



The Anthology 2018
7th Edition

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Roman Gyryn, Tadhg O'Shea

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*In fondest memory of
Mícheál Gormley,
Gentleman and Caretaker
January 2017*

FOREWORD

I find that it is always important to come back to books in life. With the advancement of the world's technology, reading is becoming less of a hobby in every generation. The harsh reality is that this is effecting our lives negatively. Books themselves have the incredible ability to take us anywhere, emotionally and metaphysically, and nothing else in the world does something quite like it.

I do think that technology can of course do this, whether through photos, travel or film but there is one thing that books have that they do not - character. Just holding a book, you can feel the age and use in its pages, showing someone's love for a story. My own addition to the anthology will be a strong memory in my mind for years to come.

Every year the Clonkeen College Press comes together to create the latest edition of the anthology, and this year I'm proud to say I was a part of it. We've worked every week since the start of the year to bring you this book, collecting submissions from here to Crana College in Donegal. We've gathered submissions from across Transition Year, all the way to 6th Year and even some from a past pupil who sat his Leaving Cert in 2005. The Anthology has been an excellent opportunity to improve our English and writing skills.

This is the 7th edition of the Anthology to date, it is amazing for us all now to be part of Clonkeen's history. We sincerely hope you enjoy.

-Tadhg O'Shea

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Poetry

Reflection

It's surprising what we forget,
and the moments we would like to remember

The People

The Places

The Drama, Over the Years

It may have escaped you, because it did me

All This History

The Stories

The Characters

They come from the one same place.....

Any Ideas?

If you appreciate our past, look forward to our future!

-By Richard Butler

Society

Roses aren't always red
& Violets aren't always exactly blue,
The society we live in never seems
To speak the truth.

Smiles aren't always what they seem,
& frowns aren't always sad
Our expressions hidden from a mask
That block us from speaking the truth
And only the truth.

-By Brian Bueno

Path

Fear is the dying, the deteriorating,
the getting old, losing oneself
stranded in the same soulless place
that raised you.

Hold your hand when no one else will.
Find a way out when surrounded by endless disorder

Sheltered in the shadow of man-made mistakes
wish to stand next to faceless men and their strings,
while staggering through an empty plain,
with the past calling out for your attention

Wake up with the cold and look at the wide faces,
hollowed out words, exhausted eyes,
the limited surroundings and unlimited potential.

Decisions have been made.
Your wants have been sculpted.
Arrows and signs tower above us to point us
In the *right* direction

Love erodes and time never rests.
The peaceful hate and the loved are loveless
grasp the closest chance
to leave your pain and let your worry wane

- By D O'R

Stories

SECTION SIX

“I’ll tell you one thing Harry, when or if I get out of here, I’m moving somewhere warm, someplace where I don’t have to stand on guard in pools of filthy rainwater getting shot at for hours on end.”

Charlie smiled and imagined such a place, far from the bleak landscape and driving rain that surrounded him. “Yeah, that’d make me happy.”

“I know somewhere warm,” Harry smirked. “It’s called Hell.” Both of the soldiers began to laugh.

“We’re already there you daft sod!” They laughed again but as the joke wore on, their chuckles slowly died down into saddened sighs.

To almost all of the soldiers fighting in the war, the trenches of France were considered Hell. For three years now, the Allied forces and Central Powers were locked in place with nowhere to go but down into the thick mud. Months were spent fighting over mere acres of land that frankly, nobody in their right mind would die for. With hundreds getting slaughtered each day on both sides of the conflict, every living moment brought its own punishments to those still remaining.

“Any word on the supplies coming in?” asked Charlie, trying to change the topic of their grim conversation.

“Not yet, though I heard the horses couldn’t get through the mud. They drowned when they tried to cross.”

Harry became solemn, thinking of the hardships the horses faced on the frontlines. He'd never liked seeing animals get hurt. God only knows why he joined the army.

As a combat medic, Harry thought he'd be saving lives not taking them as well. How could he have been so naive? He was always one who'd lusted for adventure but he was in way over his head. He compared the life of a horse to the life in the infantry: worked to death by those above you with no way to escape. Harry looked over at Charlie failing to light his cigarette in the constant downpour.

His best friend Charlie was never far away. Wherever Harry went, Charlie was sure to follow. It was like that since their childhood, always roaming the English country side and getting into trouble in the process. It was a simpler time back then. A time when your worries never involved wondering if that day would be your last. When the chance to enlist came around, the friends naturally jumped at the chance to seek adventure and glory, like so many other innocent boys.

The rain fell down hard from the night sky, like bullets from a machine gun in both shape and impact. They knew all about getting shot at. It was all part of the experience: enlist, train, travel, get shot and die. The life of a foot soldier. With barely anything to shelter the men from the rain, all they could do was stay put and hope it eased off soon. The water clogged the ground beneath them as it oozed and squelched under their leather boots, sucking

them under with every move⁴ they made to combat the unescapable grip it had over them.

“Bloody heck, I haven’t seen rain like this since my holiday in Wales!” Charlie tried to cheer up his mate but to no avail. Harry was tired, wet and hungry: all the makings of a bad day (or in his case, a bad life).

A series of shells exploded in the distance with a loud boom, startling Charlie and Harry. A bright flash momentarily lit up the black sky, exposing the swampy marsh in front of them.

“How could anything possibly survive that?” Harry asked. “Passchendaele will be gone by the time we get there.”

“Shut up for a sec,” Charlie unslung his Lee-Enfield rifle and scanned the darkness in front of him. “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

Harry followed Charlie’s lead and readied his rifle.

Soft cries for help could be heard far out in no-man’s land, beyond the rusted barbed wire and the remains of bare trees that were still standing, like roots of hair.

“Oh Christ! Somebody’s out there!” Harry could hear the faint screams of a man wailing like a banshee.

“We have to do something!” Harry began to get his kit ready, Charlie looked on confused by his friend’s sudden urge to get himself killed.

“What the Hell do you think you’re doing?” Charlie grabbed Harry’s shoulder and spun it towards him. “Do you want to die now or something?”

“If you go out there, you’ll get killed.”

Harry was unaffected by this, still checking his medical sack, counting what little remained in it. One syrette of morphine and a handful of dirty bandages.

“If I’m going to die, I’m going to do it saving someone else,” Harry didn’t look up as he stuffed the meagre supplies back.

“It’s not your bloody fault that poor sod is out there, just be glad it’s not you.”

“And what if it was me? Would you want me to be trapped there and rot with nothing to comfort me?”

Charlie was becoming desperate, trying anything to stop his best friend from going over the top. “You’ll get court-martialed for leaving your post! Why are you doing this? Friends are supposed to stick together.”

Harry braced himself on the small makeshift wooden ladder and turned to Charlie. “Cover me.” He took a deep breath and scrambled up the slippery planks of wood before disappearing into the darkness.

“You bloody idiot Harry,” Charlie watched as his friend bobbed and weaved through barbed wire and shell holes following the cries of the unknown man. Charlie prayed, hoping it wouldn’t be the last time he saw his lifelong friend.

Harry was blinded by the heavy rain and muck that was being sprayed in his face. All he could feel was the pounding of his heart and a ringing in his ears. He kept falling, either tripping on decaying bodies swallowed by the ground or by the razor-sharp barbed wire that replaced the natural vegetation, a jungle of rusted metal.

“Keep going, keep pushing,” Harry repeated this mantra in his mind, not thinking of the death and destruction around him. He was deaf to the shells exploding behind him, throwing up mud in the air like a geyser. Despite all this, after around half an hour of searching, he managed to find the injured soldier taking shelter in a large shell-hole. The soldier’s voice was hoarse from his vain attempts at calling for rescue.

He looked like he’d just escaped from the jaws of a vicious bear. His face was battered and bloodied a dark crimson, one eye sealed shut from the dried blood coating his head. Strands of his blonde hair stuck to his side, turning a dark brown the lower they went. Lying there in the mud, it appeared he was on his final breaths.

Harry jumped into the hole and landed in front of the boy with a thud. As he caught his breath and began to calm down, he noticed something was wrong. The boy’s uniform. Underneath the blood and dirt was a dark grey coat with matching trousers that were ripped to shreds, very different from Harry’s own khaki brown attire.

“Oh God, no!” Harry realized what had happened.

The young boy, no more than seventeen years of age, was German.

The boy feebly held out his left hand and Harry took it. His mind was racing. Did he really just risk his life for the enemy? Should he run back? Should he help him? What if they both die or what if he saves him but alerts the enemy to his position?

He remembered what he had told Charlie just before he left. "If I'm going to die, I'm going to do it saving someone else." After a few seconds of contemplation, he had made up his mind. This boy is still human, with a family back home, friends and dreams. Who was he to deny him a life? Harry was a medic and as a medic he wanted to save lives, no matter what side he was on.

Harry unslung his medical supplies and began to assess the boy's injuries. "You're going to be alright mate." The boy was clearly too tired to move but understood what was happening. With a very faint voice he whispered, "Danke Kamerad."

Harry was unsure whether or not the boy knew he was British, regardless he was going to help. The young German's right leg was badly cut presumably by barbed wire. Harry tried to move the leg causing the German to let out a cry of pain. The leg was nearly shredded like it was hacked by a bayonet. A thousand cuts, each oozing a dark red, completely coated the German's trousers as it trickled into a dirty puddle, mixing together like a twisted Rorschach test.

“I’m going to give you some of this to ease the pain.”

Harry took the syrette of morphine out of his kit, amazed it was still intact after his ordeal. He flicked the small tube, just enough for one use. After sticking the needle into the German, almost instantly, he looked like he was just about to go to sleep. His eyes began to flicker as he leant back seemingly without a care in the world

Harry got to work patching him up, cleaning his wounds and trying to keep him alive for just a few minutes more. It seemed that it was only the boy’s leg that was badly injured. The rest of his body was weak, but as intact that it could be in a battlefield. The boy had cut his head but it wasn’t life threatening. There were bigger fish to fry.

He spent a few minutes tending to the boy’s injuries. The German tried to talk in what little English he had. His name was Otto and lived in Hamburg. That was all Harry could gather from the broken English and frequent gasps for breath Otto took. Harry told him that he was from a small town in Sheffield and how he’d joined the army with his best friend Charlie. Otto let out a chuckle, he had no idea what was being said but went along with it.

Just as Harry began to wrap the last of his bandages around the cuts, Otto fell backwards, as if he’d been knocked out. Harry quickly checked for a pulse by pressing his two fingers against his neck. A slow but consistent thump. He will hopefully make it as long as help comes by the morning. Harry assumed he was in

German territory, so it was likely that Otto would be found by a German scout or sniper hiding in No Man's Land.

"Good luck Otto. Maybe someday we'll meet again when this bloody war is over." Harry smiled and began to scramble out of the shell-hole.

Quickly sprinting back to his own lines, he followed the same path he took before. The adrenaline was furiously pumping through his body, fueling him to keep pushing on. In a split second, a flare lit up the dark clouds overhead and cast no-man's land in a bright white haze. It blinded Harry causing him to stop dead in his tracks and he realized what had happened.

Shots from behind him landed at his feet and bounded against the exposed bark of the trees around him, splintering into a thousand shattered fragments. This is when the whole sky began to fall on him.

A barrage of shells rained down from above, as if heaven had split in two. He kept sprinting since he knew if he stopped for just one moment, he was a dead man.

He could see his own lines in just front of him. This frantic race to safety reminded him of his schooldays playing football, lining up a shot in front of the other team's goal, the responsibility of success and the adrenaline rush he loved.

As the explosions hit closer and closer, he ran harder and harder until he desperately launched himself into his own trench. Safety. He lay there feeling as if his heart was about to explode. Without any real reason he began to

laugh. Lying in the filthy mud, a refreshing rain cooling him down. He realized how he should be dead right now.

“Maybe there is some truth to those angels and ghosts after all.” He laughed at his own joke before painfully getting on to his feet.

“Ok, now I need to get back to...”

“HARRY! SOMEBODY HELP!” a voice screamed down the line.

“Jesus! Stay put I’m coming over!” Harry recognized the voice.

What he saw when he turned the corner made him freeze dead in his tracks. Sprawled out in front of him was Charlie, or at least, what remained of Charlie.

His right leg had been blown almost clean off just below the thigh. His left leg wasn’t any better. It looked like a chicken bone that was gnawed at on Christmas. A young private was by his side, confused and dazed by what was happening.

“Harry.... Harry, mate.” Charlie coughed up some blood and it drooled down his face just like the salty tears from his eyes.

“Help me.” Charlie stared straight into his friend’s eyes. “I have to see my family again; I need to tell them I love them.” His voice was hoarse and he kept stopping to rapidly breath in some air.

Harry didn’t know what to do, becoming more flustered as he felt his eyes well up with tears. He knew

the last of the medical supplies had been used on a complete stranger, the enemy.

“I...I don’t...I...” He fell on his knees close to Charlie
“I can’t...”

“I’m not ready to die,” Charlie croaked.

The lump in his throat felt like it was about to burst. Harry held onto Charlie’s hand, cold, pale and clammy. He realized his own was shaking uncontrollably.

“Officer!” The young private stood to attention whilst Harry remained on the ground. Officer Williams pushed his way past and began barking orders to the onlooking men.

“Don’t just stand there looking stupid! Get into your defensive positions in case of an attack!” He whirled around to Harry and Charlie.

“Dawson! Give Roberts some morphine and call for a stretcher bearer! MOVE!”

Harry felt like a schoolboy again, in trouble with the headmaster.

“Sir.... I’ve none left. It’s all gone.”

Officer Williams was getting visibly annoyed. He had too much to worry about right now.

“We had a full count before your shift and all the men are accounted for. Who could you’ve possibly have used it on?”

Harry knew he was in for it. It was bad enough that his best friend since childhood lay dying beside him covered in filth, now he was facing the wrath of Officer Williams.

Harry took a breath. “I heard cries for help in no man’s land and needed to give first aid.”

Williams looked like Harry had just spat in his face.

“You’re telling me you deserted your post, endangering all of my men so you can waste all your supplies on a dead man?”

Harry began crying, he couldn’t remember the last time he cried as hard as he was now.

“No sir, I…”

“I don’t want to hear it Dawson! You’ve left me with no other choice.”

