

HARVESTER OF DAYS

A SHORT STORY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL
HORROR

MAV SKYE

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The great proof of madness is the disproportion of
one's design to one's means.

— NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

HARVESTER OF DAYS

CHARLIE HAS A PISTOL, BLACK AND SHINY. It's grim in his hands. He knows what he has to do.

So he does it.

He kicks in her bedroom door and aims the pistol at his little sister. Connie needs to know this is serious. Not just a game. The Voice in the closet says so. "Hands above your head. Get on the ground."

Charlie is gruff and commanding, just like Sergeant Gears. Gears had been the sergeant of his squad during his tour of Iraq, until Gears got his legs blown off. They sent him home early with honorable papers, and a purple heart. Charlie hadn't finished the tour either, though for different reasons. They stamped PSYCHIATRIC DISCHARGE on Charlie's papers and Bam! He was back home again.

Twenty-one years old, finally legal to drink, and here he is. No money. No glory. No purple heart. Not even a damn friend, just back in this God forsaken house, the house where his parents had died three years before.

"Charl-ay! What you do that for? Why you yell at me?"

Connie is sitting on the bed she's had since she was ten. Her hair is freshly washed and towel dried. Her small eyes roll with tears, the upward slant giving away the Down's she'd been born with.

Shit! Charlie can't bear it when she cries, and she knows it. But he was going to stay strong. He has to. He's only been home a week, but a week has been too long, especially with what he knows now.

Connie's pink flannels shiver. She wraps her arms about herself and rocks. "I want Auntie Ca-fy! I want her. She sings with me."

Aunt Cathy had taken care of Connie like an angel while he'd been gone. But when he'd gotten home, his late mother's sister simply ignored Charlie, wouldn't look him in the eye, as if he didn't exist.

"Do *you* exist?" Sergeant Gears had asked the squad once, as they did endless push-ups in the sand, the desert sun wreaking hell from above. Gears had taken a long drag on his Marlboro and blew out the smoke. "Do any of us?"

That had been a frightening question to Charlie, one he took to bed with him night after night. Was his reality... real? He supposed that if it weren't real, that'd be okay. It would mean his parents were alive, maybe playing golf in the Bahamas or sipping rum out of a pineapple in Hawaii. It would mean that all the hajjis he'd blown away were at home with their wives, dishing up curdled goat milk for their multiple little ones they'd bore for the sake of Jihad. Even that would be fine with Charlie.

However, if this was all real, if reality existed, Charlie's reality, then his parents were still rotting in a grave with their heads missing, toes plucked like rose buds. And even worse, the thing that murdered them was still hiding under

their beds, crouching in their closets... licking up his sister's tears.

About a month after Sergeant Gears had asked the question, the Voice spoke to Charlie from a large iron chest in the laundry hut. Charlie had run out of soap. He was rummaging around the washers, hoping someone had left some behind when he felt a nippy breeze behind him, sending the hair on his arms straight up. He turned to an iron chest, a big ol' box with its locks busted off. The thing was heavy and likely would have taken four men to carry. Obviously, it had been there for quite some time, possibly months.

The chest was propped open, but just barely. Darkness pitted the inside.

Charlie rubbed his arms, and took a step forward to peek inside the chest. The sound of claws scraping metal startled him, and stopped him in his tracks. And when the Voice spoke, it was a mix of hiss and low growl, yet crystal clear. It said, "Connie!"

Then his sister's voice, crying.

"Connie?" he had said. Confused, he crouched down and peaked into the darkness of the chest. Two diamond red eyes greeted him. The Voice said, "Sisters are sweeter..."

"You leave her alone!" Charlie said.

Connie cried and cried, inside the iron chest.

Charlie sprinted back to his living quarters. He grabbed his M-4 and bayonet.

His roommate, Eddie, fresh out of the shower, said, "What the fuck, cowboy?"

But Charlie didn't have time to explain, he charged into the tiny laundry hut and open fired at the chest, never minding the ricochet. When his magazine was empty, he flipped up the hood of the chest with his bayonet.

