

BLOODY GULLETS

By Michael Golvach

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BLOODY GULLETS

BY
MICHAEL GOLVACH

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organisations, products and events portrayed in this collection are either products of the author’s imagination or used fictitiously.

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For Katherine Anne

~

*For Always Being There For Me, Even When I Didn't Realise It. For
Never Forgetting. For Being So Generous In Spirit. For Being Yourself.
For Being Free. And, Especially, For Never Expecting Anything In
Return For Your Love And Kindness.*

~

Thank You.

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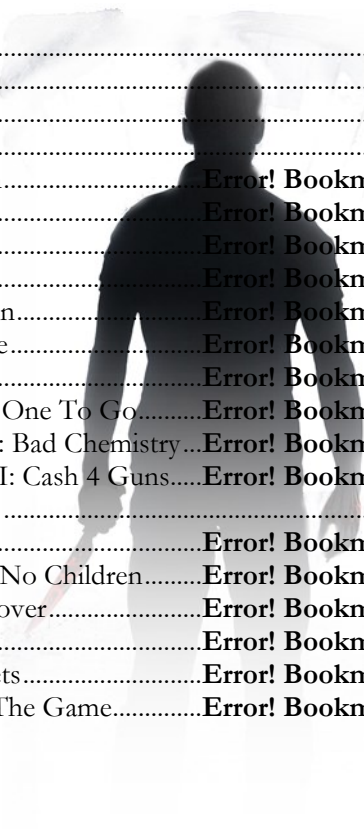
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GULLETS



Introduction.....	i
Infamous G.....	1
Soft Focus.....	38
Believer.....	43
Conversation.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Led Dogs.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Cruelty.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Klepto.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Object Lesson.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Broken Metre.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Cycle 156.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Dead Men I: One To Go.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Dead Men II: Bad Chemistry...	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Dead Men III: Cash 4 Guns....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Small Deaths.....	191
Darkness.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
No Women, No Children.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Four Leaf Clover.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Ends.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Bloody Gullets.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Infection Is The Game.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.



INTRODUCTION

When the average circular saw tears through flesh, meat or anything that lives, breathes and bleeds, no matter how long you let it run afterward, the teeth will be sparkling clean when it finally comes to a stop. But the evidence of the damage is still there. Because of its functional design, the blood wells up in the gullets. Those places where the teeth intersect.

The stories in this collection don't represent the teeth. They represent the spaces in between. Those places where everything else hides. The ugly underneath. Where the underlying messages pool, gel and become an indelible part of the instruments of their deliverance.

Still, and this is just common sense, watch out for the teeth. Without them doing the heavy lifting, the gullets never get fed.

Michael Golvach



INFAMOUS G



THERE ARE TIMES IN OUR LIVES THAT DEFINE us. For some people it's their first big promotion at work, for others it's when they marry their true love. And, for the profoundly sad, it's that big football game in High School where they score a few touchdowns. For me, that time came on my twentieth birthday. That was the day my life changed. That was the day I took out the garbage. That was the day I ate a hamburger with ketchup and relish. That was the day I played video games for almost three hours straight without going to the bathroom. That was the day the evil of this world made itself known to me. That was the day mankind took notice.

And the world has never been the same since.

You may have heard of me. My name is Stanley Frederick Mendlesohn. I was born on a muggy afternoon in the town of Alexandria, Virginia to my proud parents, Martha and Herbert. They died a year after I was ushered into this world, when a drunk driver crashed into a metal post about four car lengths ahead of them at a busy intersection. They would have been fine, except the car following the drunk driver, three car lengths ahead of my mother and father, didn't brake in time and the collision resulted in a huge explosion in which several

INFAMOUS G

hunks of hot molten steel were thrown up and back in a less than fortuitous arc that ended in my parents' laps.

After that, I was sent from foster home to foster home. This part of my story may sound familiar to you, because most stories about kids who end up in foster homes have them moving from foster home to foster home almost interminably. My story was similar, though I never had to leave because of abuse or anything else bad like that. Almost exactly the opposite. I was an intimidating child, and seven pairs of foster parents had to let me go because, in their words, I was too much to handle.

In actuality, I was moved along from house to house because, as much as my foster parents wanted to believe they were good people doing a good thing for a good reason, what they really wanted was someone onto whom they could imprint their identities and vicariously live out the parts of their lives they'd never had the courage to live themselves when they were younger. I invariably pointed this out to them and, faced with their blatant hypocrisy, they would use the standard excuse to have me removed from their home. I was so far beyond them, I exposed their double standard before I could even speak a word. More on that later, if it requires further explanation, which it won't.

At the age of thirteen, I was adopted by a couple—Caroline and Stephen Handleburg—whom I deemed able to look out for my well-being and ensure it remained as such. They were also okay with me keeping my last name as Mendlesohn, since it had changed so many times over the course of my life. They secretly felt sorry for me. They thought it was a secret, anyway.

BLOODY GULLETS

There were numerous occasions where they'd let slip that they would prefer I change my last name to theirs, but I had become a master of changing the subject by that point in my life and their arguments fell flat on their faces before them. I pretended not to notice and they pretended not to feel slighted. It wasn't a fairy-tale relationship, but it was practical and suited every member's needs to an acceptable degree. I got a place to stay where I was free to be myself and pursue my birthright of excellence and renown, and they got to claim I was theirs. I never made an issue of the fact I was adopted.

When I reached the age of eighteen, the Handleburg's—in order to deal with the stress and shame they felt at having to remove me from their home at a point in the very near future—adopted another child. A subtly charming fourteen-year-old daughter named Sophelia. I knew I was being replaced the moment they introduced me to her and put them on notice that I wouldn't be a burden to them for much longer. They protested sufficiently to assuage their guilty consciences, but I could tell they were relieved to not have to pretend they could possibly comprehend more about this world and its workings than I did for a second longer than they had to. I was well rid of them within a year, when I allowed them to kick me out of their home.

At that point in my life I had a decision to make. Did I continue suppressing my natural talent, hiding myself and my magnificence from the world at large, or did I make my presence known and accept my place among the real leaders of this human's race?

I've always believed in fate, and I'm certain it stepped in to save me from blossoming too soon when I found myself smashed into a telephone pole by a late model Dodge one

summer afternoon. More correctly, my bicycle was smashed, but I was bruised up badly—with more than a few broken bones—and had to take a break from looking for an apartment worthy of having me reside in it, while I rested up in the hospital.

The breaks and some of the internal bleeding caused by the accident kept me in the hospital for nine months. Some of the doctors and nurses had come around to calling me the miracle baby, since that's how long it takes a stork to deliver a newborn to the hospital, but I was privy to the higher meaning of the joke. Even if they weren't.

I was being born again. And the world was being made ready for my delivery.

Sophelia would come to visit me every so often, passing along regards from my former adoptive parents, and I tolerated her interference with a grace they didn't deserve. As much as her visits annoyed me, I knew she was only acting on her parents' behalf and wasn't aware of their agenda. Her attention grew more lengthy over time. I could only imagine the amount of guilt they were making her carry.

Upon my release from the hospital, the driver of the car that had put me there committed an act of suicide so cowardly it was deemed an accidental death by the authorities. Apparently, he'd been driving his car, yet again, after having conveniently forgotten to read an important safety recall notice from his automobile's manufacturer and his car had exploded, without warning, while he was doing whatever he was doing to convince an inattentive and blindly trusting public that he was just out enjoying a drive on the highway. But I'll never forget the look of guilt I saw when I peered into the pile of ashes everyone claimed was him. For shame.

BLOODY GULLETS

The world had changed while I had spent my days wasting in a hospital bed, and it hadn't changed for the better. Everything looked the same, but there was fear in all the faces I saw. The people, going through their daily routines, struggling to convince themselves their lives were worth living and things were going to be okay. I wanted to tell them the truth of this world, but most of the folks I came in contact with didn't want to hear about any of it. They didn't even want to know my name.

Most of society would have deemed me homeless at that point in my life, but I knew better than that. Though I was, technically, without a residence the government and big corporations could use to track me and my spending habits, I was free. Free to do as I chose. Free to explore options the rest of the sheep were either too blind or too afraid to. I took pity on them in the most polite way I knew how. I ignored them and their condescending offers of spare change and meagre shelter. I could find my own cardboard boxes, thank you.

As my twentieth birthday grew near, I met a man who would play a very small role in my life. His only significance, beyond the fact that he agreed with everything I had to say without question, was that he allowed me to live in the shed located on the spare acre of rotting forgotten land behind his property. His name was Wilson Spigott. Folks in town would whisper his name and there were rumours going around that he was crazy. Out of his mind. I imagined that's what the masses said about every visionary who saw fit to give shelter to a truly great man. Like Jesus, I was humble, and I did not defend his name or my own position.

