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THE *mysterious traveler* MAGAZINE

Special
Halloween
Edition!

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GREAT STORIES OF MYSTERY, TERROR AND SUSPENSE

THIS is The Mysterious Traveler speaking, asking you to join me on yet another trip into the sinister shadows of the twisted and the bizarre. You should know that we will be accompanied on tonight's ride by a few dear friends of mine. I do hope you find the traveling arrangements agreeable.

To mystery lovers searching for a detour into the odd, I am delighted to say that this very magazine is a perfect vehicle. The eerie narratives found within were scrawled by some of the finest wordsmiths of the weird that I have come across in my many years of traveling.

Like always, the collection of titles found in this sixth issue of THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER MAGAZINE are of the very highest quality I can bind together for your reading pleasure. Each has the ability to 'thrill and chill' – and, as always, I think they make for quite good reading.

I do sincerely hope that you will be satisfied with this special Hallowe'en edition of our magazine. Once again, I feel it needs to be said, that if this should be the very last time we share each other's presence, I would like to think that we remained faithful comrades to the last.

And now, without any further introductions, I ask you to join me as we depart on our trip with a chilling tale of love and loss – and love again – which begins on page four. Good reading, and goodbye.

Sincerely,
The Mysterious Traveler



FALL 2008

THE *mysterious traveler*

MAGAZINE

GREAT STORIES OF MYSTERY, TERROR, AND SUSPENSE

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SETH T. SMOLINSKE, Publisher

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Dedicated to Robert Arthur & David P. Kogan

In all civilizations since the dawn of man, respect for the dead has been a common trait linking us all together, a trait inherent in each human being. But what happens when the laws of nature have been reversed and the dead rise and come knocking on your door? The answer might surprise you...

THE RETURNING

By DARRELL PITT

Dusk had arrived by the time Richard Blackman arrived home with his wife to find a crowd had gathered on their front lawn. Richard recognised some of them - Renee Jones and her husband Bob, Gary Smith, John and Barbara Simmonds - but most of them he knew only by sight. They were nameless faces from up and down the block, and some of them were people he did not recognise at all.

He pulled his car slowly into the driveway of his two-storey white timber home, keeping an eye on the crowd the whole time. They were not like a mob of peasants in some old Frankenstein film, carrying burning torches and shrieking murder while they charged on towards the castle, but he noticed one of them held a crowbar. Another carried a petrol can. A guy near the back of the group nestled a sawn off shotgun in his arms.

Richard Blackman felt a shiver of fear as he killed the engine and turned to his wife. The smell from her was terrible. Unbearable. He had fought the desire to put the window down the whole way home from the cemetery.

Richard looked into her blue eyes. He had always loved her eyes, but now a white fog shrouded them as if a ghost resided within.

"I'm scared," she said thickly, as if she had a cold.

He took her cold hand. "It will be all right."

She tried to smile, but the action resembled a snarl; receding lips bared her teeth like an angry dog.

They exited the car and the neighbours drew back, staring in horror at his wife. Someone gasped. The unknown man at the back pumped a bullet into the chamber of the shotgun. Gary Smith - good ol' reliable Gary who had brought their bins off the path every Tuesday morning for the last four years - stepped forward, hands clenched as if about to speak at a funeral.

"Richard. We've got to talk."

"Yeah?" Richard's heart was banging a drum in his chest. "What do we have to talk about?"

Gary's eyes jerked towards Michelle. "Her."

Richard was terrified, but underneath the fear dwelt cold anger. "You

mean Michelle. My wife. You've been to dinner at our house." He felt the anger bubbling over into rage. "There's nothing to talk about."

A man he did not recognise called out from the back of the crowd. "We don't want her kind on our block."

Richard felt like he had been slapped.

"We just want to be left alone." Richard said loudly, but he heard a thin whine in his voice. "If you leave us alone there'll be no trouble."

No one said anything. A dog barked further up the street. A car distantly turned a corner, tyres squealing. Canned laughter spilled from someone's television.

Richard sucked in the cool suburban air and focused on Gary. "Get out of the way."

His neighbour looked around uncertainly.

"Move," Richard said, taking a step forward.

Gary Smith hesitated a moment before slowly moving aside. Several of the others moved away from them, not from fear, but from revulsion, their eyes riveted towards Michelle the whole time. No one said anything. They simply stared in horror.

Richard understood their silent fascination. It was one thing to hear about the dead rising from mortuary tables, to see dead people being inter-

viewed on television about their return from the grave. To experience the resurrected in person was quite a different experience.

Richard's eyes settled momentarily upon Renee Jones. She had told Richard that the talk up and down the street was that no one wanted him to bring his wife home. She had talked about Michelle in the same way that some people talked about homosexuals or inter-racial couples.

"It's unnatural." That was her explanation. "God created people to live and die and move onto the next world. Not to be reborn here."

"Maybe he's changed his mind," he told her. "That's natural enough for me."

Seven days. That was how long it took. God or the Earth or – as some scientists had speculated – a virus created in some laboratory – was returning the dead to life and there was no good reason for it, or none that anyone could divine. Richard could care less. Michelle had been taken away from him one week ago today; she had been standing at the kitchen sink when a brain aneurism had killed her dead.

In some countries burials were already outlawed – cremation was mandatory – but not here in the good 'ol US of A. No siree, even the dead have rights, they do and everyone has

a right to walk the streets.

No matter how bad they smell.

After a year their bodies decomposed to the point where there was nothing left. Only ivory white bones, rotting flesh and putrefying muscle. Michelle would die – again – and then she would be finally gone.

But until then she was still his wife.

Richard looked around at them, daring them with his eyes. He was suddenly aware of how he and Michelle must look to them. He was dressed as if ready for a Sunday drive, except for the telltale graveyard dirt staining his hands and the knees of his jeans. Michelle was more conspicuous. She wore her burial dress, her wedding gown, made from taffeta and silk and beaded with fake pink pearls. The outfit was now ruined by dirt and muck. Her distended stomach, pregnant with death, pushed obscenely against the waistline. Shattered veins stood out against her grey skin like cracks in granite.

He had driven to the cemetery. Dug up her coffin. Crowbarred open the lid and released her. She had already been scraping at the lid of the coffin, eyes open and yearning. Despite the rotting stench emanating from her decomposing body, he had kissed her gently on her lips and helped her from the pit.

Dead or alive, he still loved her.

Now he was home. Now he was going to walk into the house with his wife. Nothing was going to stop him. Not some damn redneck, hillbilly neighbours. He took another step forward and the crowd parted and he felt momentarily like Moses parting the sea. He reached back and took Michelle's cold hand. Squeezed it tightly and they walked across the grass to the front door.

Someone said something at the back of the crowd.

He could not make out the words.

He took out his house keys and had the key in the lock by the time a rock hit the veranda and rebounded into a flowerbed.

"Burn her." The same voice emanated from somewhere in the crowd. He recognised it this time. Jim Sparrow. He managed the fruit market at the corner. An all around good guy, generally, except he had a bad habit of using racial epithets.

Richard had called his attention to it once. "They prefer to be called African Americans."

Jim, missing two teeth at the front, had grinned toothlessly at him. "Sure they do."