The thing with the diamond red eyes was gone. And so was Connie's crying.

He glanced around the hut, suspiciously. Sweat beaded up and slid down his face, neck, soaking his shirt.

"Where are you?" he screamed at the iron chest, but only the laundry soap sat inside. He stabbed his bayonet into the laundry box, over and over. The blue powder leaking out like sandy tears. "Where the fu—" *Clank!* The bayonet fell from his hands, as his arms were wrestled behind him and cuffs were slapped on his wrists. "Eddie!" he had cried when he recognized his friend and the others (his own squad!). "You've got to help me! Connie's inside there!" He looked at the iron chest. "Please."

"I'm sorry," Eddie had put a hand on his shoulder, sadness in his eyes, "You've lost it, Cowboy."

Charlie felt a hypodermic needle prick his thigh. "But Connie?"

"Connie's home, Cowboy. She's just fine." Charlie fell asleep with Eddie's words, but they were of no comfort.

In the tiny base hospital, Charlie had questioned whether it was really happening, this reality, that he'd really heard the voice, seen the eyes, Connie's crying. He never stopped questioning— until Sergeant Gear's legs got blown off.

It was about the time the military doctors tossed some anti-psychotics Charlie's way, and ordered him to be flown home.

Charlie had wanted to go see Gears in the hospital, but they wouldn't let him. He wondered if Gears stayed in the same room Charlie had. God, he hoped not. The white wash makeshift walls and smell of chlorine were bound to drive any soldier mad, if they weren't already.

Charlie had lots of time on his hands while waiting to fly

home, and at night, his restless mind would wander. He'd think about Sergeant Gears in the hospital, and he'd imagine going in for a visit. He'd walk past the nurses into a tiny room and see Gears, pale and unshaved, white sheet up to his waist. He'd be sitting on his bed, slouching against the tent wall, smoking his Marlboro's. He wouldn't say a word to Charlie, but really, no words needed to be said. Gears would pull a crumpled photograph from the side table and stare at it. Charlie got a glimpse of it: an elderly man with glasses and a proud face, a woman with long gray hair (swooped into a loose bun) had her arm around the man, the other arm hugged two children, a boy (obviously Gears) and a girl. Gears would whisper at the photo, but Charlie didn't know what.

Charlie knew family was everything to Sergeant Gears. His squad was also his family. He treated them as such, and never left a soldier behind. *A man never deserts his own*, he'd always say. Which is, of course, why he lost his legs. Saving his injured troop family, packing them on his back, and hauling ass. He was so busy taking care of his men, he hadn't noticed the American coke can buried in the sand. Stepping on it detonated an IED. The fifth man he was carrying didn't make it. Neither did Gears's legs.

Connie says, "Char-lay!"

Charlie's mind trails back to the here and now. He feels as if he gets caught up in time warps, pockets of time happening over and over. Once it starts, it's hard to come back.

"Char-lay!"

How long has she'd been crying his name?

"Where she go?" Connie sniffles. "Where Aunty Ca-fy go?"

Charlie shrugs, the pistol at his side. "I don't know."

"Where!" she demands.

His patience is about up. "*I don't know.* I said that already." Aunt Cathy is a lousy aunt, and all the family they have left. The day after he arrived by taxicab, she had popped a chicken casserole in the oven, folded a clean load of laundry, all without saying a word to Charlie. Then, she'd kissed Connie on the forehead, told her to be a good girl, and split. In fact, she hadn't just split, she'd deserted them.

"*A man never deserts his own.*" Charlie lives by it. Sergeant Gears liked to quote Napoleon too, especially after a stiff shot of liquor. "Let her sleep, fellas," he'd say, "for when she wakes, she's gonna shake the world." All the guys would laugh and toast to that one, but Charlie never got it. He heard the quote was about China. What was so funny about China taking over the world?

He waves the pistol around the air. "This is serious shit, Con. Don't you get that?"

Now is the time for combat, war. He needs Con on his side if they are going to win this. And Con can't do what he needs her too, not because she lacks love, or lacks commitment even. Her *condition* prevents her from comprehending, understanding what is at stake if they don't succeed.