I sat in my shed, eating a hamburger with ketchup and relish for breakfast on the twentieth anniversary of my birth. I

could feel change in the air and, for completely unrelated reasons, decided it was time to clean up my living area and filled three bags full of garbage that I took out to the kerb in front of old man Spigott's dusty shack of a house.

When I got to the kerb, I heard a shout in the distance and looked down the road to see a vaguely female shaped figure running toward me. I turned to go back to my shed, when I heard her call my name. "Stanley. Stanley." The call came over and over, like the wail of a police siren, and I waited for the young girl to enter my sphere of influence.

To my great surprise, and even greater disdain, the girl who approached me was Sophelia. She had come bearing gifts in flowery bags. She gave me a hug, that I returned in kind, and kissed me on the cheek. She didn't have anything to say that I didn't expect to hear. Mom and dad, as I used to call them, missed me terribly. They felt awful about my living situation and wanted me to come home.

Their gift, their peace offering, was a video game system. Joysticks, console and monitor. All in one. I looked at Sophelia after opening the box. We still stood by the side of the road and she smiled at me with something like hope in her eyes, motioning back to the shed with them. The look on her face was oddly suggestive and I had no idea what it meant. For that matter, I had no idea how she could possibly know where I lived. Old man Spigott didn't talk to anyone, or hardly at all, for that matter. I had to assume my ex-parents were having me followed. My security, and my birthright, were at greater risk than I had previously imagined.

I made my way back to the shed and Sophelia trailed after, asking me all sorts of inane questions, trying to get as much information out of me as possible, but I gave her

BLOODY GULLETS

nothing she could work with. Nothing she could bring back to mommy and daddy to use against me.

We sat down in the shed together and she rested her head on my shoulder as I unpacked the video game system and proceeded to play it for three hours straight. Through all the games, she never once stopped talking. She was like a little puppy. Eager to please. Always smiling, with an expectant look in her eyes. Trying to get me to look her way. Maybe she wanted to play the game too. No ulterior motive would have surprised me. I knew the evil that had sent her.

During those three hours, I saw my destiny unfold. On that monitor, I mapped out my future greatness with precision and clarity. While anyone else might have looked at the tiny black box and seen a little green square being batted back and forth between two slightly larger vertical green rectangles, I could see the future.

I could see Sophelia's reflection in the monitor as she continued to rattle on and, for brief moments, she became part of that future. Perhaps she was meant to be there, to reflect back at me. Perhaps she too had a significant part to play in the grand story of my life.

When I had completed my third hour of continuous game-play, I paused for a moment. Her head was lying on my shoulder. Her lips had finally stopped moving. No more questions were forthcoming. I could feel her heavy warm breath, wafting from her slightly opened mouth, brush against my neck and the sharp bursts of air from her nostrils punched me over and over again as she stared into space.

I turned to look at her, putting down the joystick, and she didn't move. For a moment, I thought she'd passed away. Dead people's eyes remain open until they finish

blinking out the electricity. If it wasn't for the condensation of her breath on my neck, I would have sworn she had expired. Her body didn't move at all. For a moment, I thought she might be an Angel.

"When are you coming home?" As she asked me the question, her lower lip brushed against my neck and I moved quickly away. She lost her balance and flopped over on her side, her paper-white skirt falling around her hips and exposing her delicates, that covered her unmentionables, as she fought, with legs spread, to sit back up. I looked straight ahead and away from her as she regained her composure, pretending to cover her nethers in embarrassment. For a moment, I thought she might be a Demon.

"Who sent you here?" I asked her the question without emotion, completely unmoved by her vulgar display. I'd learnt to control myself to a degree most men would never know in the entirety of their lives. I'd had greatness thrust upon me, and I had not wasted a second of it lusting after the flesh.

"What do you mean?" She asked the question with a look of hurt in her eyes. "You're my brother. I just came to see you're okay."

I stared deep into her eyes, but they were like high-toned mirrors. I couldn't feel anything from her except a desperation that crept through in her voice. "We barely know each other, Sophelia. You hadn't lived with us for much more than a year before..."

"What?" She begged with her eyes. Still not giving me anything she didn't want me to have. Her fortress was impenetrable. "Before what? Why are you treating me so strange? I thought we were starting to, you know, bond, and then you left the house—"

BLOODY GULLETS

“I was thrown out,” I interrupted harshly, but she continued to speak.

“You left the house and I thought, maybe, your ending up in the hospital was a sign we still had a chance, so I came to visit you as often as I could. Some times you weren’t awake, but I still stayed with you and talked to you. I thought we were growing closer. And then you got discharged and you never came back home. You came here. To this shed. I just want to know why. Was it me? Did I do something to offend you or make you not like me?”

She was practised at deception. I could feel it in every laboured breath. In every sigh and in every threat of a tear drop. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Maybe,” she continued. “Maybe you just feel awkward because we’re not biologically family and we got brought together to live as one during the confusing years.”

“There was never any confusion. I know what happened.” I looked forward again. I wasn’t going to let her see inside me. I became convinced, as she spoke, the only reason I couldn’t see into her was because she was burrowing her way inside my head. Blocking me. Feeling me out. Trying to pry secrets from my skull.

“That’s not nice, Stanley.” She sniffled. Another deceit. “I was a growing girl then. I still am. I looked up to you, but I also kind of loved you. I don’t know how to explain it. It’s not right, I know, but you always seemed so sure of everything. I thought for certain you could make sense of it. That you could explain it all to me. How things work.”

“How they work?” I snorted, looking over at her with fire in my eyes—glancing down at her skirt that she immediately tucked between her legs—and scoffed.

“You’re mean, Stanley.” She started to cry. “I didn’t do that on purpose. If that’s what you’re thinking.” She held her nose, pinching it at the top. “And even if I did, I’m not ugly.” She cupped her face in her hands, crying hard. I couldn’t tell at that point, but I imagined she was laughing with her face hidden. That old actor’s trick.

I reached over to touch her shoulder and she pulled away from me, her hips rolling toward me as her shoulders moved away. Exposing, once again, the bottom of her pastel blue panties that screamed in comparison to her pale white skin.

I remember wondering if Judas had a sister, and deciding it didn’t matter because the analogy was trite and pretentious. It was then that I realised who she really was. It was then that I realised, one day, I would have to kill her.

“I don’t love you, Sophelia. Not in that way. Not in any way.” She looked out from between her hands, her eyes bloodshot and wet. “Please leave. And take your tracking device with you.” I threw the video game unit at her feet and the small cover on the bottom broke, spilling batteries all around her on the floor.

She picked up the unit and got to her feet. She never cursed me. She was too clever for that. And, even though I could only feel it inside me, I knew she knew I knew. The look in her eyes was supposed to reveal sorrow, but it betrayed her lust for blood. Her ultimate goal. My downfall.

I stood up to open the door for her and she pushed my hand out of the way as she shoulder-bumped it open herself. Then she stopped, turned around, dropped the video game unit to the ground, and gave me a giant hug. She grabbed me tight, her arms and fingers pressing deep into my flesh. And she kissed me on the cheek. I remember it was over quickly

but, somehow, she had been able to slow down time. From the moment the tiniest hair beneath her lower lip touched my skin until the moment her lips separated from my cheek, I felt every single sensation. The heat, the warmth, the sticky wetness. Everything.

“I’m not giving up on you,” she whispered into my ear, as loud as thunder. I shook as she released her hold on me. “I love you, Stanley, and I believe in you. So do momma and poppa. And we all want you to be okay. Come home soon. Please.” But she was no longer begging. All I heard in her voice, from that moment on, was dispassionate and dutiful recounting.

She was a Demon. I knew that then as I know it now. And she played me well that day. Taking up all my time. Absorbing me into her fictional drama. Making sure I did nothing of consequence on the day of the celebration of my birth. But her will to power was no match for my own.

After she left that day, I made my way to the local library, where I did some fruitful research on the computers they used to keep connected to other institutions of learning worldwide through some sort of satanic spider’s web. This is what I learnt of my sister.

She had been born Sophelia May Alburn, in the state of Missouri, to her proud parents, Lawrence and Patricia. At the age of seven, her parents had gone out on a small errand, the intent of which they had allegedly claimed to be buying groceries for the coming week. They died that afternoon, when a trailer in the middle of an empty field exploded in a ball of fire. The trailer was later determined to be a mobile meth lab and her parents’ bodies were identified at the scene. What was left of them.

INFAMOUS G

She was shuffled in and out of the foster care system from that point on. She never stayed with any family for much longer than six months. Things had a tendency to go up in flames whenever she'd been around them for too long and, as she grew older, the fires just got bigger.

She'd spent a small amount of time in a prison for juvenile delinquents when she turned eleven, and was released a year later on good behaviour.

After that, she moved back into the foster care system and was shuffled from home to home again. With an even faster general expiration date of three months per household. By the time she turned fourteen, she'd been removed from seven different homes for various reasons ranging from general misconduct to sexually inappropriate behaviour. Most of the couples, from whose homes she was removed, had gotten legally divorced within weeks of her departure.