Officer Williams prepared himself and Harry knew what was coming. He’d heard it so many times before, but he’d never thought it’d be directed at him.

“Private Harry Dawson, I am court martialing you for abandoning your post whilst on guard duty under Section Six of the Manual of Military Law. There will be a full investigation into this incident, and if found guilty you may be punished severely.”

Harry couldn’t speak. He knew a full investigation could lead to him being caught assisting the enemy. If he was charged with this, he would be tied to a wooden post and shot by his own side. By his friends.

Harry felt something tugging at his trousers. Charlie reached out and pulled Harry close with what little strength he had left, covering Harry in his blood as he did so.

“Friends.... friends are supposed to stick together.”
With that, Charlie fell backwards and went limp.

Silence.

Harry closed his eyes and lay down in the mud beside
Charlie.

Tired, wet, hungry and alone.

- *By Tom Wallace*

SNIPER

29 hours of waiting on a rooftop in the ruins of what was once a beautiful French town before the war. The sniper lay down on the edge of the town hall with his scope aimed on a group of soldiers. 29 hours of very little water, no food and two hours of very poor sleep left him anxious and frustrated but he knew he needed to take these soldiers out now before he was spotted.

Loading his sniper, he positioned himself, making the shots that bit easier for him. There were five in total, none were older than twenty-four. Younger than he was. He'd already racked up a handful of successful kills and was almost getting into the swing of it now but looking at these soldiers as they talked and laughed around a little fire they'd made, he felt remorse. They were just young men; they were probably just as scared as him. He almost wanted to shout at them and let them get away rather than having to line up the scope so that their young faces were all he could see before he pulled the trigger and ended their lives.

Maybe it was the tiredness that made him feel this way but he knew he had to do it and so, against what he thought was right he lined his sniper up once again. The coldness of the chamber, like he was gripping ice, made him curse. He cursed to himself and cursed the war and all those moments that led him to do what he was about to do.

Five soldiers sitting around a makeshift fire at about midnight made this a very difficult task. He needed to separate them to avoid them running away after he'd only killed one. He surveyed the area looking for anything he could use but there wasn't anything except for rubble and destruction. Not even a streetlamp to illuminate the streets. While he lay there thinking of a way to do this he saw one soldier get up and walk away from the group.

Facing away from them he unzipped his pants and urinated on the side of the streets, he was alone in the darkness but the sniper could just make out the outline of his head. They had all taken their helmets off and their guns were left a few feet away from in the direction of the sniper.

With one soldier in an easy position he lined up the shot. The others weren't focused on their comrade and so this would be an easy kill, he didn't even have to look at his face before he pulled the trigger. He held his breath and squeezed. A shot rang out in the darkness and the body of the young man slumped over and dropped to the ground motionless.

The other soldiers hadn't an idea what was going on. They forgot about the man who was now lying down dead and they scrambled together. Panic had set in and they looked for their guns. One man ran out to retrieve his but this led him to be an easy picking and the sniper had already reloaded and squeezed the trigger once again.

The sound of the shot bounced around the broken-down buildings of the ruined village and the man who was running at speed was flung across the ground and never reached the guns. The three men who were left now knew there was a sniper present and they split up and hid behind three separate mounds of rubble.

Unfortunately for them they didn't know where the sniper was and one of them had his back to him. Without hesitation the sniper shot him and he was struck in the back. He screamed an agonizing scream that sent chills down the snipers back but he quickly reloaded again and looking at the young man screaming on the floor he put him out of his misery with a finishing shot to the head.

With only two soldiers left he knew he was almost finished. It had only been a minute since the first shot rang out but for the soldiers it felt like forever. They cowered behind the rubble. One was praying to god to protect him while the other was searching for the sniper. He had seen the flash from the end of the gun from the last shot but couldn't see the sniper in the darkness.

The sniper had forgotten about the remorse he once felt for these young men and now just wanted to finish the job. The soldiers were stubborn. They didn't move from the rubble. There was no way he could position himself correctly without risking the soldier spotting him.

He reloaded again and had his sight on the soldier who he could hear muttering what he could only assume was prayers to God. He smiled at the irony. The soldier would

soon be with him. The soldier was now crying and sobbing in terror, he had no idea where the sniper who had just killed three of his comrades was. The other soldier was still searching for the sniper and was now looking up at the rooftops of the town hall where he was. Searching for him behind the rubble. The soldier was terrified that he was going to die alone. He made the fatal mistake of running towards his comrade but the split second he was in the open was enough for the sniper to put a bullet in his head.

The last soldier had seen the flash from the gun. He knew the sniper was on top of the town hall. He took his handgun out and jumped up out of the rubble. Firing shots into the direction of the sniper. He could only hope one struck him.

All his bullets had been fired. He was standing in the open of the town in the darkness with nothing but the small fire that had almost burned out this point and an empty gun in his hand. He had no idea whether he'd killed the sniper or not. Before he had a chance to take cover, he heard the click of the sniper's rifle and a final shot rang out in the night.

The sniper watched as the lifeless body of the last soldier drop. He looked no older than nineteen but the sniper didn't care. He'd taken care of the five soldiers. He knew he had to move before these bodies were found.

He picked up his stuff and after 29 hours, he walked away from the roof of the town hall. He looked back at the

lifeless bodies illuminated in the dying embers of the fire
and swung his bag onto his back and walked on to the next
town.

- By Tom Caffrey

BROTHERS IN ARMS

Vincent was barely awake as he tried to wriggle out from under the smoking remains of the drop ship. Vincent felt himself shivering. This was his first proper battle and already his drop ship had been shot down by a drone. Tears were trickling down onto his cheeks because of the fact that he was barely able to move while so many of his surviving comrades were being cut down by heavy machine gunfire that was being blasted by the approaching walkers. In one last effort, Vincent tried to cling onto the piece of metal that was resting on him, trying to lift it off himself. Although he barely had the strength to do it, he kept trying.

Looking up at the battle cruisers above as they desperately tried to hold off all forms of robotic aircraft, trying to stop them from scorching Berlin to the ground. One of them was already starting to burn and was slowly tumbling to the ground but it still fought on. However, Vincent suddenly saw a four legged walker bristling with machine guns suddenly come up at him planning to chew him up with its bullets but then a missile flew towards it and blew off one of its machine guns causing it recoil back from killing Vincent only for a second missile to deliver the killing blow at its hull. It then crashed down onto the ground.

Suddenly looming over Vincent was a tall towering but friendly looking boy who looked to be around 19, three

years older than Vincent. He had pale skin, blue eyes and dark nut brown hair. Tinges of stubble looked to be growing on his face. Vincent still tried to grab onto the metal that was upon him but the boy stopped him before clutching onto the metal and flinging it off Vincent. He then grabbed onto the wounded Vincent and helped him up. Vincent was barely able to feel his body as he tried to walk. He tried to ask the boy

“Hey, buddy...I can’t feel my legs!”

“Hold on...just hang on boy we need to meet with the rest of Alpha squad!”

The two retreated from the crashed drop ship to beside a ruined tank where the remnants of Alpha squad had been holding out with their commander Jan. Not far behind the two were a large group of robotic infantry. The boys barely slid in behind the ruined tank as the robotic soldiers opened fire on them. The team started to fire back at the encroaching robots, taking several of them, forcing them to retreat. Seeing the exhausted nineteen-year-old with Vincent, Jan then asked

“Hans...is that all you brought?”

“Yes sir, that’s all I got. Wait sir, there is only seven of us!”

Jan looked to the rest of the squad and simply said

“Yes, that is all too true...and I know exactly what is going through your heads, because it’s going through my head too. We started this counter offensive with over 5000 soldiers in defense of Berlin. Many of them boys like you

but who had seen battle...and now there is only us. I'm not going to be like your mother and sugar coat the situation...this is the truth about war. Unless armored team Panther teams up with us to give us support...we'll be slaughtered! But boys look behind us!"

Hans helped Vincent up to look behind where the city of Berlin was. Jan then told the team up and said to them

"Behind us is Berlin! One of the great cities of Europe! Europe has now become the central bastion of humankind and is the last great power to stand against the robotic forces of the Black Mouth. If the machines get to Berlin, they will spare no-one. Every man, woman and child will be killed on the spot, every animal will be used as biofuel! We, no matter how hopeless any battle gets, we can't just give up!"

"But what about the tanks?"

"Michael? All the more the reason to hold out, hold out so that our brothers can reach us!! Want to live??"

All seven boys nodded leading Jan to respond

"Good. So let's hold our ground!!"

The boys were all scared but they readied themselves for the oncoming machines. Seeing the advancing machines, Jan then grabbed onto Michael's shoulder and said to him

"Michael? If I die, you get the boys out of this mess and meet up with the advancing armored divisions! You hear me?"

"But sir.... we can't afford you to die. You..."

“Damn it Michael! We’ve already lost most of the squad...we’re all that is left! If one more is going to die, it better be me than one of you!”

The battle went on as the team held out to the bitter end, doing everything they could to hold against the oncoming machines. In the distance, as the sun was starting to set, several pairs of spot lights were approaching as fast as possible. This brought a smile to the boys, team Panther was on its way and the missiles fired by its artillery vehicles were already starting to pound through their target. Vincent then looked up into the evening sky to stare in horror and sadness as the battle cruiser that had been holding out for so long was finally starting to give in. By now the massive sleek twelve engine vessel was going up in flames. Dropships fled from the ship except the small dropship that would carry the captain. The enormous ship slowly came crashing down into the distance...very few machine assault frigates that had attacked the flying fortress survived to tell the tale, for the great behemoth had not gone down without a fight. Vincent seemed on the verge of tears but then Hans looked at him saying

“Hey Vincent. Don’t look up there. There’s nothing we can do for that vessel; the dropships will have to reach for their fellow battle cruiser. Hey Vincent look at me!”

Vincent then looked Hans in the eyes as he asked
“Hans?? What happens when we die??”

“Hey don’t be scared of dying!!! God’s not going to send you to hell for murdering these soulless metal monsters. Those machines don’t have a conscience; they are not alive!! If you die, you won’t have to fight again. Valhalla's not a place for warriors who just want to fight all day...it’s for those who have seen enough in battle. Alright. What matters is our duty to the mission!! Our duty to civilization!!!”

“Civilization?”

“You give a little more than you take!! Got that Vincent...that’s all you need to know to understand in order to keep civilization alive!!! Stay with me, Vincent...we have a duty to each other!!!”

Hans then stood up and jabbed his bayonet into a robot, causing it to collapse. Another walker came up towards Hans and Vincent but received an armored piercing bullet through its core which caused it to collapse. Vincent looked back to see Dermot’s emerald eyes staring with icy precision at the walker as he installed yet another clip into his rifle. Dermot was only around fourteen, younger than Vincent, so it haunted him to think that Dermot, who was the nice guy of the team, could look so menacing in battle. Meanwhile Michael and Dia were also holding out with Jan. A robotic soldier then let out a shrill metallic scream as it charged towards Dia with its bayoneted assault rifle in its hands but Dia fired at the robot, damaging it but ultimately it was going too fast, so he dropped his heavy machine gun, grabbed onto the robot’s assault rifle. He

was knocked down onto the ground as he wrestled with the machine. Going so far as to punch it in the face. The Robot's clawed hand grabbed onto the dark skin around Dia's throat. Its eyes flashed blood red. Dia then held onto the clawed hand of the robot, yanking off its metallic fingers.

This caused the machine to let go of him. He then brandished his pistol and shot it in the head. The armor piercing ammo cut through the machine's head, shutting it down. However, another robot knocked him before Michael grabbed onto its neck and sliced the circuits on the robot's neck that connected the robot's central core with the rest of the body, causing it to shut off. Without so much of a word, Michael helped Dia up before giving him a shotgun, pretty large shotgun that could spill massive blows through robotic armor. Up on the turret of the ruined tank, Alexi and Chang were holding out but were now reduced to grenades and knives. Jan looked up back in hope that Team Panther would show up. A chill had run through his spine. These boys would be the same ones goofing around and making cheap jokes at each other in the canteen or in a classroom but now in the dark, and in the heat of battle with their faces illuminated by the spotlights on robotic troops, they had a chilling menacing look. It wasn't just their training that made them fight so efficiently, nor their genetics...it was the fear of their species extinction at the hands of robots. And this fear motivated them to fight harder than ever. The fear that

their race would be extinct motivated mankind in a way that no leader could inspire.

Jan readied his shotgun. By now the sun had set and the moon was rising. The ground shook as huge walkers on three legs or on four legs started to stamp towards the group. These metallic monsters were bristling with heavy artillery and machine guns. They also had the ability to fire gas canisters. Nevertheless, Jan readied his shotgun. Michael, seeing these machines, grabbed for a rocket launcher, ready to fire at the walkers. Coming with the machines were huge numbers of robotic soldiers. The robots let out metallic screeches as they charged. Yep they were doing a bayonet charge. Jan started to shoot several down but while looking back, Jan barely heard a metallic scream coming closer to him but then felt sharp painful sting in his waist. Much to Michael and the rest of the squad's horror...Jan had just been jabbed with a bayonet. Starting to cough up blood, Jan then turned around to see the blood red eyes of the robot. He then yelled out, making a vicious looking face at the robot as he grabbed onto its wires and ripped out, causing it to shut down. That was Jan's final act of defiance. Seeing this, Michael burst out from his cover towards Jan. Dia followed quickly behind. Before the walkers could start firing, heavy gunfire coming from behind the squad ripped the walkers to shred. Vincent's heart warmed with relief as he saw huge numbers of lightly armored but quick twin turreted tanks

darting towards them. Trundling over the rubble and debris were giant armored vehicles with two pairs of caterpillar tracks on either side and that were mounted with large twin turrets and missiles. Team Panther had arrived.

Jan smiled but continued to cough up blood. Michael tried his best hold Jan's muscular body as Jan started to say

“Ah...I see it!!! My ancestors. Those who fled France from persecution of the King. They went to South Africa. The Cape of Good Hope!! I see them...those who fought to defend their families from natives as they crossed on the Great Trek, those who fought with De La Rey, who fought a losing battle against the British. I see them...they call to me to join them...j...”

