



in THE VEINS

SEPTEMBER 2024

IN THE VEINS

Welcome to the first issue of In The Veins Splatterpunk Zine!

First, I would like to thank the authors who contributed. You made this happen.

It is our sincere hope that over time this will not only be a platform for new and established authors in the Splatterpunk scene but also a stepping off point for artists, musicians and photographers in our community to gain recognition.

Splatterpunk, satire and counterculture are alive and well.

Thanks for joining us on this journey.

Yours in deviancy,

Viktor Caeneus

Editor in Chief

In The Veins

CONTENTS

GOSH DARN IT, I'M WET! - GLEN DUNGAN 4

SAY HELLO TO THE ANGELS - MAXIMILLIAN GUZMAN 8

STAR STRUCK - KEVIN NOVALINA 12

CHRISTMAS BONUS - HERNAN M. FERRARI 23

THREE LAWS OF MONSTER HUNTING - CHARLES GEORGE 28

GOSH DARN IT, I'M WET!

GLEN DUNGAN

Alright fine.

Okay so the rubber duck bobs in the water, ignorant of the vapor steaming from the pool and rising to the banisters and balustrades in the warehouse. It wears like a yellow raincoat and holds in a cartoonish way an umbrella inscribed with the words “Gosh darn it, I’m wet!” It drifts in between two pillars of steam, bumping like a lily pad just underneath the nipple of child peddler Marc “The Lobster” Cameron. So fat is the nipple that one might consider it a breast. The tattoo on Marc’s pectoral is further an example of this fact, a strange attempt at a Chinese dragon that might have looked better on a fit body but has since taken the form of Mushu from Mulan. At least I think that is his name. I don’t know. I’ve never seen it. That or the godawful remake. Don’t ask how I have an opinion of a movie I haven’t seen. I just know. Okay. All I’m saying is that this really goes to show that some movies should be immortalized, having already stood the test of time with intergenerational audiences.

But anyway. I digress.

Anyway. The duck. So the duck bobs underneath Marc’s nipple, trailing in between heated hot tub water infused with lime and lye. Reminds me of how some soups, like, if they are really good soups, get a layer of fat on them that you have to scoop out. I don’t know much about this either. The only soup I’ve made is lobster soup, which in case you haven’t noticed, is the center part of this story.

So anyway, as I was saying. Where was I. Right.

So anyway, Marc wakes up naked in the pool, not really aware of which derelict warehouse he is in or how he went from a lovely high-end courtesan orgy to being strapped here, a la – take your liver and leave you in a tub full of ice sort of deal. It’s actually the duck he sees first, looking up at him.

And so he says to me and my mate what any logical person would: “Where the hell am I?”

And so my mate, a strange country bloke who goes by “The Justice” (stupid name, I know, but he likes comic books. I’ll stick to my name, thank you very

much) materializes in the rising vapor. Like any minute now Marc will realize that we are steadily increasing the temperature.

The Justice stares at Marc like someone shit in his cereal. At least I think. The Justice wears an astronaut helmet that he claims to be a relic from the Challenger explosion (yeah, right) and like construction worker overalls. There is a little faded American flag on the helmet.

The Justice says, “One of your warehouses, Lobster. So you’ll know better than anyone how hard it is to find us. How no one can hear your screams.”

One time, I saw The Justice curb stomp a convicted rapist who got free from sentencing because his dad was some insurance magnate or something. Still not “proven”. One time, I saw The Justice file a wife-beater’s fingernails to the bone. Still not “proven”. And one time, I saw The Justice put on his shoes in the following order: left sock, left shoe, right sock, right shoe. I do not understand The Justice.

Okay and so Marc “The Lobster” is just starting to show signs of discomfort. He’s wiggling and all that, not quite sure if it’s the kidnapping or the steadily heating hot tub that gives him such a fright. Little Mushu is starting to sweat. And up and down the way the duck goes, drifting stupidly between columns of toxic vapor.

But it’s really not long until The Justice comes ‘round to Marc and provokes him enough to rattle the chains that cuff him to the floor. This was a stupid move, one which made The Justice very upset. It was not that he could hit The Justice’s weird little astronaut visor by any means. It was the intention, and that just about set The Justice off. With two thumbs hooked around his overalls, he kicked the pressure valve and cranked the hot tub up a couple notches. And like at this point Marc the Lobster is beginning to scream in his bath of magma.

It only seemed fitting that I put some bubble tincture into the tub. The rubber duck must have felt like he was in some sort of spa. Or maybe it’s a girl. I don’t know.

Where was I? No, I’m not drunk. It’s only been one glass. Well obviously not including the shot. Sure, I’ll have another.

Shut up, everyone. You asked me to tell the story. Right?

Okay.

So anyway now Marc is really starting to turn red and blister. The bubbles and lime and all that other chemical crap that The Justice made me buy are starting to cause burns on his body, cracking and flaking his rolls of fat. Reminds me of when the sun beats down on mud and you get those little ravines that up close look like

they could belong in the Grand Canyon. Have you ever been the Grand Canyon? Overrated, I say. But anyway it looks like that. But you know, like flesh colored.

And The Justice says to the Lobster, “Okay, Lobster. I can get you out of here. Treated for all these burns. Tell me which of your warehouses keep the children.”

And Lobster threatens The Justice again, saying all this bullshit about how he owns half the police force, half the bars around town. Not to mention the obvious fishing and canning warehouses throughout the city. He says that sooner or later someone will find The Justice and make him pay. Then, in a strange turn, offers him money, like, loads of money, like enough to retire in the Bahamas with two bikini babes giving you foot rubs kind of money, to just let him go. The Lobster I mean. Not The Justice.

And the Justice, being the psychopath that he is, doesn't even shake his helmeted head at the offer, or perhaps he does and we can't see it. Either way, The Justice answers by grabbing the back of the Lobster's head and dunking it into the water. Can you imagine all that bubble mixture, lime, and lye going right into your wide-open eyeballs with as much force as a fist to your nose? The Justice holds him under water, his Challenger helmet apathetically still. The Justice holds him underwater until I thought the Lobster was going to stop shaking and then picks him up not by his hair but like his nape, holding on the rolls of his neck fat like a little kitten.