Her mugshots from the juvenile detention facility showed her true nature more than her current incarnation did. Though her face was beautiful and her body was beginning to develop at that point in her life, her eyes were hollow and her teeth were jagged and pointy. She stared directly into the camera. And her gaze, even travelling through time via those photographs from four or five years ago, was magnetic. It held you. It made you want to submit.

It was then that everything fell into place. She had been sent here to stop me from achieving my birthright—vanquishing the evil from this world—even before I fully understood how to.

Her childhood was too similar to mine. The loss of her parents to a fiery explosion. Her years in the foster care system.

BLOODY GULLETS

Her eventual adoption by Caroline and Stephen Handleburg. I knew, then, they hadn't picked her. She had chosen them.

And now that I was coming into my own, on the verge of finding and fulfilling my destiny, she was positioned exactly where she wanted to be. The only thing her plan hadn't taken into account was that I wouldn't be moved to sin, like the weaker men she'd conquered on her way to my doorstep. How, I wondered, would Caroline react when she learnt the real reason Stephen had brought pretty, innocent little Sophelia into their home? She had everyone fooled but me.

And that was the day my life changed. That was the day the evil of this world made itself known to me. That was the day the world took notice. That was the day my true identity was revealed to me, ironically, by the succubus that had been sent to destroy me in my waking sleep.

I smashed my fists on the computer keyboard with great fury and shouted out my true name as the librarian shushed me. I shouted it out again, even louder, as I took my place atop the computer table in the middle of the Young Adult Mystery section. I raged my name at the heavens and picked up a ruler to shake at the sky that was blocked, inconveniently, by the dry-wall of the roof.

The authorities took me away in cuffs that evening, claiming I had committed a public disturbance, though I could see in the eyes of everyone who beheld me that the Rapture was in them. That they had seen who I was when I called out my true name. That they had experienced my rebirth unto this world.

Still, the minions of Satan pinned me down, shackled me and drove me off to a cage, where I waited quietly until the next day when they released me on my own signature. I

refused to promise I wouldn't act up again, as they seemed so intent on having me do, but I could see their true forms. Screeching monkeys. Raging and burning with hellfire. Flinging their faeces at the walls in desperation and fear. They didn't scare me, and they knew they were powerless to stop me. I walked out the door, a free man, around two o'clock in the afternoon the following day.

And I began my march. Back to the home where the iniquity of this world had converged in a maelstrom, plotting to extinguish my light before it had its chance to shine. Back to the home of Caroline and Stephen Handleburg. Back to ensure my legacy.

I stopped by old man Spigott's house and thanked him for letting me use his shed. As I informed him I would be going to collect my things, leave him in peace and bestow my blessing upon him, he told me he didn't know who I was or what I wanted but, okay. And then he slammed the door in my face.

His memory had been wiped, as per the Devil's plan. Everything I'd ever seen or done would be removed from this earth—or erased from its history—by the Demons I set out to face head-on. They'd been taking care of business slowly my entire life. But they'd gotten sloppy along the way, and now their laziness was going to cost them.

After I finished packing my things into the black garbage bag I used as a briefcase, I turned and softly closed the door to the shed—my temporary blessed place of sanctuary—for one last time. Turning around, I came face to face with my enemy's handmaiden.

“Stanley, are you okay? I heard you got arrested. There was a big commotion in town.” Sophelia stood before me,

BLOODY GULLETS

looking into me with those big, hollow eyes. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She was wearing light blue skinny jeans and a sheer white top, both of which betrayed the outlines of her undergarments beneath. The granny panties weren't fooling anyone. She cupped my face with her hands and I could feel the evil burning itself into my skin. "Stanley? Are you okay? Mom and pop are worried sick. Are you coming home?"

I grabbed her by the wrists and removed her hands from my face, a sickly feeling coursing through my veins from my palms all the way to my loins. I wanted to tell her that, yes, I was coming home. I was coming home to right all the wrongs in our little nest before I set out to right all the wrongs in the rest of God's kingdom. As I began to speak, she squealed in pain, wresting herself from my grip and leaving me struck with silence.

"Ow, Stanley." She rubbed at her wrists, trying in vain to work the red marks out. "Why are you hurting me? Mother and father want to know you're okay. I want to know you're okay. We still love you." She stopped and took in a deep breath, puffing out her chest. "I still love you." And she looked upon me with the innocence of a child. She feigned seeking acceptance so well, I actually believed it.

She pulled me close and hugged me, pressing her chest into mine and thrusting her hips up against my pelvis. As I brought my hands up to resist her, she took hold of them with her own and placed them on her behind. Her tongue brushed against my ear as she nibbled at the lobe, gave it a quick, wet lick around the edges and whispered soft and warm, "I want you so bad, Stanley. Please?"

“No.” I screamed from the bottom of my belly, trying with all my might to get loose of her grip and her soft, probing tongue. I shouted so loud, and fought so vigorously, the entire world had been put on notice. Even old man Spigott stuck his head out his side window and yelled at me to keep the damned noise down. I thanked him again for his kindness, as he reiterated that he had no idea who I was or what I wanted, and he might call the authorities. I smiled and waved as I looked back toward my nemesis.

And I laughed heartily as I realised she’d learnt a thing or two from the Devil. She wasn’t there. Perhaps her body never had been. I knew, then, she was going to be harder to remove from this world than I’d at first thought. But, within the day, no matter what the cost, I would rid God’s world of her and all the poisonous vermin like her.

I continued my march home, garbage bag slung over my shoulder. The road back to the disarmingly quaint suburban home of Caroline and Stephen Handleburg was long, but I was determined.

As I made my way through the desolation and slow decay of the small town streets, I could feel the eyes of the world upon me. The people I passed looked at me strangely. Not with disdain or disgust, as I’d come to expect, but with fear. For all the evil I could see burning in their eyes, they were rightly mortified at my presence. I stared them down, as the sea of humanity parted before me. As I passed, I could hear them from behind me, beseeching their unholy master to strike me down. They themselves lacked the conviction or the sheer might required to accomplish the task.

When I arrived at Caroline and Stephen’s door, I didn’t bother to knock. The door was closed, but unlocked, as I had

suspected. I entered that place I used to call home and stood in the foyer. All the coats were hung neatly on the coat-hooks along the left wall and I could hear bustling in the living room to the right.

“Hello?” Stephen’s familiar voice rang out. It sounded tin. Hollow. Empty.

I locked the door behind me and moved into the living room as Caroline started to question the noise, cutting her off abruptly.

“Hello Caroline. Stephen.” They glanced up at me from their reading chairs. Looks of surprise and elation that appeared genuine washed across their faces a moment too late.

“Son,” Caroline said. “We weren’t expecting you.”

“As intended,” I replied, stone faced, scanning the floor.

“And would it kill you to start calling us mother and father again?” Stephen asked, feigning good humour. Not faking it all that well. I gave him a look that said ‘I know what you’ve been doing’ and he sat and stared at me. I thought of him taking succour in the embrace of his darling step-daughter and shuddered. He’d keep his seat, and he’d keep his mouth shut, if he knew what was good for him, which, apparently, he did.

“Where’s Sophelia?” I looked directly into my mother’s eyes. She had no idea what I really meant. “I need to speak with her. She came to see me today.”

Caroline stayed seated as well, shaking her head. “Well, I don’t know about that,” she said. “She ran out to do something earlier, but she’s upstairs in her room now, I think. Getting ready. She’s going to a sleepover at a friend’s tonight.”

I looked over at them, snorted, and proceeded to make my way upstairs. “Don’t worry. I’ll knock,” I said as I continued to point my gaze toward the top of the stairs.

When I reached her door, I knocked three times. Loudly. “Sophelia. It’s Stanley.” I paused briefly, for effect and to listen to the scuffling behind the door. “We need to talk.”

“Oh, hi Stanley,” she said through the closed door. “Just one second. I wasn’t expecting you. I’m not decent.” Truer words had never been spoken.

I grabbed the door knob and gave it a sharp twist. Like the front door, Sophelia’s bedroom door was unlocked as well. I noted, for the first time ever, Sophelia’s door didn’t even have a locking mechanism. Stephen and Sophelia were more sexually deviant than I’d at first imagined. Perhaps Caroline was too. I couldn’t discount any explanation of their behaviour and seemingly poor decision making, no matter how vulgar or repulsive.

The door swung open easily, without a sound. The hinges were well oiled. All the better for a midnight tryst. Sickening.

Sophelia stood to the left of her bed, in front of her mirror, pulling thin white sweatpants up around her thighs. Her top was already covered in a light green half-tee with the word ‘PEACH’ inscribed on the back.

She stopped for a moment, not looking back, as I silently entered the room. She looked at the floor, the reflection of her face in the mirror seeming to show her eyes looking directly at my crotch as she proceeded to finish putting on her sweatpants. Gliding the soft cotton fabric slowly up her thighs, letting it gently push against the tender white fat of her posterior as she wiggled it back and forth, seductively, up to her waist.