He hears Eddie's voice in his mind, *Cowboy, if she's got a condition, then I've got one too because there ain't no Voice. You're just plum crazy now. Take your pills.*

Pills. When had he last taken them? Before the trip home— maybe. Besides, he doesn't need pills. What he needs is for the boogeyman under the bed to be gone.

He says, "Hands in the air! Now!"

She slowly raises her arms—a confused lost puppy.

Charlie feels bad. Real bad. There is another Napoleon quote Gears had always said, *It requires more courage to suffer than die.*

True. The scariest things of this world are the true things. Charlie knows the truth. He knows about suffering and death. He understands these *realities*.

And soon so will Connie.

She (finally!) spies the gun, realizes it's real. "No, Charlay! No kill. I wuv you." She points to her heart, then to Charlie, and in her brave girl voice she says, "You wuv me, Charlay." The Superman comic she'd been reading falls from the comforter to the carpet. On the cover of the comic Superman is holding up a collapsed bridge as Supergirl flies above, pulling the train to safety. Connie's face is a wreck, all snot and mascara.

Charlie feels satisfied he's got her attention; he cocks the hammer for good measure. No going back now. No going back. There's no going back once you've been to Iraq and blown people into teeny tiny bits.

Game over.

Charlie's first kill: an Iraqi woman, a bomb under her wrap. He nailed her in the head from seventy yards. When she hit the ground—*Kaboom!*

A fingernail had landed on his sleeve. It was torn and dirty, sharp as a talon. Blood stained it a deep dark crimson. It resembled a claw. It wasn't a nail of any human enemy. It was a claw of a monster.

He had picked it off his sleeve and pocketed it right before Gears had clapped him on the shoulder. "Congrats, kid. You've done good, but remember," He'd shook his head, tossed his cigarette on the ground and stamped it out. "There's no going back. Once you've shot your first one, game over. You've checked into hell, son, and there ain't no way back." Feeling the nail in his pocket, he knew Gears spoke the truth.

And soon, Charlie will have a game over. A real game

over. Except his death will be more horrendous than anything he'd seen in Iraq. Yes sirree, Bob. The Voice in his bedroom closet had told him so. And he believes the Voice.

Connie raises her hands in surrender, and quiets. Rivers run down her cheeks then pivot under her chin.

Charlie says, "Stop crying, Connie! Stop. I can't think when you cry. Besides, *he* can taste your tears. And it makes him... hungry."

Connie presses her palms together in front of her, and mumbles a prayer. Charlie waits. When she finishes, she lifts her face and eyes Charlie squarely. "Who hungry, Charl-ay? Why you kill me?"

Charlie laughs. "You *know* who! You can't fool me." But did she know? How could she live in this very house and not know about the boogeyman under the bed, in the closet. She'd been here after mom and dad's death... perhaps his aunt had hid it from her. Yes, Aunt Cathy had known too. That explained her quick departure. Who'd want to stay in a house hosting the Harvester of Days, feasting on your tears one by one.

Sisters are much sweeter...

"God!" he slaps his head. "Stop it! Stop it!"

"What?" Connie wails more and leans her face into her hands. "I don't unnerstand!"

"Ha!" Charlie waves his pistol around, then feels for his bayonet in his back pocket, sharpened the night before. "You know who *he* is!" He squats in front of Connie on the bed, and uses the pistol to part her hands from her face. "You *know*. Dammit Con, *he* lives under your bed."

She shakes and shakes, fear quivering her skin like jelly. She pats her covers. Her comforter is printed with many colored kittens chasing a ball of yarn. "My bed?"

Charlie knows he needs to say this very carefully, gently or all will be lost. “*He* promised he’d let me go if I gave him you.”

Another Napoleon quote, *Great achievement is born of great sacrifice*. Then Gears would say, “*Defeating the enemy, that is achievement. Achievement of victory, boys and girls! Who is willing to sacrifice?*” And his squad would yell. “Sir! Aye, Sir!”