“Sir, Jan!!! We've got to keep up with Team Panther....”

Jan then grabbed onto Michael's shoulder and said

“Remember what I told you!!! Remember what you are. Take care of them!!! The boys!! Get them out of here!!!”

Michael could only look with horror as Jan finally collapsed. Dia then put his hand on Michael saying

“Come on Michael...we need to go..what do we do now??”

Michael looked into Dia's Hazel brown eyes, noticing as well that the rest of the squad was looking at him. He gathered his strength and said

“What? But I don’t know what to do.... I don’t feel ready?? I’m only sixteen!! Not ready to lead an army!!!”

But then Dia gripped onto his shoulder saying

“I don’t give a damn what age you are!!! We survived training because of you, because of your charisma...you got the boys together, turned them into a competitive force and we beat the other teams!!! We just followed you, regardless and will follow you to the lowest levels of Hell!! You will always be our brother”

Michael then turned to the rest of the team and said to them

“Then we hitch a ride on a tank!!! Come on...we are all that is left of Alpha squad so we stick together!!!”

Dermot then blurted out

“So we are going, sir??”

“Off course we are, Dermott!!! (However, Michael reached for Jan’s body) But not without our leader!!”

A light tank then halted on front of the team as its captain snapped to the driver

“Hey. Hey Daniel!!! Slow down!!! You were just about to grind a fallen battle brother (Jan) into the mud!!!”

“Don’t worry sir...I see him!!”

The captain then got out of the turret and then looked down at Michael as he and Dia held onto Jan and asked

“You lost new meats?”

“We’re all that’s left of Alpha squad, sir!!”

“That new jump unit!! From which battlecruiser did you come from?”

“Tungsten!! Battlecruiser Tungsten...largest of them, under the command of Admiral Rufus Thorne!!!”

“Get on the back of my tank, mon amie.”

Giving the salute, Michael remarked

“Thank you, sir!!”

As he helped them all up, the captain remarked to Michael

“Please...you can just call me Sebastian. Holding out for us and not leaving your fallen commander behind has earned it!!!”

As the tank started hurtling onwards, Michael looked back the rest of his team. They were all tired and confused. It was now starting to dawn on them...this was war. They lost most of their comrades in this fight. In their first fight. All around them was debris that once made up the German suburbs outside Berlin. Vincent and Hans clutched onto each other as a bond was starting to form between them...between all of them. Vincent's teary eyed face looked up to see Tungsten finally showing and punching through the retreating robotic air force. It was impressive to think that such small numbers of Legionnaire forces could achieve so much. However, staring down at the battlefield in horror, Rufus Thorne just stood there at the control room. He had already desperately tried to contact the dropships of Alpha squad. All around him he heard radio crackles as the men desperately called them to

respond. A wine glass slowly slipped out of his fingers, smashing onto the ground and spilling wine over his shoes. Jethro slowly approached asking

“Sir?”

“No!! No!!! Surely we’ll get a response...what have I done???”

The men looked to him. He then asked

“What are you looking at? You may have relayed my order but you are not to blame. For I was the one who gave this order...I am to blame!!! I will stand at court if the military tribunal comes looking!!”

But then an officer detected a radio call from a tank. Sebastian had let Michael use his radio to call the Tungsten. Michael’s voice then asked

“Captain Thorne!!! This is Michael...do you hear us???”

“Yes!!! I do, this is Captain Thorne!!! How many of you are left!!”

“Eh sir, Jan is dead!! It’s...just us seven!!”

Rufus remained there dead silent. He then thought to himself

“Oh Lord...I can never look their parents in the face again!!”

Jethro then put his hand on Rufus’s shoulder and said

“Rufus? The government would be a bunch of snobbish hypocrites if they were pin the blame all on you!! It was their idea to draft those boys into the army...they are the real culprits for this debacle!!”

“I know! But the weight...the weight of a regiment. Those boys look up at us thinking we are so lucky, don't they? They can think again when they realize the amount of sacrifices they have to make!!”

An officer was approaching Rufus who then turned and said to that officer

“Prepare a dropship!!! I want those seven brought back up here and given a special position!! They will be a squad to themselves!!!”

- By Declan Cosson

THE NUMBER

3:30 AM. Saturday.

The start of a new day, or for the people that hit the town, the end of a good night. I sat outside Doherty's in Bridgend, waiting for McGinley, the man who was taking me down to Dublin. I had known McGinley for a while. He was quite popular in Inishowen, because he was always driving up and down from Inishowen to Lifford, where Bus Eireann would collect whom he left off. I had gone to Dublin with McGinley before, however I was always in the company of my mother. We went up to see my father every few weeks whilst he was working in the big city. However, my mother felt no urge to do the four-hour trip that comes with going to Dublin, and so, I was left to go alone.

It was an empowering moment, in many regards. Firstly, a wave of independence had come over me, the fact that I was to travel all alone to the big city for the first time, me only being 15. Another feeling that came over me was the feeling of freedom. Gone were the days of sitting around, doing nothing and feeling bored. The seven days I spent in Dublin that time were much more entertaining than anything I found myself doing here. In fact, living in Donegal, the only times you would do anything interesting would be the times you would get on a bus and get out of the county.

McGinley arrived at 3:45 as promised, and I hopped on his bus and we set off. I was not the only one who boarded at Bridgend, I was accompanied by a few more people, none of whom I recognized, perhaps because, like myself, the 2:30 wake up time had them looking like zombies out of *The Walking Dead*.

John McGinley was in kind spirits this day, and instead of leaving us off in Lifford as he usually did, he decided to plow on to Dublin himself. It was rare of him to do that, but he must not have any other plans made for the day.

I sat alone for fifteen minutes at the start of the trip, however at the Lifford stop, I was accompanied by a rather large man. There were plenty of spare seats on the bus, however this man decided to sit beside me. I was a little intimidated at first, because he barely muttered a hello when he sat down. It was as if the man had taken a vow of silence and had absolutely no intention of breaking it. He wore a black duffle coat and a tattered pair of working boots. He wrapped a scarf around his neck, and a hat covered the bald head he possessed.

We sat for half an hour on the bus, and suddenly, the man put out his hand, palm facing up. He had a little piece of folded up paper in his hand. He signaled, by leaning his head towards it, for me to take the paper. I followed his command and took it. Almost as soon as I did, the man stood up, without a word, and sat at the very front of the bus by himself. On the folded side of the paper it read: DO

NOT OPEN UNTIL I AM OFF THIS BUS. I was very puzzled at the behavior of this man.

At the bus stop in the center of Monaghan, the man got off the bus, I saw him get off the bus and McGinley helped him with his bag. He looked in my window, and he caught my eye. He then came as close to talking to me as he did in the whole journey that he sat beside me. He lifted his right hand, and made a phone shape with it and place it up to his ear. I then looked at the piece of paper. The man was off the bus, so I opened it. A phone number was written on it. I was about to ring the number, but I didn't. The bus was leaving Monaghan and the man started to run after the bus, signaling me to call this mysterious phone number. I looked at the number as the bus departed Monaghan and the man stopped running.

I ripped up the number, and it was a good thing I did...

- By Conal O'Boyle

FOREVER INC.

“This would be fun,” they said. “Murder everyone at your work day,” they said. Oh boy I’m regretting not phoning in sick now aren’t I. As if Rachel dared to swing an axe at my head as I walked in. I covered for her that time she was sick with the flu! Some people these days. Good thing she couldn’t swing an axe to save her life. As in it didn’t save her. Turned out she was a good screamer.

Hi, I’m Leo, short for Leonardo, the ninja turtle not the artist. I don’t know if you have heard of Forever Inc., the company responsible for the immortality of all the people on Earth. Well that’s where I work, a place where fun activities are encouraged, such as lunch to the death, typing to the death and a family favorite, bring your children to work day and then have them watch the murders too, to the death. Sure you may say that’s unethical, it brings them up in too much of a *violent environment*, or *You’re a bad father, blah blah blah* but then you’d only be repeating what my wife has been nagging me about for the last ten years or so. But come on! Who doesn’t enjoy a good dismemberment? You will just wake up unsharped in four or five minutes it’s not too bad.

Today though was a Tuesday and promised to be extra fun! Everyone gets the name of a colleague as you walk in and you have the rest of the day to murder them in the most fun and creative way possible. A nice bonus for

anyone who came through unscathed was an excellent incentive. Of course, it's just my luck to get Cliff Hanger, quite possibly the most dangerous man in the office as my target. A veteran at this sort of thing.

I whistled cheerily as I ducked under a flying rake (Don't ask) and spun my chair around before plonking myself down in front of my desk. I leaned in and turned on my computer hearing the fans whir as it powered up. "Late again Leo?" This came from my manager Mark, an expert in the being a weasel department.

"That's hardly fair it's only five minutes, what's the problem? Not to mention the traffic!"

"No excuses Leo you grew up in the city you should know you have to wake up earlier. That was your final warning. One more time and you're gone."

With that he was gone, leaving me with the embarrassment that he was right. He disappeared back into the chaos with my eyes burning a hole in his back the whole way. If death stares were an Olympic sport I would be a champion, coming second only to my wife, the resident expert in that department. Unfortunately, Mark is the one person I feel I can't go after; it certainly wouldn't help my chances of a promotion anyway.

Unfortunately, my loathing session was interrupted by a friendly face with a very unfriendly knife brandished in his hand. "Alex, no, not you," I said, honestly feeling betrayed at that point. I'm too young and pretty to die.

“I’m sorry Leo it’s my half day and I have quotas to meet.”

“Come on dude at least wait until lunch, I haven’t even had my coffee yet.”

I must have looked so exhausted at that point as he pocketed the knife with a promise to see me at lunch time. That was lucky. To be honest I’m not too sure if this was a good compromise seeing as dying with my face in a bowl of pasta doesn’t do much for my dignity.

I won’t bore you with every little detail of my day up until lunch but let’s just say I was busy getting emails sent, immortality offers signed off on and dodging death. At the end of it I was feeling exhausted and just looking forward to a nice quiet lunch. Unfortunately, that was not going to be the case.

I wandered down the corridor towards the canteen dodging two dueling, sword-wielding maniacs from IT upstairs. I was nearly killed several times on my way to get my tray. After working here for nearly five years things like this don’t scare you anymore.

Upon arrival at the canteen I spotted my best pal, Alex, who was giving me quite a murderous look. I gulped as I queued up for what looked like a very soggy lasagna dish and considered my options. As bizarre as it sounds I really had to survive lunch. I could do with the holiday this bonus would provide. I sauntered through the maze of tables and sat down in the corner of the canteen with my

back to both walls, providing me with an excellent view of the chaos. I watched someone slump in their seat with a mouthful of what was obviously poisoned cake half chewed in their mouth and a whole row disappearing as a large boulder crushed them from above. How the rock got up there I had no idea but I didn't even want to know. A bead of sweat rolled down my forehead and the bench suddenly felt very hard and uncomfortable under me.

Suddenly the idea came to me. The answer was staring me right in my face. I looked down at the soggy lasagna and grinned.

Majestic. The only word I could use to describe watching this soggy lump of beauty soar through the air and come crashing down on the head of some unfortunate soul in the middle of the canteen. As it flew, eyes focused on it and the place went silent allowing quite an audible squelch to echo throughout the open space. I could almost feel the tension in the air as if the large hall was about to explode at any moment. The silence shattered as suddenly as it started with the scream of "FOOD FIGHT!" and the tense situation erupted.

The perfect distraction. Or so I thought. I wasn't expecting the sound of screams to be so loud as cake, baked potatoes and roasted vegetables flew around. It was almost impossible to move through the chaos but slowly and surely I snuck towards Cliff. He was standing on top of a table throwing tasty confectionary at his peers with delicate precision. I was almost impaled in the eye by a

carrot, but ducked last second. So much for them being good for your eyesight.

Fortunately, I safely reached my destination and climbed aboard the table facing Cliff. He spun around wielding two very large, very scary bread knives with a murderous look in his eye. He roared, a classic predator move and charged at me. I'm not very proud of what happened next as I whimpered and picked up a whole roast chicken.

I panicked alright? So would you if a knife holding maniac ran at you screaming for blood. His first swing was wild and I easily ducked it. The second attack was a jab and much more calculated. I would have become a shish-kebab if it weren't for the fact that I was holding a large roasted chicken in the way. The knife impaled itself up to the handle in the meat and I twisted the poultry, ripping the knife out of his grip and onto the floor. Ha! That should show him I thought before getting stabbed in the arm by the other knife. I howled in pain and out of reflex swung the roast chicken to smash him in the head making him collapse onto the bench. My arm was on fire from pain and I felt my sleeve being soaked through with blood. The only thing that stopped me from passing out was the adrenaline coursing through my veins but it was still a tough battle to stay standing.

Harvey sat up groggily and I decided it was time to finish the job. I jumped up with all my weight and as I came down I stuffed the chicken on his head and knelt on

him suffocating him. Poor man, it's not the most dignified way to go, being choked by a chicken. At this point I was so hungry if it was me I would have honestly eaten my way out. I collapsed on the table panting and felt sweat trickle down my brow. All I had to do was survive three more hours and that bonus would be mine. Of course, this is when Alex found me. He stood above me with a look of pity and disgust etched on his face.

“Dude you stuffed a chicken on his head? I'm almost impressed. Almost. Also ouch, your arm looks bad, you should probably get that checked.”

“Thanks, Captain Obvious. It was a nasty one alright. Enjoying the food?”

I was stalling at this point; he was going to kill me any second now I was sure of it. Despite my brilliant wit and obvious kindness (Duh) he was still going after me?? I could tell from that blank expression in his eyes. Wait what? Why are they glazing over? Why is he collapsing on me? It was probably the spear in his back that did the trick.

“As much as I hate saving you I have mouths to feed.”

I recognized that weasely voice anywhere. Mark! I could have hugged him, or cried, or both at that moment. I made a mental note to stop leaving little passive aggressive post it's on his desk from now on. He, of all people saved me! Well I wasn't going to just let this chance slip away so I rolled off the table wincing as my arm filled with pain. I managed to straggle out of the room

with the rest of the survivors of what had been a simply epic food fight to remember.