BLOODY GULLETS

“So nice to see you again, Sophelia,” I said in a commanding voice.

She jumped with a start and spun around on her heels, almost losing her balance. “Jesus Christ, Stanley,” she said, straining to keep her voice down. “I told you I’d be there in a second. What the hell are you doing?” She pulled up the waist of her sweatpants, covering her belly button, and adjusted her bra underneath her tee shirt, pressing her breasts down to make them look smaller. Mixed signals. She was good. The darkness that sent her had chosen wisely. “How are you, sweetie?” she asked, as she finished preening. “We’re all worried about you. We heard you got arrested. There was—”

“A big commotion in town?” I asked, finishing her sentence. “Yeah, I know. We’ve had this conversation before.”

“What are you talking about, goofy?” she asked, giggling. As she looked back at me with bemusement and something resembling genuine concern, she opened up a tin of lip gloss and began applying it to her lips, making kissing faces at the mirror. “I was planning on coming to see you before I went to my friend’s house tonight, but I decided maybe tomorrow would be better. Give you some time to take it easy.”

“Is that what that was? Trying to help me relax?” I glared at her, but she continued to ignore me with professional aplomb.

“What are you talking about, Stanley?” She turned to look at me and squared her hips. I could feel her stare—those empty hollow eyes—burning into my brain. “Is that what ‘what’ was? You know, ma and pa have been worried sick about you. They wanted to come see you themselves, but I know you and I told them that would only make things worse.”

“You know me?” I looked at her accusingly.

“Of course. I spent all that time with you at the hospital. You weren’t always one hundred percent, but we talked, sometimes for hours.” She smiled condescendingly and walked toward me slowly, her sweatpants innocently slipping below her belly button, more with each step. Every time I looked down to notice, my eyes would snap back up to hers and I could see she knew I was looking. I could see she thought she was winning.

“You don’t know me at all.” I stood fast, clenching my fists with rage as my skin turned red with feelings of lust I fought hard to control. I had to be strong. I couldn’t let the Devil win this easily. Not this cheaply. Not after all this time spent being made ready to destroy Him.

She didn’t reply. She only pulled at her tee shirt, placing the hem in her mouth and yanking it up to reveal the front clasp of her bra, making her sweatpants drop down even further, exposing more of her abdomen. She ran her right hand through my hair, tracing down my cheek, caressing my neck with her fingers. She looked up at me slightly, only being an inch or two shorter, and gripped me tightly around the back of my neck. Her other hand pulled at my shirt collar, tugging my face down toward her breasts as she let her shirt drop back over them.

I opened my mouth to speak and her tongue lunged out at me, licking around my mouth, teasing my lips. Before I could think to do anything remotely logical, her tongue was dancing with my own and it entered my mouth, her lips closing against mine as she kissed me deeply, passionately.

I pushed against her with my hands, but she had a grip of steel. My head was stuck in place, my mouth moving to accept

BLOODY GULLETS

each pulse, each probe, as she kissed me more deeply and I realised my hands weren't pushing her away, rather they were massaging her swollen breasts.

I pulled my hands back and she let go of my collar, grasping my left wrist and shoving it down the front of her sweatpants, then quickly guiding my other hand even farther down the back. In seconds, she had her hands swirling around my face again, kissing and licking me as her hips twirled, smearing and spreading the warmth of her womanhood over my helplessly fidgeting hands. They explored her soft wet feminine mystery without abandon as I fought to control them.

"Take me, Stanley," she said. Begging. Panting. Pushing me up against the wall and straddling me, her sweatpants straining to fall past the top of her thighs. Her lips and tongue were working furiously. On my neck, in my ears, back on my mouth. "I want to feel you inside me."

I felt her right hand unzip my jeans. Her left hand wrestled my underpants down slightly and began stroking me, rubbing the tender skin of my flaccid erection against the soft flesh of her stomach. "I can't..." I'm ashamed to say I begged half-heartedly. But I found strength in that moment of weakness. I heard the voice, and saw the face, of the Almighty.

She pulled back, spitting into her hands, and continued to work me into a frenzy. "My mouth says otherwise." She giggled as she made a lurid gesture with her tongue and darted her glance between my crotch and my eyes.

It was then that I saw and felt it all. The fire behind her. The unseeable face of God. The unhearable words He spoke. And, as suddenly as she had reduced me to a slave to her sexuality, Sophelia's eyes turned dark and blood began running

from the sockets. The liquid she couldn't lap up with her tongue fell into her hands which continued to pull at me, stroking more ferociously. Her eyes were aflame.

"Begone." I screamed, pressing my eyes closed and forcing her hands off me. "By the power of God Almighty, I banish you." I opened my eyes, and she was no longer there. Her room was empty.

Then the door swung open. "I'll be right back. He's fine," I heard Sophelia call downstairs to Stephen and Caroline. She rushed into the room and quickly, gently closed the door behind her. She pressed her back against it, as if expecting them to follow her upstairs and try to get in anyway.

"What the fuck, Stanley?" Her eyes went wide with shock and a pitying disgust as she moved toward me slowly. "Are you okay?"

I looked at her closely, trying to figure out what was happening. Her clothing was exactly the same, except worn with some semblance of humility. Was the Demon still playing tricks? Or had It finally left this poor girl's body? Then I realised I was standing in the middle of her room with my pants around my ankles. Cock out, grasped in saliva covered hands. Standing in front of her makeup table. Facing, almost directly, pictures of her as a young child.

I couldn't believe how deftly I'd been fooled and how perfectly I'd allowed myself to be trapped. "I..." I didn't know what to say. I silently begged for forgiveness, and looked to the heavens for some answer.

"Oh my God," she said slowly, her mind finally registering the scene that had been so neatly set up. Me in her unlocked bedroom, caught apparently masturbating to pictures

of her in the second grade. “You’re not okay, are you? Everyone was right.”

The look in her eyes filled me with shame and confusion. I was still awaiting a reply from my Master on high and my mind was racing. Was this really Sophelia? Or was it still the Demon that possessed her?

She turned to open her door, looking frightened for the first time since I’d known her. I reached out and grabbed her wrists. She slipped my grasp easily—saliva spattering against the wall—and reached out for the knob. I locked my arms around her neck in a choke hold, dragging her away from the door, as she tried to run and scream.

“Stanley. Please.” Her voice sputtered weakly as I looked into her makeup table mirror and saw her skin turning pink, then red, her eyeballs bulging. And me behind her, naked from the waist down with a hard on pressed into her lower back.

“I’m sorry about this, Sophelia, or whatever your name really is.” I continued to tighten my grip, pushing her head forward, as her legs kicked at air and we fell backward onto her bed. “You’ve tried to stop me twice, and I can’t let you have another chance.” I looked at the ceiling again. Still no answer.

“Please. Please.” Her voice was barely audible and her face was turning purple. She was flagging fast, the crotch of her sweatpants soaking with urine and her convulsions becoming more violent and sporadic, tearing her flimsy clothing at the seams.

And then I heard the voice I’d been waiting for. “You must rid the world of evil,” It commanded. “The second coming is just about here. I have trusted you to do My work. You know what you’ve got to do now. And you know what’s got to be done after. Your struggles will be over pretty soon,

but you must cleanse this world of all the miserable bastards who would harm Me.” The voice seemed a little too casual, but I wasn’t about to second guess my destiny at that point. I had come too far to let His manner of speaking put me off. After all, who’s to say the way God speaks in the Bible is actually the way He speaks?

I looked at Sophelia, as her body went limp and her eyes opened wide and, for the first time since I’d met her, I felt a sadness rise up in me. One of God’s beautiful creatures, this wonderful young girl, defiled by Satan and used unto her death to serve his wicked ends. Her passing would not go unavenged.

I laid her body down on her bed gently, as I pulled my pants back up and redid my zipper. I heard a knocking, and Caroline’s voice, as the bedroom door began to slowly ease open. “Will you two be coming down for supper?”

I stood frozen, staring at the door. The coincidences were piling up high, and every one seemed worse. For a moment, I longed to be perceived as the half-naked pervert, masturbating to kiddie pictures of his adoptive sister. As insane as that wish sounded, it still beat being perceived as the fully clothed pervert standing over the corpse of his adoptive sister he appeared to have just finished raping and killing.

“We’ll be right down,” a voice called out from behind me. Sophelia’s voice. Fresh and full of life.

I continued to stare at the door as it stopped a centimetre short of cracking open and closed again. “Okay, we’ll see you two downstairs in about fifteen minutes.” The sound of footsteps followed, growing muffled as Caroline headed back to the kitchen.

I turned around, looking down at Sophelia lying on her bed. Her eyes were still shut and her face was still contorted in

a mask of pain and confusion. And my resolve returned. I knew who had spoken. I turned back around and walked to the makeup table mirror, adjusting my clothing, straightening out my hair, making sure I looked presentable. This wasn't going to be getting any easier, but I could see a surge of confidence in my eyes. This was going to get done.