And then the process repeats, over and over, dunking and dunking, layers of the Lobster's flesh flaking off now like skin peeling from sunburn, little pockmarks of reddened skin underneath all that blubber. About fifteen minutes in I notice the bubbles are starting to fade so I put in some more mixture and voila it's like being in a washer machine it's so steamy in here.

How long did the Lobster last? I don't know. A pretty long time.

Until finally he just...relents. Picture this: The Lobster with his eyes sunken and swollen, half turned to goo, finally just gives The Justice the locations of his canneries where he is keeping those children in cages like some weird pedo-doggy kennel. And I'm here thinking, why didn't he just tell The Justice the first time? He would have saved everyone a lot of trouble.

The Justice asks me to unlock the handcuffs on the Lobster's wrists. The guy was so swelled and red that I thought he was going to pop. His skin was so moist and weak that the metal cuffs actually cut into his bone and when he twisted away from me, thinking I was going to hurt him or something, I actually peeled some of his flesh like I was cutting a gyro meat tower. How do you pronounce it? Giro, geero?

Anyway, I digress. Sorry. Wait, what was that? Okay sure, one more if you're buying.

Where was I? Ducky, bubbles, oh, right. Okay.

So the craziest thing about sticking someone in boiling water with a concoction of salt, lye, lime, and whatever the hell goes into bubble liquid, is that it really erodes the body. Like really erodes. Layers of flesh like an onion. And here I am trying to pick up that blob of fat who everyone calls the Lobster and jeezus is he heavy and not helping me help him at all. The Justice stands back and watches, afraid to get his hands dirty, I guess. So anyway, I'm picking him up and he just... slides out of my arms, like there is no bones in his body. All those layers of fat just come tumbling off. Looking at his melted mass I realize that above the water his face was just getting dunked into the sour stuff. But we like chained him to the bottom of the pool and he could not move an inch for...for a while. It was almost cartoonish. His lower half just a mangled mess of skeleton, like someone popped a balloon and all the rubber just splayed out like a dead flower. If you're wondering what it smelled like I won't tell you because you'll never want to eat hotdogs again. The poor umbrella wielding rubber ducky now has particles of flesh and meat on him, now bobbing between islands of fat and fingers that rose to the top. The Lobster falls from my grasps, slips out with as much lubrication as a used condom, leaving me with what amounted to a body suit. No, I didn't keep it. I threw it in the trash.

And some of the Lobster falls into the water with such force that it splashes on The Justice's visor, a little on his overalls, a speckle on his boots.

He says to me, "Gosh darn it, I'm wet."

And I truly do not think The Justice understood the irony of it all. He doesn't think like that, you know? Not how you say...cerebral or all that.

Where is The Justice now? Not telling any of you. I just met you all. Oh, bullshit I'm not lying to you.

Wait. Why is everyone silent now? Do you all know each other or something?

GLENN DUNGAN is currently based in Brooklyn, NYC. He exists within a Venn-diagram of urban design, sociology, and good stories. When not obsessing about one of those three, he can be found at a park drinking black coffee and listening to podcasts about murder.

SAY HELLO TO THE ANGELS

MAXIMILIANO GUZMAN

Naked and happy. With our knees bleeding and the spring sun on our heads we crawled towards the Redeemer. We pray in the name of God. - For only God exists - and we owe ourselves in sacrifice. Servants of the Lord, devotees of Pain. We crawl along the summit feeling the thorns and the stones. - Happy the martyrs - exclaims Papa, accompanying Master Aquar on his prophetic walk.

For years, I believed that God was a mystery. In the community, I learn every day after prayer that no, God is mortal, and his miracles are conceptions of the Flesh. God is substantive and Mariana cries out in exhaustion. Her mother, avoiding getting up, drags her towards her and pushes her back in line. Mariana cries, but continues. Her little body is glorious, but it belongs to the Master. We all belong to the master, as long as he requires it.

If it weren't for him we would be in hell.

Mom thinks we're already in hell.

"We have to get out of here" he told me one night before we went to bed. I wish I could have answered him with more than a yawn.

Dad is the Master's best assistant. Besides being his personal secretary, he is also the one who decides the sacrifices on the appointed days. There are no names for our religion and no name for our people. We are the inhabitants of God. We dwell in God.

"He is the earth, we its fertilizer. He is the Element, we its passion. He is..."

Mariana screams again. She screams and tells her mother that she can't hold on a second longer.

The caravan does not stop, but Mariana passes into Papa's arms.

Her crestfallen mother understands that her time has come.

Mariana is a closed bowl, a rebellious diamond that enchanted becomes a souvenir and a future.

Dragging her from her feet, Dad prays for the proximity of the Sacrifice.

“Forgive him,” Mom says to me, coming closer.

There is nothing and no one to forgive. God is waiting for us on the way to the Redeemer.

For Mariana, it will be a glorious afternoon. An afternoon she will remember and we will remember

I wish I could disobey. Aquar knows perfectly well that rebels are special beings, beings to be discovered. And it is God who discovers them, who transforms them.

To gain or lose wings. Wings that transform bodies and shine on the luckiest backs. Always on our knees going blindly to the sky. A sky that is in our encounter. There was a time when the Rebels were escaping. Aquar with his assistants and parishioners began the hunt. Nobody wants to escape anymore. The town was walled in by the neighbors. Those who enter no longer leave. No one escapes and we all serve God.

The procession culminates at the House of the Redeemer.

At another time it could be said that it was a hardware store shed. Today it is the house where God lives and is presence and wonder. So fat and sublime, in Dad’s words. To me he’s a lucky man, covered in fat and blood. - He was born with the universe - Dad says when the subject of divinity incarnate is broached. - God is Substance.

He, “The Great Creator” lives with the living and the dead. He is father of the Angels and mother of the beasts. – “Here where we all unite in his Being” - says The Master. Dad separates Mariana from the group and takes her into the shed. She is the first to enter. Aquar invites us to enter. Always on our knees.

