilla, here."

"Pretzels. We got your pretzels, here. We got your Candied Apples."

"We got cider. Get your apple cider. Cider."

The boys had enough money for two sarsaparilla drinks, two pretzels and a candied apple each, but they chose to share one drink and get a pretzel of their own for now. They didn't know

how long the show would last and didn't want to spend all of their money too early.

"The Magician! The Magician!" The chanting continued through the crowd. The enthusiasm was electric.

"There he is!" someone shouted. Everyone began to crowd around the stage to try to catch a glimpse of the most famous man they had ever heard of.

"Charlie, I don't see him," Billy cried out in a panic. Charlie grabbed Billy's hand and pulled him closer to the stage. They had the advantage of being small. They could slip through the cracks left in the crowd that adults would find too difficult, if not impossible, to maneuver.

The shouts and noises from the crowd were deafening. Judge Reynolds was standing in the center of the stage reading something that was written on the back of one of the posters that were hanging everywhere. It was impossible to hear what he was saying.

Charlie pulled Billy right up to the front of the stage just as the roar of the crowd suddenly stopped. They stared at the Magician in total silence. He was wearing all black, just like in the posters. He smiled as he surveyed the crowd. He caught the eye of an elderly woman sitting in a rocking chair on one of the balconies closest to the stage. He nodded his head and said, "Evening ma'am. Glad you could make it."

She was so excited that she passed out. No one came to her aide as she slumped over in the chair. Everyone was too busy watching the Magician.

He turned back and smiled as he surveyed the crowd. He looked down and saw Charlie and Billy, peeking over the edge of the stage.

"I hope you enjoy the show, boys," he said and then winked at them.

Both boys jumped at the thunderous sound of the trapdoor dropping open and the Magician's neck snapping at the end of the noose.

"My God!" shouted Billy. He pissed his pants at the same time the Magician did.

"Yea, that was awesome!" answered Charlie. "Even better than when they hung those gypsies last year."

The crowd began to cheer as the Magician twitched a few times before slumping forward. Most of the crowd went back to the festivities before the Magician's body stopped swinging, but Charlie and Billy just stood at the edge of the stage, staring up at the man in black.

Charlie bent down and picked up one of the "WANTED" posters lying on the ground. "I'm gonna hang this on the wall of our room," he said.

Billy did not answer.

As Charlie started to roll the poster up, he noticed the writing on the back of it.

"This was what the judge was reading," he said excitedly as he unrolled it. Turning toward Billy, he began to read aloud.

"Johnny Williams, also known as 'The Magician' is wanted for more than a dozen murders throughout Arkansas. He was caught just outside of Trinity after he murdered Sheriff Jergens and two of his deputies. The horse he stole threw a shoe and came up lame less than two miles outside of town. Thanks to all of the brave men of Trinity who rode with the posse, we had him in our town jail before the sun went down. There were more than a dozen witnesses to his dastardly crimes and his trial lasted less than fifteen minutes. He was found guilty of three murders and horse thievery, and sentenced to hang by the neck until dead. Justice has been served. God have mercy on his soul."

"That was better than any show I've ever heard of," Billy finally said, still unable to take his eyes off from the swinging body. "I'm gonna be that famous myself someday. I swear it."

“The Magician” appears in the short story collection *Pages of Promises*.

STEPHEN JAMES PRICE was born and raised in New York, but has lived in the deep south (or within a two hour drive of it) for more than half of his life. Although he claims to be northern by birth and southern by choice, he has never said “*ya’ll*” and even finds it difficult to write. His published works include a short story collection *Pages of Promises* and his debut novel *2:27 A.M.*



On the cover:

"Grime 107"

Eleanor Leonne Bennett

ELEANOR LEONNE BENNETT is a 16-year-old internationally award winning photographer and artist who has won first places with National Geographic, The World Photography Organisation, Nature's Best Photography, Papworth Trust, Mencap, The Woodland trust and Postal Heritage. Her photography has been published in the Telegraph, The Guardian, BBC News Website and on the cover of books and magazines in the United States and Canada. Her art is globally exhibited, having shown work in London, Paris, Indonesia, Los Angeles, Florida, Washington, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Canada, Spain, Germany, Japan, Australia and The Environmental Photographer of the year Exhibition (2011) amongst many other locations. She was also the only person from the UK to have her work displayed in the National Geographic and Airbus run See The Bigger Picture global exhibition tour with the United Nations International Year Of Biodiversity 2010. She can be reached at eleanor.ellieonline@gmail.com and www.eleanorleonnebennett.zenfolio.com.