"We'll be right down," the voice called from behind me again. This time It was laughing. I spun around and saw Sophelia lying there. Still dead. Like a corpse should be. My mind was playing tricks on me, or the Devil was playing tricks on my mind. I gave myself a bracing slap across the face and turned away once more.

"You should have given yourself to me." The voice giggled again. More sultry this time. More alluring. Like the snake in the garden. I closed my eyes tight, pinching my nose, trying to drown out the sound. "You should have let me have you. It would have been so good. You have no idea. And I would have let you finish anywhere inside me. Or on me."

My anger grew with each word. Even though I knew Sophelia's body lay dead on the bed behind me, I did not look back. The voice continued as I moved toward the door. "It would have been so unbelievably hot. Can you still imagine what your big fat cock would feel like in my tight young pussy?" The vulgarities were growing in number, each one more profane. All designed to break me.

"I can feel you, Stanley. Pulsing. Pleasure. Filling me up. Using me. Dominating me. You can still finish. I'm not stiff yet, but I'll bet you still are," the giggling insisted, drilling into my ears. And I thought to drown out its incessant heckling with my own when I heard the voice from on high again.

“Go on. Leave her for Me. You have unfinished business downstairs.”

“You mean, leave her ‘to’ You, right?” I asked, confused by His choice of words. He didn’t respond. And I was scared, truly scared, for the first time in my life.

Her voice taunted me for the last time. “At least you wouldn’t have died a virgin.” I turned around and saw her standing in front of her bed. Stripped naked. No teasing, no sensuality. Just completely nude, the ligature marks around her neck still fresh and going rosy. She looked directly into my eyes and I could see the innocent little girl inside her. The gift God had created and the Devil had purloined. She looked out at me from her prison and her eyes, behind those Demon eyes, were crying tears of hopelessness and fear.

“I’m sorry,” I said to her. “I’m sorry I couldn’t save you.”

She stared blankly at me as the covers of her bed flew up into the air and her body blew back on its heels, landing on the mattress. The covers dropped over her again, her left leg and arm plopping out, as a large hump-like shape appeared underneath the covers, creating a dome that jerked hysterically up and down, back and forth. Her arm and leg jerked out and flopped back with each seeming thrust of the object beneath the covers as I stood, transfixed.

The movement stopped and I heard the voice from on high again. “You need to get going now. Leave her for Me. You have unfinished business downstairs.”

I turned and backed away, shaking my head as I grabbed the door’s knob. As soon as the voice from on high stopped, I could see in the mirror that the frenetic jerking and humping underneath Sophelia’s covers had begun again.

BLOODY GULLETS

“The Dark One has many tricks’, I reminded myself as I pulled open the door, proceeding to make my way to the stairwell.

“Get a move on, my son,” the voice from on high encouraged me, and I felt purpose again. This was not going easily, but I had been born to the task.

The creaking of Sophelia’s bed grew louder the farther down the steps I moved, and I fought inside my head to keep the stifled moans and cries of pleasure out. But I knew, if I was going to win this war, carry out my destiny and become the man I was meant to be, I would have to learn to embrace the deception and boldly move through it. Accept it and destroy it without mercy.

“Stephen? Caroline?” I called out as I walked through the living room into the kitchen. “You both cooking?”

They were already looking in my direction when I entered the room. Stephen was pan frying a meat cleaver and Caroline was placing a tin foil casserole dish of assorted knives and other cutlery into the oven heated to 375 degrees. “Would it kill you to just, for the love of Pete, call us mom and dad again?” Caroline asked.

And it dawned on me that, even though I had now been gifted with the vision to see what they were actually doing, their own words had given them up as the puppets they were, long ago.

Mother, father. Mamma, poppa. Mommy, daddy. Ma, pa. Mom, dad. Mom, pop. And on and on. They’d been dangling their false identities in my face the entire time. Ever since Sophelia had entered their home, neither of them had ever referred to themselves using the same descriptives with any regularity. They were actors. Poorly prepared and lacking

rehearsal. I could only berate myself for not noticing earlier on, but I wasn't going to question His plan for me. If I hadn't noticed until now, it was only because He knew I wasn't ready to fulfil my destiny before.

I felt more confident than ever, then, but I still wanted to put them to the test, if only to make it easier for myself to separate the people they may have once been from the lackeys they had become. "Sorry, mom," I said. "You and daddy have always been good to me. It's just my way. I meant no disrespect."

"That's okay, son," Stephen said, smiling way too big and wide. Exposing his teeth like a monkey. "You know we love you." He motioned to my place at the table. Stalks of broccoli and steamed carrots lay beside the plates where the silverware should have been. "Why don't you sit down and I'll go get your sister."

"That won't be necessary," I said. "She claims she's not hungry. Something about being full already."

Stephen looked back at me, concern in his eyes. It seemed genuine. They may not have remembered their lines well, but they could really sell their roles. "Pardon?"

"I said she's not going to be joining us for dinner, pa." I walked up to him. As I passed Caroline, I looked at her out of the corner of my eye and saw her true face. Nothing but blood, muscle and bone. A terrifying death mask. The thing the Devil had sent to possess her.

"I don't understand." Stephen gripped the pan tight as I closed the distance between us. He nervously flipped the meat cleaver with his spatula.

"I truly believe you don't, Stephen," I said, speaking directly to the man that used to be him. Then I turned my

attention to whatever horrific Demon held sway over him. “But the thing is, dad, it’s too late for that now.” He grimaced as I reached my hand down into the pan. “I’ve been tasked by the Lord to remove you, and all like you, from this earthly plane, and my time has come.”

I reached into the pan and grabbed the cleaver by its handle. I felt the steel grip sear into my flesh and Stephen’s eyes went wide with horror as he stifled a scream, shrinking back and down like a frightened child. Caroline cried from behind me. “Stanley.”

“Do it already, Stanley,” the voice from on high commanded again, the squeaking of broken bedsprings peppering its commands. “Your time is now. Let’s show some hustle.”

Caroline grabbed me from behind, pulling on my arm, but her strength was no match for mine. I grabbed Stephen by his collar and swung the cleaver down. He held his arms up in a futile posture of defence, but I continued swinging. Caroline let go and I hacked away at Stephen’s flesh, through to the bone, until he couldn’t hold back the onslaught any longer.

As I buried the cleaver in Stephen’s skull, he twitched and kicked, still fighting. The dead don’t die easily. Sophelia had shown me that. I continued to cut into his head, splitting it open like a ripe melon. Gravy splattered up into my face as he collapsed to the floor at my feet.

I turned around and saw Caroline holding the phone to her ear. She spoke into the mouthpiece, “Yes. Yes, he’s here.”

I dropped the cleaver to the floor and opened up the oven as she stared in disbelief. “They’re coming for you,” she said, a look of grim determination on her once-human face. “They’re coming to take you away for good.”

“No one’s going anywhere, mother.” I grabbed a knife for each hand from the tin foil dish in the oven. “No one’s going anywhere but straight back to the Hell from which they came.”

She screamed in terror, whimpering and crying, as I stabbed her and stabbed her and stabbed her again. In and out. In and out. Head, legs, arms, neck. She dropped to the floor in a pool of juice and excrement when I finally broke through and destroyed the Demon she had become.

I stood proudly in the middle of the kitchen, covered in various fluids. I looked around at the work I had done and saw that it was good. Surely He would be proud. And He was.

The voice came from on high once again, shortly thereafter. It was muffled at first, most likely by the adrenaline that pumped through my system like Kool-Aid. Then it became clear. Loud and crystal. “This will all be over soon. You should probably get out of here.”

And I knew it was time to run. Time to take shelter. Time to heal, rest, regroup and prepare for the greater war that was unfolding. But it was too late. At that moment, I feared I had failed Him.

The foyer door exploded, giant shards of thick oak shooting through the living room and bouncing off the walls. Smaller chunks making their way into the kitchen, some digging into my flesh. A cloud of black smoke enveloped me and I heard the voices of the damned surrounding my weakened body.

“Get this fucking piece of shit in cuffs,” one of them said, while the others ran through the house like the dutiful slaves they were. The Devil had numbers and they were many, for sure. I learnt that then. I learnt it the hardest way possible.

BLOODY GULLETS

It's been months since that day. And, through the constant haze of drugs I'm forced to take with my food, I still can't recall it all clearly. And I hardly ever hear His voice anymore. Then, only in whispers.

I remember them dragging me away, and the looks on the faces of the people on the street as they stuffed me in the back of a police cruiser. I remember thinking that if the Devil was going to control this world, he was cunning to infect the structures of authority and power. It wouldn't surprise me in the least if governments and military institutions were among the casualties in this holy war.