The nauseating stench makes me retch. Others vomit. It takes some getting used to, but sooner or later we will be part of God’s company.

Fallen angels hang with their leathery wings on butcher’s tethers.

“Today God wants us to see” comments a skinny, bony woman with no breasts. Happiness reigns over us all. We will see the transformation, but Mom takes my hand.

- Let's go," she says. I don't understand her.

The lights suddenly come on and the fumes of putrefaction intensify.
God appears, naked and happy with a series of knives, Dad and Aquar walk behind.

Mariana cries.

A prayer in dead tongues while Aquar incites the girl to gobble his erect member.
Mariana opens her mouth and swallows it.

"Let's go," mom repeats and I know it's useless. The ways of the Lord are sacred,
I tell myself, and I think to myself that Mom is the one who doesn't understand the
situation. She doesn't realize what we are. Mariana escupe y Dios aplaude.

Daddy places her on her back to God.

He, almighty, caresses her buttocks with his member, his hands squeeze her
shoulders, kisses and magnifies the wills inside her, penetrating her, tearing her anus.
Mariana shakes and breaks her mind to survive the onslaught and draw to her the
powers of Eternal Love.

With a knife in each hand they begin to cut her open.

From her back gushes a stream of blood that bathes God.

They laugh and celebrate. We copy the grimaces and laugh with mom too.

From the back, the blackish skin and bones protruding.

"The wings," says a man, pointing at himself with the Six Patronus sign.

The other Angels are present at the ceremony.

Black and bleeding wings. Wings of the miracle, as real as the bitterness in our
mouths, as the perfume of the Redeemer's great work.

Mariana faints. The wings take a long time to appear, delaying the celebration.

They cut to pieces.

God sweats and licks the corner of his lips.

The taste of eternity. Of the secret miracle.

Penetrates melting into it.

Mom sighs, it hurts her not to be special, it hurts her to be normal.

I want to know that world of suns and darkness, of fright and veneration - I once

told Berenice. She hangs behind me now, she has lost The Kingdom.
The Angels watch. They who know not death like the fallen, angels filthy with sin.
Their wings spread wide and converse in hushed voices.
The beasts roar within their cages.
Little fires gush from their maw. Beasts that were brothers, cousins, uncles.
Involutions of God's love.

"We have been waiting weeks for this moment, this Discovery," confesses a man with a mutilated arm.

The daggers tear the sternum and the girl agonizes in a sepulchral silence. Dad excitedly puts his hands deep into Mariana's back.

- God bless! - the ladies exclaim in chorus.

Mom closes her eyes.

God shouts angrily at Aquar. The Master enters accompanying dad in the search that slowly makes us despair.

"Have Faith!" says a little winged woman. A prodigy of the community.

"What if they were wrong?". They all watch me and God who decides in his wisdom to split Mariana in two, letting out her guts, filling herself with the warmth of a soul torn from her body. She is not an angel.

Mom tries to hide me. So many hungry eyes, so many gazes of incalculable beauty.

Dad points at the irresponsible one with reddened eyes.

And the ritual repeats itself.

This time it's me.

It is me...

And I will be.

MAXIMILIANO GUZMAN Argentinian writer and editor, he was born in a town called Recreo, in Catamarca. He is the Editor of the magazine La Tuerca Andante. He has published the novella Hamacas by Zona Borde publishing house. His stories have been published in Argentina, Chile, Peru, Uruguay, Ecuador, Mexico. In July 2024, he will publish his first story in the USA in Flash Digest by Hiraeth Publishing.

STAR STRUCK

KEVIN NOVALINA

Satire's the truth toned down.

Anonymous

All right, Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my closeup.

Norma Desmond – Sunset Boulevard

Julie's dad touches her, and she can cry on cue. Kristi's mom hits her, so every emo song on the radio she'll claw her hair, clench her eyes, and sing real loud offkey. Like everything's all about her. Just Kristi, Kristi, Kristi.

My dad's never laid one finger on me. I'm like, so out of the loop.

For reals, it's as if a piece of my life is missing. My mom died before I stopped believing in Santa, but that's for like, ever ago. To use her death, to be all, I miss my mommy, it'd so be second grade drama. Attention's only wanted if it builds your rep, boosts your clout. I need something chic and shocking. In vogue and tragic.

So one night at dinner, I say to my father, I say, "Daddy."

"Daughter."

"Think you might could punch me in the mouth?"

"Punch you in the mouth?" he says through a chew of fettuccine.

And I'm all, "Maybe make it swell and bleed?"

"Make it what?"

“Any teeth knocked out,” I go, “it’d just be a bonus.”

He napkins his chin. “Just why would I do that?”

And I’m like, “Because you love me.” Duh.

“That’s why I’d never hit you.”

“But Daddy,” I say, “Julie and Kristi’s parents hit them.”

“If Julie and Kristi jumped off a cliff, would you?”

“Hello,” I say. “They’re only the most popular girls in school.” I mean, anybody who’s anybody knows that.

“I’ll bet their popularity’s from exercise and good dental hygiene,” he says. “What say let’s try aerobics and Invisalign first.”

OMG. My dad’s always rambling about a better tomorrow, a brighter future, completely ignoring the shitty now.

“Please, daddy, just this once?” I curl my bottom lip. “Just one good whack and I’ll never ask for anything ever again.”

“BooBear, let’s finish your rice pilaf.”

“It’s not fair!” I say. “I hate you and I’m never speaking to you again!”

He keeps munching his stupid pasta with his stupid mouth while I show my displeasure with lots of crying and screaming and slamming bedroom door.

*

Next morning, I skip the bus to walk to school or wherever. Fantasizing about the perfect fucky childhood, I get a flash—pop!—like a camera bulb or a haymaker. If Daddy won’t abuse me like any normal abnormal father, then I’ll just abuse me myself. The way we learned in history how the government or whoever enters a war to boost the economy, I’ll beat myself to boost my popularity. Duh.

I mean, people do worse for attention.

So what I do, I step behind the Wallace’s tall hedgerows. Slipping Mom’s rings I wear onto my right hand, I turn my fist toward me like a blinged-out sock puppet.