Connie plugs her ears, rocks. “I don’t know what you say! I don’t know—”

“Hush!” He tucks the pistol in his belt, reaches over and unplugs her fingers from her ears. “Don’t you remember, Con? The boogeyman. The boogeyman!”

Her weeping slows. “Charl-ay, what dat?”

He walks to the closet, opens the door and looks between her dresses and coats. Satisfied, he walks back and sits on her bed. He hands Connie a tissue from the nightstand. “Everyone knows who he is—the Harvester of Days?”

She shakes her head and blows her nose.

He frowns doubtfully, then plunges full in. “The Harvester of Days lives beneath a carpet of black and under swirls of a night lonely. His castle is made of twisted limbs of rotted trees and...”

Connie leans forward. “What?”

“And rotted children.”

Connie’s eyes grow dark. “No castle here, Charl-ay.”

He stands and paces to the window, checking the lock. Rain taps fitfully at the glass, obscuring the woods beyond the yard. Charlie draws the blinds. “That’s just it, you see. His castle is buried deep in the forest where no one walks and no one knows. He digs tunnels from his castle, sniffing fear, tasting tears. And if he likes the taste, he visits the

homes of little girls and boys. And takes them. If he doesn't catch them when they're little, he comes back when they're older."

He followed the scratching down the hallway to his room, where the noise fell silent. He searched his closet, behind his bookshelves and finally, under his bed. Here, he discovered numerous dust bunnies. The dust bunnies' shapes and figures so amused Charlie that he forgot (almost) about the scratching.

The following day, and every day thereafter, upon returning from school, he would throw his backpack on the floor and wiggle straight under his bed with a flashlight. He pretended the dust bunnies were alive, like a family, his family. They were always there for him, waiting under his bed when he got home from school. It's true they couldn't make him a sandwich or pour him a glass of milk, but he forgave them for that. He even named them, and when the heater would come on, they would blow around like tumbleweeds. He loved his secret family, but one day, when the scratching began again, he knew he'd have to abandon them (just like his family abandoned Charlie.)

The scratching clearly came from under his bed, and it clearly did not come from his bunnies. Even if they could move around on their own, they didn't have claws. Whatever was scratching under his bed definitely had claws, big claws. Something evil had moved in with his dust bunnies.

It clawed the bed frame at night, but his parents wouldn't believe him. His mom said it was probably just a mouse making a nest under his bed. One day, he'd peeked under the frame to check on his dust bunny family and they were gone— every last one of them, (eaten, he knew!) vanished.

The next day, the next week, and the next month from

that time on, Charlie spent every free moment in the school library, pouring over books. He had to know what was under his bed. Mice do not devour entire families of dust bunnies.

Over the days and weeks, through his research, Charlie developed an idea of the type of thing that hides under beds and in closets. (He had heard the noise coming from his closet at some point, hadn't he? Sure he had). He kept detailed notes of his research in a spiral notebook. Finally, all the pieces came together when he found a book titled "The Harvester of Days." (Someone had hid it in the fiction section.) He read "Harvester" cover to cover in a single sitting, skipping his lunch period and the last three classes of the day. He started reading it through a second time, carefully cross-referencing each page with the data he'd collected in his notebook.

He only got to chapter four on his second read through before the janitor kicked him out of the library. (It was almost dark outside by then). But that was fine, he had found what he was looking for. He knew The Harvester is what—who—was under his bed, and that it was only a matter of time before The Harvester of Days would kill him and his family. Dust bunnies don't keep a thing like that satisfied for very long.

When the Voice talked to him from his bedroom closet a few nights ago, all his suspicions were verified.

Connie looks at her closet, then at the floor beside her bed, then back at Charlie. "How you know dat?"

"Because, *he* told me. I found this... It doesn't matter where I found this. But I saw one like it under my bed before mom and dad died." Charlie retrieves from his shirt pocket, an old jewelry box, something a cheap ring had come in. He opens the box. In the middle of the black velvet

rests an ovular deep red fingernail. Charlie draws it from the box and holds it under Connie's lamp on the nightstand. "It's his talon. He digs with it, shreds with it, kills with it," he pauses. "Eats with it. He lost this while trying to get me. He got mom and dad instead."