But, these days, I just sit in the recreation room of whatever subsection of Hell they've hidden me. Some place God can't find me. Now I just sit here and wait. I could wait in my own room, but I like to watch the television. It's the only way I can keep up on current events. I think it's probably the only way He can get a message to me in here. And they know that. I'm sure of it.

They bait me in here daily. Sometimes they force me to spend the day in my room. They tell me stories about how I went crazy one day. Something everyone in my family was sure would happen eventually. They say I assaulted my adoptive parents with foodstuffs. They say that's the only reason I'm here in this asylum, and not in a real prison where I belong.

But their minds are in a fog. They don't know the truth of this world. They don't know the Demons that roam the surface of this planet and the evil they spread. They don't understand that He wouldn't let me be put in any prison, where the Devil's institution could have my human body extinguished so easily and without question. They don't know what I know. They don't know what I am.

And I'm happy to agree with them that it was wrong to beat my adoptive father with a pork chop until he hyperventilated, passed out and badly banged his head on the kitchen counter. I'm also happy to agree that it was wrong of me to assault my adoptive mother with a turkey leg and garnish until she slipped in the juice and gravy, had a bad fall and shat herself. If these lies are all I need to keep repeating to get me out of here and back on point in His war against the Devil, I repeat them gladly.

A girl who calls herself Sophelia comes by to visit me every so often, also. They never make me agree I'd done anything wrong to her. She claims she's related to me—my sister—and she's got the staff all fooled. They give her special visiting privileges so she can come and torture me whenever she pleases.

She's proud of the fact she's able to do so. She as much as tells me so every time she comes in. She looks suitably sad for me and my condition while the staff are around, but the minute they leave us alone in my room she tells me stories.

She tells me how sorry she feels for me, being messed up in the head and all, until she's sure no one else is listening. Then she tells me how she's going to help me remember my life the way it really was. But I know she's pushing her master's agenda. And I could easily play along and pretend to remember so I could, maybe, get out of here, but I don't believe that's how He would want me to regain my freedom.

She reminds me how, when she was fourteen and I was eighteen, I used to try to molest her and how she never told Stephen or Caroline. She tells me how she went through counselling from the State, since she had been a ward for so long before being adopted, and had decided to forgive me as

BLOODY GULLETS

long as I agreed to move out of the family home and leave her be.

She reminds me how, after I left the family house, she had to make up lies about me to protect our secret, because she honestly believed I was confused. And how she wanted to help me, if it was at all possible, because, even though what I'd tried to do to her was unspeakable, she believed in redemption. And how she knew if she ever told our adoptive parents what happened, I would never be rid of that stain on my reputation for the rest of my years.

She reminds me how, when I turned twenty, she came to invite me home for a family dinner at our adoptive parents' request. She says she visited the shed I was illegally living in, behind some old man's farm. She thought things might have changed since I'd been living out on my own. But, when she arrived to deliver the invitation, I wouldn't stop playing with her dress to look at her panties. And when she tried to cover herself up, I would jostle her to make her lose her balance and she'd catch me peeking. She says I wouldn't stop telling her how much I loved her and how much I wanted her. She says she left me that day with a sincere hug and a kiss on the cheek and a feeling that things might get better for us, given time and a little distance.

She reminds me how, later that same day, I had gotten myself arrested over some tantrum I threw at the local library. And how, upon my release the following afternoon, she had come to visit me again to make sure I was okay, at which time I tried to molest her again and she had run. There were witnesses, she tells me, but she never said a word and nobody else could say they definitely saw, or heard, anything. So she held out hope that her invitation to come back home and be

with the family might bring me out of my sickness. She tells me she realises now that her hopes weren't grounded in reality. But, she likes to remind me also, she's a true believer.

She reminds me how, when I came home to visit that day, she caught me trying to masturbate myself to pictures of her as a child, which, strangely enough, put her at ease. To her way of thinking, if I was sexually attracted to children—as wrong as some might judge that to be—she no longer had anything to fear, because she was quickly becoming a woman.

She reminds me, also, how she had misread my sickness and how she regrets it to this day. She realises, now, I was obsessed with her, and not with her youth. And that evening, after she caught me in her room, I had strangled her and beaten her horribly to keep her from talking. But she had grown up in a tough world, so she didn't let me leave without teasing me about my sexual dysfunction.

And she reminds me how she blames herself for enraging me to the point that I viciously attempted to rape her. Even though I couldn't maintain an erection and never penetrated her, she believes it was her fault I tried to violate her sexually. And that it never would have happened had she treated me with more kindness and continued to practise the forgiveness she'd been trying to all along.

But these are just her words. None of them can be, or ever have been, proven. And I always thank her for her candour, and for still being here to talk to me, even though the facts change slightly with each retelling of her stories. Generally for the worse. I know, were I to question her openly about any of them, the implications of the stories she tells would put me in a much darker place than I currently reside.

BLOODY GULLETS

She knows this. I can see it in the smile she wears when she tells me the really bad parts. I can see it in her eyes when she wears short skirts, keeping her eyes locked on mine while she spreads her legs in front of me and tells me she can't remember if she wore panties. I can hear it in her voice when she talks of the terrible things I did to her. Slowly, softly, purring like a kitten, rubbing herself in suggestive places and moaning ever so softly.

And I know I never killed the Demon inside her. I know she's stronger now than she ever was before and, when I had faced her previously and thought I had destroyed her, she was merely toying with me. She had me pegged long before I fully realised my own special place in this world, and she had come to remove me from the equation.

And I wonder all the while, who among Satan's minions could be capable of such foresight? Of such cunning? Of seeing so many moves in advance? Of altering everyone's perception of reality in such a way as to ensure that, within as little as two years, His greatest champion in this Holy war would be held back from victory by the very people he was chosen to protect? Which of the monkeys in the Devil's army was capable of putting down His plan with such grace and perfection?

Who but Lucifer himself? And, disguised as a beautiful young woman with charms no man could resist, how could he be beaten?

I'm sure my God has considered this quandary, and that sexuality isn't the main issue. Merely a distraction. Zero sum. If He had chosen a woman to rid the world of the evil that infects it, the Devil could use a man to tempt her. Even if He

were to choose a man or woman who might lust after someone of his or her own gender, that could just as easily be countered.

This is a game I cannot comprehend, and a game I don't believe my adversary's human form can fathom either. Just as I, without His voice to guide me and His eyes to help me see, would be completely lost. Unaware this struggle even existed.

But, over time, as these revelations come from Sophelia's lips, I can feel His presence growing stronger in me again. Through the fog of the drugs and monotony. Some days I can swear He's inside me, talking to me, even though the pills do their best to keep Him docile and His voice muffled.

And today I can feel Him very strongly. Very acutely. Sophelia is sitting with me again, wearing a pink felt mini-skirt. Her legs are spread, I'm looking and she has, in fact, forgotten to wear panties. And when I look back up into her eyes, I don't see accusation or hurt. I see that glint. That clever smile. That telling wink that says 'Do it. Touch me. Eat me'. Her eyes not facing the cameras, her hips squared. Knowing if I reach for her or touch her in any way, I will have made all of her lies into truths. Allowing her to finally crush me.

I look over at her, and a voice comes from deep within me. "I still love you, my first born. We'll achieve peace and unity in this world one day."

She smiles at me. Closing her eyes, closing her legs. She hangs her head down and looks back up, a tear running down her cheek. "I love you too, Father. I want that so badly. Like you. Like always."

"If only we could agree on the means," the voice continues to speak through me.

BLOODY GULLETS

“Yes.” She leans forward and kisses me softly, slowly on the forehead. The orderlies outside begin to move in and she waves them off with her hand.

“I just have one question for you, my precious child.” I begin stroking her cheek and the orderlies are on high alert.

“What are we going to do about the kids?” she asks with a sly grin.

I smile back at her. And a laugh, filled with great wisdom and compassion, pours forth from me in waves.

I fear I may never understand why.

SOFT FOCUS



EVERY EVENING, AS I LIE DOWN TO BED, I LOOK over at my pictures of Kiera. I say good night to her, even though she isn't really there. And, as I drift off, I look at her, from time to time, and smile. It feels like peace. And then, the next morning, the world's a blur. In that time when I'm not quite yet me, I can see the outline of her face on the nightstand by my bed. And I can feel her. Touching me softly. Kissing me. Telling me everything is going to be all right.

Then I wake up, and she's no longer there at my bedside. Only in pictures. No soft voice telling me everything's going to be all right. And the world comes into focus.

I can feel the spiders and the worms, crawling and slithering around in my veins. I scratch at the skin, but they just move around. They're faster than I've ever been, and I'm getting slower every single day. Every day I waste delaying what I know to be unavoidable.

Because, as I touch her pictures, running my trembling fingers across them, her eyes don't close like I want them to. Peaceful in death. They remain open. Staring at me. Looking at me like they still love me and they don't understand. Like they did when she was still here. In body and in spirit. With me. All day and all night.