Richard pushed open the front door as another rock skipped off the front porch and a chorus started at their backs. Michelle hurried in after

him and he pushed the door shut. The door was solid oak with a deadlock and he had never felt more thankful for it than he did at that moment. Something slammed against the door - louder than a rock - it sounded like a brick.

He stepped back from the door, staring at it in a kind of disbelief.

"They're mad," he said. He was shaking again and he felt ashamed of his fear, but he was a computer programmer, for godsake.

Michelle took his hand.

"They don't understand," she said.

"What's to understand? You're my wife." As he stood looking at her, he spied a maggot epileptically working its way through her hair. "I'm getting a weapon. A knife from the kitchen. Just in case."

Something smashed through their living room window at that moment as if in response.

"My God," he said.

He stumbled down the hallway past photos tiling the walls; their marriage, standing under palm trees in Fiji, the flickering ocean in the background, their first date, a snapshot taken by someone whose name he could never remember. A holiday in Virginia. Another holiday at Disneyland.

He raced into the kitchen, rifled through one of the drawers with shak-

ing hands and dragged out the largest knife he could find. He almost laughed at it because it was so funny, really, the concept of him using this against this mob outside and that's exactly what they were. A mob. Because now they had begun to chant something.

Burn.

Burn. Burn. Burn.

Another window broke and he ran back to the hallway feeling terribly afraid. Michelle was standing in front of the door, staring at it with the same ghost filled eyes.

She said something and he did not understand her. Only when she spoke again did the words make sense. "They're our neighbours. Friends. How can they do this?"

"It would be different if it happened to them." Tears were in his eyes. He was shaking badly and he knew that Michelle could see his fear but that couldn't be helped. He was afraid. Absolutely terrified. Then he inhaled and sucked in something that made time stand still for him.

Smoke.

God, they were burning down the house!

A crackling sound came from the living room.

He hurried to the living room with Michelle behind him. Judging by the broken glass on the floor, a makeshift

Molotov cocktail had broken across the living room floor. The settee was on fire. Richard glanced through the window. He could see Gary, his arms spread, talking to some people, looking ineffectual as he tried to communicate with the crowd.

Richard stamped at the burning couch, flipping it over backwards so that the fire was smothered. Clouds of smoke billowed from under it.

He hurried over to the window.

"What can you see?" Michelle asked.

"Most of them are gone." He was about to suggest they make a break for the car when he heard an enormous whoosh. Jamming his head through the broken glass of the front window, he saw their Ford sedan go up in flames.

Someone he had never seen before had set their vehicle alight. The guy shot a venomous look in his direction before racing away from the vehicle and out of sight. Some of the people on the lawn looked in his direction. He saw something approaching pity on the face of Renee Jones.

"This is our home," Richard screamed. "Get the hell –"

Something hit his face so hard he was thrown backwards and the back of his head hit the broken glass. He fell back and hit the carpeted floor, as much from shock as from pain.

Michelle screamed. A brick. Someone had thrown a brick at him.

He lay on the floor, shaking with terror. These people meant business. They were going to burn the house down with them inside. Some of them had guns. They might even shoot them if they tried to escape.

"I'm calling the cops," Richard said.

He raced back to the hall table and snatched up the phone. Dialling nine-one-one, he wondered how the police would respond. The law was still the law, and no matter how people felt about –

"No!" Michelle screamed.

A barrel of a rifle was jammed through the break in the living room window. It pointed directly at him. Richard tried to jump back from the aim of the weapon, but there was no time. A roar filled the room and the handset of the telephone exploded and jerked out of his hand.

"Oh God no –"

He gripped his hand. His ring finger, just above his wedding ring, was missing.

Michelle grabbed the barrel of the weapon as it fired again. Putrefying organs and stinking flesh exploded from her shoulder as she was thrown backwards. Somehow she stayed on her feet. Richard cried out, but out of instinct. Michelle could not be hurt.

She twisted the gun out of the hands of the shooter and dragged the weapon into the living room.

Blood was oozing from his severed finger, but Richard ignored the thudding pain. He stumbled to his wife's side. "We've got to get out of here."

He jammed his bloody hand against his shirt, grabbed Michelle with his other hand and dragged her from the room. Still clenching the rifle, she tried to speak as he led them up the stairs. Only when they were in their bedroom did he realise she was resisting his grip.

"What?" he asked.

She said in a throaty voice, "We should get out of the house. They're trying to burn it down. We'll be trapped up here."

Michelle was right, he thought. This was stupid. They would be trapped like rats in a cage.

He crossed the room to the window overlooking the back yard. The entire back wall of the house was alight. Smoke was everywhere. A couple of guys were running around their yard as if they owned it, spraying petrol against the side of the building.

Richard felt a terrible sense of impotency. They could not exit the house. They could not stay where they were. There seemed to be only two choices. Stay here and wait until the

flames consumed them or make a break for it. Run. Try to fight their way through the crowd.

He sat down heavily on their bed. The air within the room was hazy. It had been a mistake to bring Michelle back to the house. He should have collected her and driven away. Left their home. Left their lives behind them.

The mattress moved under Michelle's weight as she sat on the bed next to him.

She took his hand. The skin had receded from her fingernails, looking grey and bloated.

This is my wife's hand, he thought. He looked into her face and drank in her features; her fog-filled eyes, her mottled grey pallor, the rips in her face. She was falling apart in front of him and he did not care.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you," she said. "I will love you till the end of time."

And upon saying these words, she stood, raised the rifle and brought its butt straight down hard upon the top of his head.

Richard opened his mouth to protest, but no sound escaped. She looked at him with an expression of pure love as she fell away from him, fell into darkness as he found himself swimming in a well deeper than the deepest ocean. Sounds come distantly

to him from the entrance to the well. Men's voices. Women screaming in horror. He heard the crackling of fire morph into laughter. He was very hot, then so freezing cold that he struggled to breathe.

The well closed above him and he slept.

When he awoke, he found himself staring up at a blank, grey ceiling, an endless horizon. His eyes shifted and he saw the edge where the ceiling met the walls. His eyes angled downwards until he saw electronic gadgets that monitored his vital signs, an empty bed covered with impossibly starched sheets and a man sitting in a chair with a glum look on his face.

Gary Smith.

This was a hospital.

Fire. He remembered burning. Then he remembered –

"Michelle," Richard tried sitting up, but realised that his entire body was in pain. He fell back onto the pillow. "Michelle. What happened –"

"Take it easy Richard. You've been out of it for two whole days."

"My wife –" He tried to speak, but the words would not come. His head hurt. As did his hand. He looked down and saw the bandaged finger. Someone had shot off his finger and the remainder of the digit was wrapped in a mile of bandage. Richard wondered briefly if he still

wore his wedding ring.

There were tears in Gary Smith's eyes. "I'm sorry about what happened. Truly sorry. They were –" He corrected himself. "We were out of control. We did it out of fear. We were..."

"Monsters," Richard said.

Gary nodded stiffly.

Richard asked, "Where is my wife?"

"She's gone," Gary said. "She saved you, partner. She carried you out of that house. Laid you out on the lawn."

"And then?" Richard's mind was filled with a terrible image of Michelle being dragged to the ground. Beaten like an animal. Set alight.

"She walked back into the house,"

Gary said. "As God is my saviour, she walked back into the house. She saved you. She sacrificed herself for you."