Deep breath, I swing but stop just short of my mouth.

This is like, way harder than it looks.

I cinch my eyes, imagine third period with everyone watching everyone else to see if we're being watched. I picture the school counselor, Mrs. Tate peeking in and saying, Kristi Strode. And just thinking about Kristi sliding from her desk with her head all down, soaking up the stares, my face starts to burn. I know she's my BFF and like, totes adorbs, but seriously. She can be a real bitch sometimes.

With this, I count to three three times, then slam my bejeweled fist into my mouth. All I taste is pennies, and when I touch my lips there's just a dab of pink.

Not even enough for an arm around the shoulders.

Outside the hedgerows, the bus squeals and hisses at each stop along my street.

This time, I angle my face for a better shot at my lips against my crooked teeth. Another swing and it sound's like a dropped melon inside my skull. I do it again, then again. Again, then again.

Whatevs. No one said being popular was easy.

After a few more licks I tally the damage. This time, we've got something to build on. Looking down my nose I see two bloody sausage links, tight and full as a Hollywood starlet after lip filler injections.

Satisfied, I step from the hedges headed for school. For the stage and spotlight. Break a leg, I think, wondering how much sympathy that would pull.

*

So this thing I did, I just keep doing. Behind the same hedgerows before school, I'm creating my very own home trauma. Sculpting the perfect childhood tragedy. If I want a black eye, there's ringed swings to the socket. Need an earring ripped out? Hook a pinky in the loop, yank it through the lobe.

Fractured elbow? Just smack the joint against the Wallace's brick wall until it's a skin sleeve of confetti.

BFD. No one said being a heroine was painless.

But since three weeks ago Tuesday, I only do it Mondays, and there's two reasons why. One, one might assume my dad went on a drunken drug binge over the weekend and my body's the result. And B or whatever, healing time. After the thing with Dad's hole saw drill bit, sympathetic looks turned sus. Seriously, I'd be in the hall with Julie and Kristi, going: "And I told Laurie, I go, 'Oh Mylanta, Alli needs to chillax with the drama,' and she's like, 'Wouldn't you just know it,' and I'm all, 'She's such a snobby beeyatch.'"

Picture this while they're staring all amazeballs at the string of bloody drool seeping through the hole in my bottom lip. The whole time trying to like, not.

So now, it's once a week. Just enough to get teachers wondering about the contusions and lacerations, broken teeth and shattered bones. Asking if there's anything I'd like to talk about, then I'll lower my eyes all emo and whimper, I might've tripped a bunch in the driveway.

Or: I keep running into doors.

Or: I accidentally rolled off our roof is all.

At home, Dad's forever asking about my injuries, if things are okay at school, but I'm like, "Everything's Dash, daddy." Dash as in Kardashian. Dash being Cool. Dash being Hot. Awesome, Fab, Bitchin'. Or, I'll just say I got into it with that skank bully Emily Lynne. Maybe I caught four elbows in PE. It's possible I keep rising into the corner of my open locker. Just back-and-forth, volleying both sides while swaddling up the limelight. Not just part of the "it crowd," but the whole Dashin' thing.

*

Thing about high school popularity, it's like the changing fads in all those fashion magazines. Their headlines claiming pink is the new black, scallop's the new scoop. Leopard is this summer's tattersall.

What's Dash today is dumb tomorrow.

As tweenagers, girls developing early turned all the rage, and just like that Barbies and batons were out, boobs and boys were in.

Cleavage became the new covered.

Tank tops the de rigueur turtlenecks.

Me, I tried keeping pace with Kleenex, but OMG. Lopsided bra cup one itsy-bitsy teeny-weeny time and you're so called "tissue tits" all through Junior High.

Go figure, but soon as my biology gets with the program, the fad flips, and hidden chests replace buxom breasts. Gorgeous goes goth and angst becomes the modern content.

Just when I'm ready to get wild and entitled, rags begin trumping riches and depression's the all-new and unimproved healthy mind.

Now, each Monday morning it's me setting the trends, creating the craze. Behind the hedges, I'm burning my arms with a Zippo. Tattooing MOM on my stomach using soot and a guitar string, then suturing a palm with an industrial staple gun.

Last week, I cracked a backrib dropping ass-up off the Wallace's fence. In January (or was it March), I grated off a patch of hair over their stone quoining.

And soon as I get to school I have them lining up. My own mini paparazzi gazing at the star as she bleeds the carpet red.

Scars and scabs, they're the latest blemish free.

I've even perfected crying without being sad. With all this attention, how could I be? Anymore, I'm the happy tortured soul. The euphoric tormented diva. I bought the book, Family Abuse: You Can Live with It, But God Does It Suck. Carrying it everywhere, the covers bent back cracking the spine, I read it page one to done. I'm like, so ready for anything.

At some point, I'm blacking out one third period when the counselor cracks the door and says, "Mallory Charles?"

All heads spin toward me as I slide from my desk. Head down, I peek at everyone's eyes tracking me. Wishing their lives were this dramatic. Imagining themselves walking the victim runway.

At the door I wink back to Julie and Kristi, letting blood frown down from the crooks

of my smile.

*

In Mrs. Tate's office, I've gone through half a box of tissue feigning tears and stanching my leaky ruptured eardrum.

"Let's get to the point," she says, doodling on a notepad. "Mallory, is your father ever physically violent with you?"

When this counselor says, Let's get to the point, she like, does.

But I know how to play it. To a T. Eyes down, showing wounded yet brave, I tell her my daddy's a great man.

"Does he ever drink or do drugs around you?"

I tell her he's only doing the best a widower dad can.

"Does he touch you in any way that makes you uncomfortable?"

I explain that with Mom dead, he's had to be both father and mother. Nurturer and provider. "It's enough to like, break your heart."

We do this for like, ever and I'm delivering an Oscar caliber performance. Faking authentic emotions. Parceling out fragments of my own handcrafted nightmare. She's practically eating outta the palm of my stapled hand, and though my right eye's crossed blurry since the whole clawhammer incident, I'm almost certain she might be crying.