After a quick trip down to the nurse's office to get my arm fixed I reached my cubicle and collapsed, drenched in (mainly) my own blood and sweat. I turned on the small fan sitting on my desk and felt the cool air wash over me. I settled down in my chair and got stuck into some actual work.

After what seemed like eternity I looked up at my clock. 3:59. Perfect! I'd escape any minute now and hopefully not cook roast chicken for dinner tonight. On second thoughts I called my therapist. I think I'll be having nightmares about that piece of poultry for quite a while.

I stood, stretched and swung my coat over my shoulder. I decided I should wave goodbye to Mark on my way out. He deserves it. Here at Forever Inc. you learn to survive but always to have fun. To quote the popular saying around here, "live like there's always a tomorrow."

- By David Farrelly

THE ISLAND

“Go James, it’s now or never...” said his mate Bobby.

“One second Bobby, I’ve never jumped off a plane before,” he replied, getting ready for the jump...

5 HOURS BEFORE

James woke up at nine a.m. from the call from one of his best friends, whose name was Bobby. Bobby had been doing sky diving as a hobby for two years now. “Hello? Bobby, what’s wrong?”- said James

“Good morning James, can you come over to the place where I do skydiving? I really need your help today!!!” said Bobby in his nervous voice.

“Ok mate, I’ll be there in about two to three hours. It will really depend on the traffic on my way to you. What happened by the way?”

“I’ll tell you when I’ll meet you at the place, bye.” He hung up his phone.

James stood up from his bed and went to the bathroom to take a fresh shower. After the morning’s shower James walked to the kitchen to make some light breakfast for himself. He made a hot latte and two slices of toast with jam which should be enough for him until lunch which he would probably have with his friend Bobby.

James went to the garage and sat in his Porsche 911. He realized that the fuel tank was nearly empty and it will be just enough to get to the closest petrol station. So, he

went to the petrol station, which was two kilometers away from his house. When he entered the petrol station, he met Jenny who would always be there as the shop keeper except for Monday and Tuesday as she had to visit her granny who was in the hospital. I fill up the car with fuel and made my way to the field at which Bobby was most likely waiting for me.

It took two hours and a bit to get to Bobby's, so I made it in time. I went to the reception and asked for Bobby and they told me that they will call him for me. After five minutes I heard Bobby calling me to the field. He stood there in skydiving gear with a gear bag wrapped around his shoulder. I went to him and asked, "Hey Bobby, so what's the problem that you wanted me to help you with?"

"Hey James, today is your birthday and I wanted to take you skydiving with me. I thought it would be a good experience and great fun for both of us."

"Oh cool, but before that can I have a quick lunch as I only had a cup of coffee and two toasts," said James

"Well, it's not a very good idea to eat something before the flight. But sure, you can have a quick snack like a chicken roll or something like that" said Bobby

After having a quick lunch, myself and Bobby got on the plane and I asked him, "Where are we going to be sky diving today?"

"We are going to be jumping near one of the islands located in the Caribbean Sea," said Bobby and looked out of the window.

In about thirty minutes of flying on the plane, we got to the place and the green light lit up beside the door of the plane and Bobby told me, "Let's go, time to jump."

I was standing on the edge of the Plane and I was startled by the panic in Bobby's voice. He rushed to me and said "Come on James, jump out. The plane is on fire and falling down."

I was standing there shocked, I couldn't move as I thought, "What? The plane is falling? What happened?" I once again hear Bobby panicking and shouting, "Go James, it's now or never." In two seconds I can feel Bobby pushing me and I'm falling out of the plane. I suddenly realize that I'm flying.

I am trying to find Bobby in the air as I am not sure how to release the parachute. I spotted the burning airplane on which we were flying half a kilometer away from me and I was hoping that Bobby had time to jump off the plane. I can remember that we were flying at the height of five thousand feet so I had roughly five minutes before I'll touch the ground. Then I heard Bobby shouting my name somewhere above me and I know that everything is going to be ok. In a few seconds I felt Bobby took my hand and opened my parachute. Then Bobby's parachute opened as well just he was closer to the ground than me. In three to four minutes we eventually landed on the small island which I saw from the plane when we were flying past it. I tried to stand up and walk to Bobby to see if he is ok. After I made two steps I fell and ...

When I woke up I realized that Bobby wasn't anywhere around me, but I heard different voices few meters away from me which spoke in Spanish or Portuguese. I stayed very quiet where I woke up hoping that they won't find me.

"The second one should be here somewhere, check around those trees," said person who had a deep male voice.

"Ok sir, I'll meet you in camp when I'll find him," said the other man who had a slightly softer voice.

I saw someone crouching near me from the opposite side of where I saw the man who was talking about Bobby.

"Come here buddy, quick or he will kill you..." said the guy with a very strong accent who sat at the tree four meters away from me. I was in a bit of a panic then as I didn't know where Bobby is and how am I was going to survive on this Island. So, eventually I decided to quietly go to the man who called me, as I thought I would have a better chance of surviving with him, but I wasn't sure if I could trust him. When I got to him he was wearing light clothes, which was a green polo and jean shorts.

"What's your name?" I said.

"My name is Robert and what's your?" Robert replied.

"My name is James," I said.

"Ok James, let's get to a safer place and then we can talk. Ok?" said Robert and we moved on.

Robert said that he has a car somewhere around here, so I followed him to the car. When we got to it, I saw a little car which reminded me of a Peugeot. He told me to sit on the front seat of the car beside the driver's seat. As soon as I got into the car I fell asleep, as I presumed that the road will take a little while.

When I woke up we were going past the radio tower and I asked, "When are we going to arrive at your village?"

"Wait a little bit, we are nearly there," Robert said.

In about five minutes I noticed a house which looked as a very old house which looked like was built back in 1980s or around that time. I asked Robert, "Is this your house?"

"No, that's the house we use as a watch tower. Our village looks more like slums," said Robert and screamed something in Spanish or Portuguese language.

I decided not to ask any more questions before we arrive at his house or whatever place he will bring me to.

Eventually we arrived to the village which really looked like slums. Robert came out of the car and told me to follow him. We came out to the campfire which looked like the center of the village. Everyone was looking at me with scared or surprised look probably because they didn't know who I was and where I came from. We entered the house which didn't look different from any other house. In the inside of the house there was very few pieces of furniture, only was a small bed beside

the window and a table with two chairs. We sat on the bed and Robert said, “Now it is time for questions.”

- *By Roman Gyrin*

THE HUNT

He walked down a narrow alleyway, an expression of seriousness on his face. In his left hand he held a scrunched up piece of paper. It was only an hour before Sheppard had received a call about a job. The air was cold and dry, as it had been for the whole month of January.

Sheppard was tall with dark hair, wearing an old dark navy suit and a brown overcoat. A bounty hunter by trade. On small cases, mainly in which he regularly got himself involved in combat. He was clever, good at his job, and knew his way around the streets.

He continued down the alleyway until it opened up to the older part of town. It was run down, the walls were covered with dirt and grime. A strong smell of rotting food, waste and smoke lingered in the air. This was the poorer section of the district; little care had been put into the upkeep of it. And now it's a breeding ground for crime and poverty. This area was familiar to Sheppard, as he spent much of his time down here. He was on his way to the bar down beside the post office. Rick was the owner of the establishment and he knew everything about the area. He was where Sheppard would get his information.

Sheppard walked in through the dark oak doorway. It was one large open room, which was dimly light by old lamps around the room. To his right there were two burly men engaging in a game of billiards, another spectating. The place had seen better days, the wallpaper was peeling,

and there were rips in the seats. Sheppard continued down to the bar table, it was half-burnt and had scratches in it. The bar tender was cleaning antique glasses and sorting various bottles of drinks. His name was Tim, he was an older man and had been working in the bar for all his life. He had known Sheppard since he was a kid.

Sheppard handed the piece of paper to Tim, the one he had been holding.

“How are things?”

“Just the usual, nothing much.” Tim un-scrunched the paper. “He’s in the back.”

“Thanks,” Sheppard said as he strolled past the bar and towards a door leading out back, with his hands in his pockets

“Hey kid, look after yourself, ok?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

He entered the room, there was small with a circular table and around it was a quartet of old chairs. As Sheppard walked in he was greeted by Rick. He was wearing a pinstriped suit and had a golden watch on his left wrist. Rick was well off, he owned a few businesses in the town. People liked Rick

“I hear that you are here on a job,” said Rick as he leaned forward putting his hands in a clasp on the table.

“I received a call not too long ago about the guy you may be looking for.”

“Tell me what you know,” said Sheppard as he handed over a small bundle of notes held together by a grubby rubber band.

“A week ago, I saw him. It’s rare, ‘cause the guy never shows his face. Rumor has it that he’s hiding out in a safe house on the outskirts of the city. So I decided to get my guys to do a little digging.”

Rick hands over a folder, in it is a picture of a house and a marked map clipped onto it along with a picture of a middle aged man, his target. “This is the best information we got, he might not be there anymore.”

“It’s enough,” replied Sheppard while he was scanning over the map.

He walked out of the bar and out onto the streets, back up the same alley way and towards his car. It was an older model with leather seats and a red paint job.

Sheppard looked down at the photo, then up at the house it was old and looked like it had been abandoned since the early part of this decade. He was at the specific place that was marked on his map. “This is the house,” he said to himself as he pulled in about fifty meters away from it.

Outside were two guys in thick jackets, both with handguns at their side. They were leaning against the wall and seemed to be at ease. Sheppard maneuvered his way along the side of the path making sure to stay out of sight. As he got up to the wall surrounding the house he edged around to the back, staying clear of the guards. Stealth was

one of Sheppard's skills in which he excelled at. He saw just in front of the back door was another guard. Sheppard silently moved forward towards him from the side and grabbed him covering his mouth until the muffled noises came to a halt. Sheppard went up to the back door, it had a corroded brass handle and was covered in an old coat of chipped paint. Sheppard pulled out his knife and bolt, then began to pick the lock, and with a click the door opened. Sheppard slowly entered the house. He heard no noise from except for a set of voices upstairs. Sheppard slowly moved his way up to the stairs pulling out his gun.

He made it up then staircase, clinging to the metal rail. At the top there was three doors leading into rooms. All were open, except one. The one closed was the one in which he could hear the noise. It sounded like there was at least three people in the room. Sheppard could have taken them on, but he didn't want any blood on his hands. But he had to. So with the element of surprise, he kicked down the door and opened fire, he knocked down two men and then lunged for the other, taking the gun out of his hand and subduing him. None of the men matched his picture. His target wasn't there. He now had to act fast, the people outside were bound to have heard him. He moved over to the table that the men were around. There was a file. Sheppard grabbed it and ran off, as fast as he could.

It was later now and Sheppard had looked through the files, on it was all of the information about his target. It

contained everything he needed to know, where he would be and when. He could now plan his next move.

- By Seán Walsh

THE GIRL ON THE SWING

I watched the autumn winds lightly sway the swings from side to side. Crisp, golden leaves, plucked from the nearby trees, danced towards the ground, creating a pristine, amber blanket. Sporadic rays of light forced their way through the branches of the canopy. They illuminated small patches of the ground but it was most noticeable at the swings where it shone, like a spotlight, over the tattered ropes and planks. Birds chirping in their nests was the only sound that could be heard from my isolated home. Usually I would watch this scene with great adoration but my gaze was locked to the swaying swings. My eyes, peering from my window, watched the uninvited guest who sat there.

She couldn't be much older than me, about twelve I would guess. Her ivory silk dress covered her neck and flowed all the way down to the amber blanket. Sunlight seemed to shine off her fair and unusually long hair to the extent where it could almost be described as glowing. I thought about calling out for mother but I remembered that she was still out. My muddled mind was flooded with both feelings of fear and curiosity. I was like a dog chasing cars, never able to catch up with my own thoughts. Suddenly, she looked over in my direction with wide, pale blue eyes. Every instinct in my body told me to duck but my knobbly knees stiffened up as if they were frozen by a witch. I could feel every distinct bead of

perspiration drip down my neck from my greasy black hair. After the initial rush of panic had worn off I couldn't help but become mesmerized by her pale blue eyes. The pastel coloured irises seemed like vivid oceans of sapphires when compared to her ghostlike skin. However, what really concerned me was how similar to mine they looked. The sheer vibrancy of them and the perfectly imperfect contours were unmistakably that of my own. Mother would always tell me how beautifully unique my eyes were which made me even more wary. There had to be an important reason for her being here. I had to be connected to this mysterious girl in some way. I don't believe in coincidences. Not since the death of my best friend Jack. I pictured the purple Volkswagen in my mind as Jack's case swirled through my head for a couple of seconds. I could hear the deafening shrieks and cries of the engine as it desperately tried to halter. After the wicked crashing sound, I snapped back into the present. My focus shifted, once again, to the girl on the swing who slowly raised her right hand and eerily beckoned me over before clutching the rope of the swing once more. At this point I was just curious. Any sense of fear that clouded my thoughts had dissipated. I began to make my journey to the edge of the garden.

As I made my way towards the swings I imagined every conceivable scenario that might occur during our conversation. The whole situation already felt so bizarre that I couldn't help but think she was a ghost or a time-

traveler or something else insane that people would normally consider preposterous. She wouldn't stop staring at me as I walked down which made me quite uncomfortable. I faced the ground, glancing up at her every so often for half a second before awkwardly looking to the golden ground once more. When we came to face to face I racked my brain for an introduction but she beat me to it.

"I'm not supposed to speak with you," she said in a soft, unsettling voice. "Ghosts should keep themselves to themselves."

Every elongated syllable she spoke shook me to my core. I would have thought it was a prank if it wasn't for the genuine sincerity in her voice and I did feel a strange sense of pride, having guessed she might have been a ghost just a few moments earlier. I've always wondered if there was a supernatural world but I never considered that I would encounter it in my lifetime.

"Who are you?" I asked after composing myself. She gently turned her head away from me which, despite what she was obviously trying to avoid, made me even more inquisitive.

"You called me over. Why?" I asked with growing courage.

"I told you. I'm not supposed to speak with you," she responded in a slightly sharper tone.

Feeling defeated I turned to walk away.

“But,” she hurriedly added, “it doesn’t mean I don’t want to.”