Tears gathered at Richard's eyes as the two sat in silence. Finally he said, "There's one thing I'll never understand."

Gary Smith leaned forward. "What's that, Richard?"

"I don't understand," Richard said, "if the dead can respect life so much, why can't the living?"



Think back – can you remember your first true love? Can you recollect the palpating heartbeat, the sweaty hands, the exuberant, frenzied emotions? Now if you will, multiply those emotions by a thousand and you'll have somewhat of an idea just how Richie is feeling right now...

A HALLOWEEN STORY

By WILLIAM A. HALL

Her name was Lucy Devlin and she was the first girl I had ever met that stirred any feeling that might be thought of as true affection. Love was too strong a word for a thirteen-year-old boy but what I did feel for her was as close to that emotion as my young mind could master. She was beautiful; no doubt about that, and the day she came into our class at school seemed to change everything – especially for the boys. There was something unseen that passed between her and the rest of us, and it was something electric and powerful and full of an indefinable texture that was almost akin to passion.

Her parents had moved here from someplace back in the East and that was as definite a location as I ever remember being told. Her father was reported to be a doctor although, to

my knowledge, no one ever really met him. She told us her mother had what was described as a “nervous condition” and she and her father moved to our little town to “start over”, an explanation that was accepted without any reservation.

On the first day she was introduced to her classmates our teacher, Miss White, assigned her a desk that was catty-cornered to my own. She took her seat and for the remainder of the day I found my eyes straying over to glance at her, a lingering glance that soon became a persistent stare. She had long jet-black hair, dark eyes that seemed to reach into a bottomless universe, and I was attracted to her hands. They were smooth olive colored skin with sleek nimble fingers ending in shiny painted fingernails. On her left hand she wore a gold ring which held a smooth round black stone she later told me was polished pearl. But stranger to me was that I felt about her a kind of energy, something that held me like a tangible force, luring me to watch her almost as if pulling against my own will.

At the end of that first day the final bell rang in the late afternoon. I hurriedly gathered up all of my books before stuffing them into my backpack and when I turned toward the

doorway Lucy had disappeared. I was swallowed up in the group of departing students as I made my way down the crowded hallway and outside to freedom.

The days of September were still warm but the long slant of afternoon light promised the change of autumn was soon coming. As I shuffled down the sidewalk in the direction of home I inexplicably found myself disappointed at having had the new girl slip away so quickly. I was certainly not in the habit of spending time with female classmates but there was still something about her that held my curiosity, something that demanded my attention. I was lost in these thoughts while meandering down Sycamore Street, a tree shrouded and mostly deserted lane that was the favorite part of my daily walk home. It was cooler here and eerily quiet and while walking my imagination was afforded a peaceful solitude in which to wander. It was a long stretch that extended for almost a half mile along a cracked sidewalk littered with fallen leaves as well as the occasional gum wrapper or discarded soda can which was always a ready target for a swift kick. I was randomly counting the deep cracks separating the sections of the sidewalk when I was suddenly startled by a low voice.

“It’s very deserted here, isn’t it?”

I caught my breath in a short gasp looking over toward the line of trees bordering the walkway and there stood Lucy. She was holding a short stack of books clutched close to her chest peering over them as though they were a sort of shield. Her eyes that fastened upon mine as if they were searching for some secret immediately struck me. They were deep pools of darkness and yet seemed to hold a strange light inside spilling over from another place.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

I opened my mouth and when I spoke it came out in a stammer. “I-I wasn’t, well, what I mean is that I didn’t see you and you surprised me, that’s all.”

I was suddenly aware it seemed unusually quiet as she moved closer in my direction her eyes never leaving mine. “Would you mind walking me to my house, Richard? I think it’s so lonely to walk alone, don’t you?”

I gave a hesitant nod and in a moment she fell in step beside me. “I..well, everybody calls me Richie. Miss White uses everyone’s real name when she introduces people in class.”

She smiled. “Okay, Richie, and I really do appreciate you walking with

me.”

We walked in silence until I said. “Hey, I didn’t even ask you where you live. Are we even going in the right direction?”

She nodded her head in the direction we were walking. “I live in the house at the end of Dedman Street. It’s the very last house on the right next to that tall iron fence with all the ivy covering it.”

I slowed my step thinking about what she had said while glancing in her direction and saw a lingering smile on her lips. I recognized the house she was referring to and knew it had been vacant for a very long time. The place was dark and shuttered while the yard was a tangled mass of weeds as well as runaway vines and tangled tree roots rippling the sprawling yard.

I gave a shallow cough. “That’s the old Cambridge house. No one has lived there as long as I can remember.”

She said nothing as we continued walking eventually turning onto Dedmon. In minutes we were standing in front of the house and I gasped in puzzled astonishment.

“It’s...what happened? It looks so different!”

“My father bought it and hired carpenters and a landscaping firm to

remodel everything.”

She stared at me and although her manner was calm there seemed a note of challenge in her dark eyes. “Don’t you like it?”

I opened my mouth before pausing. “Yes. I can’t believe it. I’ve just never seen anything like it. It’s...beautiful.”

She stepped in front of me so near that I could feel the soft warmth of her breath against my face. Her voice was low and soothing almost like a mother patiently calming a frightened child. “Why don’t you come inside, Richie? My parents will both be out until later in the evening but I know they would love to meet you. I could show you around. We could go into my room upstairs and talk. Wouldn’t you like that, Ritchie? Wouldn’t you?”

Her voice was soft as a whisper while she stared into my eyes with a great intensity. She was not touching me and yet I could feel an almost physical control as if she were willing me to listen, to hold her gaze, to follow her like a puppy following its master. I felt suddenly warm and the feeling grew until it was almost a fever as though I were standing in front of a furnace or the mouth of an oven. Without knowing why I sensed slow movement before I felt her hand

slowly close around my wrist. Her grip was firm and tight like the feel of steel shackles yet there was pleasantness about it, almost a feeling of security, protective, while at the same time desperate. Her grip tightened pulling me near her before I was suddenly awash in a strange aroma. It was a mixture of chemical heat, something almost toxic like melting—

“Hey! Hey, guys wait up!”

I jumped and felt her release me as I pulled away and hurriedly turned to see Jimmy Dolan, one of my old classmates hurrying up the sidewalk in our direction. I turned away feeling momentary embarrassment at being seen with this girl. Jimmy approached while his eyes darted down the street before I stepped in his direction abruptly turning my back on Lucy. He hurried past me running in the direction of a pick-up game of football being quickly assembled in a nearby vacant lot. I wistfully stared into his face my eyes eagerly following his excited pursuit of the other boys. I stood feeling helpless then glanced back over my shoulder to see Lucy was gone, vanished to inside the house, as though she had never been there at all. I shrugged off a feeling of unease and hesitant confusion before walking alone along the now empty sidewalk.

That next day was a Friday and I did not see Lucy again until the following Monday at school. I intended to avoid her but could not and found myself staring in her direction. Miss White rambled on about some forgotten subject and suddenly Lucy had half-turned in her chair while we stared deeply into each other's eyes. It was a feeling unlike any other as though I were no longer in the classroom at all. Everything and everyone else had ceased to exist until the bell signaling the end of class broke the spell. Without thought or remembrance I found myself walking along a deserted street in a part of the town I did not recognize while Lucy strolled next to me. Her hand brushed mine until without thought I reached and held it in my own. We walked without speaking although somehow it did not seem necessary and soon we sat together on a worn wooden picnic table under a leafless oak tree in a deserted park.

