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Free

# If E Zine

Issue #16

Comes the Cosmic Vandals

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## Editorial



Hey, folks! Iffy here. Welcome to the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Special Halloween Edition of If EZine! We've seen a lot of changes to this old online rag over the years and I'm excited to be celebrating my third year with you good people.

Besides this year's Halloween issue, I'll be making my first public appearances this October. Yep, your old pal Iffy will be appearing at two events, including the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Flint Zombie Walk in Flint, Michigan, USA. It's a good time to be alive! Or undead... BWAAHAHAHAHAHA!!!

In this issue we will be introduced to my cohorts and comrades, the psychobilly band members of the Cosmic Vandals. We'll read their origin stories and have a blast as they meet up for the first time.

Here's hoping you have a fun and safe Halloween!

~ Iffy

## Johnny Rotted

by Charles Shaver

Johnny was a good kid. He'd just turned eighteen and was building a rat rod for himself. He could never put it to words, he had always preferred the aesthetic of ugliness that rat rods often have; the decayed, putrid, ramshackle, on-the-cheap look of the homemade vehicles. He was building a rail. He had built everything from the ground up, except for the base of the body and the engine block. The body once started life as a 1934 Ford pickup. He wasn't a dumb kid, as most often shop rats and jocks are seen. He loved the sights, sounds and smells of a machine shop; most of all he loved the fact he got to play with fire and torches and clamps and all kinds of big, wieldy tools and, in the end, had something to show for it. He could never quite bring himself to stating the work was akin to the *Great Masters* in the museum of cities like Paris, but he had heard others say it and wondered if they weren't far off from right. *Great Master* or not, Johnny loved building things that moved and expressed his love by taking *Mechanics Shop* all four years of high school.

Now he had a mere two weeks before graduation. He wasn't passing with flying colors, he had particular trouble making a cake and figuring out

theorems in Home Economics and his pre-trigonometry classes, but he was passing nonetheless.

Johnny raised the blazing blue-white flame of an oxy-acetylene torch to the cigarette in his mouth and lit it. He was a handsome young man with sharp lines in his face and thick sandy blonde hair. He wasn't so far gone from youth that he hadn't lost some of his boyish looks, but didn't have enough manhood and living in him yet to look grizzled.

"Johnny Drysdale!" Coach Asper yelled. The assistant lineman coach that doubled as shop teacher and, on occasion, as history teacher walked over to him. He snatched the cigarette from Johnny's mouth, threw it to the concrete of the floor and stomped it out. "Cut that shit out!"

"Aw, c'mon coach," Johnny jested, "I checked. No one's using anything that my little cigarette will blow this place sky high."

"I don't give a shit! There's no smoking on school grounds, period. I'm surprised at you, Johnny, since you learned you're somehow walking at graduation you've been out of control."

"I'm just having a little fun," Johnny said seriously.

"You damn fool kid! You're stupid as shit! You're a good ball player, Johnny. Why would you wanna fuck up your future with cancer sticks?"

Johnny lowered his head and shrugged.

"Am I gonna have any more problems with you today? Can I get through today without you acting an asshole?"

Johnny looked to his coach and teacher and nodded. He said, "Sure."

The coached walked away and into his office.

Johnny looked to a couple friends that had been watching nearby and all of them erupted with giggles.

One of the guys, a bright-eyed, red-haired kid named Scotty Maley, came to Johnny's side. They talked as they donned their goggles and commenced to chopping the top on a 1982 Buick Regal the school had inherited from a charity that gave cars wrecked in accidents as educational tools.

"Scotty, when I'm done here and gone from this horrible hall, I want you to take over the work on this Buick," Johnny instructed and, quite literally, passed the torch.

Scotty looked at Johnny through his goggles, the blue flame held in his hand. He said, "Thanks, Johnny. I'll make this thing bad as shit."

"Good. Did you get the mirrors from it for me?"

"Yeah. I put them in bag in your locker."

"Thanks."

Scotty cut through some of the Regal's roof. He then stopped and took a deep breath.

"Don't hold your breath, Scotty," instructed Johnny. "Keep breathing, nice and slow. Holding your breath will make your hand shake."

Scotty nodded and continued cutting. When he had the length of the passenger side cut, he stopped and put out the torch. He said, "Man, that rat rod of yours is gonna be fine as hell when you're done, Johnny."

"You haven't seen her run yet, have you?"

Scotty shook his head. "I was there when you turned the engine over the first time, that's it."

"Come out to my place sometime and we'll take her on a run."

"How about tonight?"

Johnny took the torch as Scotty put wedges under the part of the roof he cut so it wouldn't collapse inward when the other side was cut. He shook his head. "Nah, not tonight. I got Christi coming over and we're going out."

"Christi Horton?"

"Yeah."

"Damn, she's a fine-ass girl. You get some of that yet?"

Johnny smirked, but didn't answer.

"You mean you haven't?" Scotty asked, in shock. "What the hell? How long you two been going out?"

"Almost the full school year."

"And nothing?"

Johnny shook his head.

"Why you with her then?"

As Johnny shrugged it came to Scotty, "You love her."

Johnny's embarrassed smile confirmed this.

"Oooooooh, Johnny's in looooooove," Scotty taunted.

"Shut the fuck up," Johnny pushed Scotty.

The two laughed together.

"You won't tell anyone, will you? Most everyone thinks we're doing it every time we're together."

"Yeah, I heard you two arranged to get a couple hall passes to meet up in the gym showers to do it."

Johnny shook his head. "I heard that, too. It never happened. I got called in to the office because I'd forgotten something at home and my dad

brought it to school. Christi was out at the same time, but to see the nurse because she burned herself in home ec."

"Man, don't let that shit out."

"I won't. And you better not, either."

"I won't, Johnny. I won't."

"I know," said Johnny. "C'mon, let's get back to work."

"Hey, Johnny," Scotty said as he watched Johnny spark the torch again. "Whatcha gonna do when you graduate? Christi's a junior. You think you two can make it work?"

"I'm sure we'll try."

Johnny grabbed his tray of lunch. Christi, the petite strawberry blonde he'd been dating the whole school year, was at his side. He was tall and lanky. She was small and curvy. Johnny still wore his greasy jumpsuit from shop class. He wore it most times to lunch; the grease and the work wear making him feel a little rough about the edges. He led Christi to their usual table where they sat with their usual host of friends. Scotty was

there, though without his shop clothes, and he made room for the both of them.

"Thanks, Scotty," said Johnny.

Scotty just waved at him and bit into his sloppy joe.

As they sat, Christi said, "Ya know, Johnny, the diner downtown is holding a sock hop tonight. Some sort of flashback to the '50s."

"Is that so?" Johnny said without any real interest.

"Yeah, I heard it from my brother Logan in third period math."

Johnny grimaced as he lifted the bun from his sloppy joe and looked at the meat within. "I hate math. Hey, Scotty, is this shit any good today?"

Scotty took another huge bite and nodded.

"I guess they're gonna have contests and everything."

"Yeah? What kind of contests?" asked Johnny. He took a bite of his own sloppy joe and found it to be delicious.

"Something about cars and dancing and maybe some other things."

"Cars? You think my rod might be worth entering?"

Christi smiled. "I think it could win."

"I dunno, most people think it looks like shit."

"Can we go anyways?"

"Sure, why not? It's Friday, right? We were going out anyways, might as well check out the geezers at the diner."

"Not everyone that's going to be there will be geezers," said Logan. He was a brooding brute and Christi's older brother and had been eavesdropping from a table nearby when he decided to walk over to Johnny and the others. He was an ugly sort, but not ugly in features. If he ever smiled someone might threaten to call him handsome. He was ugly in other ways, in more accountable but less physical ways. He was tall, had a thin dark brown crew cut and long, long chops. His forearms were the size of some people's waists and he had a little belly as he'd been drinking beer daily since he was fifteen. He was now nineteen, had been held back a year in grade school and uncertain if he'd be graduating with Johnny and his other classmates.

"I'll be there," he said.

"So there *will* be old geezers there," taunted Scotty.

Logan placed his massive hand on the back of Scotty's head and slammed it forward onto the tray on the table in front of him.

"Shut your mouth," said Logan.

Johnny grabbed Logan by the wrist and stood. "Let him go," he demanded.

"Sure, I'll let your boyfriend go." Logan's grip loosened and he let go of Scotty. Christi grabbed up some spare napkins and helped Scotty wipe his face clean of food.

Johnny let go of Logan's wrist.

"How's the rat rod coming along?" he asked.

"It's coming," answered Johnny.

"Does that piece of shit run yet?"

"Yeah, it does."

"Then bring it down to the diner. We'll make it a regular old rod rally. Unless, of course, you're going to be too busy messing with your boyfriend to show up." Logan sneered.

Johnny asked, "Why you gotta beef with me, man?"

"Cause you've been puttin' it to my sister all year. An' my sister ain't yours ta have."

Christi spun on Logan and said, "I'm not yours to have, either, Logan! I'm my own woman."

"Heh, maybe," said Logan.

"Just get out of here, Logan."

Logan nodded, eying Johnny. "I will... for now," then said to Johnny, "See you at the diner, princess."

Johnny and Christi watched him go as Scotty continued to clean off his face.

The diner was bright, even at night, and busy with all kinds of activity. People had brought out their classic cars from all over the county for the rally and dance. Johnny was no longer dressed in his workshop clothes instead now wearing jeans, a plain white undershirt and a leather jacket.

"Wow, this is a pretty big deal," said Johnny as he pulled his beat up old rat rod into a stall. "How long they been doing this?"

"This is the first year," said Christi. "Johnny, can you cut the engine? It's so loud."

"Sure, sure," Johnny complied.

A young girl rolled up on old style rollerskates, stopping by Johnny's window and said, "Can I take your order? Or do you need more time?"

"Ah, we just got here. We're gonna need a little more time," said Johnny. He looked over the marquee menu.

"Hey, Jules," said Christi.

The rollergirl looked across to Christi and smiled, "Oh, hey Christi."

"This where you work?"

"Yeah."

"I didn't know."

"It gets me spare money," said Jules. "I'll give you two a couple minutes. I'll be back as soon as I can. It's crazy right now."

Jules skated away.

"You know her?" asked Johnny.

"From home ec, yeah."

"She's cute."

Christi slapped Johnny's arm. "You're mean."

"No, she is."

"What about me?"

"Yeah," Johnny smiled, teasing, "you're alright, too."

"Thanks." Christi scooted across the seat into Johnny's arms and eyed the menu with him.

The car to their left pulled away and in its spot came the roaring, rumbling engine of Logan's 1955 Oldsmobile 88. All 402 horses roared.

"Shit," Johnny shook his head.

Logan cut his Oldsmobile's engine and said out the open passenger window, "Heeeyy, looky here. The queer and my little sister. Where's your boyfriend, queer?"

"Don't use that word, Logan!" scolded Christi, "It's not nice!"

"Why not? He looks a little off in the head to me. Ya know, a little queer," taunted Logan.

"Sometimes I wish he wasn't my big brother," said Christi to Johnny.

"Ah, it's his job to protect you and rag on me," Johnny said. He looked over at Logan and said, "She's lookin' fine, Logan. Are you finished?"

"You're never finished working on a rod, dumbass. Is yours finished? Are ya gonna slap some paint on it? If ya want, I got a can of spray paint, but you'll have to do something about all that rust before you paint."

Johnny just shook his head. He liked the ugliness of his rat rod, but not the ugliness of Logan. He could handle most of Logan's harassment, though.

"What the hell's that damn thing s'posed to be, anyways?" asked Logan. "It looks like a goddamn skull!"

"It is."

"See, Christi? Goddamn queer."

Jules returned and Johnny and Christi ordered. They ate in relative peace as Logan got out of his Olds and walked around looking at cars and chatting with other people. Jules came once more to take away their trash.

Johnny

"I'm surprised Logan didn't hassle us much," said Christi as she reapplied her lipstick.

"Me, too. I keep waiting for him to yell in the window or something. But let's get out of here, we can go park up on the point and look down at the city."

"Oh, Johnny, do we have to? That factory below the hill smells bad."

"Just for a minute, Christi, please?"

Christi reluctantly agreed, saying, "I know you like to look at the lights."

The rat rod roared to loud, piercing life. Everyone noticed it come alive and waved a few greetings to Johnny and Christi as they left the diner.

Fifteen minutes later, a similarly loud 1955 Oldsmobile 88 was started and left the diner.