I stopped myself mid-turn and allowed myself a smile, which had been extremely rare today, before going back to sit on the swing beside her. I had to hold onto the ropes and lever myself upwards to reach the plank. This left my legs dangling over the golden leaves and I, admittedly because I was embarrassed of my height, or lack thereof, was desperately trying to stretch them down to the ground. The girl sat gracefully beside me like how the birds in the nearby trees elegantly perched themselves in their nests. She continued to stare directly ahead of her, remaining completely still and silent.

“Who are you?” I asked again after about a minute when it became clear that she wasn’t going to start the conversation.

“You know who I am. You’ve merely forgotten,” she simply replied with what almost seemed to be a hint of jokiness.

Her response was so ambiguous that not only did it not answer my question but it filled my head with hundreds more. In the process of picking one they suddenly became scrambled by the voice of a woman screaming, piercing my eardrums. A dizzying sensation filled my head and everything slowly shifted into a blurry state until nothing was legible. My reality began to disintegrate like the ashes of burning paper. The purple Volkswagen stampeded its way through the distortion. I could see Jack, standing

helplessly in its destructive path. Bang! Crash! A lightning flash! And then there was nothing. Everything faded to a black abyss.

“What’s troubling you?”

Trembling, I could feel the senses that I’d temporarily been stripped of suddenly sharpen once more.

“What happened? Did I faint?” I hurriedly asked, panting after the disturbing experience.

“No. Just a trance. Tell me what’s bothering you.” She spoke with the wisdom of a poet and the tone of a blissfully innocent child. I wasn’t sure why but I knew I could trust her as if we were linked by an indelible bond.

“I have a lot on my mind,” I responded. I continued to tell her about the flashbacks that had engulfed my head over the day. About the screams and the fear and the purple Volkswagen that had haunted me ever since. I knew the purple Volkswagen. I couldn’t remember when or where but I had definitely seen it before. However, the memories of it seemed to be buried deep within the contents of my brain. The girl never interrupted me, not once, as I rambled on about the horrific incident.

Once I had finished, the girl slowly turned her head away from me and stared off towards my home.

“I’ve waited twelve years for you,” the girl told me, “but I can’t bear to stay any longer.” She stood up and wandered slowly towards the house. I jumped up and followed behind her.

“Where are you going?” I called out.

“I thought you were the lucky one. I was wrong,” she responded, completely ignoring my question.

“What do you mean *lucky one*?” I asked as I tried to understand what was going on.

She didn’t answer me.

Instead she quickened her step and briskly made her way to the window that I had first peered through. I was infuriated by the discreetness of the situation. She nodded towards the window, insinuating that she wanted me look in.

Mumbling nonsensically to myself in annoyance, I pressed my nose up against the freezing glass and glared into the room. To my surprise, I noticed mother sitting in the old, red velvet armchair. She must have just come home. Just before I was about to turn away I stopped myself after seeing a stream of tears flowing down my mother’s pale cheeks. I called out to her but she remained unmoved, quietly sobbing.

“She can’t hear you,” the girl said solemnly. “Now follow me.”

“Not until you tell me what’s going on,” I demanded.

“Follow me and all will be revealed,” she said as she began walking around the house towards the front driveway.

Reluctantly, I obliged and traipsed behind.

The golden leaves that covered the ground began to crisp and crinkle before my very eyes until it was an

uneven blotch of brown and gold. I could feel the leaves crumble beneath my feet with each step I took.

Once we'd reached the front of the house I noticed something that made me shake and tremble in horror. I rubbed my eyes and tried to erase the object from my sight. But the purple Volkswagen wouldn't disappear.

"What's your name?" asked the girl as if she already knew the answer.

"It's...it's..." I muttered, trying to remember. I racked my brain. I rattled my brain. I searched through every conceivable fold of my brain but I could not remember my name. I stumbled backwards, aghast. The flashbacks besieged my head once more, only this time it was clearer. Laughing and smiling, I carelessly ran out onto the road. That's when I noticed it. The purple Volkswagen desperately tried to halt but it was too late. My mind shifted back to the present. Everything in my head seemed to click. It was as if the cogs of my brain suddenly began to move once more. It all made sense and every thought was clearer.

"I'm Jack," I said, "he's not my friend, he's me. And mother she was the one...she..."

"Yes, but you can't blame mother. It wasn't her fault."

"Mother?" I remarked, wondering why she would refer to her as her own. "Why do you call her mother?"

"I'm the lucky one," she simply replied. "The stillborn twin. The one that didn't have to suffer your hardships."

The inevitable truth did not shock me. My thoughts felt like clouds floating in the sky; unable to control them, I merely let them pass through my head.

Just then, the girl began to dissolve slowly into the Autumn breeze.

“It’s time for me to go,” she said as she faded away.

“Why?”

“You don’t need me anymore.”

“I want to go with you. I can’t stay here on my own,” I proclaimed. I knew I was ready to disappear. I had no reason to stay in this void between life and death. The last of the golden leaves began to dwindle.

“You may be ready, but when it’s her time she won’t be,” the girl said as she gestured off towards where my mother was in the house, “You need to guide her like I have for you. She’ll never be ready to leave here with her conscience.”

“She can’t leave here until she knows I forgive her,” I said, realizing what my purpose was. The girl smiled, nodded and vanished into the air. The last thing I saw were the eyes that I knew so well looking back at mine. I calmly walked back to the swings, to wait and to wait and to wait. Beautiful, pristine drops of snow began to fall, creating a soft, silver blanket. The winter winds lightly swayed the swings from side to side.

- *By Ronan Cullen*

HITCHHIKING CAN BE DANGEROUS

Another car zoomed past on the near deserted highway, kicking up dust in his face. He coughed, lowering his outstretched thumb. He sighed and looked up and down the road, the car was already fading from his vision and there was no other in sight. He trod back to his car, wrecked on the side of the road. He sat on the ground his back resting against the burnt wreckage. It was a miracle he had survived the crash. He'd been out here for hours and was beginning to consider walking back. How far back was home? He wondered.

The sun was beginning to set and the temperature was going down with it. He shivered, he'd have to find some way to stay warm. Then off in the distance, a pair of headlights lit up the road ahead of it. He scrambled up and jammed his thumb out, in clear view, determined to not being ignored. Excited, he saw the car begin to slow down for him. As it neared he began to pick out more details about it, it was a blue pickup truck, dirt caked the hull of the truck and the paint was peeling.

The truck pulled up in front of him, the windows were tinted, making it near impossible to see inside. A large silhouette leaned over and opened the passenger door. The overhead light came on and he got a better look at the driver. His face was stubbled and he wore a net cap over curly hair.

“Hop in, son,” the driver called.

“Thanks,” he responded.

The driver stuck out his hand.

“The name’s Lucius, friends call me Lucky. People with a death-wish call me Lucy. And yourself?”

“Jerry.”

He took Lucius’ hand and shook, he had a strong grip.

“Jerry it is then. So Jerry, how’d you find yourself out on a highway like this at night?”

“I was on my way to visit my sister in the next town over. A car cut in front of me. Too near. I swerved and crashed into a tree for my troubles.”

“Well that’s mighty unfortunate on your part, where can I leave you out?”

“Just into the town. I can make my way from there.”

“The town it is.”

Lucius turned back to the wheel and began to drive, trees flashing by, Jerry breathed a sigh of relief and sunk back into the seat. The interior of the truck was a dark muddy red, the seat was comfy and the air was warm and stuffy. Finally, something was going right. A thought occurred to him and he turned to Lucius.

“What about yourself Lucius? What are you doing out here?”

“Finishing’ up work for the day, making my way home.”

“What do you do?”

“Collect and deliver across the state. See a lot of weird things on the road - lotta poor souls like yourself.”

What he said seemed odd. Jerry figured it could've been that accent. He couldn't tell where it was from but it sounded foreign.

"What do you do yourself, Jerry?"

"I work in a bank. At a computer all day."

"Sounds like boring work. I'd say you're glad to be out now."

There was another weird annunciation - *glad to be out*.

"Certainly am," Jerry said, thinking, "This guy is weird."

The city's lights slowly came into view and Jerry gave a soft smile. He would go home, sit down and forget about this entire night.

"This your stop, Jerry?" Lucky asked.

"Yeah, the turn in is coming up on your left."

There was a silence after that. Lucky was getting stranger and stranger by the minute. Lucius was getting stranger by the minute. They were nearing the turn. He turned to Lucius.

"I was wondering, how'd you get your nickname, Lucky?"

Lucius glanced at him and looked back out to the road. They were practically at the turn now

"I got a reputation back where I'm from, folks think I'm bad luck."

"Seems stupid to me, I was lucky you ran into me back on the highway."

"Yes, yes you were."

Jerry felt uncomfortable, he looked back out onto the road. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Here, you can take that turn now.”

Lucius missed the turn. Jerry felt his heart skip a beat.

“Um, Lucius, you missed the turnoff.”

“You’re not getting out.”

The color drained from his face. He began to sweat nervously, looking for ways out of the truck. “Was it just him or was it getting warmer?”

He tried the handle, the door was locked, and all the windows were shut fast. It was definitely getting warmer now, it was like a sauna. A bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face.

“W-wuh-what do you mean Lucius?” He croaked, his throat felt like a bed of sand.

“I mean Jerry, you will not be leaving this truck, ever.” There was something dark in Lucius’ eyes as if he was disgusted.

“I know who you are Jerry Banks. I know what you’ve done.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Lucius scoffed. “You can’t lie to me; son I see everything.”

Lucius’ accent had changed. The southern twang was suddenly gone. Something had replaced it, something old, very old. The heat was nearly a furnace now; it was like he had a burning fever.

“Who are you?”

“How rude, I thought after all this time you would have recognized me, after all, everything was for me wasn’t it Jerry?”

“I-I don’t understand...”

“Oh please, come on Jerry neither of us are stupid.”

“Please I don’t get it.”

Lucius sighed.

“Jerry, you’re going to do something for me. Check your pulse.

“Why?”

“Just, do it.” Lucius snapped.

Jerry brought his two fingers up to his neck, he searched for a pulse, he couldn’t find one, he frowned and put his fingers to his wrist, nothing, his arm was ice cold. “How? It’s boiling in here.” He thought. He looked back to Lucius.

“I can’t find one.”

Lucius barked a laugh. “Thought as much.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh Jerry, did you really think you survived that crash?”

“What, of course I did I’m here am I not.”

“Look out the window Jerry.”

He looked out the window and gasped, somehow, they had looped back around to his car when he wasn’t looking.

“How hadn’t he noticed?”

“What are we doing here Lucius?”

“You needed to see this.”

“See what?”

Lucius eased the truck to a stop veering so it faced the front of Jerry’s destroyed car. Lucius flicked on his headlights. In the driver seat sat Jerry’s body. His eyes were rolled back and blood fell down his ashen skin face from a large cut on his scalp.

“Th-that’s impossible, it’s got to be some sort of trick.”

“No tricks here, you died in that crash Jerry.”

“But then, how am I here?”

Lucius looked at him almost through him, like he wasn’t there.

“Like I said, I know what you’ve done. I know you’re a bad person. I know everything.”

“I-I don’t understand I didn’t mean to do those things.”

“Don’t give me that crap boy, I’m not a fool. You killed and hurt because you enjoyed it, and then you had the audacity to say you did it for me, that I told you to do all of it. You’re evil and too childish to admit it.”

“You-You’re him... you’re the d...”

“Devil!” he finished, sticking out his hand like he had earlier. “Lucius. Most call me Lucifer though.”

“That’s-That’s impossible...”

“Not exactly, it’s like that placebo thing scientists natter on about. If you believe in something it can be true. That’s why I’m still alive these days, crazies like you.”

“But why me, why did you come to me?”

“Well, Jerry you’re a rare case. Someone as bad as you deserves my ‘personal’ attention”

“What’s going to happen to me?”

Lucius chuckled.

“You’ll be punished as you deserve.”

“Punished? That’s not fair, I gave you gifts, and they were all for you!” he shouted.

“You think I wanted those people? People die every day without you getting involved.” Lucius snapped back.

The car was boiling now. The leather was drying and cracking, his seatbelt burnt across his chest, jerry scrambled against the door, slamming against it with his fists. It held fast. Lucius leaned over a pushed him back into his seat, falling backwards Jerry’s arm hit the volume knob on the radio. The noises flared to life, screaming and begging filled the car. Begging for freedom, screaming for the pain to stop. The seatbelt tightened around him, locking him into his seat. Calmly, Lucius reached over and switched off the radio.

“What the hell was that?”

“Where you’re heading now?”

“No-no-no-no please no, I can’t go down there I’ll do anything.”

“Anything you say? I don’t appreciate begging, Jerry.”

“Yes-yes I will, anything.”

“Well then, we’ll quickly skim through the formalities. Jerry Banks, I subject you to damnation until it is seen fit for your release.”

“What?! But you said you’d make an agreement!”

“Nah, I just felt like keeping that hope for a second.”

“No!”

“Goodbye Jerry.”

The seats burst into flames, Lucius’ eyes filled with fire and horns burst through his net cap. Jerry screamed in desperation. He hammered at the door to no avail. The glove compartment fell open, revealing the source of the flames, a searing yellow portal sucking in anything that wasn’t struck down, an old mug, crumbling bits of paper, and old cracked leather from the seats flew in. Jerry uttered a final screech before being sucked in.

Like a crack of a whip, there was silence. The flames died instantly, the leather seats morphed back to the way they were, the windows rolled down, letting in new air, Lucius, horns receded back inside his scalp. He took off his cap and brushed a finger over the holes, new fabric grew across. Lucius pulled the hat down low over his eyes.

Putting the truck in gear he pulled out onto the road and set off. Fifty-five million people die every year, he was busy. Under the hat he grinned, “How fun.”

- By Tadgh O’Shea

SPEAK THE TRUTH AND ONLY THE TRUTH

I have been up to many projects since my departure from work. I've been inventing machines that will test their limits and speak the truth. These machines will end people's lives if lies have been said. Only the truth will set you free.

No this is not some John Kramer 2.0 bullshit. This is my own inventions, inventions that will be tested on many sinners of our society, sinners that got away from being barred just cause of one little bullshit story they made up. These people need to speak the truth, and by doing that is by putting them up to the test. I may seem like a psychopath, but no I have no chronic disorder of such, I am simply purifying the sinners and showing them what can happen if you hide the truth.