Connie moans and covers her ears. "Bloody murder. Blo-ody!"

Charlie yells, "Stop it! Connie, no!" She had cried and screamed, *Bloody murder!* for weeks after mom's and dad's funeral. It was her last words to him before he'd joined the army and gone to boot camp.

And now she screams it again. She cries and cries. His little sister. Charlie briefly considers leaving again, just getting up and leaving and never coming back. But where did he have to go?

In the quiet of his mind, he hears Sergeant Gears voice, *A man never deserts his own.*

He says, "Damn it." Gears is right again. Charlie sits beside his little sister, and wraps his arms about her. She turns and hugs him back, her freshly washed hair smelling of coconut. When she calms, he opens her palm, puts the blood red nail in it, and closes her fingers. "The Harvester of Days spoke to me from my closet last night, Con. He said that you—"

Connie's red-rimmed eyes watch him carefully. She listens intently.

"He said that you'd taste..."

Little sisters taste sweeter.

Charlie didn't have the heart to say it, but he needs her to do this. It is the only way. "He's here, Connie."

"No." Connie slaps the air with the nail. She looks around the room and shrugs. "No, Charl-ay. No boogey." She

looks back at him, a haunting gleam in her eyes. "No bloody..." She can't finish.

And Charlie is glad she doesn't. He takes her hands in his. "I love you, Connie. I do. And I promised mom and dad to take care of you. Mainly, Aunt Cathy has done that, but I was over seas, keeping you safe from that lot over there. I've done my part. Now it's time for you to do yours. It's time for you to take care of me. Now, I've laid down my life for you. And now its time for you to lay down your life for me."

Sergeant Gears whispered, *Great achievement is born of great sacrifice.*

They sat hand in hand on the kitten comforter. Moments birth silence.

Connie spills a fresh plume of quiet tears. Her sobs turn to hiccups, and she keeps shivering in the low lamplight of the room. She says clearly, calmly, "Take care of Charl-ay. My turn." She turns and wraps her arms around his neck like a child.

He's sweating, and dammit, crying too. "Yes, Connie."

Let her sleep, for when she wakes, she'll shake the world. Charlie got it now. Only he didn't see it the same way Gears and the rest of the boys had seen it. He also didn't think of it as China. She is Connie. Connie has been ignorant, sleeping. Her eyes are open now. And only she can make this work.

"How, Charl-ay. How?"

Charlie covers his eyes with his hands, wipes the sweat from his forehead. "Get on the carpet."

Connie squeezes him hard. "Okay, Charl-ay." She slips her toes to the fuzzy shag carpet and sits cross-legged. One knee points under the bed, the other points to the closet. She looks up at him, mouth turned down. Her slanted puppy dog eyes glaze over, trusting him.

"Now, hold out the claw in front of you." Connie holds it out in front of her, then sneezes on it.

Respect the Burden, says Sergeant Gears, quoting Napoleon.

"Respect the burden, Con." Charlie stands and paces.

"Huh?" She wipes her nose with the hand holding the talon, then holds the claw out in front of her again.

He yanks the pistol from his pocket. "Nevermind. Nevermind about that. Now, crawl under the bed."

Connie looks at her white bed ruffles hovering above the ground.

The furnace growls, and blows heat through the floor vent beside the bed. The bed ruffles move slightly, but whether from the vent or from what's beneath the bed, Charlie doesn't know.

"No, Charl-ay." She searches for the right word, pointing to the darkness lurking behind the ruffles. "No Boog-ery there."

Charlie can't help but let loose a high-pitched cackle.

It startles Connie, and she wraps her arms about herself and rocks. "Sca-red."

Charlie paces and sweats. He looks in the closet, out the blinds of the window. "Me too. But you have to help me Connie. It's the only way." He points the pistol at the bed.