BLOODY GULLETS

And, near the end, this is where we stayed. On this mattress, soaked wet with fluids, bodily and otherwise. Except for the occasional errand, this is where we lay. Unless our supply was low, we never moved an inch.

Near the end, the lovemaking was more spiritual than physical. When we'd tap in, it was just us, looking into each other's eyes and feeling our souls being lifted into a dulled and soothing ether. It wasn't the same thing as sex. It was better. By far. We both agreed. There was nothing we could do, separate or together, that could equal the bliss we felt in those invisible arms. As we drifted and our eyes went hazy and we reached that pinnacle of peace that sometimes turned into a nap.

At first, when we met, I would stay out long hours during the day, dressed in a monkey suit, while she waited patiently for me and did whatever needed doing around our small apartment. And every evening, we'd relax and enjoy each other's company. Back when we still touched each other physically. When the feeling of her tongue on my body or the taste of her dripping down my throat was still pleasurable. When we made love like animals and passed out from exhaustion.

Over time, we fell prone to routine and, even though things were still good and we still loved each other very deeply, we began to take more risks. Changing things. Going deeper into each other. Exploring options. Trading pleasure for pain and enjoying ourselves again as we made the pain go away.

And, pretty soon, I stopped spending my days outside the apartment. I no longer dressed up like a corporate stooge. I stayed home, in bed with her, unless I needed to go out and

run errands for us. And she would wait there. Only leaving the bedroom to bathe or use the toilet. We barely ever ate. It wasn't what we craved anymore. And we were eating into our savings enough as it was.

Then, as was inevitable, the money ran out and she began to go out to do the errands. It wasn't anything either of us wanted. And when I look back, I think I can see a little girl begging in her eyes as she tells me she'll be back soon. Begging me to tell her she doesn't have to go out and things could go back to normal. Even if the shells we'd become didn't want that at all.

Some nights she would come home with bruises on her face and inner thighs. Sometimes her makeup would be runny, smeared across her face, and I would tell her I loved her and she would echo the phrase and kiss me softly, quickly, before we relaxed for the evening.

And all those evenings had become routine, again. Except, by that point, there was nothing but the relieving of the pain. We had no reason to inflict it upon each other anymore. The length of the days took care of that part for us.

We would lay together in perfect ecstasy, looking into each other's eyes. Letting ourselves drift and just feel the numbing warmth. We almost never took baths anymore. We never showered. But I could still see her, lying across from me, and she looked so very beautiful. Like an angel. And, even though our mattress reeked of urine and spoilt food, I could still smell her. Her fresh clean body. The one hidden underneath the dirt, the clogged pores, the scars and the bloodied and bruised tracks.

And then, one day, she was gone. Taken from me in an instant. Like that. She left and never came home. The girl I'd

BLOODY GULLETS

loved for so long, for whom I'd do anything in this world, never returned to our apartment. She had died. She had been, in a very real sense, destroyed. By the world. By the monsters who inhabited it.

And as I touch her pictures, running my trembling fingers across them, her eyes still won't close like I want them to. They remain open. Staring back at me. Looking at me like they still love me and they just can't understand. Like they did when she was still here. In body and in spirit. In bed with me. All day and all night.

And, near the end, this is where we stayed. On this mattress, soaked warm and wet with bodily fluids. Unless our supply was low, we never moved an inch.

And now that she's gone, the only thing I have to remind me of her love for me, and to drive me harder and harder toward avenging her death, are her pictures and the smell from her side of the bed. The smell gets worse every day, and I feel the fear when I look over to where she used to rest.

And I remember, again, the day she left, never to return. She had gone out that morning, looking tired and weak. Itching herself and shaking, just as I was. Promising me everything was going to be all right and she'd be home soon. But the hours passed and I began to panic. Where was she? What was taking so long?

It wasn't unusual. It's what we did. Both of us. Every day then.

And it hadn't taken me long after that evening to determine who was culpable for her death. For killing the once beautiful, sweet, caring, compassionate woman who had crawled into bed with me that night. For stealing her soul and leaving a wasted husk to act in her stead, as her body slowly

died beside me. Staring into my eyes with disbelief. Looking at me like she still loved me and would never understand.

And, tonight, I'm shooting our poison into the femoral vein in my groin. Hoping against hope my shaking hands will take pity on me and let the needle miss, or over-shoot, and puncture the artery at last. The gutter's been muddy for days. It's only a matter of time. I console myself with these few cogent thoughts I have left.

And, as I release my bite from the belt and feel the junk rush my system, I roll away from her pictures. I look over at her. I stroke and kiss the yellowing flesh that no longer resembles her photographs and I pray that tonight I will finally deliver, for her, the justice she deserves.

As my eyes drift closed in that horrifying ecstasy, I whisper that I love her. I need to believe she can hear me. I know that, soon, she will understand. And I hope that she will have forgiven me.

BELIEVER



I'VE HEARD IT SAID, MANY TIMES IN MY LIFE, that the ultimate psychosis is not knowing who you are. Of course, I've never heard it said to me in those exact words.

But many like them. Having no sense of self, being completely dissociated from your very humanity, is what most people would consider crazy. Viewing your existence from a crow's nest. Looking at your life from the outside while still actively living it. Seeing yourself and knowing it isn't really you. Hearing voices. Seeing things that don't exist. Smelling, feeling and tasting that which no one else can. Realising, finally, you are not yourself. All these things. Stark raving loony.

The medical and scientific communities support the hypothesis that anyone who exhibits these traits must be, to some degree, insane. This keeps the general population fat on fear, while it keeps the profitable arm of the medical and scientific communities fat on the mass consumption of medications. Medications ironically designed to allay the very fears those self-same communities manufacture.

We are hamsters. All of us. Running at breakneck pace on our wheels, trying to outrun ourselves. But that wheel never stops turning until we drop from exhaustion or death. All of us. So deeply involved in our own lives we don't see we've been running away from ourselves and never gotten any farther

than we did in those first few moments when we realised we'd better get running.

Some argue, still, that this dissociative state the human mind is capable of producing at will, is freedom from the ego. That the self is a construct of the self. That we aren't who we think we are, and we never were. They say the truth of the matter is we never were ourselves. Never have been, aren't and never will be. That we create our own realities, not the other way around. Most philosophers, religions and those psychiatrists and psychologists who aren't owned by the medical and scientific communities, believe this as well.

And the questions remain. Are we who we think we are, or are we who we believe we are? Is reality what we believe or what we think we know? Regardless of where you stand on the issue, they're all tricky questions to answer when someone's using your face to bang open a six-inch-thick steel door.

"Sorry to break your heart, Foreman," guard Mackey goads me as he follows up with a baton to the kidneys. "You're going right straight back to the hole. Time to get you out of that fancy suit and back into your rags." As I drop to my knees in pain, I realise, once again, that, though I've always loved Texas, I've never cared much for prison life.

"It's just a good thing I'm getting out of here soon," I reply, snaking my way up off my knees onto the bench, handcuffs still wrapping my wrists behind my back.

"You're something else, fucker." He shifts his posture, puffing out his chest and pressing his fists into the flab just above his belt. "In case you weren't present at the reading, the

parole board denied your application. You're in for at least another year, dipshit." Mackey's a firm believer that reality is solid. Immutable. Not the kind of man who questions things too deeply. What most folks might call a realist.

"That doesn't really matter, though, does it?" I motion like I would be pointing to my head if I could. "Because I believe I'm free."

"That's real special. That fancy thinking of yours must be a real comfort, sitting all day and all night in the solitary." He's giving me the same look he always does. Contempt. Always looking at me, and the other prisoners, with contempt and disgust. Either that or he has serious bladder control issues he's trying very hard to mask.

"No, you don't understand." I lock eyes with him. Windows to a vacancy between his ears. "I'm free already. You have no more hold over me. You, Mackey. You are going to walk me out the front door, yourself. Give it five, ten minutes." I look away from him and behind my back, wriggling my wrists around in the cuffs.

"You're a smug fuck, ain't you? All that airy-fairy philosophical nonsense. You actually believe that shit, don't you?" He moves around behind me, tugging up on the cuffs and bending over to whisper in my ear. "This may be a minimum security prison. But you ought to know by now all that really means is, if you piss me off enough, I could beat you to death right here, right now, tell the front desk you slipped and fell and that would be the end of that."

"True," I concede, facing forward, trying desperately to avoid the smack of his breath. "Still, it doesn't alter the course of events that have already occurred. For example, you walking

me out the front door. It's already happened. You just don't realise it yet."

"That's what they say about most dead men." He's good and pissed. So much the better. I open my mouth to speak again and he gives me a slap. "And keep your fucking philosophy to yourself. Don't want to hear about your religion, or whatever other crazy shit you feel like talking about. They pay me to move you from here to there and from there to here. You can talk all the other guards shit nuts, for whatever I care, but don't start with me."

"Apologies," I say, letting my shoulders slump and heaving a desperate sounding sigh. "You do realise we're actually experiencing the past right now, though. Don't you?"