VICTIM #1 Alisha Hastings

Alisha Hastings is a college student who stole a women's purse and took her money and left the women to die from an asthma attack, when she tried to chase Alisha and get her purse back. Alisha didn't realize that she was asthmatic but she could have simply saved her life by giving her inhaler that was in her bag, but she chose the wrong path and left her to die.

VICTIM #2 Robert Fields

Robert Fields is a high rank doctor in our community, he is known to be the best doctor in our society. But people don't know his background, he killed his baby that was only one-year-old and framed his wife. His wife was sent to an asylum due to her "Mental Illness". Robert did not visit his wife once during her time in the asylum, leading her to suicidal thoughts. She hung herself inside her room 3 weeks into her stay. Robert has been living his life and has showed no remorse ever since.

VICTIM #3 David Young

David Young is a business worker age 42 who is a man of many sins. He is a husband to a wonderful wife who works at a nursing home who works every day for eight hours. She thinks he is the most perfect husband but behind his shadows are dark secrets. He is on this victim list as he raped many girls between the ages of 16-18. To this he still is up to no good and needs to be tested for his sins.

VICTIM #4 Taeyeon Park

And the final victim is Taeyeon Park. She is a Korean teenager who set her friend's house on fire by throwing a firework at her friend's window room from the outside resulting the death of her friend and the mother while they were asleep. Taeyeon showed no guilt ever since this freakish act.

How rude of me, I completely forgot to introduce myself, my name is Charles Viernes and my purpose today is to test these selected people and push them to their limits. No I am not a murderer, I am simply showing the victims that they should cherish life and not waste it. If you don't appreciate life then you don't deserve to live.

HEAD TRAP

I have prepared all the traps and the victims in the first room before they begin their first test.

I have placed head traps on each of the victims which the front is hooked to the front and lower jaw of the victims. They have 60 seconds to find a key that will unlock the trap out of their and release them from death. If failed to do so the trap will set off and it will rip open their jaws.

A loud siren rings, a red light flashing continuously until the victims awake. Taeyeon Park wakes up first she's dizzy, confused, she tries to scratch her itchy head until she realizes a head trap is on her. She realizes what's happening, she tries screaming but the head trap is connected to her mouth leaving her mute, she squeals and cries and desperately tries to escape but there's no way out, her loud squeal wakes up the others they look at her and a simultaneous reaction happens. They're all trying to escape but no matter what they do nothing will work. David Young finds a tape recorder on the floor, he plays it, a message from Charles Viernes plays, he explains

what's happening and why it is happening, he begins with a simple "Find your key that has been inserted in the dead pig's body, you have 60 seconds until the trap rips your jaw apart. Let the test begins". The test begins and everyone scramble to a pig and tries to find a key to unlock the trap. 30 seconds is left, and no key has been found, Taeyeon reaches into the pig's stomach and feels a metal key in their she pulls it out of the pig and nervously unlocks her trap. She tries unlocking the traps out of everyone else but it doesn't work. David finds the key in the pigs mouth he tries to unlock his trap but it doesn't work he throws it away. Robert Fields runs for the key that David threw, he picks the key up and unlocks his head trap, he nervously takes off the trap he's free. 20 seconds left and Alisha and David still have their traps on, Alisha spots a key inserted in the pig's eye, she gouges it out of the pig's eye and unlocks the trap on her head. David cries out loudly as the timer goes down. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1... the trap rips David's jaws apart killing him in an instant, everyone screams loudly as the trap sets off. They all look at him with fear and confusion.

Alisha: "What is this bullshit, get me out of her."

Robert: "I don't deserve this! I am a doctor!"

Taeyeon: "We've been chosen to be tested."

Alisha and Robert look at her with confusion. They both ask her;

"What do you mean chosen?!"

Taeyeon: "We have sinned that's why we are here."

Robert grabs Taeyeon furiously he screams at her asking her if she has anything to do with this, but realization he knows she has nothing to do with anything. They all introduce themselves. They get to know who they are and what they have sinned. As they are all talking a door automatically opens leading them to a new room. They all walk towards the opened door, and as they enter the new room a loud siren is alarmed as if it was triggered by them, and the door behind them automatically slams closed.

They all stand in the new room; a television is in the center of the room turned off. Robert turns it on and a video pops up showing them what happened to them when they were unconscious. A key was put in their eye and they have to gauge their eye out to retrieve the key to escape the next room and if they can't the walls will close in, coming closer and squish them, brutally killing them. They have 2 minutes to retrieve the key, live or die it's their choice. The 2 minutes has begun, they all struggle to gauge their eye, though Taeyeon had no problem of doing it to live, she gauges her eye out and retrieves her key she opens her door and escapes the room, the three others are still hesitating they haven't moved, it looks as if they have all given up, Alisha screams, she takes the dirty scalpel from the ground and stabs her eye until she gets the key, she's bleeding a lot but retrieves the key, she opens her door and escapes. 30 seconds is left and Robert is losing time, the wall finally comes closer and closer

eventually squishing him to death and one finally scream comes out from Robert, blood everywhere splattered all over the squished wall nothing left but Roberts lifeless body.

Alisha and Taeyeon the final two girls left alive. But there is one more test. Along their path is a long corridor they walk through leading them to a room with a bullet and a shotgun. But what they don't know is that a key is inside the bullet, a key that will let them escape this entire dungeon of traps and giving the second chance to live. They both walk through the long corridor and open the door at the end of the path. They both enter and a tape is played as soon as they enter the room.

“Welcome to the final test, this final test will test your limits, will you kill to live? It's your choice, in front of you is a shotgun and a bullet, one bullet is the key to your freedom, live or die you decide.”

As the tape ends Taeyeon runs towards the gun and bullet before Alisha can grab it, she loads the gun and looks at Alisha.

“I'm so sorry Alisha but I have to do this”

“Please no! There's another way out!”

“THERES NO OTHER WAY. I HAVE TO KILL YOU.”

Alisha screams and Taeyeon finally shoots her with the shotgun. Taeyeon screams, she falls on the floor and cries. “THERE, I DID IT. LET ME OUT OF THIS HELL HOLE.”

As Taeyeon screams she notices a key that was shattered. She cries as she comes into realization that she doomed herself and has trapped herself in the room forever.

“NO, NO, NO! THIS CAN’T BE HAPPENING.”

Taeyeon lets out one final scream and the doors closes leaving her to die alone away from society.....

- By Brian Bueno

CHRISTMAS CRISIS

In the shopping centers plaza, people hurried to and fro between the shops, children asking about sweets and expensive toys they wished to get, parents trying to distract the children by pointing out things like the fountain, the Christmas tree's lights or shop mascots standing around getting pictures taken with. Some searched for last minute gifts, others searched for family members lost in the tsunami of people flooding the shopping center. Looking down on all of these people was a single man, looking for one very important, very specific thing.

"Brian, you there?" The Walkie-Talkie crackled to life. Brian rolled his eyes as he reached into his black leather jacket, past his pistol, and pulled out the small device.

"Speaking," he said reluctantly.

"We've made an alteration in the plan to catch Michael Santiago. As he enters the plaza, you are going to tail him around the shops and verify that our source was right about his intention to take some civilian's hostage in one of the upper floor shops."

"Okay, but why am I tailing him instead of Sarah? I thought she was supposed to tail him around the shops and find out whether or not he was meeting up with the other members of his little gang to pull this off?"

"Detective Lance is instead going to watch over the situation and make the call for their arrest once you have

confirmed that Santiago is armed and intending to hold the shop up for ransom. Now do you have eyes on Mr. Santiago?”

Brian looked down on the plaza, looking at the clothing of the civilians. He looked at one man in particular who fitted the description of Santiago but their hair color didn't match that of Santiago's hair. Theirs was auburn whereas the suspect's was black.

Brian called back into the Walkie-Talkie: “When is he supposed to arrive here? ‘Cause I don't see him anywhere.”

“Santiago is supposed to arrive at two o'clock and continue to the shop at quarter past three, according to our source that is. That means he should be there any minute now.”

Brian looked down on the people once more. He looked from one end of the plaza to the other, slowly and carefully studying the clothing and faces of everyone he saw. He again saw the man that he had thought was Santiago but now he was with four more men. Brian realized they all had similar outfits: brown bomber jackets, denim jeans and runners. That's when Brian spotted him emerge from a nearby shop. Santiago. He walked over to the five men and started talking with them. Brian began to move for the escalator whilst reaching for his Walkie-Talkie.

“I have eyes on the suspect. Moving in to tail. He’s with five other possible gunmen. Their all wearing brown bomber jackets and denim jeans.”

“Please repeat. Did you say you have eyes on Santiago?”

Brian sighed. “Yes, I have eyes on him and five other possible gunmen. I’m moving in to follow him. Let Sarah know how many people there are.”

He continued to run down the escalator and began to look around for the gunmen. As he caught sight of the group, they all began to split and disappear into the crowd. Brian began to try pick them out of the crowd but couldn’t see any of them.

‘Where could they have gone?’ Brian thought to himself.

“Brian, Sarah here. I can see them from up here.

“Okay, well where are they?”

“There’s two to your right, one in the shoe shop, the other in the clothes shop. Then two are making their way towards the stairs. However...”

“However?”

“I can’t see Santiago or the last man anywhere.”

Brian quickly glanced around, looking to where the other men were and then looked for anyone else in brown bomber jackets. As Brian walked through the crowd, he stepped on something and almost lost his footing. As he collected himself he saw what he had slipped on. A brown bomber jacket. Brian realized instantly what had

happened. They knew he was watching them! Brian reached for his Walkie-Talkie but as he did, he felt something press against his back. He looked over his shoulder to see one of the other men behind him, smiling, with a gun to Brian's back.

"Sorry officer, but I can't let you make that call right now. Boss has something big planned and I'd really like to see it through."

Before Brian could respond, someone else spoke.

"Well, why don't you tell me what he's got planned before you try to kill my friend there?"

The gunmen turned to see Sarah standing behind him, with her hands in her pockets, staring at him with a stern look. This was the distraction Brian needed. Before the gunman realized who she was, Brian spun around and grab the man's arm. He then took the gun and tossed it to Sarah as he twisted the arm behind the man's back. Brian turned to Sarah.

"I had this situation under control. You should be looking for Santiago and his friend, not here with me."

"Well your no good to me dead now are you. I mean seriously? You were going to pull off that move you just did without him pulling the trigger as soon as you moved? I wasn't going to take any chances with this guy."

"Santiago and his friend have ditched their jackets. They could be anywhere now."

"Or they could be right there."

Sarah pointed past Brian toward the maintenance area Brian saw two men in navy jumpsuits pulling caps over their faces as they pushed two cleaning trollies toward an elevator. The only thing wrong with them was that the outfit of the cleaners in the shopping center is dark green in color. Brian turned toward Sarah and nodded. They both turned to walk toward the cleaners with the gunman when they heard it. The screams. Followed swiftly by the firing of an assault rifle. Brian looked toward the top floor and saw flashes of light and people running. The glass railings shattered and shards fell to the lower levels. Two heads peered over, and pointed their rifles toward the ground floor and began to open fire. Sarah dived to the side as Brian threw the handcuffed gunman to the ground before jumping behind a pillar. The gunman lying on the floor began to laugh.

“It’s begun,” he exclaimed. “It’s all over now!”

Sarah turned to look at Brian behind the pillar. Brian had his pistol out now and was ready to shot up at the attackers. Sarah readied her gun as well, knowing what was about to happen...

“On the count of three. One...two...three!”

- By Conor Cronin

DERANGED

Barry and Linda Bolton are a couple from Glasgow Scotland, who have been married for twenty years despite the fact both of them loath each other and they are too lazy and stupid to get divorced. Because of this they have decided to have a battle of the sexes to the death.

“Ye Glaikit Besom is whit yer,” yells Barry as he insults his wife for about as many times as Sean Bean has died in a movie and TV series.

“Dinnae ye ca’ me a besom ye dunderheaded Geordie,” Linda says angrily with a breath of Gordon Ramsay’s roast chicken that she’s stuffed her face with. “Ah will strangle ye wi’ yer belt ‘till ye cannae breath,” snaps Linda with her mouth full of chicken and potatoes that she ate because she didn’t care about the guests and she was also a hungry blob of tofu just like her husband.

Now in order to get away from argument that feels like Jay Z vs Nas in 2001, except for the the fact that Barry and Linda rap like their playing with fire...let’s just talk about the characters!

Barry Bolton is forty-two years old and weighs 404lbs. Or 183kg or twenty-nine stone. He used to work as a bus driver until he got too fat to fit in the bus. He has very short, greyish-brown hair and has skin that is whiter than a snowman in a toothpaste factory.

Linda is forty years old and weights 402lbs. Or 181kg or twenty-seven stone. She used to be a P.E teacher until

the school she worked for found out that she was obese. She has long, messy hair and has the same toothpaste skin as her husband.

Both of them had the same ridiculous diet, which was double the amount of Michael Phelps' diet, which shows how fat they were and how they ate each day.

Now that I'm finished talking about these idiots' boring lives, let's continue with the actual story about why they want to try and kill each other rather than get a divorce like all other deranged couples.

The reason for this, is the fact both of them don't want to see each other at all and they don't have enough money to divorce. So both of them go the internet of all the places rather than just get a gun or a knife because they don't know how murder works and they want the death to be hilarious, stupid and unusual.

Barry is going to try and kill Linda the same way Edward II of England died – you'll need to look this up for yourself. It's too gruesome for this book...

Linda is going to try and kill Barry the same way Charles II of Navarre died - by tightly sewing a very flammable spirits soaked sheet and setting the sheet on fire.

Both of them plan out how they get each other to meet their maker. But really they got these deaths from Wikipedia.

They start out to plan out their murder scene, by getting the tools to murder the victim and hide the evidence so they don't get arrested, but to be honest the police wouldn't believe that Barry and Linda had tried to kill each other based on how stupid they're making the deaths look.