Johnny parked the rat rod under an oak at the top of the hill. The city glistened below them.

"Look at it," said Johnny, "every one of those lights is a life, is a family."

"God, that factory smells horrible," answered Christi, her finger to her nose to block out the smell. "What the hell do they do there to make that smell?"

"They burn waste, I think. I know it's not a good smell. Just one more minute, sweetie."

Christi smiled. "I like when you call me sweetie."

"I like you."

"For realsies?"

"For cereals," smiled Johnny.

The two kissed.

Johnny reached into the small space behind the car seat and pulled from there his small three-quarters size cheap acoustic guitar. He strummed it and played at the strings, making certain it was in tune.

"Play me something, Johnny," said Christi.

Johnny began playing and singing 'Earth Angel'.

Christi smiled.

A mile away, Logan turned off his headlights and pulled over to the side of the road. He thought to himself, "That bastard is up there fouling my sister. He's a full year older. He's an adult, for chrissakes! She's barely seventeen. Isn't that rape? In the law? I dunno, but it makes me sick."

Logan downed his fifth beer of the night and threw the can out the window. Thoughts of sexual acts being performed on his sister by Johnny enraged him. He opened a sixth beer and nearly drank the whole can in one gulp. He wiped the excess from his chin and threw the can out the window.

"That sonuvabitch!"

Logan stamped on the gas pedal and the Oldsmobile cried out.

Johnny pulled away from Christi and looked back.

"What's the matter?" asked Christi.

"I thought I heard an engine. It sounded like your brother's Olds."

"Oh, we left him back at the diner," assured Christi.

"Maybe, but we should get you away from this factory smell." Johnny put away his guitar and started up the rat rod and threw it in gear just as Logan came up under him without headlights, slamming the Oldsmobile into

the back of the rat rod and catapulting it out over the cliff. The rat rod speed down the hill, Christi and Johnny screaming for their lives. Having made the entire rod out of steel, Johnny's car built speed, crashing through the fencing of the factory.

Logan got out of his Olds and looked down the hill in horror. "Oh, shit," he said, "Christi!"

He watched as the rat rod went hurtling into the factory, its rail design acting like a spearhead, piercing the side of a large tank. Highlighter green sludge spilled from the tank, covering the rat rod. Sirens blared automatically, alerting the few workers that staffed the factory at night to the breach. Johnny and Christi fought against the current of oncoming waste, but could make no headway. They were trapped in the skull-cab of the rat rod and the tall tank kept vomiting forth its contents.

Johnny and Christi didn't so much die of exposure to the toxic waste as they drowned in it.

Logan, afraid, returned to his Olds and sped away from the scene, determined to act surprised and sorrowful when he heard of his sister's death.

The breach and the deaths of the two teens was big news all over Indiana. A special day of mourning was held at their high school and during the Valedictorian's speech at graduation, he called for a moment of silence for Johnny and Christi.

Logan played his part. He told the cops he'd seen his sister and her boyfriend at the diner, then went home for the night where he'd been drinking. A few cops became suspicious when beer cans were found a mile from where Johnny's rat rod had rolled down the hill. More suspicions followed when damage was found on the back bumper of the rat rod and Logan's Olds came up missing a front bumper.

"I've got a newer one on order is all," he told authorities. "I sold the old one for scrap." Which he did. And the old bumper was gone now.

The news was told the bodies of the teens would be kept and autopsies performed, but the families wouldn't be allowed to bury their children due to the toxic levels of waste they bodies now contained.

What didn't make the news was the fact the bodies of both Christi and Johnny were still complete and intact, if not a grotesque shade of green. Bones had been broken, waste ingested. The autopsies were set to be

carried out the day after graduation. The doctor ordered newer x-rays be taken as he wasn't certain of some of the details previous ones showed. When he looked at the new x-rays, he gasped, "How in the hell did these bones heal in a week's time on dead bodies?"

He proceeded with the autopsies anyways, starting on Johnny. As Johnny lie on the table, his chest spread wide open and the doctor dressed in a biohazard suit, Johnny's eyes opened. He looked at the doctor and asked, "Hey, what's going on here?"

The doctor and his staff panicked. They scrambled for the door and locked Johnny in his containment room. They communicated with him through microphones and speakers and peered at one another through thick safety glass.

Johnny got up from the table, his chest still wide open.

"Johnny," said the doctor, "I'm Dr. Vamiel. Can you understand me?"

"Of course I can. It's not like you're speaking Chinese."

"Do you..." Dr. Vamiel was uncertain how he was going to approach this new matter. He asked, "Do you feel that?"

"What?"

"That," the doctor pointed at Johnny.

Johnny looked down at his chest. "Holy shit. What do you know about that?" he said with underscored surprise. "How'd this happen?"

Johnny got up to walk to the glass. He caught a bit of his reflection and stared at himself. "I'm green," he said, "and my hair's messy and long. And... and my chest looks like the Grand Canyon! What the hell's going on here?"

"Johnny, don't panic," soothed Dr. Vamiel.

"How the fuck am I supposed to *not* get panicked? Do you see this shit? What the hell happened?"

"You and your girlfriend was in an accident."

"Shit! Christi! Is she okay?"

"Last I saw she was, well... she was dead, like you were at one time."

Johnny looked down at his chest. He wasn't bleeding and his heart wasn't beating. He looked back up at Dr. Vamiel and said, "I'm no doctor, but I think I'm still dead. What happened?"

"Your hot rod-"

"Rat rod," Johnny corrected.

"How's that?"

"It's a rat rod, not a hot rod. Hot rods are hot and clean and have a nice paint job. Mine's a rat rod. It runs and that's about it."

"Oh, okay, well, you're rat rod wheeled down the hill and slammed into a tank of toxic waste. It killed you and Christi."

"Is she like me? Is she dead but walking around?"

"I haven't checked."

"God, I hope not. This is some freaky shit."

Dr. Vamiel agreed with a nod.

"Can I see her?" asked Johnny.

"Not just yet. Let me ask you, how are you feeling? You seem to be giving no response to the current state of your chest. Are you in any discomfort?"

"Discomfort? I should be screaming my ass off!"

"Yes, you should be. But how do you feel, Johnny?"

Johnny was slow to answer. When he finally did, he said, "I'm feeling zombified."

Dr. Vamiel watched as Johnny looked himself over. Slowly, slowly Johnny pointed a finger and directed it towards his open chest.

"No, Johnny, don't," said Dr. Vamiel.

Johnny looked up at him. He smiled and said, "Who's body is it?"

Johnny put his finger on an unmoving lung. He didn't feel it. He then poked at his heart. He didn't feel that, either. He grabbed the heart completely and squeezed it twice. As he did this, green pus squirted from various open wounds. The doctor's staff looked away in horror. One poor woman vomited into a nearby wastebasket.

"Johnny... Johnny, please," begged the doctor.

"This is crazy, doctor," Johnny let go his heart and placed his begoed hand on the safety glass, leaning there. "What's become of me?"

"I'm not quite certain, Johnny."

Johnny quietly allowed Dr. Vamiel and his staff to return to the room where they sewed up the young undead man's chest.

"I don't know if this will heal," Dr. Vamiel admitted through his biohazard suit to Johnny, indicating his stitched up chest.

"At least I won't catch death of a cold from a draft," Johnny joked.

Most of the staff was allowed to leave while Dr. Vamiel remained to speak with Johnny and another staffer cleaned up.

"How did this happen?" asked Johnny.

"It would seem the waste first killed you and then, somehow, reanimated you."

"Will I stay like this forever? Will I get better?" As soon as Johnny asked these questions he knew the answers.

Dr. Vamiel shook his head. "This is all beyond any science I've ever known, Johnny. I'm sorry I don't have any answers for you. But if we can deduce the exact event, maybe we can find some answers together. What do you remember of the accident? Did your... uh, rat rod, did it slip out of gear while parked on the hill?"

Johnny thought back. He shook his head. "No," he said, "In fact I think I'd just put it in neutral, then was going to back out. But sometimes the gears stick and you have to push it forward before you can slam it back into reverse.

"Shit! How's my car?"

The doctor shook his head. "I couldn't tell you. It looked pretty bad to me."

"It looked pretty bad to everyone before all this."

"You say you put it in gear, did you accidentally hit the gas, then?" asked Dr. Vamiel.

Johnny thought back again. His eyes widened as he said, "No... I heard the sound of a revving 402."

"402?"

"An engine."

"Another engine?"

Johnny nodded. "A specific engine... from an Oldsmobile. We were hit from behind!"

"Another car hit you?"

"Yes. By Logan in his Oldsmobile 88. He slammed into us. I remember trying to slam on the brake on the way down, the trees rushing past us, the brake not working and the tank towering over us. I remember..." Johnny gagged as though gasping for air. "We were drowning! Logan did this to us! I'll kill him!"

Johnny hopped off the surgical table and paced. "I need to get that sonuvabitch!"

The speakers in the room squawked with someone's voice. "Doctor," said the woman, "the same thing's happened with the girl. She up and walking around and asking questions."

"Shit," Johnny softly cursed.

Dr. Vamiel studied Johnny. He rested a gloved hand on Johnny's shoulder and said, "Johnny, I think you two might need each other. Would it be okay if I had her brought over here?"

Johnny nodded.

Soon the door opened and another staffer in a biohazard suit was escorting Christi into the room. She had changed, too, much like Johnny. Her skin was lime green, almost glowing. Her eyes were forever bloodshot. Her hair was messed and matted. Her dress was drenched and ugly. She walked stiffly, but she walked.

They drew nearer one another. They embraced.

"Johnny, it's so terrible," said Christi.

Johnny held her closer. He asked, "Do you remember much?"

Christi was slow to answer, "I remember drowning... before that I remember screaming. Oh, I was so scared. I kept screaming and screaming. I thought for sure we'd hit a tree or big boulder or something and be thrown and mangled. Then... before that... I remember you saying something."

Johnny kissed her atop the head. He didn't want to ask her to repeat his words.

But then she said, "It was Logan, wasn't it, Johnny? Logan did this to us."

Again Johnny said nothing. He merely stood, holding her close.

"I remember one thing more," said Christi. "I remember you singing to me." She smiled and nuzzled her head deeper in her chest.

Johnny looked to Dr. Vamiel and said, "Are they going to get Logan?"

Dr. Vamiel shook his head.

"Why the hell not?"

"I'm not part of that investigation, but last I heard he walked because there wasn't enough evidence against him."

"What the hell, man?" Johnny raged and pulled away from Christi.

"We're standing right here telling you who the hell did this to us! Just call them and get that bastard in cuffs! I'll sign anything that says he did it!"

Dr. Vamiel shook his head once more. "You're not known to be alive. And those in power over this facility, my employers, mean to keep everything about this accident as quiet as possible. They're already having trouble keeping reaction to your accident low. As far as the general public is concerned, your beat up old rod slipped out of gear. This was a complete freak accident and you two are dead and in no way is the company or anyone

else at fault. Your families have been told your bodies aren't being allowed back to them for burial due to toxicity. There's less controversy this way."

"So a killer, a potential murderer, or whatever the hell he'd be called is left to walk away?" screamed Johnny.

Dr. Vamiel nodded.

"Where's the justice in that?" asked Johnny.

Dr. Vamiel continued to shake his head as he said, "Justice and legalities aren't always mutual bedfellows."

As Johnny and Dr. Vamiel argued, Christi had been examining herself. She now spoke up, "I don't think I want to stay this way."

Johnny turned to look at her. He held her close once more. He grimaced at Dr. Vamiel and said, "Let me go. Let me find Logan and I'll return to you. I know this entire town. I can do it on the sneak."

"Are you talking about murdering someone, Johnny?" asked Dr. Vamiel.

Johnny considered this. He said, "I don't know what I'll do."

"I can't release you onto the world, anyways. Just forget it. You've got a new life to adapt to. Concentrate on that now."

"Justice is needed, doctor," Johnny argued. "And I'll be getting it. I don't know how, but Logan will get what's coming to him."

Two more days passed. Christi and Johnny were allowed to remain together. Most of Johnny's time was spent battling Christi's newfound depression and arguing with Dr. Vamiel over releasing him, if only for a little while. Johnny promised to return after he'd dealt with Logan, however he meant to do so, and he meant it. But the doctor refused.