For a time we did not speak a word. I stared at her but she would not meet my gaze instead staring at some unseen image in the distance. In the next instant she stirred and looked at me with a tentative smile.

“Last week.” She paused as though to gather stray thoughts. “Last week, you were afraid to come

inside the house with me. Why?"

"I wasn't afraid. Why do you think so?"

"I could sense it. Do I make you uncomfortable?"

I hesitated. "I think I was so surprised at everything. That old house has been abandoned as long as I can remember." I smiled. "I always thought it was...haunted."

"She shrugged. "It's only a new coat of paint, some work in the yard, everything cleaned and polished and made to look new again. Why would that make you afraid?"

I stopped and looked at her suddenly feeling unsure. "I...I really wasn't afraid just confused. I wanted to come inside, I really did, so much like some place I needed to come inside but..."

"But what, Richie?"

She was staring at me again, her eyes holding me, drawing me to her like the unerring pull of a moth to white light. She touched my hand and hers was ice cold as though it had been buried in snow. She leaned closer to speak and her voice was lilting almost like a detached melody.

"Friday is Halloween, did you remember? I'm having a party at my house. Will you come?" She smiled and gave a low laugh. "If you come inside for a party then you can see for

yourself it isn't haunted."

That night I was in my bed as soon as the light had faded from the day. I was so very tired, so exhausted in fact, that I felt as though I could not stay awake another moment. My eyes closed instantly and although I fell into sleep I did not rest, instead my sleep being dominated by an endless dream. It was a dream broken into randomly attached segments like the panels of a cartoon in the newspaper. Each was different and yet the same, because each was a dream about Lucy, and Lucy was pulling me closer and closer to be near her, sapping my emotions and ever ounce of strength from inside me. She was so exotically intoxicating, so demanding of every part of me, but my strength was something I gave to her willingly and without thought.

The next morning I went to school feeling almost as though I resided in my slumber, my day out of focus and hazy with the only thing seeming real the presence of Lucy in the classroom. After school I walked her home without a second thought remaining oblivious to the calls from my male classmates inviting me to other after school activities. We walked until we arrived in front of her house and I stood for a moment to stare at it and oddly felt it was the

most beautiful and appealing place I had ever seen in my life. She reminded me again of the Halloween party on Friday and before I left she leaned against my face before placing her lips against mine. They were cool and moist like sweet nectar and I inhaled her breath as it bathed my face in the strength and power of her nearness.

The next night and the night after and every night until Friday my thoughts were filled with her and nothing else. In the darkness she came to me in a series of endless dreams, always drawing me to her, pulling my mind and spirit deeper inside of her until it was as though I no longer existed, as though I was so much a part of her as to have become only a ghost of myself and no longer real. It was as though I was now without form, was now instead only part of her being.

Friday and Halloween arrived but I did not go to school. I live alone with my mother who works long hours and after a morning of cursory attention she left me for the day. I was not so much sick but simply more tired than I had ever been. I rested in my bed before drifting to sleep; a heavy troubled sleep as though I were at times suffocating before falling again into dreams of

Lucy, until I awoke to find that most of the light of day had melted from the sky. As darkness descended I stood in front of a long mirror in my tiny bedroom surprised at myself for not wondering until this very moment what I should wear on this night of costumes and revelry. In the end I dressed in my normal clothes then stared with curious fascination at how pale I appeared to be. Soon I was walking expectantly in the direction of Lucy's house.

When I arrived darkness had fallen and there was now a steady cold wind. The night touched me as though it were cold fingers caressing my shivering body until I hurried up on to the porch of the house. I could see a stream of pale light hiding behind long parted drapes that hung in the front windows and yet there was an air of emptiness that hung about the house. Suddenly the door soundlessly opened and there stood Lucy dressed in a black shimmering gown. Bright red lips and the darkness of her deep eyes contrasted her pale skin and I felt her hand reach for my own. I followed her without question inside until we stood in the center of an empty room. She pulled me in the direction of a staircase while I paused to stare upward at a stone statue that stood against the

wall. It was such a strange form that I could not make myself look away. There was something familiar about it and yet like nothing I had ever seen. It appeared to be the form of a large woman endowed with wings that hovered about its face and the exaggerated features of its torso. I struggled to find my voice until Lucy spoke.

“It’s a symbol, Richie. It is ancient. It is a memento to mark the journey; your journey, Richie. It is our journey that we will share. It is the journey to fulfill, to satisfy the desire you are feeling, the hunger, the need that calls for your very breath.”

I quickly turned away moved along by the urgency of Lucy’s guiding hand.

The staircase was a series of wide highly polished wood steps, so shiny as to reflect our forms as we climbed together. I stared at our muted reflections all the while climbing upward feeling Lucy’s body pressing with undisguised urgency against my own. All the while I felt myself becoming fatigued again and could feel that strange pressure upon my chest as though I were somehow being slowly smothered. We reached a wide landing and I abruptly looked up to face a huge painting hanging against the wall. The frame glimmered as

though it were endowed with some unseen source of light. I focused on the painting itself hearing the sharp intake of my own breath. The form was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, her body emitting sharp features glowing with life. The eyes held me while the parted lips of the mouth seemed to reach for me as if they had somehow come alive to touch me, kiss me, to taste me. The fingers of her hands were long, slender, perfectly formed extensions reaching in my direction until I could somehow feel their touch as she longingly, lovingly, cradled my face in her hands. Her touch was like fire, her eyes hypnotic, and I once again felt the pressure in my chest as though I could barely breathe. I wanted nothing more except to hold her---

“She is Lilith.”

Lucy’s mouth was close to my ear and her breath a hot sweetness. “Her name is Lilith and she is my... mother.”

I slowly leaned forward in the direction of the painting until Lucy pulled me away quickly pushing me upward along the stairs until we stood in front of a tall oak doorway. The handle turned of its own accord and the door swung inward on silent hinges revealing a cavernous room bathed in shadows and shimmers of

light like the reflected colors of a prism. There was a huge bed, four round smooth mahogany posts supporting a glowing canopy of rich silk fabric.

Without even a sense of movement we were suddenly upon the bed together, Lucy and I, motionless, side by side. I closed my eyes again feeling the weight of pressure against my chest like an invisible weight. I felt myself being enveloped by blue-black darkness that slowly deepened before feeling Lucy's moist lips against my ear.

"It will only take the night, Richie. Soon you will rest and you will at last escape into eternal peace while I consume you."

I struggled to move but instead was paralyzed by uneasy fear and the persistent weight upon my chest. I opened my mouth to speak but the warmth of Lucy's desperate outstretched hand covered it.

"Lilith wanted you but I said no. You are for me, Richie, and in eternity only I alone will be fulfilled."

I struggled to open my eyes to do anything to escape her voice but I was without a true sense of will.

"It is the way, Richie. It is ancient; it is timeless. It is the ways of legends come true. Tonight you will at last become and cease to be a

man, and yet it will be only a short journey into the pleasures of oblivion. You will know joy that only one as me can bring you. It is the way of the legend, Richie, it is the way of our kind, the way of the succubus."