I know he doesn't. He really, truly, honestly believes what's happening right now is what's happening right now.

Seconds later, his walkie-talkie buzzes and squawks. "Yeah," he growls into it, watching in child-like amazement as the magic voice comes out of the speaker. He looks like a man thrown forward in time, staring in awe at the fancy talking box. It's a wonder to see. Especially for the hundredth time.

"Hey Mackey," the voice on the line crackles. "This is Control. There's been a mix up. Foreman's freed up. Walk him out."

He turns to me with a contorted look of hatred and confusion on his face. "Say again?"

"I said there's been an error, Mackey. Are you fucking deaf?"

He looks over at me, glaring, to make sure I'm not showing any signs of enjoyment at his dressing down.

The voice on the other end of the walkie-talkie starts to elaborate as I talk over it. "See what I told you? Right out of here." Mackey's half listening to me and half listening to the

voice on the other end of the walkie-talkie, while simultaneously sliding it back in its holster. He isn't really listening at all anymore. Not to me. Not to his comrade. Probably not even to himself. Nothing's computing.

"What kind of shit are you trying to pull?" His nearly unforgivable breath smothers me once more as he waves his billy club around in the air. I know he really wants to ask that question of his peer, but he isn't going to give me the satisfaction of seeing him get talked down to again. It would undermine the authority he truly believes he has.

"Look, Mackey," I begin. "You said you didn't want to talk philosophy. You don't care what I believe. You think I'm nuts, and I know I can't convince you otherwise."

His forehead is working up a nice sweat.

"But the fact remains. You're going to walk me out the front door. Whether you like it or not. Like I said, it's already happened. You can't change that. Only I can. And I choose not to."

His forehead wrinkles up as his lips quiver with suppressed rage. The look of a man beaten by self-loathing and the reality of the situation he's found himself in. I can see in his eyes he knows two things for certain. He could do things his way and lose his pension, or he could follow his master's orders, like a good dog, which would mean doing things my way. And, though the latter option is guaranteed to eat him up inside, most likely for the rest of his dense compacted existence, he can't see any way to stick it to me without losing the job—the life—that defines him.

"Let's go, you fucking faggot," he finally barks, his tough guy demeanour cracking. Yanking me up onto my feet by my suit collar. Doing whatever he can to make my last moments

behind bars as miserable as possible. “Let’s go to the desk so you can collect your shit and get the fuck out of my face.”

“Won’t be necessary,” I reply with a cough. “I came here with nothing. I’ll leave just the same.”

“Got to sign you out anyway.” He laughs, somewhat pathetically. Another battle won at the expense of the war he’s already lost. “Besides, don’t you want to make a call? Or are you just planning on walking home? Wherever the fuck that is.”

“The only thing I know for sure, Mackey, is you’re walking me out the front door. And I suppose I’ll just keep walking from that point on.” I give him a pouting look. “I don’t have any family that still speak to me, and no friends to speak of. I may as well walk. Home or wherever.” He likes hearing that. He likes thinking about me wandering the streets, looking for work. He likes knowing how hard life outside the walls can be for an ex-convict. I think he actually cracks a genuine smile.

He moves me out into the main lobby, near sign-out, and gives me a good poke in the back with his baton while the clerk behind the bullet-proof glass looks the other way. As he uncuffs me, he pulls me close again. “Just don’t ever let me see your face in this prison again, Foreman. Because if you come back, I can promise you I’ll make your life a hell, the likes of which you’ve never even dreamt.” It makes me somewhat sad inside to see him fight so hard to hold on to nothing.

Mackey moves over to the sign-out cage, pulling me along by the arm and stopping me at the white line. “Signing out prisoner Foreman,” he roars, giving the clerk a mean look.

BLOODY GULLETS

“The fuck are you talking about?” the clerk shoots back, not looking up. “I ain’t got no release papers for nobody today.”

Mackey looks over at me and I shrug my shoulders. “Have him call your boss,” I suggest, looking as disinterested as possible.

“Shut your hole,” he snaps back. It’s becoming glaringly apparent he’s determined to enjoy every last second of the control he’s always thought he had. Especially now that he knows he doesn’t have it over me anymore.

“What do you mean, you ain’t got no release papers?” He slams his meaty fist onto the counter and the clerk looks up.

“I mean I ain’t got no release papers,” the clerk replies, his tone deadpan.

“Are you going to make me call the tower? Again?” The clerk doesn’t seem too concerned. “How about I call the Warden? Maybe he’d like to see what a well-oiled machine you got running up here?” That gets the clerk’s attention. Like everyone else inside these walls—the inmates and the staff—he’s some degree of crooked. No one ever wants a thorough inspection from the Warden. Not even the people who know he’s just as bent as they are.

“Look. Hold on,” the clerk stutters, pulling the two-way from his pocket. “I got to at least get some verification.” He taps the ‘send’ button. “Control? Control? You there?”

Nothing but static for a moment and then, “Yeah, this is Control. What’s up?”

“Listen,” the clerk continues, stammering. “We... We got a prisoner here, name of Foreman, and—”

“Is Mackey there?” the voice on the other end asks abruptly.

“Yeah. You want to talk to him? He’s right—”

“Ask that fucking douchebag what he didn’t understand the first fifteen times I told him,” the voice interrupts. Mackey’s doing his best to suck it up. His face is turning red and he’s eyeing the clerk like he wants a nice big piece of him for breakfast.

“Okay, Control,” the clerk replies. “I’ll handle it on this end.”

“Control, out,” the voice on the other end of the line squawks, and the two-way goes back to mute.

“Now,” Mackey begins, hiking his pants up around his belly. “Here’s the deal. I don’t know what’s going on up here, or how you guys managed to fuck up the paperwork, but I got a prisoner set for release now. He doesn’t have any personal effects to collect and he doesn’t need to make a phone call. So, unless you want this to get some other degree of worse, give me the sign-out sheet so I can get this piece of shit out of here and back on the streets.” He looks over at me like he’s salivating over a steak. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing his ass back here soon enough.”

The clerk scribbles my name and identification number into the sign-out ledger and pushes it forward. I sign my name and back up behind the white line. “You’ll never see me again,” I say, looking over at Mackey and back at the clerk. “I’m reformed. I’m already somewhere far away. Enjoying my life and taking it easy. Drinking Margaritas and toasting you boys and your fine establishment.”

The clerk gives me a puzzled look as Mackey drags me toward the front door, motioning for him to open it. I smile.

BLOODY GULLETS

As we walk across the yard to the front gate, the guards give him a nod and the electrified, barbed-wired gates slowly slide open.

“I’m going to see you soon, Foreman,” Mackey says, laughing in a pathetic way that, I suppose, is meant to make me feel intimidated. “Because I’ve seen it. I’ve seen the future, and you’re on your knees giving the brothers some damn good head.”

I give him a smile. Kind of chuckling with him, kind of chuckling at him. “As much as I wish that were true, Mackey, you’ll never see me again. Like I said, I’m already a long ways away.” I stare at him for a moment and I think I almost catch a glimpse of recognition. “Hey. No hard feelings?” I extend my hand and he crosses his behind his back, looking off to the side. “Well, I guess that’s it then.”

“Yep,” he replies in monotone, still looking away as I walk out the gates. I wave goodbye to the guards and walk down the block and around the corner, toward the car waiting for me there. My girlfriend already has the motor running and I give her a kiss and a smile before she pulls a U-turn and speeds us away.

We make it to the border in double time. She’s already drained all our accounts and arranged for us to be transported backward with the Coyotes. They think we’re a crazy couple of Gringos, wanting to be smuggled into Mexico, but they like our cash plenty enough to not ask any questions. They get us where we need to go.

When we finally settle in, and I find some real peace one afternoon, I drift off and remember. I remember life in the prison. All the fights. All the threats. All the violence. All the harassment. It had been a hard four years, but

nothing, I'm sure, compared to the ten I was supposed to have served.

But all those memories, all those pictures in my head, pale in comparison to the one memory I only had the fortune to hear from around the corner and a few miles away on my radio scanner.

It was Mackey's voice, on his walkie-talkie to Control.

"Foreman? He's been released like you said... What do you mean his parole was denied...? You mean he wasn't supposed to go back in the hole...? No, sir. Of course, I understand—He was only supposed to be released into gen-pop...? I'm not questioning your authority—Yes, sir. I mean, no sir—"

And, I must admit, as brutal as the suffering I'd endured at his hands had been, I pitied him. Dropping from exhaustion. Flat on his face, as his hamster-wheel rocked slowly back and forth to a stop. Because that wheel never stops turning until we drop. All of us.

For all his conviction, Mackey never really believed in anything and, in a funny way, it made me sorrier, still, that he would never know it. Never know that, had he considered a way of thinking about this life, other than his own, I wouldn't be here today, enjoying a quiet repose.

If he had allowed himself to be insane, for just one moment, none of this would have ever happened.