Johnny and Christi didn't sleep. They never grew tired. They also never ate, though Johnny tried. He found he couldn't taste the food and he no longer had any sign of an appetite.

Finally, on the third day, alarms sounded in their room and the control room behind the safety glass where Dr. Vamiel most often spoke with them. The lights dimmed and red lights strobed in their place.

"What's happening, Johnny?" asked Christi.

"I don't know."

The staffers scattered and disappeared, screaming of fire.

"You're not just going to leave us here, are you?" Johnny yelled after them.

Christi said nothing. She remained seated on the surgical table, wishing for the fire to consume them.

The door to the room slid open. Dr. Vamiel, in his biohazard suit, appeared. He looked at Johnny and said, "Now's your chance."

"What?" asked Johnny.

"I've agreed with you all along, but couldn't say so because everything you say or do or anyone around you says or does is recorded," explained Dr. Vamiel. "The fire alarm's been pulled and most of the electronics disabled. Run, Johnny. Take Christi and find your justice."

Johnny grabbed Christi by the arm and lead her to the door. He said to Dr. Vamiel, "We'll return, I promise."

"It doesn't matter. I'll explain you escaped, whether you return or not is up to you. They'll not believe any of this. They'll just believe you ran when you had the chance. There's a cafeteria down this hall and to the left. There's a service entrance in the kitchen. You should be able to get out that way. It's a fire exit so other may be out there, but most will be too scared of you to come after you. Now run."

Johnny started to say something more when the doctor yelled, "Run, damn you!"

Johnny ran, dragging Christi behind him. He followed the doctor's directions and what he had told him was true: there was a cafeteria they ran through; there was a kitchen they ran through; they found the service entrance and bust through the door into the open air of a dark night. Six people, line cooks and bussers, were there. They screamed in horror at seeing Johnny and Christi and ran away.

Johnny looked around. He mounted a hill with Christi. The two young undead lovers escaped into the night.

Logan had been on a drunken binge since the night of his sister's death. It seemed to him the cops were watching his every move, so he only left his small single-wide trailer to go to the local party store to pick up more beer. Tonight he bought some Bud Light and splurged a little on some Killian's and a forty-ounce of malt liquor. He drove home with the liquor in the back seat. He passed a sheriff sitting at a speed trap along the way and waved playfully at him. The sheriff didn't wave back, merely watching Logan pass in his Oldsmobile 88 while obeying the speed limit.

Back at his trailer, Logan carried all his liquor inside. He put the Bud and Killian's in the fridge and opened the malt liquor and a Killian's. He sat in a battered recliner before a television and drank, flipping channels until he came across a creature feature with a horror host named Iffy. The demonic host was babbling on, making dry references to his skeletal body and cornball jokes about death. He then introduced the movie of the night, *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*.

Logan took a sip of the malt liquor, then drank deeply from the Killian's. He watched the introduction to the movie, wondering if he truly wanted to watch an old movie as her entertainment. He drank and drank, the Killian's being emptied first and then the malt liquor. He got up and grabbed another Killian's and two Buds. He returned to his recliner, the movie, and drank from a Bud and the power to his trailer went out.

Logan got up. He walked clumsily to the door of his trailer and poked his head out. He lived along on 5 acres he'd inherited from his grandfather. He peered through the darkness and thought he could see the nearest neighbor's lights.

"Damn fuse," he cursed. He stepped outside and walked to the back of the trailer where the fuse box was at. He couldn't see anything in the dark

and wished he'd had sense enough to bring a flashlight. He felt for the top fuse, the master, and pushed it in. The power kicked back on to his trailer.

He heard the screen door to his trailer slap shut.

"What the hell?" he wondered if there was an animal trying to get in his trailer, hungry and after food, or if the cops had shown up again to hassle him. He couldn't think straight, however, as his brain floated in a cloud of intoxication. He stumbled to the front door, opened it and cried, "Who the hell's in here?"

No one answered.

He stepped into his trailer and was about to sit down when he realized Johnny was in his recliner, green as an emerald and his eyes bloodshot. Johnny looked from the TV up at Logan and said, "Good evening, Logan. Is it movie night at your house?"

Logan squinted. He thought he was dreaming or so drunk he was seeing things. He asked, "J-Johnny?"

"Yeah, heeeere's Johnny!" Johnny spread his arms wide as though presenting himself to Logan.

"Holy shit," Logan backed away.

"Where are you going, Logan?" Johnny asked as he got up from the recliner. "Why don't we sit and enjoy the movie like a wholesome family. I'll even make popcorn!"

Logan shook his head, wishing Johnny's mirage away but it wouldn't go away.

"Sit down, Logan!" Johnny yelled.

Logan shook his head. He turned and ran out the trailer.

"Logan! Come back, Logan!" Johnny cried as he burst through the screen door, tearing out the netting as he went.

Logan ran for his Oldsmobile.

"Get over here, Logan!" Johnny yelled as he chased after his nemesis.

Logan got in his car and started it up.

Johnny jumped up onto the hood of the Oldsmobile. He lifted a foot and swung his engineer boots down at the windshield, smashing it in a small spot. Logan cried out, threw the car into gear and hit the gas pedal.

Johnny sprawled out onto the hood, holding on. As the Oldsmobile went careening down the road, Johnny struggled to climb into the open passenger window. Logan reached over to roll up the window. Christi reached

from the wide backseat to grab Logan by the forearm and said, "Let him in, Logan. We want to talk to you."

Logan screamed louder and slammed on the brake. The Oldsmobile came screeching to a smoking halt. Johnny was flung from the car, but he rolled up quickly and jumped through the window to sit next to Logan. He smiled and Logan screamed again.

"Why'd you do it, Logan?" asked Christi.

"I dunno what yer talkin' about!" refused Logan.

"Sure you do, buddy," said Johnny. "Why'd you kill us?"

Logan looked at them both. "Are you...? Are you dead?"

"What the hell else would we be?" Johnny yelled at him.

Logan shook his head and closed his eyes.

"Why, Logan? Why?" asked Christi.

Logan's words stammered, "I-I was d-drunk. I dunno what I was doing, or thinking. I was just so angry at Johnny for the things he did to my little sister."

"He's never touched me," said Christi. "Not in *that* way."

"W-what?"

Johnny nodded. "You killed us for nothing. You killed us for your own sense of hate and anger. You're a foul, foul person, Logan. And foul, foul people should come to a foul, foul end."

"What? No!" Logan pleaded for his life.

"Johnny, don't," said Christi.

"We deserve justice, Christi," argued Johnny. "And he deserves punishment."

"Well, I can't. And I can't watch."

Johnny eyed Christi. He then looked to Logan and hatred and vengeance filled him. He said, "Then get out."

"What?" Christi said.

"I'll be back for you soon enough," explained Johnny.

Christi got out of the Oldsmobile.

Johnny looked to Logan, pointed down the road and said, "Drive."

Logan shook his head.

"Do it or I'll drive this damned piece of shit right off a cliff," threatened Johnny.

Logan reluctantly drove away. Johnny ducked low as they drove by the sheriff, warning Logan not to drive erratically or swerve or call attention to

himself in any way. Logan obeyed and drove slowly, though not too slowly, past the sheriff. Clear of the sheriff, Johnny told Logan to head for the diner.

The diner was closed for the night by the time they got there. Johnny ordered Logan to park in a stall, then ordered him to get out of the Oldsmobile with him.

The two met at the back of the car. Johnny threw up his fists and said, "Put 'em up."

"What?"

"You heard me, put 'em up. We're finishing this now."

Logan weakly put up his fists. Johnny rocked him with a punch to the ear. Logan staggered a bit.

"C'mon," taunted Johnny. "Fight me!"

Logan staggered and stared, unbelieving.

Johnny punched Logan in the face with a left hook, break his nose. Blood sprayed down into his mouth. Tasting the blood, smelling iron, Logan gritted his teeth, grinning and growling. He clenched his fists tighter.

"That's better," Johnny smiled.

Logan punched at Johnny, but Johnny ducked and rose up with an uppercut, knocking Logan back. He came at Logan again, swinging wide. Logan put up his thick forearm to block the blow, grinned through his blood and stomped on Johnny's foot.

Johnny smiled again. "I no longer feel any pain."

Johnny punched Logan in the nose again.

Logan backed up and said, "Maybe, but if you are what I think you are, I just need to take of your head."

"Good luck trying," said Johnny. He came at Logan again, swinging.

Logan blocked each punch, then slammed his palms into the ears of Johnny. When Johnny didn't react, he grabbed him by the sides of the head and slammed his forehead into Johnny's. The force, more than anything, knocked Johnny back. Logan jumped at this opportunity and kicked Johnny in the chest, further knocking him back. Logan charged Johnny and pushed him until the undead Johnny fell onto his back.

Logan ran to his car, grabbed the keys from the ignition and ran to the trunk, but Johnny was up again and coming at him. Logan kicked again and sent Johnny on his back a second time. He then put the key in the lock and

opened the trunk. He reached in the trunk and pulled out an old axe. He turned in time for Johnny to return to his feet.

"C'mere, 'lil chicken," Logan playfully taunted, "c'mere and gimme yer neck!"

Logan swung the axe at Johnny. Johnny backed away. Logan swung again and Johnny dodged before moving in to grab Logan by the neck. He sent Logan to the ground with a hiptoss. The fall forced Logan's grip to loosen and he dropped the axe. Johnny picked it up.

Logan looked up at him, his eyes wide and pleading. He held up his hands as Johnny towered over him and said, "No! Please, no!"

Johnny swung the axe down into Logan's chest. He cut Logan to pieces, dissecting him with the axe and his two hands.

When Johnny was done, he wiped himself down and slowly, quietly made his way to Christi, avoiding the sheriff along the way. But it had been a long time since the sheriff had seen Logan drive by and he knew he was spending more time at home. Wondering what Logan might be up to, the sheriff left his speed trap position and headed in the direction he last saw Logan drive in. When the sheriff finally found Logan, Johnny was long gone. The sheriff came to the diner and found Logan's axe on the ground next to

the Oldsmobile, his intestines hanging from the Oldsmobile like so much crepe paper decoration, his legs lying in the open trunk, his hands locked on the steering wheel, his body in the passenger seat and his head - mouth wide and eyes gouged out - mounted on the Oldsmobile's window, facing into the car like a drive-in movie speaker.

Johnny found Christi sitting on a large stone, waiting. She greeted him with a hug and kiss.

Hesitantly, she asked, "What did you...?"

"We had a fight," was all Johnny would ever allow.

"Johnny, I've been thinking while I sat here waiting for you. I know I've been down these last few days and I'm sorry for that. I've decided that I'll take any life, even an un-living life, as long as I'm with you."

Johnny smiled.

"That is, if you'll have me. I don't quite look the same I used to," said Christi.

"You're beautiful," said Johnny. He kissed her sweetly and passionately.

The sheriff's car came speeding up. The sheriff had called in the death of Logan and was on his way to Logan's trailer to find answers when he saw Johnny and Christi kissing by the road.

"Shit!" Johnny cried.

"What'll we do?" asked Christi.

"We run!"

The sheriff came to a screeching halt nearby as Johnny and Christi ran. He got out. He had seen the two, their green skin, their sickening looks. He asked himself, "What the hell are those?"

He got out of his car and yelled at them to stop, but Johnny and Christi didn't stop. The sheriff chased them into a nearby stand of trees.

"I don't think we can get away," said Johnny as they ran. "We have to distract him, maybe hurt him so he won't be able to follow us."

"Don't kill him, Johnny!" demanded Christi.

"I don't plan to," answered Johnny.

They ducked behind a large oak tree.

The sheriff came running up. He said, "I know you're behind there, come out!"

Johnny whispered Christi to stay behind the tree and he stepped out. The sheriff shined his flashlight in Johnny's eyes and gasped at the horror there. Without thought, he pulled his service revolver and fired five times before he realized all five shots hit Johnny in the chest but he reacted in no way. He could hear Christi screaming behind the tree.

"Give me the gun, officer," said Johnny as he walked slowly towards the sheriff, his hands up as though giving himself up,

The sheriff said, "What the hell are you?"

"I yam what I yam," Johnny mimicked a favorite cartoon. He drew closer to the sheriff and called to Christi, "It's okay, sweetie. Come out."

Johnny grabbed the sheriff's wrists and kicked him in the crotch so he fell to his knees.

Christi came out from behind the tree and drew near. Johnny squeezed the sheriff's wrist and said, "Drop the gun. Let me have the gun."