I'm a battered girl just trying to survive, you'd cry too.

Duh.

She blah, blah, blahs about the Division of Children and Family Services, then yap, yap, yaps about meeting with my father at the upcoming Parent-Teacher Conference.

"Trust me," I tell her. "You'll never shake a firmer hand."

At lunch I sit by Julie and Kristi, and they're acting all witchy bitchy, crotches itchy. Anymore, they should be happy I give them the time of day. For realies, I'm the new them. Sure, they did it first, but I do it majestic. The early bird gets the worm, but the

early worm gets got.

“Look what the cat gagged up,” Kristi says, and Julie’s like, “Miss Counselor Cooze Kisser.”

And I’m all, “Mrs. Tate says to say your company’s no longer relevant.”

“You’re like, such a little ho-bag,” Kristi says, and all smile-sies Julie goes, “And a liar cuz not all those lacerations are real.”

Bitch, bitch. Moan, moan.

Standing, I say, “You need me, I’ll just be seated at the head of the Dash table.”
And Kristi’s like, “Dash,” and Julie’s all, “So Dash with me.”

*

Tonight’s the night, or least I think. Act III. Where the Tragedy of Me brings the house down.

Like Cinderella’s Ball without that fairy godmother spell. Because these wounds, they so aren’t healing by midnight.

It’s Parent-Teacher Conference, where all the moving parts constellate. Solidifying my legacy as victim and survivor. As Megastar.

All week, I rehearsed my climatic 11 o’clock number on a loop in my loopy mind. Picturing Julie and Kristi with the other students and parents gathered around as I melt down, sobbing, I can’t take it anymore. Yelling, “I’m just a kid!” Screaming, “I only wanna be loved!” Everyone with hands to their hearts weeping. I mean, it’s child abuse. You’d weep too.

Duh.

And though it’s Friday, I made a special trip behind the hedgerows this morning. My body shaking from excitement and my fourth concussion, I squatted on my haunches, scrunched my eyes, and slammed my face into the wall.

Three.

Hard.

Times.

The first, I pissed myself and an arm went rubber. The second, blood stretched from my face to the bricking like Radical Red Bubblicious.

That last whack knocked me unconscious I guess, because I missed first period and half of Home Ec.

No biggie. No one said Cinderella was all fairy tale.

So now we're in the car and it's the first time Dad's seen my new makeover. He's feeding Kleenex up my nose that's turned mushy as Manwich. I'm a little woozy and it appears I've somehow forgotten my mother's name.

"Just how," he says, tissues sticking to his fingertips, "are we going to explain this?"

My head reared back, all goose nasal I squonk, "Just tell them you're only human."

"I mean, what's our answer for that urine smell?"

"Look them right in the eye and tell them you are not cray-cray."

"Wait, what?"

"They're understanding people."

"What would your mother think about all this?"

"That's good, bring Mom up," I tell him. "Say how I've risen above her death or whatever, then throw in stuff about my inner strength."

"Jesus."

"How I've endured so much in my young life," I say over my ringing ears. "Tell them I had to grow up like, way before my time."

"Are you kidding me?" he yells. "Are we completely out of Kleenex!"

At school, we park and sit a sec. "BooBear, we get through tonight," he says. "What say let's give some serious thought to private school."

Holding me up, he walks me down the hall like a father giving his daughter away. I keep my head down, showing weak yet strong. Gaga with nerves and brain injuries, I see in my smeared periphery classmates and parents all frozen, starstruck. Someone whispers, "My God." Another gurgles, "I'm gonna be sick."

I mean, people do dumber things for glory.

I tippytoe to Daddy's ear and tell him to chillax. "Dead silence," I whisper, "is today's roaring applause."

Julie and Kristi, they're giggling and snorting hisses as we pass.

Bitch, bitch. Moan, moan.

I stick my gnarled tongue out and a tooth goes with it, tick, tick, ticking across the tile toward them.

The meeting's in a classroom, but instead of my teacher, Mrs. Tate's behind the desk. Two officials beside her, DCFS on their nametags. Their six eyes all OMG wide.

"Clumsy girl," Daddy says, chuckling. "Tripped in the parking lot."

"She trips a lot," Mrs. Tate says.

"She does, now you mention it," Dad says. "Especially on Mondays."

I'm still shoegazing, but after a minute I glance back at the crowd around the doorway. Clamoring to see the storybook ending where the little glass slipper fits the princess like an orthopedic cast.

And now. Time for the showstopper.

Throwing my head back, I clench my eyes like, Kristi tight, and fake sneeze hard as I can. My head goes helium light, blood spraying the papers on the desk. My dad's face somehow flushes and pales in unison. Still chuckling, he dabs at the soupy goopy pages with his shirtsleeve.

One official gags, the other looks away.

Dad and Mrs. Tate are locked in like, a really awk stare down, and I can see in his eyes he knows she knows my nose is broken.

The two officials stand and one says, “Sir, may we speak with you.” Rounding the desk, the other says, “In private.”

“I’d be delighted,” Dad stutters, and tells me he’ll be right back.

As if.

FWIW, it’s kinda sorta sad. And someday, I may even come to like, regret everything. This living a better today, a brighter present, completely ignoring the shitty later.

Whooppy Doo. No one said being a legend’s without sacrifice.

Jesus gave his life on that cross or whatevs and just look how Dash He turned out.

For my curtain call, I gimp back out in the hall to bask in the loyalty of my fanbase. And wouldn’t you just know it, but Julie and Kristi step in to like, steal my spotlight.

With my good eye, I notice they’re both decked out in slut-tastic Gucci slingbacks. Prada silk tops with Hermès Birkin handbags. Their forearms are beaded rainbows of stacked friendship bracelets, some flashing neon lights.

And by their hairstyles, I’m guessing the Romantic Updo’s replaced the oily unwashed. Retro Sleek’s the brand spanking new hand chopped crop.

I wink but the gore tacks my eyelid shut. How Dash is this, I tell them. My daddy’s getting arrested as we speak. A blood bubble swelling and popping from a nostril with each breath, I say: “Jealous?”