She moved closer to me, nearer to my face, licked my mouth, until I was covered by her form. My mind moved in slow, measured grasps searching to decipher her words until at last I remembered.

Succubus. In the words and the legend. Succubus. The most ancient of demons.

It was then I felt her move above me, the oneness of her body. I reached for her and pulled her near, at last longing for her nearness, feeling her move inside the length of me like the eternal warmth of a summer wind spreading its fire. I shuddered in muted cries against the fire of that lingering blanket, feeling shame, before insatiable hunger, until at last the end, which was to become my moment of ageless submission.



Kevin is a curious man. Maybe too curious, one could say. He has his eye on his strange neighbor lady that he heard is a witch. Are you familiar with the phrase 'curiosity killed the cat?' Well, in this strange poem, perhaps you would be lucky to be the cat...

EDNA

By CHRISTOPHER BURDETT

Clad in black T-shirt and gray sweats,
Kevin sneaks out after midnight,
steals in the shadows to the edge
of his neighbor's driveway
to open up her mailbox
and peer inside.

Kevin has not seen his neighbor--
an elderly woman with the name Edna, whom his ex-wife thought was a witch--
for more than a week,
has noticed that her window shades are always shut,
her garage door always down,
fears her dead inside,

lying bloated in the tub or decomposing in her easy chair in front of the television.

Since his ex-wife moved in with her boyfriend, Kevin has busied himself with neighbor-watching: he knows the little girl who lives next-door joined a softball team, has stood peeking through drawn shades as her father coaches her. He suspects that the man two houses down has lost his job. He knows the woman three houses farther is having an affair; he's seen the black BMW in the driveway afternoons when her husband is at work. But there's been no sign of Edna. If her mailbox is empty, he reasons, she's had someone pick up her mail

or has stopped delivery
and she is likely away visit-
ing family,
perhaps for her granddaugh-
ter's graduation
or her son's surprise birthday
bash.

Peering in, Kevin sees that
the mailbox
is stuffed nearly full with cat-
alogs,
bills, postcards, more than a
week's worth
of deliveries.

He reaches in, pulls out the
postcard on top, reads it
under
the yellow light of the street
lamp:

Granddaughter's graduation
wonderful;
enjoying the Virginia spring.
Kevin, why are you reading
my mail?

Startled, he thrusts the post-
card back

in the black mailbox, closes it
with a clang,
shakes his head, opens the
mailbox back up.
The stack of mail has disap-
peared.

Back in his house, exchanging
his sweats for his PJs,
he slips pulling off a sock
and his head crashes into the
dresser;
Kevin tumbles to the floor,
lies there motionless,
the life slowly seeping
out of him.

A week later, his mailbox
is filled to capacity.
No one sneaks out
to peer into his mailbox.
No one knows
to check on Kevin.



Think back – can you remember your first true love? Can you recollect the palpitating heartbeat, the sweaty hands, the exuberant, frenzied emotions? Now if you will, multiply those emotions by a thousand and you'll have somewhat of an idea just how Richie is feeling right now...

LET'S MAKE A DEAL

By LANNY GILBERT

Johnny K. was playing all the hot juke joints up and down the Mississippi. People from miles around would come just to hear his soulful voice, and the sweet, stinging licks from his big red guitar. Men would shout and clap and the women would swoon whenever Johnny K. came in town to play a show.

But for some reason, Johnny K. never was able to break into the big time, like some of the other Mississippi bluesmen. He couldn't figure out why until a grizzled old harp player explained it to him one night after a jam session in a little shack deep in the Delta.

"Johnny," the old man said, "you gonna have to make a deal with the devil to play like them boys. You gonna play them second-rate juke joints till you die 'less you do it."

Johnny told the old man that he didn't believe in none of that devil stuff. "Old man, that's just a bunch of

junk folks made up about Robert Johnson because they couldn't play as good as he could."

"Believe it or not, that's how him and lots of them other boys got to the big-time. You wanna play the big time; here's what you do. Carry your guitar to the old crossroads just outside of town at midnight on a full moon. Ol' Scratch hisself will come out and sign you to a deal that'll make you world famous."

"Sounds pretty good to me, man" said Johnny.

Well, there's a little catch I haven't told you about," the old man chuckled. "You see, Ol' Scratch wants your soul in exchange. Think hard about it, Johnny. Forever without your soul is a long, long time." With that, the old man packed up his harp and left.

Johnny thought about this for a while, and finally decided to give it a shot. "There might just be something to it," he thought. "And besides, even if there ain't nothin' to it, being out by myself at midnight on a full moon might give me a good idea for a song."

Johnny showed up at the crossroads at about two minutes before midnight on the next night. He stood around and looked up at the moon, paced around a little, and looked out at the huge cotton field growing next to the road.

At exactly 12:00 midnight, Johnny heard a rustling noise in the cotton field. He was quite scared until he saw

a short, balding man dressed in a suit coming out of the field and walking toward him.

"Hello, son" the man said. "Waitin' on somebody?"

Johnny managed to stammer out, "Are you the... um...ahh... devil?"

"That's a good one," the man laughed. "Ha, ha, ha. I'm just a poor talent scout looking for good blues talent, Johnny."

"How do you know my name?" Johnny asked.

"Well", the man said, "I've been following your career for quite a while. You are quite the bluesman, Johnny. Them women go crazy when you start playing that guitar and jumping around on stage. What you need is somebody to guide your career so you can get out of these small town dives and get to the big time."

"So, how come you was hiding in the cotton field?" Johnny asked.

"Well," the man said with a laugh, "it's a little trick I thought up. I've heard the legend about the devil meeting with aspiring bluesmen at this crossroads, so I hide in the cotton field before midnight on every full moon. If anybody walks up and I recognize 'em as a good blues player, I come out and try to sign 'em to a contract. It works just about every time. By the way, my name is Star and here is my card. Go ahead and take one, Johnny."

Johnny checked out the card. It read:

*F. Allen Star
Talent Agent and Manager
Specializing in Bluesmen*

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Star" Johnny said and held out his hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Johnny" said Mr. Star, returning the handshake. "So, do you want to sign a management contract with me? I can give you references of several top players that I've signed."

"No, that won't be necessary," said Johnny. "Just let me read over the contract and if I got no problem with it, I'll sign it."

"No problem. I've got one right here. If you'll just read it over and..." With that, Mr. Star suddenly grabbed Johnny and roughly pulled him into the cotton field.

"Hey. What was that all about, Mr. Star?" Johnny asked.

"Shhh. Keep your voice down. There is somebody walking up to the crossroads and I didn't want him to see us. Now, just sign right here."

"Well, Mr. Star. I sure would like to read this thing before I sign. If I could just carry it home and read it, then maybe bring it to your office, that would be great."

Mr. Star replied sternly, "Johnny, this is the only opportunity I'm giving you. I bet that guy walking up to the crossroads now is a bluesman looking to hit the big time. If you don't sign, I'll have to go and talk with him. Here,

take this pen and sign, please."

"Well.. OK," Johnny said a bit cautiously and reached for the pen.

As Johnny started to sign, he felt a sharp pain in his right index finger. "Ow" he said. "I must've stuck my finger on a brier or something when you drug me in here, Mr. Star. Now it's bleeding. Well, let me sign this contract and get it over with."