The sheriff looked at the nearing Christi and was revolted. His hand lifted once more, bringing the gun up. He fired his last round.

The bullet caught Christi in the forehead. Her head whipped back, her eyes rolled back and her body fell backwards to the ground.

"Christi!" Johnny yelled. He turned to watch Christi fall, then turned and punched the sheriff in the temple, knocking him out. He ran to Christi's side. He picked her up in his arms and spoke to her. "Christ, please. Please please please! Christi? Please say something, anything. Speak to me!"

But Christi would never speak again.

Johnny sobbed without tears for a long time. When he saw the world growing lighter with a coming dawn, he knew he had to flee. The sheriff's men would find the car. They would find the sheriff. They would find Christi dead for a second time, but he knew the factory would somehow cover that up, too. He thought about returning to Dr. Vamiel as he had promised, but knew that wasn't a promise he could keep. He'd be killed... eventually. Either accidentally during testing or to rid themselves of him permanently.

He kissed Christi on the head and said, "I'll forever love you, for realsies and for cereals."

Johnny stood. He straightened his leather jacket and his messed hair. He ran. He ran in desperation, he ran with hope. He ran with the intention of running forever.

## AT THE SEAMS

by Charles Shaver

The 1967 Plymouth growled, its tires gripping asphalt. The car's weight shifted as it came to a curve in the road and the surfboard strapped to the top of the car threatened to break its bonds and fly away. Stanley Finnley pulled hard on the steering wheel. The Plymouth screamed around the curve, tires screeching. The whole machine moved sideways a moment, drifting in and out of control. But Stanley soon was able to regain control. He stomped on the gas pedal. The tires gripped deeper and propelled the Plymouth violently forward.

Coming behind the Stanley's Plymouth was Danny Mercer's 1984 Toyota (???). It drifted, the tires smoking and rocketed onward down the street.

Clouds moved away from the moon, brightening the nighttime world below. With every new turn, Danny caught up with Stanley, his Toyota capable of taking the turns quicker and easier. With every open stretch of straight road, Stanley accelerated away from Danny. For the most part, however, it was a decently close race and as both young men neared the blind hairpin curve - often affectionately called Dead Man's Curve -

leading into an intersection each knew how each car responded to the final turn of their race would determine the winner of the race. If Stanley could get his Plymouth around the curve without slowing down much, he'd win easily. But should he have to turn too slowly, Danny's Toyota would overtake the Plymouth and then Stanley would have the remaining short length of the race to catch up.

Worst of all, the curve was high atop a cliff. Stanley would have to slow down to some degree lest he rocket his Plymouth over the cliff and into the canyon below.

Stanley then made up his mind, he would not lose this race.

They came upon the curve. Stanley tapped the gas. Danny eased his Toyota beside the Plymouth. Seeing the hood of the Toyota come up along his side, Stanley panicked. He slammed his foot on the gas. The Plymouth's tires squealed and smoked, turning sideways. The Plymouth skidded sideways off the road, into the dirt. Stanley thought a moment to jump from his car, but then the earth fell away below him. the Plymouth flew out into the night, its engine revving uselessly, its driver screaming and unheard.

Danny stopped, pulled over. He got out of his car and ran to the cliff's edge in time to see the Plymouth hit solid rock far below, a gas leak catch fire and flames reaching higher and higher into the night below.

Stanley Finnley was dead.

Stanley awoke three weeks later, renewed and revived. He found himself in a cluttered basement lying on an old oak dining table. He tried to rise up, but pain shot through him. Darkness flooded his vision. He lay content to be numb. He then heard a door, footsteps and then a voice, "Welcome back, young man. Let me get rid of some of that pain for you."

Warmth flooded Stanley's veins and body. He fell into a sleeping world once more where he remained another two days. When he awoke once again, a kindly old gentleman in a fine sweater complete with suede elbow pads sat at a small desk nearby eating a bowl of ramen. The old man looked up and smiled.

"Hello, Stanley," he said.

Stanley winced in pain. "Hey," he said as he lay his head back down.

The old man got up from his desk and came to Stanley's side at the table. He said, "How do you feel?"

"In pain," said Stanley, trying to take stock of himself. "Tired. Hungry. Very hungry."

"Good," said the old man. "That's a good sign - a sign of recovery."

"Why am I here?" Stanley opened his eyes and looked up at the old man's face. The questions flooded out of him. "Where am I? Who are you? What's happened? Where is this?" Then memories of his final minutes came back and more questions came. "Where's my Plymouth? Where's Danny?"

The old man raised his hand to silence Stanley. When Stanley was silent, he said, "I am Dr. Shelldon Winterwelth."

"This doesn't look like a hospital," said Stanley.

"It's not. We're in the basement of my home in Tuscola Canyon. I own about five-hundred acres here, a corner of which your Plymouth crashed on," explained Dr. Winterwelth. "I allowed the authorities onto my property. That was a most difficult matter for me. My past dealings with authorities haven't always been... pleasant. It's bad enough I've had to call out the police on more than one occasion about you kids racing along that stretch of

highway overhead, but this time they had to come onto my property. And, with my past, they were rather less than cordial about matters."

"What kind of problems have you had in the past?" asked Stanley.

Dr. Winterwelth sighed at this. He considered not telling Stanley, but decided there was no harm in his knowing. He said, "I've been stripped of my practice in this and many other states. I'm still a doctor, but I'm not allowed to practice in hospitals and there's specific things I'm not allowed to practice no matter how desperate the situation and no matter how life-saving my procedures may be."

"Procedures? What procedures? You didn't do any of your godawful experiments on me, did you?" Stanley became excited, nervous. He wanted to be far from the doctor's side, in his bed at home and eating a grilled cheese. Hell, he thought, I'd even prefer to be in homeroom right now!

Dr. Winterwelth, seeing Stanley tense, injected something into an IV attached to Stanley's hand that was strapped to the table. Stanley calmed down a few minutes later and listened as Dr. Winterwelth spoke.

"What I do, Stanley, is a sort of vivisection. A grafting. Consider it a kind of grafting of old parts and new to create something different entirely."

"You're a surgeon then?" asked Stanley.

"I am," answered Dr. Winterwelth.

"Please tell me you didn't cut me open."

"I had to, Stanley."

"No," pleaded Stanley. "Please."

"Stanley, you were dying. If you hadn't, you'd be dead now instead of alive in my basement." Dr. Winterwelth then became instantly angry. He said, "I've saved your life, you damn ungrateful kid!"

Stanley looked up at Dr. Winterwelth. Hesitantly, not wanting the answer, but fearing not asking, he said, "Will I have scars?"

Dr. Winterwelth leaned against the table on which Stanley rested, his face hovering over Stanley. He smiled and said, "I'm afraid there will be scars. Plenty of scars. You're not quite as you once were, young man."

Stanley, frightened and tired, cried himself into unconsciousness.

He awoke an hour later. The doctor had finished his noodles and the bowl was nowhere to be seen. Stanley eyed Dr. Winterwelth sitting at the desk, writing on various bits of paper. He asked, "Can I see myself?"

Dr. Winterwelth looked up. He grabbed a large hand mirror from off a bench and brought it to Stanley. He held it over Stanley's face.

In the mirror, Stanley saw the creature he had become. A large stitch scar ran over his face with a few more atop his head. His chest was a pattern of colors and bruises and stitching and scars. Stanley raised his head and looked down at the rest of his body.

"How was I made?" he asked.

"There are more accidents than you might expect on Dead Man's Curve. And a lot of kids come to my canyon seeking some urban legend about a haunted cave. They come here and, well, disappear."

Stanley wanted to ask if Dr. Winterwelth caused the disappearances, but didn't want to know.

Dr. Winterwelth said, "You are made of many kinds of kids, mostly males. One of your lungs is that of a particularly beautiful young lady that fell and broke her hip here in the canyon. I didn't know she was out there, dying of exposure and starving, until it was too late. I got to you in time, though. So by chance you've become my latest... well, my latest."

"There have been others?"

"Oh, yes. Mostly failures now buried throughout the canyon. But two others have come before you."

"Where are they?" asked Stanley, thinking it impossible to hide such conglomerated people.

Dr. Winterwelth frowned at this. He said, "That is of no consequence to us. Nor will you meet with their similar fates."

This frightened Stan. He refused to ask the inevitable question about what had happened to his two predecessors. He asked instead, "Can I have a bowl of cereal? Maybe some of that ramen?"

Dr. Winterwelth nodded. He left Stan alone to study the basement room. He spied a strip of cloth he thought might be hiding a small window. He thought then, if only he could free himself of the bonds he could crawl through the window and make his escape. He continued to scan the room only to find two very small security cameras placed in the rafters of the ceiling of the basement. He knew then any escape attempt would be witnessed. He wondered how exactly he would take his leave from his captor.

The doctor soon returned with a bowl of hot ramen noodles and a bottle of soy sauce. He gently removed the IV needles from Stan's hand. He glowered at the young man, asking, "You won't give me any problems should I loosen these bonds, now will you?"

Stan shook his head. "I'm too hungry to try anything."

Dr. Winterwelth then knew Stan at least had thought of escape. He hesitated a moment before thinking escape a natural course of thought. He went to the desk and pulled from its drawer a Smith & Wesson Police Chief (???) .38 Special revolver. He placed it in his pants pocket and said, "I would suggest you not try anything." He then unfastened the straps holding Stan's arms, chest and legs down.

Stan sat up. He was allowed to sit at the desk to eat while Dr. Winterwelth sat atop the dining table to watch over his specimen.

"Do you have any chop sticks?" Stan asked.

"No," said Dr. Winterwelth. "Why should you need those?"

"I usually eat ramen with chop sticks, not a fork."

"I see," said the doctor. "Well, I don't have any. Tell me, boy, of your interests. I found a shattered surfboard near your car's wreckage. I assume then you surf?"

Stan shoveled a forkful of ramen into his mouth and nodded. He chewed, swallowed some of it and said, "Did you find my skateboard and guitar in the trunk?"

Dr. Winterwelth shook his head. "I'm afraid I didn't rummage through your car more than I needed to retrieve you."

"That sucks," said Stan. "I had a fine-assed acoustic-electric Alvarez in the trunk."

"I doubt it survived. I'm surprised you did. And if it did, it would be in the possession of the police now."

Stan ate, finding it difficult to sit up. He was yet weary from the multiple surgeries and drugs. He then asked, "How did the cops react to not finding a body in the Plymouth? How did you hide me?"

"Oh, they found a body," said Dr. Winterwelth. "As I said, there have been others before you, only two were successful. The one just before you was a failure. There was a mishap with a mixture of alchemical fluids. It... deformed the poor boy. His corpse was found in place of yours, burned beyond recognition."

"What about DNA testing? All that scientific stuff?" asked Stan.

"It could prove the corpse they have an imposter, but there's a matter you don't understand about science: it costs money. And in these times money is not spent by public services, like police, unless it is universally demanded. I doubt the DNA test will ever take place unless your family kicks up a real funk about it."

Stan rolled this over in his mind. He said, "All I've got is an uncle I live with. He's a drunkard and a pretty good guy. He knows I race. I doubt it'll even occur to him to ask for such a thing."

"You haven't any parents?" asked Dr. Winterwelth.

Stan stopped his eating. He gazed into his bowl of remaining ramen, then at the doctor. He said, "They died two years ago in a car accident. A drunk driver swerved and hit them."

"I see," said the doctor. "Had you been drinking the night of your crash?"

Stan shook his head. "I don't drink. Or smoke or do drugs. For obvious reasons."

Dr. Winterwelth nodded his understanding.

Stan's vision blurred. He said, "I think I should lie down again."

Dr. Winterwelth helped him to the table. He strapped Stan down once again, but this time brought for him a pillow for his head and a blanket to cover him.

"I'll get you some clothes. What size are you?"

"Large," said Stan before he passed out.

Stan's recovery went on in this way for a few days more. Dr. Winterwelth went to a Salvation Army to purchased clothing for Stan. He got for him a few articles he might like, t-shirts with surfers and sunsets and skateboards on them. He also found a pair of jeans with a Fender patch on them. He knew Fender was a guitar maker, but wasn't certain if Stan would like them. He also bought for Stan a plain gray hoodie. Stan was pleased with them, with all the clothing.

"I'm sorry the hoodie is so plain," said Dr. Winterwelth. "It's the only large they had."