Barry plan is to buy a horn from a music shop and get hot coals from a sauna and heat them up so they're warm enough to burn Linda's internal organs. Linda's plan is to buy a highly flammable kitchen towel and soak it in Barry's favourite spirits. When both Barry and Linda finish their death plans, they try and find a way to lure each of their victim to their deaths.

For Barry, he gets some of Linda's favourite types of meat and spreads it across a path to his trap. For Linda she gets some of Barry's favorite types of alcohol and pours them into plastic shot glasses that she lays out in a line.

But enough of that story, I want to tell the story about how both these people began to hate each other and believe me it's far more interesting than you probably think. Let me tell you about how this nonsense happened, shall I?

....to be continued...

- By Tom Brophy

LAST HOPE

He was trying to find something or someone. Couriers is what they call them, in fact he was intelligent. They were meant to bring back humans alive so that they can fight the mysterious creatures that invaded the Earth. These robots were created by the last remaining humans who are protected in the last city. He was human-like, in fact he could feel emotions.

He was ordered to search in the old cities. The buildings are abandoned and overtaken by vegetation. The streets are filled with empty cars and old street lights that are knocked down by a strange looking vehicle. Telephone wires are covered with ivy and a school bus is rotated as something powerful had hit it.

He began sneaking beside the buildings, knowing that the creatures had set up camps around the old city. He was surrounded by large buildings, not knowing where to start. He clicked something on his face wondering if he could find someone. His vision turned blue, highlighting the signs of life with red. Something moved unusual on second floor on the building to his right. It was hiding from something. He observed the area before making an action. He continued sneaking, making sure his footsteps were as light as a feather. He was careful. Approaching the door, he looked at the ceiling of the building, looking if any creatures are on the top of it. Thankfully there wasn't any. He went up the stairs to go to the second floor.

The building was merely empty. Its ceiling lights were hanging as if it could fall by a single touch. There are plant life coming out from the holes on the floor. It was a normal sight from the robot. He turned on his thermal vision again to find the movement. He heard a sobbing sound on his left.

Suddenly he saw a woman, she was hopelessly crying on the floor. A man was on her lap who appears to have been stabbed in the stomach. He approached her calmly and his face was touched by an emotion he never felt before. He offered to help, but it was too late. Her eyes was filled with anger and sorrow. She said that they were attacked by the creatures as they were looking for supplies in the city. He noticed that the woman was dressed with dirty lab coat with a hawk logo on her left shoulder. She was armed. She stood up, leaving the person lying dead on the ground. Wiping her tears from her eyes she talked to him.

“I have gained some data that could save humanity, please escort me back to the city,” she said.

“Are you a scientist sent out by the Hawk Patrol?” he asked.

“Yes,” she responded

She told him her name is Angela and the wounded person was her husband named Charles. They were sent out by the Hawk Patrol, the military organization in the last city. Her team was sent out to research about the

creatures that had invaded the earth. Most of the people on her team is now dead.

“What is your name?” said Angela.

“My name is Simon. Also known as the X-11 Courier,” said Simon.

“Couriers huh? Before we left the city four years ago they were only prototypes made.”

Simon believed Angela without a doubt. The hawk patrol is known for their adventures outside the last city. She asked Simon to take the metal briefcase beside her husband.

They went on the top of the building to scout the city before attempting to leave it. With Simon’s eyes, he could detect signs of life around the area. For the first time he saw the creatures from a distance. He was only used to seeing them from simulations. Simon felt anxiety. These creatures are humanoid except they have four arms. They wear a mask and four tubes connected to them from an advance machinery on their back. They have four eyes on the middle of their face. Their skin was metallic and was close to a color grey.

Before they left the building, Angela reloaded her pistol. She said that the creatures are unpredictable. After leaving, they are faced with the vast abandoned city. Simon thought it was dangerous for them to go on open streets because of the creature’s camps. Instead they tried leaving the city by going on alleyways.

The alleyways are narrow and tight. It was filled with trash and plant life. Windows are broken down as if a riot has just recently happened. Vents and pipes beside the buildings are overtaken by nature. Simon is cautious of his surroundings as they quietly walked along the alleyway. Angela looked as she is serious but deep down she is sad about what happened earlier. Out of nowhere, Simon heard something move inside the building. They quickly crouched down so they wouldn't be able to be seen by anyone. Simon touched the button on his face quickly. He slowly tried to look over the window.

One. Two. Three. He saw a dog inside. The dog looked at them for a second and barked at them as if something was behind them. Simon and Angela slowly turn around. She knew it was one of the creatures. She slowly took her gun out of the holster on her hips as she turns. Simon felt scared as he turned. As they turned, they saw it. There was no way of avoiding it. It was standing in front of them. Looking to both of them with its red four eyes. Without warning, the creature lunged at Simon bringing him down on the ground. Angela saw it again. She knew she wouldn't let someone die to one of these creatures again. Simon was struggling as the creature tried to hold both of his arms. He felt powerless as he couldn't use his weapon. He felt his training went to waste. Angela tried her best to aim on the creature. She breathed deeply as she sets up the shot. Simon saw Angela as she is aiming at the creature. Simon used his both of his legs to kick the creature away

from him. After his third kick, the creature went out of balance. Angela used this moment to shoot to creature.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

It fell on the ground.

Angela rushed to Simon to help him get up. Her bullets are special and it was made to kill the creatures easily. Angela and her team researched that a special metal called Dilithium can be used to kill the creatures easily. She told him that the sample of Dilithium on the briefcase they carried can save humanity. Simon was thankful for what she did. They quickly left the alleyway by going inside the building through the window.

They saw the dog again. It was wearing a red bandana around its neck and goggles above its eyes. It was no ordinary dog, Simon thought. As they step inside the building, the dog barked as if it wanted them to follow it.

“Do we follow it?” Angela said.

“We have no other options, do we?” Simon replied.

“Let’s just be careful while following it then.”

It took them hours and hours to get out of the city while avoiding the creature’s camps. The dog was clearly trained by someone. The dog used its nose to find a safe path to get out of the city. Angela tries to keep her hopes up but her husband’s death continues to haunt her. Meanwhile Simon is observing the dog’s action and how it used its sense of smell. Simon was intrigued.

After they got out of the city, they are faced by a dense forest. The trees are at least one hundred feet tall. It was

wide and thick. The green vegetation is contrasted by the brown body of the trees. They felt like ants beside to it. The ground was moist and you could smell the earthy smell after a rain. They also heard the sway of the leaves and the buzzing sound of insects.

The dog was certain it's going on the right way. Angela saw a lot of footsteps on the ground. She thought that the dog was leading them into a trap. The forest felt uncomfortably quiet. She looked around but there was no one. Feeling paranoid she told Simon to be cautious. As they went down a hill, they started to hear voices of people. Could it be a trap? They got nearer and nearer and the voices went louder. Finally, they saw a camp.

They were faced with a large wooden gate. Beside it was walls that are at least five meters long. A guard wearing a makeshift leather armour approached the dog while another guard pointed an assault rifle to Simon and Angela.

“Drop all your weapons and raise both of your arms!” The guard shouted.

“We are not a threat. We just followed the dog through here,” Simon said calmly while dropping everything and raising his arms.

“Where did you come from?” said the other guard while petting the dog.

“I am a courier and I am here to escort a scientist to the Last City,” Simon replied.

The guards did not believe them until Angela explained that they have gained data that can save humanity.

The gate was opened. One of the guards let the dog inside the camp while calling the leader. Simon and Angela still had a gun pointed in front of them by the guard until the leader came outside with the dog.

“I see you have met my dog Sammy,” said the Leader

He has no hair but his white beard was eye catching. He was wearing a dark green beret, a brown long trench coat, army trousers partnered with black boots. Simon thought he was intimidating.

He told the guard to lower his weapon.

“Come on inside, you are welcome here,” said the leader again.

While walking around the camp, the leader explained the history of the camp. He said his name is Dean and he is the only son of the original leader of the camp. He tries to continue his father’s legacy by further expanding the camp and recruiting more people. Then he stopped walking.

“I heard from my guard that you have gained some information that could save humanity,” said Dean

“We have indeed,” said Simon

“I am from the Hawk Patrol and we were sent out outside the last city to do research and experiments on the creatures. We have found the key.”

“I will give you a deal. If your information is true, it can help a lot people in this camp to survive better against

the creatures. Give me your information and I will give you resources that's enough for you to travel to the last city," said Dean.

Angela and Simon agreed since the information cannot harm them if they share it. Dean was shocked that the material used is Dilithium. It can easily be made by extracting them from atomic powered cars.

"I hope that you can deliver this to the Last City. This can truly change the world," said Dean

Dean thanked the two from their information. Simon and Angela were allowed to stay in the camp to rest. The next day, he gave them two horses, guns, ammo and food to continue their travel to the Last City.

Finally, after traveling for one month, Angela and Simon finally returned to the last city. They were welcomed as heroes and were praised by people. Angela was glad that their team's research didn't go on a waste and it can save humanity. As for Simon, he did his job as a courier and he will continue to do so.

After the city got the information they needed, humanity can finally fight back against the creatures.

- By Gabriel Tan

GUARDIAN OF WAR AND CRISIS.

A guardian angel to those who come under his care, Dr. Sui is a peerless healer, a brilliant scientist, and a staunch advocate for peace.

He is a biologist and a field medic who always stays at the frontline of war and crisis around the world to heal the wounded and imperiled. His battle armour helps him to keep close to his allies like an angel.

Sui rose to become the head of surgery at a prominent Chinese hospital before pioneering a breakthrough in the field of applied biology that radically improved the treatment of life threatening illnesses and injuries. It was this expertise that attracted the attention of many people in the medical business.

Sui's parents were taken by war when he was still young, he opposes many organizations that have a militaristic approach to withhold global peace. Ultimately he recognized that the Chinese hospital offered him the opportunity to save lives on a very large scale. As the head of medical research, Sui sought for leverage on his work for healing in many wars.

Despite his contributions to the hospital, he was often at odds with his superiors and the hospital's overarching aims. When the hospital dissolved, Sui dedicated himself to helping those affected by battles. Though he spends most of his time caring for the broken and dispossessed in

crisis areas around the world, Dr. Sui can be counted on whenever innocents are imperiled.

- *By Brian Bueno*

THE PIT

Frederic had arrived into the measly hamlet yesterday morning. It was as grey as the people, who regarded Frederic with a lethargic stare that lacked both joy and energy. When asking around for work, he was met with the only positive emotion he experienced in that town. Hope. The mayor told of a creature that made its home in a nearby cave, a creature that turned their village into a prison. They had attempted to kill it but all they gained from that endeavour were five new headstones. This is what brought Frederic to the cave about half a day's walk from the village. He dropped his belongings at the mouth, keeping only the essentials with him. His protective leather gear, his steel shortsword, a torch, and a few last resorts. With grave resolution he headed inwards, into the dark pit, with only a pouch of gold as his motivation.

He had to stoop slightly to enter. Once his torch was lit he could take in this dwelling in its entirety. Vicious claw marks marred the inner walls, stretching from the floor to the ceiling. The interior rock was damp and permeated by a faint yet familiar odor. With nowhere to go but forward Frederic persisted with measured awareness. After about five minutes an anomaly started to take shape. The torch was not diminishing, nor was the cavern getting larger yet there seemed to be less and less light in the tunnel. He got to the point where he could no longer make out the tunnel's features, or even the tunnel itself around him. As

this darkness grew so did the stench, it was the stench of blood. The job had now reached a new level of seriousness. He continued through the pitch black abyss but now his free hand rested on the sword's handle as it lay in his scabbard, for he could not shake the feeling that the insidious creature of his hunt hunched mere inches from his face, coiled in the darkness and ready to pounce.

His hunter's concentration was broken by a loud crunching underfoot. With feline grace he leaped backwards and inspected the source of the noise. There was barely enough time to register the human skull before a long sinuous claw raked at him from the shadows. He sidestepped it and it recoiled backwards only for him to drop his torch and follow with a lunge. Into emptiness he realized, as his weapon found no purchase and a secondary claw lashed from his behind, catching his ankle. Panic slowly crept around Frederic's heart. He and the creature were both agile, but there was more to the situation than met the eye. His adrenaline kept the now bleeding ankle from becoming a problem, but it wouldn't last forever. Two more quick swipes, both were dodged but in the midst of the assault Frederic let loose his own, catching the creature's wrist with a quick strike. A hateful hiss was not only heard, but felt by Frederic in his blood. It seemed to chill him and with this retaliation, the creature entered an enraged frenzy. The air around him was now a whirlwind of whipping tendrils, whose blades sliced more times than Frederic was comfortable with. He

was taking note of his injuries when a large maw snapped at his face. He stepped back but instead of solid ground his foot landed on the torch and it rolled out from under him. He landed vulnerably on the ground and the creature seized its chance.

However, Frederic did not come unprepared. He fished a small spherical capsule from his pouch before throwing it to the ground. It smashed, the alchemical concoction causing a bright flash which dispelled the darkness for a moment and revealed part of the creature's form. It terrified Frederic. For a moment he found himself paralyzed on the floor, as the image of this demon was branded into his mind. Its face was ungodly, born directly of a nightmare and possessed hate Frederic did not think existed. Its body was a shadowy, shapeless form, with an amount of limbs he could not fathom. It released another torrent of terror accompanied by a ferocious roar, but a roar of pain. Frederic was ready to surrender to the beast when he noticed its tendrils had no order. They flailed randomly at the air around him but had no sense of aim. His mind was working for a second before he leapt to his feet. He was now the attacker, and had become his own silver tornado of blazing steel. He freely let loose his alchemy, causing consecutive bursts of radiance that crippled the beast. Again and again his blade would draw blood and again and again the creature howled. With one especially powerful thrust the creature was thrown onto the floor. It hissed angrily and already its shadowy form

started to reassert itself. Frederic seized his chance. He leapt forward and with a powerful arc, his blade plunged deep into the beast's face.

What followed was a loud thump as the creature fell and then, silence. Frederic stood panting, and as the creature's life ceased, so did the surrounding darkness. It started to recede. It dripping from the walls and slithered into all that remained of the creature, its skull. Frederic was tempted to leave it there in the hope that all of his memories of this place could rot alongside, but a reward needed proof. He scooped up the skull, a hideous display with multiple eyes, sharp twisting horns and a maw of endless jagged teeth that gave the effect of an undead grin, and left the cavern.