Johnny signed the contract and handed it to Mr. Star. After giving Johnny his copy of the contract, Mr. Star said, "Come on out to the road, Johnny. Let's talk about next steps."

"What about that guy who was walking up to the crossroad and hiding from him and all that?" Johnny asked, looking around and seeing no one.

"Oh, him. I...saw him leave just a second ago," said Mr. Star. "We're all alone out here now."

Johnny followed Mr. Star out to the road. Since the moonlight was brighter in the road than in the cotton field, Johnny began reading over the contract. He immediately felt cold shivers coming over his body.

"Mr. Star" Johnny said in a shaky voice. "This says you own my soul. What does that mean?"

Johnny looked up to see not a small, business suited man, but a large grotesque being in a black cloak with a dark, evil face. Mr. Star also seemed to have grown a rather long tail that protruded from underneath his cloak.

"Johnny, Johnny, Johnny. " Mr.

Star said. "Didn't you read the card? F. Allen Star? As in Fallen Star? As in Lucifer?"

"Now, wait a minute Mr. Star, or whoever you are. I can just tear up that contract and won't owe you a thing."

"Go ahead, Johnny," Mr. Star said with a chilling laugh. "Try to tear it up. It's impossible, because I made it. Also, you signed with your blood. Remember the pricking on your finger. That wasn't a brier. I did that. You're mine. Now, do you want to be a famous bluesman or not? I've got your soul either way. It's your choice."

"I guess that I might as well play the blues," Johnny said with tears in his eyes. "You've already got my soul, might as well have something to sing about."

"Good, good," said Mr. Star. "First of all, let's change your name. How about..."

Well, I guess you'd like to know Johnny K.'s stage name. I'm sure that you'd recognize it. Sorry but it's a trade secret.

However, for your own good, if you are going to sign a deal with a short, balding man wearing a suit, you better read it over carefully before you put pen to paper. And make sure not to prick your finger.



For some, movies are a way of life. In this gripping tale, Chris Burdett offers up the notion that movies can also be a way to come to life...

GRAMMA & THE MOVIE BOY

By CHRISTOPHER BURDETT

“Ohhhh,” Dad groaned, holding his stomach. He pushed himself back from the table. “Why did you let me eat so much?”

“You say that every Sunday,” Mom said, and swatted him on the arm with her cloth napkin.

“I take it as a compliment that he still likes my cooking that much,” Gramma said, and winked at me and Lisa.

Every Sunday we had lunch after church at my grandmother’s house, and every Sunday went pretty much like this. In a few minutes we would prompt Dad for a story (he always told us a story from his childhood after lunch), he would tell us he was too full, we would beg, and he would give in.

“Hey, Dad,” Lisa said, “what was it like going to the movies when you were a kid?”

“Oh, Lisa,” Dad said, his hand still resting on his belly, “I’m just too full to tell you a story right now.” He let out a little groan to show us how stuffed he was.

“Oh, come on, Dad!” Lisa protested. My theory is that Dad uses the time between when we ask for a story and when he finally tells us one to remember a story worth telling. Or, I often suspect, to make one up.

Dad blew out a gust of air. “I need to let my food digest for a while. Boy, was that a good lunch, Mom!”

Gramma smiled. She put down the spoon she’d been stirring her coffee with and said to us, “I’ll tell you a story.”

For a few seconds nobody said anything. This had never happened before. It was always Dad who told us a story while Mom and Gramma cleared the table and did the dishes.

Dad cleared his throat. “Well, I do remember one time when me and Milton Lester wanted to see the new Tarzan movie, but we didn’t have any money, so—”

“You’ve told that one before,” Gramma said.

“No, I haven’t,” he said.

“You got caught sneaking in,” Lisa said, “and had to work on the manager’s farm for an entire Saturday.”

“Oh,” Dad said. “Well, there was this other time when they were having a contest—”

“Until I was nine years old,” Gramma said, cutting Dad off, “all movies were silent. Once or twice a month Daddy would take us to Atlanta, and we would see a Saturday matinee at the Fox. Since there wasn’t any sound, most movies were accom-

panied by an organ player. He would play fast, exciting music during chase scenes, or slow music during emotional scenes. The pipe organ at the Fox was one of the biggest ones in the country. It had pipes that went all the way to the ceiling, and it could be so loud sometimes I would put my fingers in my ears.” Gramma smiled, blew on her coffee, and took a sip.

“I remember when Daddy took us to see King Kong,” she continued. “I was about thirteen, and we were still getting used to talking movies, and suddenly we had to get used to this giant gorilla on the screen! We didn’t know anything about special effects like you kids today do. We thought it was a real gorilla, forty feet tall!” She shook her head.

“That’s interesting, Mom,” Dad said. “It reminds me of when I saw *The Seven Voyages of—*”

“But way before King Kong,” Gramma told us, ignoring our father, “there was a movie called *The Phantom of the Opera*. It didn’t have any giant apes in it, and it didn’t have any talking, either, but it was about the scariest thing I’d ever seen. My favorite part was the organ music that went along with it. I managed to convince Dad to take me to see it again the next day, and I learned that the music wasn’t the same every time! The organist wasn’t exactly just making it up as he went along, but he varied it throughout the movie, so that it was a little different than it had been

the day before. I guess he would have gotten bored, playing the same thing every day.

“A couple of weeks later, Daddy took me to see another movie, a cowboy movie. Tommy was sick and couldn’t go, so it was just Daddy and me. Well, about halfway through the movie, which I wasn’t enjoying too much—let me tell you, organ music just doesn’t go with cowboys and Indians!—I looked over, and Daddy was sound asleep!

“Well, I decided I wanted to go exploring, so I snuck out of my seat, and I went down the stairs to the floor level. We nearly always sat in the balcony because the seats were cheaper.”

Dad was smiling. “That reminds me of one time when—”

“Jimmy,” Mom said, “why don’t you clear the table while your mother is telling her story?”

Gramma smiled. “That’s a good idea, Mary,” she said, and put her silverware on her plate and pushed it towards Dad.

“What did you do when you got downstairs, Gramma?” Lisa asked.

“I made my way towards a velvet curtain off to the side of the theater,” she told us. “There was a sign above it that said ‘Private.’ I didn’t know exactly what that meant, but I knew it went somewhere that I wasn’t supposed to go, and that made me all the more eager to go there. I went slowly, hoping that no one would notice me, and I guess nobody did, because when

I got to the curtain, I pushed it to the side and went right through and no one tried to stop me.

"It led to a long hallway, with a few doors along the side. The doors all opened to closets and storage rooms, but at the end of the hall there was a big room with a lot of furniture in it. I couldn't see very well because it was pretty dark, but I could tell there were tables and chairs and sofas, and tapestries on the walls, and rugs on the floors, and the ceiling was high, at least thirty feet, with at least one chandelier, and with wooden beams crossing from one side to the other."

"Why did a theater have a room like that?" Lisa asked.

"The Fox isn't just a movie theater," Dad said. "They also have plays and magic shows and even operas there. It has several rooms like that for parties and receptions and things. We should take you there sometime. It's so beautiful; I remember one time—"

"Yes, Jimmy, you should take them there," Gramma said with a smile. "Anyway, as I stood there looking up at the ceiling of that great room, I saw something dark fly across it and disappear in a corner."