This time, Connie doesn't flinch when she sees the gun. She draws in a deep breath, nods. "Okay, Charl-ay." She stretches on her stomach, the pants of her pink flannel jammies creeping up her thick calves to her knees. She holds the talon out in front of her like he'd asked and squirms beneath the bed ruffles.

Charlie aims at the floor by the bed.

A second ticks by.

Two.

Connie sounds relieved. “No boog-ery, Char-lay.”

Charlie winces at the sound of her voice. Something he hasn’t considered—perhaps *he* only exists in Connie’s reality. Like a TV show. In Connie’s reality, there is no “boogery” man, and perhaps Charlie is the sibling who was fucked in the head. And this is silly, all so silly.

Charlie giggles.

He takes out his bayonet, brims his thumb across the edge. His skin breaks and blood beads to the surface. It stings. If he doesn’t truly exist how can he feel the cut? He sucks on his thumb, staring at the gleaming edge of his weapon. *You’ve checked into hell, son, and there ain’t no way back.* He thinks about tossing the bayonet aside or perhaps slicing his wrist, when he sees a form sitting beside the nightstand.

He startles as it materializes from shadow to solid body before his eyes.

Sergeant Gears is pale as a ghost. A slim cigarette hangs from his lips. His army fatigues are splattered in blood and bits of intestines, intestines that are not his. Below his blown out knees, sinew and flesh hang in strings. Charlie can see the tip of femur bone in his right thigh.

Gears takes the cigarette out of his mouth and snuffs it on the bit of femur. It makes a hissing sound. “Well, kid, everyone doubts their own existence now and then,” Gears says. “Maybe you *don’t* exist. Maybe I don’t. Hell, maybe the whole fuckin’ army never did. But one thing I can tell you sure as I’m sittin’ here.” He tugs another Marlboro from its box, the plastic crackling as he does. He lights it, and points underneath the bed. “That thing under there? He sure fucking *exists*.”

Charlie nods. "Okay, Sarg, I trust you." Charlie cusses under his breath. He clutches the bayonet in one hand, the pistol in the other, ready for combat. Mainly, he wants Connie out from under the bed. He says calmly, gently, "Connie, get out."

Sergeant Gears cups his hand and flicks ashes into it. He quotes Napoleon, "It's the cause, not the death, that makes the martyr."

More urgently, Charlie says, "Conn, I said get out from under there."

"It ok-ay, Char-lay. I see now." *When she wakes, she'll shake the world.*

"No, no, Connie. It's not okay. Come out now." She wiggles under the bed further, holding out the talon. He hears her say, "It's for you, Boog-ery."

"Come out right the fucking now!" He drops the knife, stuffs the pistol in his waistband, and grabs Connie's ankles. He yanks her legs to drag her back.

Connie struggles, resists. She's much stronger than he'd ever thought.

"Charl-ay... stoppit!"

Sergeant Gears shakes his head and sticks the cigarette back in his mouth. "Game over, kid. Game over."

Charlie ignores Sergeant Gears. "Connie! Get the fuck back here!" He keeps pulling, but she kicks back at him, clobbering him in the nose. "For you, Boog-ery."

A hiss.

Charlie screams, "Connie!"

There is a second, a precious second: a flick of the bulb, a tick of the clock. Now is the time to do something.

Gears says, "With you it rests, Callimachus..."

Charlie tears up. "...either to bring Athens to slavery or to secure her freedom.' The Battle at Marathon."

“Atta boy.” Sergeant Gears blows a circle of smoke into the air and it disappears. Charlie wrenches the pistol out of his waistband with one hand, and holds one of his sister’s ankles in the other. He would not be a slave to this monster. The time for fighting was now.

Gears salutes him, and Charlie drops his face to the carpet.

Sweat drips in his eyes. He can’t see a damn thing in the pitch-black, except Connie. She lies in a dark void, suspended by her pink jammies. He hears a hiss, and Connie giggles.

He aims beneath the bed. Points left towards the hissing, trying to aim above Connie’s head. She tee-hees madly like a five year old. He begins to squeeze the trigger. Stops. The hissing comes from the right side now. He aims that way. Connie waves her arms, “Boog-ery! Ha! Ha!”