They look at each other as if.

“Didn’t you hear, Swift is the new Dash,” Julie says, and Kristi goes, “Swift as in Taylor.”

“Swift being superior.”

“Swift being elite.”

“Haut monde.”

“Crème de la crème.”

They both sweep hands over their designer threads. “The Haves,” they squeal together,

“are the enhanced Have-nots!”

“Anyways, abuse is like, so yesterday.”

“Love’s the new hate, duh.”

“Lord, what’ll become of thee,” Julie howls, and all outta key Kristi trills, “Now you’ve lost your like, novelty or whatever.”

“And being a Swiftie, it’s the revamped...,” Julie says, her stupid eyes slicing around for the stupid words, then Kristi flings a hand at me and goes, “Being you.”

I know she’s my BFF and like, totes ensemble Swift, but seriously. What. A. Bitch. Like everything’s all about her. Just Kristi, Kristi, Kristi.

“Besides.” Julie slips a Charles Mallory accessory mirror from her bag, pops it open before my face. “Anybody who’s anybody knows Swifties so don’t hang with fugly Dashians,” she says, snapping the compact shut before I ever see who’s staring back at me.

KEVIN NOVALINA has Fiction, Non-fiction and Poetry published in over 200 Literary Journals, Magazines and Anthologies. He won numerous writing competitions and was nominated for multiple prizes and awards, including three Pushcart Prizes.

CHRISTMAS BONUS

HERNAN M. FERRARI

If one were to say that Fleitas acted with relish when committing acts worthy of a disturbed mind, it would be prudent to consider that he acted under the influence of a violent emotion that sprouted from his deepest interior. From the caverns of his psyche. Moreover, he was convinced that he was doing a good deed.

This was evident in his carefree stroll through the Caseros neighborhood, dragging a bag and leaving traces of blood in his wake, scattering clues like a twisted version of Hansel from the Brothers Grimm.

Just minutes before midnight, he arrived at the doorstep of Manrique's house, his coworker.

Years ago, Fleitas had accompanied him to that very same door after Manrique had overindulged in drinks, trying to drown his bad luck.

From that day on, Fleitas knew he was destined to lend him a hand.

He slid the latch and opened a barred door leading to a courtyard with wilted flowers. As he approached the window, he discovered Manrique's wife and their two small children sitting at the table, having dinner.

The front door was no obstacle to his precise kick. As he burst into the room, illuminated by the few lights of an improvised Christmas tree, the screams of the family and the howls of dogs in nearby houses blended in a tragic chorus. Fleitas had arrived to spread joy.

Before knowing the events that took place in Manrique's house, it is necessary to know what was the trigger that led Fleitas, a humble worker and devout Catholic believer, to go down the most misguided paths of human behavior.

Hours earlier, he had just parked the truck he was in charge of at a waste collection company. The parking lot was empty, except for a guard who was lying in his booth, possibly drunk.

He walked into the locker room and undressed to take a bath. As he entered the showers, he saw Manrique standing naked in a mist of steam, shivering as he clutched a hammer in his hands.

“What are you doing?” asked Fleitas.

The man gave him a blank, glassy-eyed look.

“I went to ask the head honcho when we’d be receiving our Christmas bonus, and”

“So what?”

“He told me we’re not getting a dime” he replied, banging his head against the white tiles. “The country’s situation, inflation and all. I’m up to my neck in debt. I won’t even be able to give my kids a plate of stew this Christmas! I owe money to little Italian Rody. You know what Rody does to those who don’t pay him?”

Fleitas scratched his head. He knew exactly what was going on inside the little Italian’s hovel near Pinal Square. The whole neighborhood knew about it. When one of his thugs managed to capture some uncollectible debtor, the little Italian would grab a pair of rusty scissors he’d inherited from his mom and chop off a finger. One finger per month, until the debt was paid off.

“Hey, we can hold a raffle....”

“No. I already know what I’m going to do,” said Manrique, shaking the hammer. Accident at work, the insurance is going to guarantee me what they don’t.

He placed his left hand on the moldy tiles, extending the hammer towards Fleitas.

“I don’t have the guts to break my finger.”

“But look, raffling a piglet is sure money!”

“You go ahead, I’ll buy you a beer later.”

Maybe those weren’t the plans Fleitas had in mind to help his friend. In any case, he knew that the man was desperate, and that someone in that state can take extreme measures.

The first blow went straight to the nail, causing Manrique to bite his lower lip.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Don’t be a wimp, hit it hard,” Manrique shouted.

The second blow finished splitting his nail in the middle, leaving a trickle of blood that trickled down his legs, until it got lost in a grid covered with pubic hair. Fleitas could only feel a growing anguish in his chest.

He knew what it was like to fall from grace. To have your guts twist with hunger. To have the neighborhood kids tease him about his tattered clothes. Somehow, the situation led him down dark passages in his memory. Passages in which his father's face appeared replicated on red walls, stained with blood. The same blood that slid from his mother's body, while his father held a knife aloft.

Fleitas began to blink in a hurry, and with each blink a new (or old) image of his childhood appeared, as if his mind was taking the form of a demented slide projector. That's how he saw his father arriving drunk, while he was scribbling a drawing of Santa Claus in a blue notebook. He saw his mother berating him, the man's accurate knee to the woman's belly, and Mom's strands of hair lying on the floor after Dad dragged her by the Christmas tree. And then the slides had sound, and the still photos became a movie in his mind. He saw himself, clinging against the doorway, as Dad held Mom up, grabbing her by the neck. Then the sound, the incomparable sound of flesh opening, the metal blade of the razor penetrating Mom's belly. Mom shrieking, Mom squirming, as Dad reached inside the open belly and pulled out yards and yards of intestine.

The father asked him to decorate the Christmas tree with his mother's guts. He took the drawing of Santa Claus, smiling and impregnating it with blood. Then he tore his neck from side to side, and screamed at his son how much he loved him while spitting blood out of his mouth. Then, the movie stopped. Fleitas blinked like a camera shutter.