Stan said, "No, it's fine. Actually, if you have any markers or paints or something, I can decorate it myself."

Stan dug through his house and found markers of six different colors. He handed them over to Stan and each day, as Dr. Winterwelth ran tests on him, Stan would sit with his markers and hoodie, drawing out different scenes and writing different words. In a burst of inspiration, Stan wrote down the right sleeve, "Monster".

Seeing this, Dr. Winterwelth said, "That's not very kind, Stan. You're not a monster. You're far from it. You're a kindly young man for my money. You shouldn't feel down about your new form."

"I didn't mean it as a degrading thing," said Stan. "Actually, I guess I kinda meant it as an homage. Like I'm taking hold of my new form."

Dr. Winterwelth smiled at this. He said, "It's still a horrible connection to be made, though."

Across the back of the hoodie, Stan wrote in large letters "Death or Glory". He decorated the hoodie with skulls and stripes, stars and guitars.

"Death or glory?" asked Dr. Winterwelth.

Stan shrugged. "You know, it means like 'don't sit still' or accept the mediocre. Go all out for either death or for glory."

Dr. Winterwelth nodded his approval. "I suppose," he said, "you and I have a kinship in that."

It was many more days before Dr. Winterwelth allowed Stan to sleep in the basement without tying him down. "I think you've proven yourself trustworthy," he said to Stan.

Stan merely nodded, happy to be able to sleep with more comfort, without drugs; to be able to use the bathroom in the basement and launder

his clothes in the connected utility room. As he fell asleep that night, he continued to wonder how he would make his escape. "It would seem," he thought to himself, "my only way out would cause confrontation. Perhaps, then, I should go right to the source of my imprisonment and simply confront Dr. Winterwelth outright."

For the next two days, Stan saw and heard nothing of Dr. Winterwelth. The doctor had left bread and peanut butter and jelly for Stan to survive on. Stan checked the door leading out of the basement in the afternoon on the second day, but it was locked tightly. He thought he could hear some far off engine running, but wasn't certain. He wondered if the doctor had some other experiment he was tending to in another part of the house.

Early in the morning on the third day, Dr. Winterwelth returned to Stan's side, checking in on him. "How are you, young man?" he asked.

"I'm okay," said Stan, though he thought the doctor looked very tired and perhaps sick.

"I'm sorry I was away from you for so long," said Dr. Winterwelth. "I had other pressing matters to attend to outside the home. Matters that

have left me disheveled and in need of some rest. I'll not be bothering you much today, I suspect."

Stan quietly chastised himself that day for not having made his escape attempt while the doctor was out of the house.

That night, he fell asleep thinking of surfing, of playing a guitar again and of securing his freedom. He awoke in the middle of the night with a strong desire to leave. He knew he could crawl out through the small window. He knew he'd be seen, if Dr. Winterwelth happened to be sitting at the monitors at all times. And, Stan was convinced, the doctor would most likely have alarms, motion detectors, some kind of alarm system. But then, with a simple alarm, Stan still stood a chance to get away. He'd alert Dr. Winterwelth to his escape, but would yet have a chance at freedom.

Stan decided for it. He would rather run for his life than fight for it in a confrontation with the doctor. He blinked in the darkness, wishing his eyes to adjust to the darkness. He rolled off the table, landing on his feet. He donned his hoodie. He bolted for the window, raised the cloth there and found the window nailed shut. He couldn't waste this opportunity. He jogged to a nearby workbench, found there a wedge and used it to pry open the window, breaking the pane and wood frame there. He heard the door of the

basement open and he leapt into the window, scared, ready to run. Crawling through the window was like trying an escape from a shark's maw. Jagged glass, wood and nails caught his hoodie. He tore away, causing gaping holes in the sweater. He kicked and was free.

He ran through the night, every sense overloading. His face caught became moist with night air. His feet froze against bedewed grass and stone. He could yet smell the heat from the day. His heart and feet pounded in his ears. He ran.

Then a new sound came to him, of paws - big, thick heavy paws - chasing. And an engine.

"Of course!" thought Stan. "Of course he'd have a dog! And he's coming after me on some vehicle behind the dog!"

Yet Stan had never heard a dog in all his time in the basement. If any dog had been near the house, he'd have heard it whimper or bark or running about. Stan had heard none of this. He turned to look, but only briefly. Moonlight glinted off a large mechanical beast coming after him and, most horrifyingly, gaining ground on him. It had the head of a dog, though welded of steel and wearing heavy goggles where the eyes would be. Its midsection

was that of a small lawnmower's engine. Its legs were large and looked mostly made of hydraulics.

Stan ran.

The mechanical dog pursued. It leapt and crashed down on Stan. The weight of the noxious beast was too much for Stan. He cried out in pain, his body yet recovering in small ways from the many surgeries. The dog sat on his back, waiting, sniffing with odd sensors. Stan cried and through his sobs could hear the slow churn of a small engine.

Then Dr. Winterwelth was kneeling before him as Stan buried his face into the ground and cried in pain and loss of his freedom.

Said Dr. Winterwelth, "Do you think you could get away? I suppose it's only natural to want to leave my side, Stan, but it's foolish. Where would you go? Would you return home with your uncle? I'll have you know of that pressing matter outside the home, then. I had left the home entirely, you see, boy, for I found out where exactly you were living previously and I went there. Your uncle should've been found by now or, if not, will be found soon I suspect. The authorities will determine his death came about as a cause of alcohol poisoning."

"You killed him!" cried Stan into the dirt surrounding his face.

"I did," admitted Dr. Winterwelth. "For the good of you. Your uncle represented stability for you, though he didn't appear much stable. But it was some shred of stability for you, some sense of family. And as long as he lived, so too would your desire to be free from here. But you cannot leave this place, Stan. You are not quite the persons you were before and you cannot return to your previous lives. I couldn't have that. All the trouble it would cause me? No, I could never have that. What I need foremost is your stability. You must remain here as my own son. We'll grow together. And once you've accepted your new life and have come to love it, we shall go to the world with you and show them what exactly I can do. We will show them I can do what I've claimed all along. We will show them I can save lives, save families, save people from pain."

Stan lifted his head and screamed, "I'm in pain!"

"Oh, yes," the doctor realized the weight of the mechanical dog must be hurting Stan. He said, "I can remove Franklin from your back, but you must first promise me not to run again. You see, young man, he's been programmed with every bit of DNA in your body. He knows your scents. He could find you if you were a thousand miles from here."

"Help!" Stan cried out.

"Help!" Dr. Winterwelth mocked. He yelled louder still, "Help!"

Stan cried, his back aching.

"You see, boy, this is my canyon. There's no one here to hear you. And only I can help you. Now, do you promise not to give me any further problems?"

Defeated, Stan nodded.

"Now, if you do decide to give me problems or to run, all I would have to do is say 'angriff'."

At this, the mechanical beast named Franklin tensed and gave a mock growl.

"You see? With that one word he'll do this to you all over again. Without that word, however, he'll be a kindly puppy."

"I'll not run," Stan said.

Dr. Winterwelth commanded him and Franklin stepped off Stan's back. The doctor then helped Stan up from the ground, holding him close, as a consoling father might, while they walked back to the house.

"Ferse," said the doctor to Franklin and the mechanical dog followed them.

Once more, Stan was strapped to the table. The doctor then worked through the night making molds of wood to be placed around the window. He then filled in the window with quick drying concrete. When Stan awoke in the middle of the next day, the concrete had already hardened.

Stan lie on his table, alone. He thought, "I must now confront him. There's no other way out of this. I do not want a life with him."

Four more days passed. With each day, Stan learned the routine, studying everything. Dr. Winterwelth now came into the basement only to feed Stan and he always came with Franklin. The doctor would undo his straps and hold his revolver on Stan while he sat at the desk. Once sitting, the revolver would be put away in the doctor's front left pants pocket. On the third day, Stan was allowed to remain without the straps. Dr. Winterwelth cleaned up his plates from lunch, turned his back to Stan and walked up the stairs with Franklin following behind.

"There's my chance," said Stan to himself. "When he turned his back."

The next day, the doctor returned for breakfast as usual. Stanley was sitting on the edge of the table that was also his bed. The doctor did not pull his revolver today, but Stan could see its outline in the front left pants pocket.

Throughout breakfast, Stan thought over how he should usurp the doctor. He could wait until the doctor had turned his back again. That was when the doctor would be most vulnerable. But the doctor might call out the command for Franklin to attack quickly. Stan could not allow a single second to be wasted. He would have to reach for the gun, pull it free from the doctor's pocket and shoot him. Which, Stan was afraid to admit to himself, would likely mean he would have to shoot the doctor in the back. But his own life, and freedom, was at stake. He could only hope he could live with himself after taking the life of another. Even if that other person was his foul captor.

Stan finished his breakfast. He stood as though to return to his table.

Dr. Winterwelth bent over the desk, cleaning up the plates, his back to Stan.

Stan lunged. He placed his right hand on the back of the doctor's neck and pushed his head forward. He reached at the same time with his left hand, digging into the pocket for the revolver. It was there, though now trapped against the desk. Angry, frightened, frustrated and with the doctor starting to speak, fearing he might speak the command to Franklin, Stan

placed his hand around the gun's grip, wrested it around to point generally at the doctor's thigh and pulled the trigger.

The gunshot rang out sharply against the concrete walls of the basement. The doctor screamed in pain and shifted sideways. Stan was then able to pull the gun free. Not wanting to waste much time, he raised the gun just enough to fire it a second time into the kidney of the doctor.

Dr. Winterwelth rolled sideways and crumpled in pain. He screamed. His pants and part of his usual sweater ran red with his blood. He looked up at Stan in fear.

Seeing the doctor's fear stricken face, Stan finally felt powerful in his otherwise powerless situation. He raised the gun and fire twice more into the shoulder and chest of the doctor.

Stan leaned back against the dining table.

The doctor slipped to a seated position on the floor, gasping.

Stan tried to remember how many shots he had fired. He thought he might need to save the gun for his escape. He then decided against it. He raised the gun and aimed for the doctor's head.

"Where will you go, you damned fool kid?" demanded the doctor. "Your uncle is dead. And now you've killed me, or nearly so. Will you go to the

authorities and say you tried to kill me? Will you confess to murder? Will you free yourself on me and this life only by running towards a prison? I would have treated you far kinder. All you damned fool kids try to escape. You can't escape your creator! Even the two successes previous to you escaped. One finally returned. And you know what I did to that ungrateful bitch? I shot her dead!"

Curiosity struck Stan. He asked, "Where's the other?"

The doctor smiled. He said, "To hell with you. I'll take that to my grave."

Stan weighed his options. He could leave the doctor alive, perhaps to continue his atrocities. Or he could end his horrors now and live on the run from the law for murder and from everyone as a monster. He decided he could not allow anyone else to live the life he now faced. He demanded in screams once more, "Where's the other one like me? Where's my brother?"

The doctor spoke the command to Franklin, "Ang-"

He never finished the command. Stan pulled the trigger twice in succession. He fired the remaining two rounds into Dr. Winterwelth's head, spattering brains and flesh across the front of the desk.

Stan looked at Franklin. The dog eyed Dr. Winterwelth with blank optic lenses hidden beneath the goggles. It then looked at Stan. He hadn't heard the command completed. He remained seated, waiting patiently and obediently.

"Will you come with me, Franklin?" asked Stan. He then said, "Ferse."

Franklin stood and walked to Stan's side. He sat down next to Stan's right leg.

"Good boy," said Stan.

Stan grabbed some tool. It took him nearly two hours to finally get the door leading out of the basement open, but he did. He stepped through a door into a world he'd never known. The house was clean and comfortable. It was a nice sprawling family home with two master bedrooms. Stan scoured the home. He found car keys to a 1973 Plymouth station wagon sitting in the driveway outside.

"Another Plymouth," mused Stan. "My favorite."

He then found a gun cabinet he broke into. He took a 12-gauge Winchester pump shotgun and placed it in a hardcase he found under the bed. He then placed about a hundred shotgun shells into a shooting bag along with a gun cleaning kit.

He packed up a bunch of food for himself into a Styrofoam picnic container he found in the kitchen. He looked at Franklin and asked, "What do you eat? You look like you have a small engine, so I'd say gas and oil. There's gotta be a battery on you somewhere, too. I'll try to figure you out once we get out on the road. I'm afraid we'll have to stay on the run for a while. I don't think they'll like me as a murderer, even though the doctor's death was justified."