After collecting his reward Frederic left the village without delay. The village people, whose entire attitude was filled with a joyous potential, did little to ease his mind. It took a couple weeks before he could go to sleep knowing he wouldn't gasp awake in the middle of the night, haunted by the creature's face. Its claws left physical marks but its demonic visage left scars on his mind. Ever since that day his thoughts had taken a steep turn into paranoia, and he would never be able to pass a shadow without looking over his shoulder for fear he would again see that unholy abomination.

- By Seán Nolan

ERIC'S BIRTH (TO EARTH'S CORE)

Keith's muscular arm pulled the lever that released the last lifeboat from the burning zeppelin. The one that contained Elinor and their newborn child. At first Keith waited till he was at a safe distance to jump into the water but before he could move, a piece of burning metal knocked him into the icy waters. Horrified, Elinor leaned over the lifeboat to see if Keith was still out there. Meanwhile, Keith burst out of the icy waters of the English Channel, swimming desperately against the waves, which lashed at him like a whip while the rain poured down. Every so often he would submerge involuntarily under the waves. Keith just kept swimming as he tried to endure what Gaia would send for him. But all of a sudden, something surfaced underneath Keith. Curious, he looked down to see an enormous coal black shape with white spots on either side of the creature. Though it had a fish like appearance, there was a warmth to the creature...a warmth that could only have come from a mammal.

Keith looked back behind him to see the burning skeleton of the zeppelin as it started to stumble into the water. Hearing Elinor then call for him by name, Keith jumped into the water and swam towards the lifeboat.

Elinor's long thick locks of curly red hair lapped (blew) around her in the wind as she burst out from the blankets and grabbed onto Keith, dragging him onto the

boat. Once he got onto the boat, Keith's sapphire blue eyes looked into Elinor's emerald green eyes as he threw his arms around her.

Laying cuddled up in Elinor's arms was their newborn son. By that stage, the boy had been calmed down, as he turned around, he looked up at and smiled at Keith. The boy shared his bright sapphire blue eyes and his blonde hair. Claspng the boy in his arms, he asked,

"Elinor, are you alright?"

"It still hurts...but seriously (Looking at the boy) ...that pain was worth it."

Keith smiled as he passed the child back to Elinor...but then he asked her

"Where are the rest of the passengers?"

"I don't know"

But then a light shone on the couple. They clutched onto each other as they heard a call in Breton from the boat that the light shone from. Hearing it, Keith got up and called

"Hey...come here!!"

The vessel turned out to be a fishing boat and the fishermen reached out to help Keith and Elinor onto their boat. One of the fishermen tried to ask how Keith was in Breton, but Keith didn't understand and responded

"Hey, wait do you speak English? Est ce que tu parle francais?"

"Yes I do."

Smiling Keith then asked

“Good. I thought we were in Normandy...you’re Bretons.”

“We are...but we could see an airship burning from here, so a group of us went out to retrieve the passengers.”

Elinor slowly stood up, cradling the boy in her arms. Notably, she was still bleeding between her legs. Seeing this, a fisherman then asked (In French because it was a medium which the Trents could understand)

“Wait...that child. You only gave birth to him now?”

Elinor’s soaked and bereft face nodded yes. Surprised, the fisherman then asked

“On that zeppelin that just went down??”

Keith responded as he went over to Elinor’s side

“Yes, she did.”

The fishermen were struck with surprise by this response. For them, giving birth successfully on a burning zeppelin was something no ordinary human woman could do. The main fisherman responded

“But you must be Northmen - to have such endurance is something I have only ever heard in my grandfather’s tales. Stay with us...he must see you two!!!”

Even as the boat went on, Elinor sat down on the deck and looked into her son’s eyes. Keith went over to Elinor and sat down beside her. Elinor then asked

“When he mentioned Northmen...he meant Vikings, like E...”

“Eric the Red, yes. He did, Eric...the Northman that trekked the sea of worms to find Vinland...that what we’ll call our boy.”

“Eric?”

“Yep...Eric Trent, nice and simple name!!”

Keith then draped his arm around Elinor and the two kissed as they snuggled up together (With Eric in their arms).

- By Declan Cosson

REAL FRIENDS

The strangest thing happened to me a little while ago. Let me tell you a story.

See, I've been friends with Kate for as long as I can remember. Literally, as in I have no memories from when I didn't know her. The two of us were always inseparable, mainly because neither of us are particularly social, to put it lightly. We'd always just go around as a pair, even as kids. I'd spend so much time in Kate's house that her own parents were starting to be alarmed at how much time we'd spend playing together. Just Kate and Brian, friends till the end, we'd say. Sounds idiotic, now that I think about it. The sort of thing kids say after watching too much American telly.

Of course it's not that anything went drastically wrong between then and now. There was no falling out or anything. We might have been young and oblivious, but we were still right. Some amount of years on, and here we were, still close. No, the strange thing happened just yesterday, after a couple of months of build-up. I'll get to the point.

It all started one, maybe two months ago. I didn't realise this was the thing that kicked it all off until I started talking just now. Could've been any other day. We were sat in Sandycove-ish area, I think. Perched on a big limestone wall that sloped down seamlessly onto the beach, one thick enough for me to lie down on with one

leg dangling precariously over the sloped side. Kate was sitting upright beside my head, munching away on a chicken roll, one of two we had bought for our lunch and planned to sit (or lie) in this exact spot to eat. I'd finished mine. I was staring at the sky; a solid edgeless grey, teetering on the line between raining and not, with my open eyes as easy targets for a sadistic hailstone or two. Kate was watching dead ahead, eyes fixed on the apparent border between sky and sea, both in desperate need of some warmth. Her head was tilted slightly to the side and I looked back to see her eyes shift slightly towards some specks in the distance dragging a boat up a pebbledash ramp. It was times like these that I could nearly read what she was thinking as though I were in her head. When she spaced out, I could always bring her back down to earth with a well-aimed question.

Seems like my shot was off that time though, because I tried to open with some stupid comment. I don't remember it very well, something like, "That looks like it's easier to do when the tide is in, huh?" So it was clear I was paying attention. But not a peep. She must've been fairly deep in thought to not tell me to shut up. Instead, a small glob of barbecue sauce fell cleanly from the bitten end of her unfinished roll and planted itself firmly in my hair, above my ear. I groaned and swung myself upright again, which caused me to lose my balance and slide somewhat noisily down the rough decline. Some part of this must have snapped her out of it because she had seen

enough to be in fits of laughter looking at me lying in the sand at the bottom of the wall. I lay for a second, looking at the same blanket of grey as before and questioning why I do this to myself, before picking myself up, dusting myself off, and looking up to see exactly why I do. Kate was grinning and giggling to herself slightly, dangling her legs from her sand less ivory tower at the top of the wall.

“Oh, now you’re paying attention?” I shot up at her.

“Yeah, well...” she trailed off. I scrambled atop the wall again, sitting on her right side rather than her left, as there was the spot of barbecue sauce still there.

“Am I gonna have to snot myself every time I want to get a couple of words outta ya?”

I smiled at her. She sighed and began to apologise, but I stopped her.

“Is it bad today?” I ask, quieter. She nods, and my chest goes cold. I just drop my head on her shoulder and she sighs.

After some amount of time, I’m not all that sure how long, I sit up and look at her. “Hey. Hey dude, look at me?”

She glances very slightly in my direction. “Look at me in my eyes!” This gets a laugh out of her, and she turns.

“Will you please get help?”

“Brian...” she begins but I stop her.

“Yeah, yeah, I know I keep asking, but you’ve not even tried booking an appointment like. It could help, you never know. It’s all in your head, y’see. And these people

specialise in...well, in heads.” Another pause. “Okay, meet me in the middle.” I clamber off the wall and stand carefully on the slope, gripping the wall for dear dignity, to face her. “Will you go if I do all the booking end of business?”

After what felt like forever, she looks at me and quietly nods. I let go of the wall to throw my hands up in celebration and nearly slide down again, dragging another laugh out of her. But it would’ve been worth it to roll down again for that reveal. I was gonna help my best friend get help after years of bugging her about it.

So I did all the stuff, true to my word. I was researching therapy firms left right and centre, and I found one a day or so after the Sandycove incident. I rang up and booked an appointment for her, and she didn’t change her mind. When she was telling me about how it went, I was so buzzed. She didn’t even seem apprehensive, which was the best part. This was the start of the good bit, right?

Turns out, this was the start of the strange bit, too. It seemed as she was getting better, something was up with me. I know that’s obviously nonsense, but it was the first thing that I correlated in my head for some reason.

See, over the next while, I started to notice that Kate was getting better. She’d be chattier, and better with strangers, and she’d be sleeping more, and all that jazz. Which delighted me to no end. But I’d see her a lot less frequently, which was disorienting, having spent all my time with her before. I wouldn’t go to the sessions with

her, and I was sleeping a lot more. I assumed that was because I was worrying less, so I was getting more sleep. In hindsight, entire stretches of time are gone from my normally-vivid memory. I must have been sleeping the whole time. But this continues for a few months, like I said. She's getting noticeably better, but she's far from cured, so to speak. Having said that, she's happier and so am I.

Until one day, she wasn't. One of the days I went to see her, she seemed off again. Like she was before. We were in Stephen's Green in town one of the days, and it was fairly filled with people. Much nicer day than Sandycove, with more than enough actual sunshine to cast shallow shadows beside hedges and under trees for people to shelter in. We were two such people, lying down on freshly cut grass under the collective shade of a cluster of new birches. She was lost in her usual hobby of people-watching: a pair of women angrily stormed off in separate directions, teary-eyed; a young teenager nervously approaching a horde of kids his age in a worn gazebo; two small children approaching an elderly man with a guide dog, who patiently allowed herself to be pet by the eager kids. Her thoughts were as clear as day to me. Like I was right there, in her head with her.

Despite this, I caught her slightly off-guard with a question.

“What's on your mind, brown eyes?”

Like I said, she was kind of visibly taken aback. Kate's not all that confident a person, so she would've been rehearsing whatever it is she had to say in her head on a loop. Seems like I had caught her mid-sentence, because she was stammering under her breath, trying to begin a word. I told her to breathe and to take her time, and she did. After a brief moment, she looked at me and started talking. It all came out at once.

"Okay, so, you know the way I've been going to Dr. Nolan - well, of course you do, you signed me up and everything, and she's been really helpful and all, like, stupidly helpful, and I just wanted to say thank you for everything, but -"

"Slow down, dude," I told her. "Take a breath, maybe?"

She takes another deep breath, and tries again.

"Right. So she had a name to put on the thing that I have, dissociative-something-or-other, I think. And that's perfect, because now- okay not perfect, so to speak- oh, you know what I..." She buries her face in her hands and sighs. It's at this point I start to worry a little, because she sounds like she did back at square one. But she sees the concern on my face and apologises.

"Let me start over. The doctor must have hit the nail on the head, because she was explaining to me what people with this yoke typically feel and it fits me perfectly. But as it turns out, there are... uh, I think I had more of the symptoms than I really knew. Because there

was this one thing she mentioned that kind of gave me a heart attack...” She started to laugh nervously and scratch the back of her neck. My blood ran cold a little, because I was starting to connect the dots a little.

“Do you know what a paracosm is?” she says.

“I haven’t a clue,” I reply. “Is this a tangent of some sort?”

I can hear her breath catch in her throat. “No, this is...no, not at all. A paracosm is a hallucination, except I think it’s not so much your brain telling you the sky is falling. More like your brain telling you there’s someone outside your window when they aren’t. Specific stuff like that. D’you get me?”

“I think so. What’s this got to do with anything?”

“Apparently that’s one of the hidden things. And they worsen as my state does, you know? If my head gets worse they get more vivid, et cetera. The doc thinks I’ve only got the one, though. Which is good, it just sucks a whole lot because I really don’t want to believe her but it all makes so much sense-”

“Slow down, kid. What exactly is yours?”

And here she drops her eyes to the grass underneath her that she’s been anxiously plucking out of the ground. She inhales and I can hear her chest rack a little in her breath, and it all clicks in my head. The worry goes away, for some reason. Right as she speaks.

“You are.”

Bang. It all made sense, right in that second. She was getting better, the images are more vivid as your state gets worse, and I was vanishing for hours at a time.

“I... I am a carapasm?” I ask.

“Paracosm,” she corrects.

“I’m a hallucination.”

“I’m so sorry Bri, I don’t want to believe any of it but like I said it’s all perfect. She asked me about you when I talked about my best friend and she looked like her mind had been made up when I couldn’t tell her how we met or even what you looked like-”

“Kate? It’s okay. Jesus, I’m not sure why you’re acting like you’re responsible for this.”

“Well, technically, I am.”

I laughed at that. Leave it to her to make a pun, even at a time like this. I guess that’s where I got it from.

It was all kind of just white noise after that point. She kept explaining everything, trying to soften the blow a bit. I guess there’s no easy way to tell someone they don’t exist, so she may as well just get it over with. Ironically, she was trying to talk to me, but all sound was muffled as I was doing her favourite thing in the world. Staring at our surroundings, taking in all the little details. Probably the last time too, now that I was aware of the whole thing. When I was sure she was done talking, I said “So, what happens now?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” she replied, her voice small.

“This is it so?” No reply. “This is probably really strange for you, kid. It should be strange for me, but I kind of just feel... at peace. I’m glad I got you to get help in the end. That’s the main thing for me.”

I go to stand up, and she shoots up with me and grabs me in a vice grip of a hug. I look around for some reason, and everything is moving somewhat slower for me. She murmurs something into my shoulder and I can feel hot tears seep through my shirt a little bit. I hug her back, and take a deep breath.

Sam and his younger sister were sitting in St Stephen’s Green, furiously petting a big golden Labrador with a special leash on it. Sam didn’t know what the leash was for, but the old man with the sunglasses was holding onto it and smiling. The dog turned its big head around to face his sister and she giggled. Sam looked around, and for some reason his eye was drawn to a lady standing in the grass, on her own, with her arms wrapped around herself. He shrugged his shoulders and turned back to the dog, who had just sat down on his mum’s foot.

- *By Joe Clarke*

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