“Stop waving your damn arms!” Now the hissing, louder, comes from the left where Connie is. He swings his gun toward it. Fingers the trigger, ready to squeeze. Connie turns and looks back at him.

He stops.

He can’t do it. Not with Connie’s head in the way. The boogeyman *wants* him to shoot. Instead of hitting the monster, he will hit Connie. That’s what it wants. And Charlie will be damned if he walks straight into that trap.

The beast growls.

“Holy shit!” Charlie aims into the dark, begins to squeeze the trigger again, then drops the gun on the floor. “Fuck you! Fuck!”

And the second is gone, his moment of victory ticks by.

Connie lets loose a rabbit-caught-in-a-snare scream.

A voracious hissing booms from under the bed,

disturbing the white ruffles. It is the Voice from the closet. The Harvester of Days growls, "Sweeter!"

"Charl-ay!" Connie struggles to back up.

Charlie yanks on both Connie's calves. "I gotcha, Con! Please, come back to me."

The monster rakes her further under as if she is weightless. The wedge of her pink flannel jammies around her knees disappears beneath the ruffles, then her knees, calves...

Charlie has full grasp of her feet. He can barely breathe, but he screams to the monster anyway. "Take me!" He yells at the monster, the dark one, the Harvester of Days. "Take me instead." His voice breaks and he cries, "Please, oh, plea—"

A roaring laughter leaps from the dark space beneath the bed, a laughter full of teeth and claws and bile. "Little sisters are sweeter, so much sweeter." There is a sharp scream cut short by an agonizing high-pitched wail.

A bone crushing chomp.

"Oh, Connie," Charlie sobs. A hard yank jolts Connie into the shadows. She disappears under the ruffles. Charlie still clutches her ankles, and he is pulled under with her. And then he sees. He sees that she hasn't completely disappeared; only half of her has.

Connie's upper body is deep inside a midnight abyss, bent at the waist. Her lower body is limp.

"God, no. No! I changed my mind! Don't you hear me? Leave her. Take me! Please..." wails Charlie. "Give her back."

The Harvester of Days hisses, "Take her then."

With a sudden energy, Connie's upper body flips up out of the hole, and the dark abyss closes up.

"Connie!" Charlie heaves and tows her back from under

the bed. "Oh, Connie, I'm sorry. So sorry." He scrambles out from beneath the bed, and continues to lug Connie from the bed ruffles into the full light of the lamp.

Tears fly down his cheeks. Guilt engraves his face, his throat, his insides. His sin is a knife carving him inside out.

Connie's shoulders and neck still lie hidden under the bed ruffles.

With a final heave, he hauls her body all the way out... and screams.

Screams.

Screams.

Connie's head is gone, her throat chewed and severed. Veins and blood spurt from her neck stump, painting the white ruffles red.

Charlie clutches his blood splattered face, screaming and wailing.

Outside, from far off, he hears a nosy neighbor yelling. It is probably Mrs. Sanders, she'd called the cops after he and Connie had found their parents beneath their bed, three years before. "Don't worry!" Mrs. Sanders yells back. "I called 9-1-1!"

Charlie crumples between his sister's headless body and his pistol, black and shiny. He touches it, picks it up. It feels grim in his hand.

He calms as he raises the gun to his mouth, all the while clinging to Connie's hand.

"You were right, Conn. Bloody murder."

Sergeant Gears is still in the corner beside the nightstand. His helmet hangs loosely from his bloody head, and the same cigarette sticks out his lips, the way his leg stumps thrust out from his hips. He whispers, "*Game over, kid.*"

Charlie salutes the Sergeant.

The Sergeant salutes back.

Charlie settles the pistol snug in his mouth and pulls the trigger—*Click! Click! Click!*

Empty. The magazine is empty.

Sergeant Gears says, “Your father never loaded his pistol. He kept the bullets separate in a shoebox. He knew about you, kiddo. So did your Auntie, she read your discharge papers. She found the bullets and flushed them one by one down the john.”