He looked all around the house for items he could find useful down the road. He thought to himself the house was quite a place for a single man. It seemed to Stan to be more suited to a family.

Lastly, he found upon the mantel of a fireplace in the family room a collection of photos of the doctor and a family. He wondered where the wife and two kids, a boy and girl each, had gone. He then found a small newspaper clipping in a small frame. He read it and learned of the Winterwelth family tragedy. The family had suffered greatly after being hit by a drunk driver. Both children died immediately. The doctor's wife had lingered for some days, but died in a violent fit. Only the doctor remained.

"What are the odds?" asked Stan of himself. He thought of his own parents, then answered with some lament, "I suppose they're pretty good."

He commanded Franklin to follow him. He loaded up the station wagon, checked the gas gauge to make sure it was full, got Franklin to jump up into the front passenger seat and drove from the Winterwelth home, leaving the canyon behind and heading for a new life. Stan wasn't certain how he'd make it in the world in his new form, but was determined to do so.

## Iffy Reviews

Legend:

0 = Avoid it; 1 = It's worth a rental; 2 = It's worth a matinee or sale price; 3 = It's worth a full price purchase; 4 = It's amazing and is worth owning at any price

DVD = It's a movie; VG = Video Game; B = Book; N = Novel

Pick Up (DVD) - This is one of those bad grindhouse movies from the 1970s. It's an odd one complete with a clown running through a swamp. Very odd. It might be worth watching just because of the oddity factor. Otherwise, avoid it. Rated: 0

The Teacher (DVD) - An interesting movie that could almost be considered softcore. It's great to watch out for the crew 'hiding' in the background (and not succeeding). The story is good, though very slow. If you have a taste for these kinds of movies, I'd recommend it. Rated: 1

Best Friends (DVD) - This movie is odd, uncomfortable and its only redeeming value is its ending. Haha. Rated: 0

Saints Row 2 (VG) - This is easily one of the best and most fun video games I've ever played. In the end, it had me asking, "San Andreas who?" A great knock-off of the GTA franchise. Definitely worth owning, especially if you love open-ended games. Rated: 4

Trip with the Teacher (DVD) - When one thinks of classic grindhouse movies, this is the kind of movie that comes to mind. A bunch of girls are on a field trip to the desert and their bus is high-jacked by ruthless men looking for fun. The surprise ending leaves me desiring a lot, but it's a fun romp anyways. It's worth checking out. Rated: 2

Executioner 2 (DVD) - Talk about ridiculous! The Executioner cleans up the town using grenades and badd-assery. The use of the same explosion over and over is classic hilarity. This movie is so bad it's good, although not THAT good. If you're into grindhouse stuff, check it out. If not, avoid it. You won't appreciate it. Rated: 1

Sherlock Holmes (DVD) - This retelling of Doyle's classic starring Robert Downey, Jr. is pretty good. A lot better than I'd imagined, anyways. It was fun and, in truth, its sequel should be built up as a summer action flick.

Rated: 2

Badlands (DVD) - I watched this movie in preparation to film my own movie (still in the works as of this writing). Retelling the tale of a Bonnie & Clyde-like couple being chased across the Dakotas, this movie is interesting and well acted. I can recommend it. Rated: 2

Direct Your Own Damn Movie! (B) - This book by the genius behind The Toxic Avenger details a lot of the basics of movie making in a no-nonsense, wise way. There's a lot of advice you won't get in film school and a lot you will. Mostly, it was fun reading about the behind-the-scenes stuff of Troma.

Rated: 2

Weekend with the Babysitter (DVD) - This movie was bad and barely entertaining. Meh. Rated: 0

The Pink Angels (DVD) - Since first viewing this early in 2010, I've seen it twice more. This is an amazing movie with a ballsy ending. It's great storytelling and social commentary. Rated: 3

Blood Mania (DVD) - For a movie called Blood Mania, there's not very much blood. Actually, for a movie by any name there isn't much blood in it! A total yawn-fest. Avoid it! Rated: 0

Van Nuys Blvd. (DVD) - Another poor grindhouse film. It's supposed to be funny. It's supposed to be kinda like American graffiti. It's neither of these things. It's just plain bad. Pass. Rated: 0

The Pom Pom Girls (DVD) - Yet another bad film from the 1970s. Rater: BORING 0.

The Sister-in-Law (DVD) - The script on this one tried to be smarter than the people making it. Yeah, I said it. And I ain't takin' it back. It's not a bad movie overall and even had some decent cinematography (maybe with two or three scenes anyways). But in the end it just couldn't deliver. Rater: 0

Cindy & Donna (DVD) - What won't girlfriends do together? Modeling. Softcore. Drugs. You know what saves this movie? The ending. Not kidding. It's not a good movie, but it's not as bad as many others. Still, most people probably won't enjoy this one. Rated: 0

Black Dynamite (DVD) - Michael Jae White' homage to blaxploitation films. I love it and everyone in the world **MUST** see it. Rated: 4

The Babysitter (DVD) - Boring. So boring I don't remember there even being a kid that gets babysat. Ugh. Rated: 0

On Writing (B) - Stephen King's book concerning writing. I loved reading this. In a lot of ways it served as an affirmation of what I'm doing is all the right things a writer should be doing. It's also an intimate look at his accident. A writer writes. And when he could, he began writing again. Good. Any writer should read this. Any fan should read this. Everyone else might not care. Rated: 3

Dementia 13 (DVD) - What an odd, horrible film. One wouldn't believe the director would move on to such greatness. What meager beginnings. Rated: 0

Alice in Wonderland (DVD) - I pretty much have hated everything Tim Burton does when he touches other peoples' material, with the exception of Batman. I mean severely hated. Alice wasn't nearly as bad as I'd thought, but what a yawn. Seriously. It was one of the most generic versions of Alice I'd ever come across. BLAH! Rated: 0

The Thing (DVD) - I'm talking about the original The Thing here. The movie wasn't so bad. It was odd and intriguing. The characters weren't always entirely believable, but that was okay. There's enough here to satisfy. Science fiction fans should watch this. Rated: 1

The Hills Have Eyes Unrated (DVD) - I didn't hate this. Haha. It wasn't good, certainly not as tense or creepy as the original. I'm sorry, inbreds are creepier than mutants. But this wasn't as bad as I'd heard. Rated: 1

The Stuff (DVD) - I can't get enough of that stuff! Seriously, this is classic 1980s science fiction/horror. It's so dumb yet fun it's great. Definitely worth the time. Rated: 2

C.H.U.D. (DVD) - There's enough going on in the bad 1980s horror to keep you interested. If you like cheese, you'll like C.H.U.D. Rated: 2

Nightmare on Elm Street (DVD) - This is the reboot movie. I really enjoyed this despite having crammed elements from so many previous movies into this one. I also did not appreciate the play with whether or not Freddie was a pedo or not. If not, Freddy becomes a likeable guy. I don't want my Freddy likeable! I don't even want to consider it! Even though in the end it's revealed he definitely was a pedo. Still, it was an ignorant element to this movie that took me out of the whole thing too many times. Also, I'm tired of seeing pretty kids in movies with fancy new cars. Fuck your sponsors and producers. Find beaters and ugoes. That being said, it's not a bad movie and many of the deaths are creative. Rated: 2

Return of the Living Dead (DVD) This is one of my favorite zombie movies of all time. I love Tarman. I love Trash. I love the music and cheese and parody. Rated: 3

Smoke Signals (DVD) - What a touching, albeit quick, little story. I liked this one quite a bit, but it's not a necessary viewing. Rated: 2

Iron Man 2 (DVD) - This had everything a sequel should have... except an interesting villain. Favreau needs to realize heroes are only as good as their villains. The villains in both Iron Man movies have felt secondary to Tony Stark's showcases. Which, in Tony Stark's mind, they would be. But that shouldn't be the mindset of the storyteller. Rated: 2

The Snorkel (DVD) - This Hammer Horror classic has a dumb name, but is actually a very smart film that keeps you engaged. I'm sorry the girl told the police about the snorkel, but I understand why - otherwise she'd be as bad as the killer. All in all though this is a good movie. Rated: 3

The Maniac! (DVD) - The material's not that good. The movie is poorly shot. But there's enough here to start a franchise. I can see why it was successful, but I didn't buy it in the end. Rated: 1

Punk's Not Dead (DVD) - The online critics are right, not every band is discussed in this movie. But this movie covers tons of bands and political matters to make up for it. This is a great movie and pretty damned entertaining. I was growing up as a lot of these bands were doing their thing. I'm also carrying on in the punk tradition, in a way, with this ezine and going-my-own-way attitude. This is a good movie. Rated: 3

28 Days Later (DVD) - Yep, I finally saw it. I liked this movie quite a bit, but it got too odd and almost confusing once the characters met with the military. I got the parody, but the sudden shift in attitude and feel between the first part of the movie and the part wherein they meet with the military leaves the overall project feeling like two different movies. I didn't like that. Rated: 1

Fat Albert's Halloween Special (DVD) - I'd forgotten how poorly produced the Fat Albert cartoons were. Horrible. It was difficult for me to finish this DVD. Rated: 1

1 Down, 2 to Go (DVD) - What a weird, uninteresting movie. Rated: 0

Abbot & Costello Meet Frankenstein (DVD) - The banter! They don't make comedians like this any more and that's a bad thing. I loved this movie. A must-see for ANY monster movie fan. Rated: 3

Brotherhood of Death (DVD) - Three black men return from the 'Nam to fight racial injustice... with guns! This blaxploitation film is a classic and is as good as it is bad. Rated: 2

Godzilla vs Megaguirus (DVD) - This movie proves how good kaiju movies can be. This isn't the best Godzilla movie, but it's very good. Rated: 3

Rumpelstiltskin (DVD) - Think Leprechaun, except not as good. What you're left with is Rumpelstiltskin. The funny parts aren't all that funny. The story

is what it is. At least it doesn't try to be anything more than a goofy horror flick. Weird and worthless. Rated: 0

Creepshow 3 (DVD) - There's one story that's good: the story of the students that become convinced their old professor's wife is a robot and so decide to disassemble her... despite her being a real woman! Other than that, this is the second worst film I've seen all year. Rated: 0

Tombstone (DVD) - Yep, the classic Tombstone. It's great in every way. Watch it. Rated: 4

100 Miles to Midnight (DVD) - Sometimes I wonder how movies get distribution. This is one of those movies. It's not entirely bad. But it's stilted and poorly written besides being poorly acted. The finale is just dumb and idiocy for the sake of idiocy, although I can admit some might find it humorous and therefore won't discount it. All in all, it's not really a bad movie. It's worth watching simply for Zombie Jesus. THAT is an instant classic. Rated: 1

Deuce Bigalow (DVD) - Talk about stupidity for the sake of stupidity! Man, after so many years since I've first watched this in the theater, I still laugh my ass off at this movie. It's a classic. Rated: 2

Skinwalkers (DVD) - I wouldn't say this is one of the worst werewolf movies ever. It isn't. But it's one that shouldn't have been taken itself so seriously. There's so many clichés it's almost cliché. And where the script tries to be smart, it simple takes a slight turn. I didn't like this movie very much at all. Rated: 0

The Wolf Man (DVD) - The classic starring Lon Chaney. Man, was this interesting stuff. It moves well. It's acted decently enough, although Chaney isn't the greatest (but, then again, he's far better than Bela). A lot of the tropes of modern werewolf lore is set forth herein. It's worth a watch. Rated: 3

Bloodthirst (DVD) - I am furious that not only did this piece of shit movie get distribution, but there's a sequel. It looks as though Geordi LaForge video taped it on VHS cameras. It has some of the worst acting ever. The

storyline is such that it left me believing they made it up as they went along. It is, quite simply, one of the worst movies of all time. When I said Creepshow 3 was the second worst movie I'd watched this year, the first worst was this one. Avoid this at all costs. Go bait alligators with you hand instead. You'll have more fun. Rated: A BIG FAT O

## FALLING IN LOVE AGAIN

by Charles Shaver

He stood graveside, raining streaking down his face, hiding the tears. Only his sister-in-law had shown for the funeral.

"At least now she's out of her misery," said Helena.

Michael Milliner frowned. He said, "She seemed so happy and healthy the last few days."

"Cancer will do that." Helena stood closer to her brother-in-law, raising her umbrella to bring it above his head. "It'll leave you alone for a day or two, then it will take you away without warning. Our father went the same way."