Lisa let out a little gasp and leaned toward Gramma. I had my elbows resting on the table and was listening intently. Even Dad stopped where he was, headed towards the kitchen with his arms loaded down with plates, to listen.

"The first thing I thought, of

course, was that it was a bat. The idea frightened me a little, but I was also curious. So I stood there, looking up, and let my eyes adjust to the light. I could just barely hear the organ music playing through the walls; it was a fast melody, so I knew there must have been a chase scene going on. I wondered if it was near the end of the movie, and if maybe I'd better get back before my father noticed I was missing.

"I was a little distracted, thinking about that, when the shape flew across again. I could see it well enough to tell it was probably not a bat, though. For one thing, I couldn't see anything like wings flapping, and it didn't seem to be the right shape. And if it had been a bat, it would have been huge, almost as big as me!

"I couldn't see exactly where it landed, so I just stood there looking up, waiting for any movement. I don't know how long I stood there, staring up, barely blinking, before I became aware of a quiet sound coming down from that corner. I could just barely hear it above the muffled organ music. It took me a minute to tell what it was.

"But then I realized, it was the soft sound of someone crying."

Lisa's eyes were wide open. "Who was it, Gramma?" she asked in a whisper.

"I couldn't tell, of course. I was frightened, but the crying sounded like it was coming from someone who was hurt, so I gathered up my courage and

walked toward the sound. I stood there for a minute, just looking up into the dark corner of the huge room, before I got the nerve to call softly, ‘Hello? Who’s up there? Are you all right?’

“Nothing happened for a few seconds. I almost gave up and left the room; in fact, all my instincts told me to run away quickly and go back to Daddy right away. But if somebody, or something, was hurt, I thought it was my duty to make sure they got help.”

Gramma paused and took a sip of her coffee. Nobody said anything. Dad put the dishes down on the kitchen counter and returned to his chair at the table.

“After a minute,” she continued, her voice quieter and softer now, “I saw a figure walk out onto one of the beams and look down at me. It looked like a little boy, younger than I was, only...well, it was more like the image of a little boy projected up there like the movies on the screen than it was a real boy. He was sort of in black and white, like the movies all were in those days, and I could see through him a little.

“I almost screamed, and I took a step back, and he took a step back too so I couldn’t see him anymore.

“Neither of us moved. As I stood there, I could hear my own heart beating rapidly in my chest more clearly than I could hear the organ music through the walls.

“Finally, I found my courage again, and I stepped forward and called up, ‘Hello? I’m not going to hurt you. Do you need help?’”

“He stepped forward again and looked down at me. Then, he leaned forward and jumped!

“He floated down as slowly and lightly as a feather, and came to a rest right in front of me. And do you know who it was?”

Nobody said anything.

“It was the little boy from the western movie!

“But it wasn’t the actor who played the boy standing there, it really was the boy from the screen—black and white, flat like a sheet of paper, and flickering slightly. And silent: he opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.”

“But you said you heard him crying,” Dad said.

Gramma nodded. “Yes, I did. I think his sorrow and pain were stronger than the silence of the movies.

“I just stood there and looked at him, my mouth open. I asked him how he’d gotten there, but of course he couldn’t answer. I asked him if he was lost, and he nodded sadly.

“I reached out to touch him and he shrank back. I assured him I wasn’t going to hurt him. He looked at me for a minute, chewing on his lip. Then he took a step forward and allowed me to touch him. He felt like thick, rough cloth, like what I imagine the movie

screen would have felt like.

“I walked around him a little bit. As I walked to the side, I saw that he was, from that angle, literally flat, like a bed sheet!

“Finally I said to him, ‘Did you escape from the movie?’ He nodded vigorously. ‘And now you don’t know how to get back?’ He nodded slowly, sadly. ‘Then I’ll help you get back,’ I told him.

“I took his hand in mine, which felt a little like holding a rolled up newspaper, and led him into the hall. I looked back at him. He looked scared and uncertain.

“Is this the way you came?’ I asked him. He shook his head, and looked back into the big room.

“We stood in the doorway of the room, and I asked him where he had come from. He looked up at the ceiling of the room, looking from one corner to the next, and then he turned and looked into the hallway, looking searchingly at the ceiling, and then he shook his head and began weeping, and again I heard the sound of his sobs.

“Of course, I didn’t know where to go either, but I gripped his hand confidently in mine and said, ‘This way.’ I led him down the hall to the first door, hoping that it would lead up to the stage. It was locked. So was the second.

“But the third door, which was on the opposite side of the hall, wasn’t locked. I opened it slowly and peeked

in.

“‘Hey, what are you doing?’ a rough voice demanded. I heard footsteps coming towards me. ‘You kids are always sneaking into my theater! I’ll teach you!’ I saw a very large man in a wrinkled brown suit coming towards me.

“I pulled the door shut and began running down the hall back toward the lobby, pulling the little boy behind me.

“Before we made it through the curtain back into the lobby, the door was flung open and the man called, ‘Hey, you kid, come back here!’ I put on a burst of speed and zipped through the velvet curtain; I looked behind me and saw that the film boy was flying out behind me from my hand as though he were a coat I was carrying by the sleeve. I guess that’s why the man didn’t see him.

“I ran on, and, without thinking about it, charged out the front door and onto the sidewalk of Peachtree Street. It was a sunny Sunday afternoon, and when I looked behind me I could just barely make out the shape of the little boy. I could still feel his stiff, clothed hand in mine, though.

“I looked all around for the best way to go, and decided to go around the building to see if I could find a side or a back entrance. I had just turned the corner when I heard the voice call, ‘Come back here, kid!’

“The quickest getaway route I could see was the fire escape.”

“What’s a fire escape?” Lisa asked,

almost in a whisper.

“It’s a big metal ladder they put on the side of a tall building so that if there’s a fire and you’re trapped up high, you can escape by climbing down the outside of the building.

“I stood there for a second, looking up, before I heard the sound of footsteps and the huffing and puffing of the manager approaching. So I stepped onto the first rung of the ladder, dragging the boy behind me, and then...do you know what I did?”

We shook our heads.

“I rolled up the little film boy like a rug and tucked him under my arm! I thought it would be easier to carry him that way.

“So I went up the fire escape as quickly as I could, and was soon on the roof. I looked over the edge down to the street, and I saw the manager looking up and shaking his fist at me. ‘I’m going to call the cops!’ he hollered. I guess he was afraid to follow me up, though, since he was so...” She let the words trail off and gave us a guilty grin.

“Fat,” Lisa said, and giggled.

Gramma nodded. “Well, I unfurled the boy on the roof, and, even though I could barely see him in the sunlight, I could tell he was laughing. I think it tickled to be rolled up like that!

“On the center of the roof there was a little building with a door in it. I said a silent prayer as I tried the door handle, and was relieved to find it

unlocked. There were stairs on the inside, which led down to another door in a brick wall. I opened it, and we stepped out onto a ledge right above the screen! I don’t think the audience could see us, though; we were pretty high up.

“I walked as quietly and carefully as I could across the ledge and turned a corner so that we were over the side of the stage, above where the organist sat and a little lower than the top of the screen. I looked back, and saw that the boy was looking down at the screen. He looked sad.