Now he was facing Manrique, who was looking at his hand and telling him that enough was enough. But Fleitas knew that for that he would only get a few pesos. A placebo for someone whose debts would continue to rain down. Manrique's family deserved more than the crumbs of insurance.

He clutched his partner's hand against the tiles, and unloaded the third blow. The fourth. The fifth. Manrique screamed. The flesh of his thumb was beginning to fray, and blood was flowing down in communion with the water. Small pieces of ligaments clung to Fleitas' beard like inert parasites.

"Don't pull back, you little shit," he said, smiling.

Manrique shouted for help, and Fleitas gave him a direct blow to the jaw, breaking his teeth and making him fall against the shower faucets.

Sheltered by the company's scarce controls, Fleitas had enough time to change and carry his companion's naked body to the side of the truck. Manrique shuddered at the sight of the razor's edge towering over him.

Fleitas straddled his friend and began to separate the skin of his face from the skull, until it was completely removed. From the skinned Manrique's nasal cavities gushed bloody bubbles and it was then when, perhaps driven by the adrenaline of the moment, Fleitas noticed his cock hardening. He was distracted for a moment as he felt the swelling inside his pants. A pungent aroma invaded his sense of smell, an aroma that seemed like an aphrodisiac. Manrique was gasping for breath. Fleitas opened his fly and introduced his member into his friend's lipless mouth, repeatedly, until he choked him with his semen.

When Fleitas activated the truck's compactor where his partner's remains rested, the sound of bones breaking echoed in the parking lot. The guard stumbled out from inside his sentry box and approached the truck. But there was nothing there but the remains of blood. Fleitas had already left the place with the skin of Manrique's face over his own and carrying a heavy bag.

And this is what happened when he arrived at his friend's house: the youngest of Manrique's children asked his mother if that sinister apparition in front of them was his father. Fleitas removed his companion's rotting skin, revealing an ecstatic look.

"I see that your tree has lights, but no garlands. Who wants to decorate it?" he said, pulling out yards and yardss of intestine from the bag, while the police sirens began to increase in intensity.

The first cop who entered the house could not help vomiting. Behind entered his colleagues, weapons in hand, who were stunned by the sinister postcard. The youngest of the Manrique family was on Fleitas' shoulders, decorating the tree with his father's intestines. The older one was trying to stop the incessant hemorrhage emanating from the body of his mother, who was lying next to the Christmas crib with her neck open from side to side, bathing everything in blood.

Fleitas turned to the new arrivals. He lowered the child from his shoulders, gave him a smile and ran a bloody finger across his nose. He approached the cop smiling.

"Welcome! Would you like a glass of cider?"

Someone fired a shot, giving way to a succession of shots that ended up riddling Fleitas with bullets.

The police chronicle spoke of the growing insecurity in the neighborhoods and of the sadism with which the crime was perpetrated.

Few, perhaps no one, stopped to think that Fleitas acted in search of a greater good. Those children would grow up with the peace of mind that their parents' insurance would give them, and misery would never again knock on their door. He had given his best to save the fate of that family.

The smile on his corpse testified to that.

HERNAN M. FERRARI Studied Film Direction and was part of the staff of the Film Screening Series “Martes del Terror” (Salón Pueyrredón, CABA 2008-2012). Published in anthologies and digital magazines in Peru, Spain, Argentina, and Mexico. Finalist in the I Novel Contest Café Madrid with “La inflexión del codo” (Spectrum, 2018 – Spain). Received an Honorable Mention at the “Terror Córdoba” festival for the short story “Una partida de naipes” (Special Gualicho, 2020). Editor of the Argentine horror, gore, and related magazine “Curandero ‘zine”.

THREE LAWS OF MONSTER HUNTING

CHARLES GEORGE

LAW (1)

Only a monster can catch a monster

To modify a monster, you first need to find a monster.

For a monster hides in plain sight and in the light. But when the light is waning and darkness is ascendant, it's at that time that you should watch your surroundings.

Hunting monsters is not for the faint of heart.

I didn't choose it, for I was apprenticed to the only monster hunter in the region.

The region was at the edge of the forests, and it was our job to keep the monsters at bay.

"They get slippery every year," said Master Jovi. "You need to watch your step, and when trees cry."

I perked up my ears to hear the tell-tale signs of any trees crying. Given a test, I wouldn't have realized how to look.

But a whiff of the forest verdure, and it went to my head, without even a semblance of holding back, I was off.

Off through the trees hacking my way through the lush vegetation—the vegetation which the monsters took glowed with a certain hue.

Or was it for my eyes alone.

I'd taken this path before the start of my apprenticeship, but the leaves were green and the tree trunks their shade of brown.

They looked the same but also different.

“Don’t just get caught in the colors,” said the monster hunter. “See beneath the color. Smell the fear beneath the colors.”

But it wasn’t enough for me at the start. For every small twig which broke, crackling in the still forest air and the fragrances of the crushed weeds attacking my nostrils, felt like a hand or clues of the monster.

“Look beneath the noise,” he said.

And I had to look beneath the noise, I had to look within.

And when I looked within, I could see the entrails of the off beaten track— the trail of the one we hunted.

Now brambles and shoots didn’t hinder my ways but became my accomplices, my spies—to tell where the hunted lay.

“It’s taken a little girl, this time,” said my master. “It brought about its doom fast enough.”

“So, are they not doomed from the start?”

His eyebrows quivered, and he said something, which stayed with me even after I became the monster-hunter. “Every living thing is sacred.”

“Even a monster!”

“For once, they were us!”

I scoffed as I read the trail, becoming focused and dissipated intent on not losing it. Intent, so much that I thought that I had lost it.

“Take a step back, Till,” said the master. “Don’t lose the forest for the trees. Don’t let your femininity deceive you.”

I closed my eyes and opened them again.

The colors of the world and the underworld were more pristine, more vibrant.

It couldn’t be said that it was a walk in my mother’s medicinal garden, but close to it.

A red hood lay on the path just out of the trees. I picked it up, and smelled a faint whiff, of a child and something sinister.