Michael removed from an interior suit coat pocket a cotton handkerchief and wiped his face dry. He said, "What a sad end to such a sad life."

The corners of Helena's mouth turned down. She repeated, "At least now she's no longer in pain."

Michael spent the next few days in mourning, alone, in his big ranch-style home outside of Baton Rouge. He didn't do much in those days besides

eat and sleep. But soon he returned to his work, thinking work would distract his mind from his sorrows. He carried on with his work, making giant heads for various krewes and characters for parades, most especially for those attending the annual *Mardi Gras* carnival in New Orleans. After a few days of completing work on such a head, he turned his attention to the making of marionettes for an acting troupe that was looking to expand into puppet shows for local schools. He gladly picked up the work, making the marionettes to specifications and learning the arts of puppetry.

Two weeks strolled by before he completed this work and by then puppetry had captured him. How delicate the face he had carved from wood, how life-like and real. He imagined the marionettes, each of them, with their own thoughts, hopes and desires. Sharing in their creation allowed him to let loose some of the loss he had recently suffered. So much had he enjoyed the carving of the marionettes that he soon found himself carving another and another, then carving more beyond that. He wondered about to whom he might sell these marionettes, but knew he would likely find some small shop to sell them nearby. Or he could always sell them online.

After a flurry of making such marionettes, Michael realized it had been two days since he had thought of his deceased wife. Guilt raptured him,

sending him to bed for two days more. It was only Helena's visit on the third day that roused him from his sickbed.

She knocked at the door many times, each time becoming more impatient as fear grew within her for her forlorn brother-in-law. When he finally answered the door, she exhaled with a sigh of relief.

"Oh, Michael," said she. "I thought... I feared the worst for you when you didn't answer right off. Are you well? I've come to check in on you and I must confess, you look dreadful. I've never known you to be without a cleanly shaven face, yet here you stand with a beard as scraggly as an Appalachian wild man. May I come in?"

Michael Nodded, "Of course."

They stepped into the kitchen where Helena set about making a pot of coffee. She chose to use the percolator instead of the drip-coffee maker, filling it with water and grinds before setting it atop the gas stove. She spoke as she did this. "You mustn't carry on this way, Michael. Your life must be carried on with despite our recent loss. Why don't you go run some hot water and shave? That should make you feel the better."

Michael shook his head, "I don't want to shave."

Helena frowned. "I don't very much care what you want right now. What you *need* is a good clean shave and to get back on your feet and round and about. Now get in there and shave."

Michael frowned, but not wanting to arguing, he did as Helena was commanding. And he gladly admitted after his shave that he felt a so much the better for having done so.

"Good," said Helena as they sat at the kitchen's dinette table drinking coffee. "Now what you need is some sun. And I need to do some shopping. Fall is coming and I haven't much new to wear. My old coat is a rag and my skirts won't do in the wind. So you'll come with me and we'll forget our troubles for the time being and we'll enjoy the day."

Michael wanted to protest, but wanted even moreso to avoid an argument. He nodded, excused himself into the shower and soon returned in a nice dress shirt and slacks. Together the two left for the commercial areas of Baton Rouge.

They returned to Michael's home later that night.

"I'll admit," said Michael as they enjoyed another cup of coffee at the dinette table, "Our outing today was certainly helpful in clearing my mind."

And I hadn't realized how the company of another might help ease some of the pain. I shouldn't have locked myself away for so long, burying myself in my work."

Helena smiled and patted his hand. She reached into her purse and removed from it a book on death and the occult.

"Here's the book you bought. I don't know how you can read about such things. Just touching that book gives me the willies."

Michael shrugged. "It's just a hobby."

Helena shook her head. "It's a disturbing hobby."

"It's a part of our culture," explained Michael. "I'm looking for ways to cope, I suppose."

Helena sighed. She stood from the table and said, "I'll be back in a few days to check in on you again."

Michael stood and walked her to the door. "That would be nice, but you shouldn't have to."

"I will."

Then Helena was gone. And Michael was alone once more.

Two more days passed. Michael returned to his previous habits of not shaving and working tirelessly on marionettes. He longed for companionship once more, wishing Helena would drop by unannounced and earlier than expected, but she didn't. He read from his book, worked and only rarely ate. Then, when reading through his book, a thought occurred to him.

"Yes!" he cried out. "But of course! That's the answer!"

Michael immediately set about making a life-sized marionette.

Helena stopped by on the third day. She had to rap on the front door harder than ever to rouse Michael from his sleep. When he answered the door, she was dismayed by his disheveled look.

"Oh, Michael, look at you," she said. "You once again look a mess."

Michael frowned.

Helena stepped into the house without being asked to enter. She pointed towards the bathroom, saying, "You know what to do. Get in there and shave. I'll put on the coffee."

Michael frowned ever more, but he obeyed, not wanting to argue.

Again the two went out for the day, eating lunch and strolling the streets of nearby towns. But this time, all Michael could think of was the work he had awaiting at home.

As soon as he returned home, he made excuses about having an headache to chase Helena away. Once his sister-in-law was gone, he returned to work. He caressed from the wood a fine full-figured woman. He took a dress with lacy embellishments from his wife's closet. It didn't quite fit as he had made the marionette's proportions... bigger; bigger in the chest and hips. But the dress fit well enough for now and he thought he could shave or sand down some of the curves. Three days later, after much research through many books, the Internet and dancing about his sister-in-law's questions, he returned to the cemetery late at night. There, he exhumed his wife's corpse and took from it a single hair. He re-buried the casket holding his wife before dawn and returned home. He slept a mere two hours afterwards before awaking to weave the strand of his wife's hair into the horse hair he was using for the life-sized marionette.

With a dark arcane ritual that caused his very soul to tremble, he brought the marionette to life.

The living doll lay on his workbench, her eyes darting about with curiosity. He waved fingers at her and said, "Sit up."

Struggling, she did as she was told. She looked about the room with wonder. He eyed her with voracious glee and heartfelt longing. He asked, "Can you speak?"

The marionette eyed him, hesitated, then said in a beautiful woman's voice, "Yes."

Michael smiled.

She asked, "Who are you?"

Michael frowned. "Don't you know? Have you retained none of your memory?"

The marionette searched her mystical woody mind and said, "I haven't any memories before now."

Michael frowned all the more.

She asked once again, "Who are you?"

"I-I am Michael," with a deeply lamenting sigh he added, "I am your husband."

The marionette looked at herself, her wooden arms and asked, "Who am I?"

"My wife."

"Well, duh."

Michael reeled at this. His wife had never spoken thusly to him. He was terrified the wooded woman before him was someone entirely different than his wife.

The marionette said, "If you're my husband, then the next logical step is that I'm your wife. But *who am I?* Or, at least, who do you expect me to be?"

"You were made, in part, of my wife who has passed. It was the lifeforce remaining within her hair that granted you life. I was hoping you would remember all this, remember all of her memories."

"Well, I don't toots. *Get used to it.*"

"Toots?"

"Yeah," said the marionette. "It's a term of affection. Look it up." She eyed the smaller marionette dolls around her. She jumped off the workbench and walked about on her bare woody feet. She said, "Can a girl get some shoes?"

"I-I suppose you can have my wife's."

"Where are her shoes?"

"In the bedroom," Michael hesitated, then said, "Here, I'll show you the way."

The marionette followed him through the house into the bedroom. She picked out for herself a pair of black stiletto heels. She also ripped off the dress he had placed on her, saying as she did so, "Sorry, hon, this nicey-nicey stuff has gotta go."

She rummaged through the closet and brought out a bustier and lacy black skirt that was part of an old Halloween costume. She looked at Michael and said, "Ooh, kinky." And gave him a wink of her rotating woody eyes. She clothed herself as he watched. When done, she asked him, "What do you think?"

Michael hesitated. He then said, "It's a little trashy." He was convinced this marionette was a new woman entirely. His wife would only wear such a thing as a goof and on Halloween.

"Good," she said. "Now, what's my name?"

"I was going to call you Imelda after my wife."

"Bleh," said the living doll. "How very 1920s of her. Did she hang out with dames called Veneta and Franky, short for Francis, too?"

"No."

The marionette led him from the bedroom into the living room. She grabbed the remote from the coffee table, plopped down on the couch and said, "Well, I don't need a man to give me a name no-how. I'll pick one of my own." She turned on the TV and started flipping channels.

"Are you hungry or thirsty?" Michael asked stupidly.

"Just what do you think I'm gonna eat?" the marionette's mouth moved in arcs along the lines cut in her jaw.

Michael frowned. He didn't like this living doll at all.

While flipping channels, she came across a rerun of an old show about people stranded on an island.

"Hey," she said, "I'm like a marionette, right? I mean, the way you made me. I'm like those other dolls you made. Right?"

Michael nodded.

"What about the name 'Maryann'? Like Maryann the Marionette?"

"It sounds kind of cheesy," Michael admitted.

"So does 'Michael'. Why don't you go by 'Mike'?"

"Mike is the name of someone into sports and... well, I'm not."

"Not a jock, eh? I should've guessed. But, yeah, I like Maryann. Sure it's cheesy, but it can also be kinda classy and sweet."

"I think I need to lie down."

"Knock yourself out, Mike," said Maryann. "You know where the bed is."

Michael closed the bedroom door behind him. He lay on the bed all night, regretting the creature he had made. He had wanted his wife back, to fall in love with her again, not to make or meet someone new. It was an hour before dawn when sleep finally overtook him.

"Hey, get up," said Maryann.

Michael sat up in bed, fearful of the familiar voice of the marionette. He had dreamt in his short few hours sleep of destroying her, of burning her. He feared she knew his dreams and desires.

"Some lady's banging at the door," explained Maryann.

"Oh, no!" Michael shot from the bed to the door. He said in hushed tones as Maryann followed him, "You have to hide. Trust me, you have to hide!"

"Why? is she your new girl? Something you had hidden on the side? Will she go into a rage if she sees you with another woman?"

"No," said Michael.

"Then why should I hide from her?"

Michael explained, "You're a new kind of creature. Something different. Helena wouldn't understand why I made you. She wouldn't know about what a man needs--"

"What a man needs?" asked Maryann. "Say, you didn't make me to be a sex doll or anything, did you?"

"What? God no! No no no! I just mean she won't understand how you're alive and she may not be accepting even if I explained it. Just, please, hide."

Helena's rapping grew more insistent.

Maryann nodded. "Okay, I'll be in the closet. Like all good sex secrets."

"You weren't made for sex!"

"Sure," said Maryann as she closed the hall closet door and darkness engulfed her.

Michael opened the front door. Helena marched in and said, "You know the drill. Shave, shower, I'll make the coffee and then we'll be off for the day."

"I'd really rather not," said Michael.

"Too bad," said Helena. "Get in there."

Maryann opened the closet door and said, "You heard the man, he said he'd rather stay at home."

Michael felt as though he were about to have an heart-attack.

Helena eyed Maryann, "Who the hell are you?"

"The name's Maryann. Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Helena, Michael's sister-in-law."

"Could've fooled me. I thought you were his mother."

"Well!" Helena stepped closer. She squinted to eye the woody nature of Maryann. She asked, "Is this painted on, or some sort of stupid tattoo?"

"I'm au naturale, baby."

Helena, unbelieving, rapped on Maryann's arm. When she heard the woody echo, her eyes grew wide with fright. "What the hell are you?"

"A living marionette. My lover, Michael here, made me last night. And damn was he an animal in bed!"

"What? No!" cried Michael. "No no no! I didn't make her for sex!"

"Be quiet, Michael, I'm trying to build you up here," said Maryann.

"How on earth?" Helena thought it over, then said, "It's that occult shit! You've been studying all that occult shit all your life! I bet you killed my sister with it so you could make this... this..."

"Don't say it, sister," warned Maryann.

"This hardwood hussy!"

"That's it!" Maryann yelled. She punched Helena across the jaw and she fell to the floor with a screech.

Maryann towered over the woman. Helena backed away, crawling on the floor and into the kitchen as Maryann slowly stalked her.

"It's one thing to come in here and talk that way to your brother-in-law," said Maryann. "It's something entirely different to treat his guest and a lady that way."

Helena swept Maryann's out from under her and the living marionette fell to the floor. Helena stood, grabbed the occult book from off the dinette table and lit the edges with the gas stove as Maryann stood up. She flung the flaming book at Maryann, who ducked. The book hit the floor and the nearby curtains of a window exploded into flames. The room quickly filled with fire.