“I looked at the screen, and saw that it showed the main cowboy, kneeling down, holding his hat in his hand, and looking up and talking. But there wasn’t anyone standing in the space he seemed to be talking to!

“The subtitle came up, which is how they showed you what people were saying back during silent movies, and it said, ‘I reckon you’ve noticed how much your mother and me have been seein’ each other lately.’

“The boy, standing beside me, nodded, his eyes open wide. The cowboy on the screen moved his mouth a little more, and the screen said, ‘Your mom is one special lady.’ The boy nodded vigorously beside me.

“‘And you’re one special boy,’ the screen read. The boy nodded slowly.

“I looked ahead, and as my eyes adjusted to the darkness I saw a staircase that led down to the stage. I pulled the boy’s hand to lead him to it;

at first he resisted, wanting to stay and watch, but then he saw the stairs.

"We hurried down the stairs and hopped down on the stage. I stood there, out of view of the audience, but the boy took off running towards the screen. As he crossed the stage, the audience gasped. On the screen, the cowboy had his arm up, his hand resting in the air like it was on somebody's shoulder, only there wasn't anyone there. The screen flashed the words, 'And, well, I'm gonna be your daddy.'

"Just then the boy reached the screen, leaped up, there was a little flash, and suddenly he was on the screen, his arms around the cowboy's neck giving him a great big hug! The audience exploded with applause.

"I stood there at the edge of the stage and watched. After a minute the boy looked up—I would swear he was looking at me—and the screen flashed the words, 'Thank you.'

"A tear trickled down my face as I said a quiet, 'You're welcome.' I stood there for a minute before going down to the floor level seats, and then making my way back up to the balcony.

"Believe it or not, Daddy was still asleep when I got back to my seat. I nudged him and whispered, 'It's almost over.'

"He nodded and smacked his lips, looking around sleepily. 'Was it a good movie?' he asked. 'I know you don't like westerns.'

"I smiled at him. 'I liked this one, Daddy,' I said, and leaned over to give him a great big hug.

"We left a few minutes later. The manager was in the lobby, frowning and scanning the crowd as we walked out. I think he might have recognized me, but I was holding Daddy's hand so he only frowned. I smiled and waved at him.

"Over the years I began to doubt whether it had ever happened. As you get older, you stop believing in things like that." Gramma smiled at us. "But now I'm old enough to know that it did happen. Nobody in the audience knew what was going on, of course; we weren't used to special effects back then, and accepted nearly anything that happened as the magic of the movies. But I know what the truth was."

Gramma leaned back in her chair and let out a big sigh. Then she clasped her hands before her and smiled towards Dad. "Now, Jimmy, why don't you get the pie out of the refrigerator?"

Dad rolled his eyes and got up to go to the kitchen.

"Gramma," Lisa said, "while we're having dessert, do you think you could tell us another story?"

"Maybe," Gramma said, and I think I saw a twinkle in her eye. "We'll see."



In this portion of The Mysterious Traveler Magazine, it is usually my distinct honor to offer our dear readers a short tale of suspense and intrigue. However, as Hallowe'en is upon us once again, I've arranged something special in honor of the witching season...

DANCE MACABRE

By THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER

As told by Mark Zahn

The harvest moon glowed big and orange on a blustery Halloween night. I had one last house to trick-or-treat on this evening of fun and fright.

The spooky old mansion at the end of the block, you know the one I mean: with black cats, cobwebs and dying trees – the scariest house you've ever seen!

But the worst thing about that creepy place were the neighbors buried next door; for the house was next to a graveyard – with a hundred tombstones or more!

Gulping with terror and trembling inside, I trudged up the foggy lane. When something quite queer caught my eye and sent alarms off in my brain!

There were skeletons leaping between the graves, a horrifying sight to see. They rattled and shook as they waltzed about, dancing 'round a willow tree!

Their band was made out of ribs and skulls – and even a thigh bone or two. They sang a weird song I'll never forget, I swear every word is true!

“Clitter-clatter-thunder-and-shake, Halloween is when we wake! Rattle-tattle-jibbery-snook, tinkle-and-finkle-and-doo-doo-crook!

Blamedy-bloo-and-fiddle-dee-dee, and a zambidy-zombidy-zook! Snooker-stink-t r e m b l e - a n d - q u a k e , Halloween is when we wake!”

I decided right then to ring the bell – I would just get my candy and go. I didn't want to hear that sinister verse, or the chorus of their skeleton show!

“Feeter-fatter-skip-and-prance, Halloween is when we dance! Snotzen-freebley-flim-flam-boo, and a dingley-dangle-doo!”

Blatzen-howdy-ju-ju-phizz, and quiddily-quaddily-quoo! Hagsnort-acorn-boil-and-lance, Halloween is when we dance!”

The door opened slowly and I held out my bag, then got the biggest surprise of them all! A skeleton stood there grinning at me, its bones were seven feet tall!

He grabbed my bag and held it over his head, opening his mouth very wide. The treats fell through his rib cage, not a piece remained inside!

I ran as fast as I could all the way home, my feet didn't touch the ground, I slammed the front door and listened, then I heard a horrible sound!

The dancing skeletons had followed me home, they were singing that crazy song! I jumped under the covers of my bed – I knew it wouldn't be long!

Now they are inside my room! I hear them beside my bed! They're shaking me and moaning, they want me to join their dancing dead!

The covers are pulled back - I let out a shriek – mom wakes me from a sleeping fright...

“That's what you get,” she says to me, *“for eating all your candy tonight!”*



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A Word On The Mysterious Traveler

A joint venture of Robert Arthur and David P. Kogan, "The Mysterious Traveler Magazine" was based on their radio program of the same name. This digest-sized magazine was published bi-monthly by Grace Publishing Co., Inc. of New York City at 35 cents a copy – annual subscriptions could be had for \$2.00. David Kogan was credited as the Publisher and Robert Arthur was credited as the Managing Editor. The cover of each issue featured stunning artwork by Norman B. Saunders.

Each issue consisted of twelve stories classified into various genres and sub-genres including crime, suspense, detection, mystery, strange stories, science fiction, terror, macabre, short shockers, etc. Some issues contained special features like contests and movie/book suggestions. Each issue featured at least one story by the Mysterious Traveler himself (Robert Arthur) plus stories by some of the most well-known writers of the day including Ray Bradbury, Dorothy L. Sayers, John Dickson Carr, Craig Rice, Sax Rohmer, Agatha Christie, Cornell Woolrich, August Derleth, Brett Halliday and others. As many as seven stories in each issue were penned by Robert Arthur, most under various pseudonyms. The Mysterious Traveler (Robert Arthur) also introduced each story with a paragraph or two.

Each issue began with a little introduction (or sales pitch!) by the Mysterious Traveler (except Issue #5). These introductions usually told a few tidbits about the authors or the stories in the issue, encouraged readers to spread the word about the magazine, let the reader know that back issues were available, and finally, tantalized the reader with information about the upcoming issue. Consisting of five issues, this short-lived magazine ended at about the same time that the radio program finished its nine year run in September of 1952.

...Wherever the lonesome train whistle can be heard, The Mysterious Traveler cannot be far behind. Be on the lookout for more exciting issues with some of today's finest new voices of the macabre, exclusively at www.threeinvestigatorsbooks.com!