IN THE VEINS SPLATTERPUNK ZINE

I plodded on, and I looked back, to see my master trying to catch up.

He limped. I hadn't seen him limping before, but this was the first time I had seen him, not fully whole.

But I couldn't slow my pace. I had to climb the steep cliff face. I had to battle the thrush to the mouth of the cave.

"Glad of you to come," said a beautifully dressed woman, when I stepped inside the cave.

I looked hither dither, searching for the child.

She lay on the cot with her face bandaged.

"Poor child," said the woman. "Found her just below the path. Must have lost her way."

For they hide among us.

A sheen like no other emanated from the woman's eyes.

"What are you doing here, my lady?" I spoke.

"Came to escape the court. This is my hideout from everything." I grasped the hilt of my dagger.

"Why don't you have something girl? The broth is good. Come have some."

I smiled and though the woman's glamor flickered and held on to reality, I took out my dagger in one fell sweep and held it close.

"I'll put some potion on the poor child," she said, and turned and leapt at me.

LAW (C)

Only a monster can see a monster

For an instant the glamor held and like a glass shattering it broke, revealing the woman's true form.

With hair like cobwebs and eyes as dark as coal, the witch roared, and I felt her wrath.

Wrath for having been found out.

-For not all eyes can penetrate the glamor. A glamor to behold, for the Lady Mistane

I didn't feel a thing, as I clutched the dagger. I was swinging it to cut off the wand she had raised, and the wand flew through her hand. And I was jumping over the bubbling cauldron, and my hand was with my dagger. For both me and it was one.

Then I was standing over the witch with my dagger buried in her heart up to the hilt.

The witch's glamor flickered, as the blood flowed out from her. For an instant she was the Lady Mistane and for an instant the hideous witch.

I heard footsteps behind me as I untied the child.

"No one would believe it," said the monster-hunter. "The Lady Mistane."

"Was a witch, and the reason was so many disappearances." "Quick," he said, panting. "Unwrap her eyes. I fear."

I hurried and as the bandage fell off, I saw that the child was whole. She opened her eyes and then smiled at me.

Not that there weren't repercussions for doing good and weeding out the monsters, the vacuum in the court was considerable and inadvertently may have sown the seeds of the empire's doom.

Didn't the empire know about Lady Mistane? But it is for another time.

In the tavern as I downed one ale after another, the master asked me, "So you could see Lady Mistane—even through the glamor." •

"As clear as daylight, master," I said. "More," I said as I downed another ale.

He shook his head and handed over the medal. And he said something in the old tongue.

A tongue archaic enough to be obscured—and before the time humans saw the light.

I could palely make out the words, but understanding evaded me. But deep down in the very nature of my being, I knew.

LAW (3)

Only a monster can kill a monster

As days passed the master grew more distant.

On the road the master kept his distance. He foraged for food alone and didn't share his finds.

Most of the rabbits he trapped he ate raw and slept not near the fire but in the woods.

I tried to draw closer, but he kept his distance, never venturing close.

My eyesight improved and my sense of smell more than tripled. I could not only track monsters but even animals for food.

It was my tracking skills that got us food, it was my senses which kept us on track, and it was my sight which kept us true.

Was he jealous?

He didn't manage to do any work except the scent of a quarry, and these he found not by his senses but by something a tad different.

A network of informers.

I don't think he could have found it in any other way. So, he used his 'people' element, but I had talent.

But were people keeping their distance from me or from him?

For once on the trail, I couldn't find him. He had been behind me, keeping his distance, but I couldn't hear his feet scrunching on the forest floor.

Yes and no, for his feet had stopped scrunching.

There was a holler in one of the villages which skirted the forest.

A hooded monster had taken a child. The tavern was crowded even during the day.

The wooden tumbler fell to the floor. I hadn't drunk a sweeter ale, but the scent took me, and I knew I had to follow the scent.

The entire world around me dimmed—a glow with a bluish hue.

The scent took hold of me, and I rushed through the tavern, through the rock-strewn path and branches and leaves crackled below my feet as I had the scent in my sights.

My body was secondary as I ran. I only became my eyes and my sense of smell. More so, I was my eyes, and I was my sense of smell.

I could make out a subtle difference. I could make out every subtlety and go behind it. The brambles and bushes kept coming in my way, but they met the sharp edge of my dagger, and I was through, without even an ounce of effort.

Rocks and mountains couldn't stop me—what were mere branches? What were mere shoots of trees?

And like a clearing in the forest the colors and noise inside my head cleared and I saw clearly.

The entire clearing was shorn of trees, and on a stump of a tree stood a hooded figure without a bow.

That could well have been me.

The stump of the tree, which was as big as a dining table, held a child. A child with dark red hair—the disappeared one.

The hood fell off and it was the master.

I lowered my bow, then raised it again and my aim was true.

When the arrow struck, he didn't cry out. With a few bounds I was at the tree stump. The child shivered when I touched her.

Good, she was alive.

“This was for you, Til,” said the thing which had been my master for so many years.

“A sacrifice to increase our power,” he said. His words seemed like a floodgate opening.

More power.

“We don't sacrifice innocents,” I said.

His words were a scowl. “Tell that to the innocents we didn’t save.” He smiled. “We sacrificed, so that your powers grew. You’ve been a good apprentice, Til Stormweather.”

His words were a blur and his movements too, and he had claimed a knife, all poised to strike the child on the tree stump.

But my movements were quicker and in a moment’s respite I took the knife from his hands and buried it to the hilt in his chest.

“You will know, Til Stormweather,” he said in his dying breath. “Only a monster can kill a monster.”

The child shivered as she got up. Her face had the same hazel freckles and the bush of red hair.

“What’s your name child?” I said, as I wrenched out the dagger from my now dead master’s chest.

“Mistane,” she said.

“Welcome child to monster hunting.”

CHARLES GEORGE is a speculative fiction writer. He is originally from South Asia. His fiction has been featured in various online magazines. He writes horror and fantasy. Sometimes he wears his literary hat. He takes delight in dark fantasy too.

SEPTEMBER 2024

STAY DEVIOUS

WWW.INTHEVEINS.NET