Out the window in the storm and rain, the echo of police sirens blot out the sound of Mrs. Sander’s voice at the front door. An ambulance honks through the sleepy neighborhood. Charlie can see the headlines now: BLOODY MURDER! DISCHARGED SOLDIER CHOPS OFF DOWN SYNDROME SISTER’S HEAD!

He curls around his sister’s torso, sobbing into her blood. “Connie, oh, Connie...”

The Harvester of Days hisses from the great abyss. The blood splattered bed ruffles dance above the carpet. Beneath them, he sees diamond eyes the color of crimson and hell-fire. Charlie reaches behind himself on the carpet, his hands curl around the butt of the bayonet.

Police pound the door. “Police! Open up!”

Charlie whimpers.

Razor talons creep from under the bloody bed ruffles.

“Stay away!” Charlie points the bayonet at the monster.

He hears the front door burst open. Footsteps thump from the hallway, up the stairs.

An ovoid face appears beneath the ruffles, eyes glimmering with madness, teeth needle sharp. It hisses.

Charlie pisses himself. He thrusts the sharp edge of the blade at the creature’s face, plunging toward its diamond eye.

The creature leaps forward.

The bedroom door breaks in and the police yell, "Freeze!"

He holds the knife in front of him, shaking, shivering, clinging to his dead sister's body. The knife is bloody. Very, very bloody.

A young officer approaches with his gun drawn. "You sick fuck. Drop the weapon."

"It's not... I didn't..." He mumbles.

"Drop the weapon now!" The young officer aims his gun.

Charlie drops the bayonet and clutches Connie. Shaking, shivering, he looks to the Sergeant for support, but Gears is gone.

Cuffs clap around Charlie's wrists. "You have the right to remain silent..."

Claws reach from under the bed, yanking Charlie's hair, pulling his head back. Reality slices his jugular. Existence gurgles in his throat and implodes out his mouth.

More officers enter the room. He feels hands lifting him to his feet.

Charlie bares his needle teeth and hisses—roars! He is alive. Really alive. And all that he loves is dead. This knowledge, this *life*, this reality. It has made him a monster.

He hears Sergeant Gears whisper, *We exist only because we are loved. Without love, we are nothing but dust under the bed.*

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AFTERWORD

My teen son loves to be scared, but only when reading books. He asked me to write a scary boogeyman story. So at first, I wrote a short story about an absolutely horrifying monster stuffing its underground kingdom with the skulls of children. But then...I got bored.

I wanted to write a REAL boogeyman story. An adult boogeyman story. Something that we as adults could actually believe might happen. Something that slips in that fear of doubt, *could I do that?* We all go a little nutty at some point in our lives, but what if it's the wrong kind of nutty, the snap, crackle and pop kind of nutty...the *killing kind* of nutty.

That scares the bejeezus out of me.

Yes, Charlie has PTSD a very real and disabling mental disease. If you know someone who has this, go see them and give them a hug. Support is everything.

Connie was originally supposed to live in the story, but by the time my edits were through, the monster got her. He got her the way monsters in the real world prey upon and devour innocence. Is the boogeyman real or did Charlie do the monstrous deed? That is a question you must search

inside your mind for and draw your own conclusion. Thank you so much for reading and supporting my writing.

~Mav

Ps And the Napoleon quotes? We all go a little nutty sometimes...

PSSSTTT...YOU. YEAH, YOU. OVER HERE.



direction.

THANK you so much for reading *Harvester of Days*! If you enjoyed the book, *please* leave a review and share with your friends. Click [HERE](#) to go to the review page.

I promise to think happy thoughts and blow bubbles in your general

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



When Mav Skye isn't turning innocent characters into axe murderers, refinishing old furniture, chasing around her spring ducklings, or reading the latest horror novel, she's editing at the almighty Pulp Metal Magazine. She adores puppies, pirates, skulls, red hots, Tarantino movies and yes, Godzilla. Especially Godzilla.

I'd love to hear from you. Hit me up!

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