Maryann turned and punched Helena, knocking her to the floor once more. She then ran to Michael's side, grabbed his arm and lead him outside.

"Wait," Michael pulled away from Maryann. "We have to help her! She'll be burned alive in there!"

"So will I!" Maryann protested. "What do you think I'm made of? You want me to be reduced to kindling?"

Michael glared at her and she knew that, perhaps, he did. But he turned to run back into the house to save Helena. Only, he never returned. Maryann noticed people from the neighborhood starting to peer out their windows as the fire consumed the home. She took off her heels and ran. She ran as fast as she could. She didn't want to be nailed down for burning two people alive when, in fact, it was they who had wanted to burn her alive. She ran through backyards until she made it to the edge of town where she was able to easily escape through a nearby woods.

## FINDING BRYAN

by Charles Shaver

It was late at night. Stan was driving well over the speed limit. He wasn't much paying attention to the road as he was singing along with Jimi Hendrix playing on the radio. It had been three days since he left the Winterwelth home and he'd made his way as far as Louisiana. He was heading for New Orleans. He wasn't certain yet why he should go to New Orleans rather than some other city, but New Orleans seemed as good as any city. He didn't see Maryann at first, but caught a glimpse of her stepping from a stand of trees. It bothered him to see a lady walking a lonely old road late at night. He brought the station wagon to a screeching halt. Franklin tipped a little with the momentum, but rested gently in the back of the wagon.

Stan turn the wagon around and returned to the spot where he saw the woman, this time driving slowly. He looked out into the moonlit night, looking for her, but he couldn't find her. When he was certain he'd passed the spot he's seen her, he turned back around and drove slowly the way he was originally headed. He yelled out the window, "Hello! Is anyone there? Do you need help? I wont hurt you! I want to help!"

Maryann stepped from behind a tree. She stepped to the side of the road and Stan pulled along side her. He leaned out the window and said, "Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah," said Maryann. "Are you? Your face is all covered with cut wounds."

"I got into an accident a while back," Stan explained uncomfortably. "Do you need a ride somewhere?"

"Where you headed?" Maryann asked.

"New Orleans."

Maryann looked down the dark road and nodded. "Yeah, okay, I guess I could give my tired dogs a rest."

"Get in," instructed Stan.

Maryann climbed into the passenger seat next to Stan and shut the door. Stan hit the gas pedal and sped away.

"My name's Stan," he said. "Better put on your seatbelt."

Maryann did so. She said, "I'm Maryann. That must've been some bad accident you were in. You've got marks all over."

"Yeah, I nearly died from it."

"Aren't you gonna ask about my looks?"

Stan looked at her and shook his head.

Maryann was almost insulted. "Can't you at least say I'm pretty? Or ugly? Or pretty ugly?"

"Well, you're very pretty, but who am I to make a fuss over the way one looks. Besides, sista, I've seen too much to judge and too much to know the world ain't as wholesome and normal as it looks on the surface."

Maryann nodded. "I think we're gonna get along, Stan."

Stan smiled.

Johnny boosted a Ford Fairlane in St. Louis and was taking the back roads south until he could figure out his next move. He'd wandered a long time, learning the best ways to steal cars and live off the land without bringing too much attention to himself. He pulled into a diner about thirty miles from New Orleans, pulling up next to a station wagon. He eyed the wagon, thinking it might be a nice reliable car for his needs. He looked into the diner. A couple sat inside at the counter, their backs to him.

Johnny hopped out of the Ford he'd been driving and stepped to the wagon, his acoustic guitar in hand. The owner had kept it unlocked. He opened the door gently and sat down inside, placing the guitar in the

passenger seat. It was then he noticed the sounds of a small engine running, followed immediately by a growl. He turned to come face to face with Franklin.

The dog barked at him and Johnny poured himself out of the car, amazed at the dog that was defending its territory.

Stan and Maryann came running out of the diner upon hearing Franklin's bark.

"Can I help you?" asked Stan.

Johnny turned to look at him and Maryann stepped back in horror at his green skin. Johnny said, "I was just walking by the wagon, man, when your dog barked at me."

"Sure," said Stan. He reached in and patted Franklin, commanding him to shut down. Franklin obeyed. Stan then turned his attentions towards Johnny.

"You need a ride or something?"

Johnny looked at Stan. He asked, "What the hell happened to you?"

Maryann retorted, "We should ask the same of you."

"I..." Johnny hesitated, then said, "I was in an accident a long time ago."

"Oh yeah?" said Stan. "Me too. We're heading to New Orleans. I think I finally figured out why, too. We could probably blend in during Mardi Gras. The same might go for you. Wanna come along?"

Johnny looked at Stan and Maryann. He said, "Yeah, sure. Why not? Sounds like it could be fun."

"It should be. Get in back."

Johnny sat in back.

Maryann asked, "Is this your guitar?" as she handed the acoustic back to Johnny.

"Yeah," said Johnny.

Stan sat behind the wheel. "Just walking by, huh?"

Johnny, embarrassed, said, "Yeah, well maybe I was thinking of stealing your wagon."

"I'm glad you didn't. You know how to play that thing?"

"The guitar?" asked Johnny. "Hell yeah."

"Look in the back under the blankets. Don't worry about Franklin, he's harmless when powered down."

As Stan pulled the wagon away from the diner, Johnny lifted some blankets to peer at a small collection of three electric guitars and two small amps he'd picked up in his travels.

"No kidding!" smiled Johnny. "What kinda stuff do you play?"

"Lots of beach stuff, you know. Some flamenco. Classical, too. Took some classes here and there. How about you?"

"Rockabilly stuff mostly. Blues, too."

"Cool, man. Maybe we can jam along the way to New Orleans."

"Cool," Johnny nodded. "How about you?"

"Me?" asked Maryann. "I'm only weeks old. I haven't learned to play anything."

"You should," suggested Stan. "Music is the cosmic dance."

"That's pretty," said Maryann.

"I heard that once in some old movie."

Johnny laughed at his own thoughts as he spoke them, "You should learn bass to be our bassman."

"There ya go. Bass can be easy enough to pick up," urged Stan.

"We should get her a stand-up bass."

"What's that?" asked Maryann.

"One of those big, big, big basses. They look like bigger cellos or oversized violins."

The three followed around various musicians during *Mardi Gras*. They went out every night and marched along, playing. Maryann learned to play some rhythms from them both and they hocked one of Stan's guitars to buy her a cheap acoustic of her own. On one night, they snuck into a *City of the Dead* after hours and sat around talking about various things, including music.

"We should form a band," said Maryann.

"Ha! That's a thought," said Stan.

"I'm serious. We should go around playing. I bet we could get away with our looks a lot better."

"Yeah, look at *KISS*," said Johnny. "It was years before they revealed themselves without make-up. We could be that kinda band. People can try to guess if it's all make-up or for real."

Stan laughed. "A band. Yeah, sure."

Maryann and Johnny looked at one another, then at Stan.

Stan looked at them both and asked, "Wait, are you serious?"

"Why not?" asked Johnny.

Stan thought it over. He nodded a few times and said, "I suppose we could. Maryann needs more practice and on a proper bass. Maybe a bass like you were talking about, Johnny. And we need a drummer, too. We'll definitely need a drummer. Then we'll be set."

"Damn," said Maryann. "Where are we going to find a drummer?"

The next day, they pooled what little money Johnny and Stan had and drew up some flyers that read: "Seeking Drummer for Psychobilly Band. Must Have Own Costume and Drum Kit. Meet us in Jackson Square at noon today."

Only one person showed. He was a short, young boy. He came dressed with four fake spider arms hanging from his sides and he was wrapped all over in medical gauze. He was carrying a pair of drumsticks.

"Hey, I'm Bryan," he introduced himself. "You must be the ones looking for a drummer."

"How'd you guess?" joked Stan.

"I'm psychic," Bryan joked in return. "Man, your costumes are great. Has anyone else shown up?"

"Nope, but that doesn't mean you've got the job. We need to hear you play," said Stan.

"Okay. I live not too far from here. You can see me play there. Is that okay?"

They all agreed and followed Bryan back to his small apartment. He had done his best to soundproof the room with his drum kit. It was a custom kit, with twenty-two drums and three cymbals. His entire apartment was filled with monster memorabilia, the walls lined with monster movie posters. They gathered tightly around his drum kit. He played with his fake arms still attached, the gauze flying about his head as he played. When he was done, Bryan asked, "How'd I do?" knowing he'd played a good audition solo.

"Can we step into the other room and discuss this while you stay in here?" asked Johnny.

"Sure. There's drinks in the fridge if you want," offered Bryan. "Help yourself."

The three stepped into the next room. Stan looked at Johnny wide-eyed and whispered, "He's gotta be the best drummer I've heard since Kieth Moon, man."

"Or Chick Correa," agreed Johnny.

"I dunno who they are," added Maryann, "but he sounded damn good to me."

"So is it a yes, then?" asked Johnny.

Maryann and Stan nodded.

"Hey, Bryan!" called Johnny. Bryan ran into the room. Johnny shook his hand and said, "You're in the band."

Bryan smiled, tickled as all hell to be a part of a band. He pulled his hand away, though, and said, "Huh, your hand made my hand tingle."

"It's probably the radiation," explained Johnny.

Bryan laughed and said, "I see. Do you have a buzzer or something to shock me? Hazing the new guy, huh? I get it. Bring it on! I'm just happy to be a part of things."

Johnny shook his head and asked, "Bryan, how old are you?"

"Nineteen. Or, at least, I will be... next year. Oh, no... that's not gonna be a problem, is it? Like getting me into clubs and stuff?"

"No, no," Johnny shook his head again. "It's not that. I just wanted to know. Why do you like monster movie and monster stuff so much?"

Bryan shrugged. He said, "I dunno. I just always have. I'm just kinda weird that way. But you guys are the same, right?"

"In a way," said Johnny. "Except, you see, we are *actually* monsters."

"What?" Bryan looked confused, then smiled. He said, "Oh, c'mon with the hazing guys."

"We're not hazing you," said Johnny.

"These are real stitch marks, Bryan," Stan said as he got closer so Bryan could inspect them.

"And I'm actually made of wood," said Maryann as she rapped on her own arm.

"And I initially died in an accident involving toxic waste," explained Johnny.

Bryan sat down in a nearby chair, staring at the three. He finally smiled and said, "This is so awesome! I knew monsters existed! Now I'm in a band with three of them! Wait, wait... I'm not a real monster, though. Do you still want me even though I'm some goof with fake spider arms and medical gauze?"

"Trust us, kid," said Johnny, "The real monster is you seated behind those drums."

"You're too good for us to pass up," said Stan.

"Hot damn!" Bryan cried with glee.

"By the way, what do you do, Bryan? Do you go to school or anything?" asked Stan.

"Nope. I just finished high school and I came down here a month ago to find a job as a drummer."

"Down from where?" asked Johnny.

"New York."

"You have family there?" asked Stan.

"I used to. They all died in a plane crash. I've been living off an allowance from the airline. Once I hit eighteen, though, I got the full settlement. So I came down here, following my dreams."

"Cool," said Stan.

"Good for you, kid," said Johnny.

Maryann plopped herself down in a chair and asked, "So what are we gonna call ourselves?"

They mulled it over for some time.

"I dunno, I really like The Vandals," said Bryan

"But there's already a band called The Vandals. And we really don't vandalizing anything," said Stan.

"I do," said Johnny. "I mean, I steal cars. That's kinda the same. But we don't have to be whatever our name suggests. Not quite."

"Hey, what was that thing you said about music?" Maryann asked Stan.

"I dunno, what'd I say?"

"You said something about music and dancing. It was real pretty."

"Oh. Music is the cosmic dance."

"Hmmm," Maryann thought the phrase over. She then said, "What if we call ourselves the Cosmic Vandals?"

The other three thought this over and with each pass of the name, they liked it more and more.

All four nodded.

"Alrighty, then," said Maryann. "We are the Cosmic Vandals."

Each of them smiled.

Maryann smiled with pride in her naming abilities. But her smile soon faded as she asked, "Now what?"

"We practice," said Stan.

"And practice and practice," said Johnny. "Then, when the time is right, we get our first gig."

"Mind having some roommates, Bryan?" Stan asked.

"Of course not!" Bryan exclaimed. "I mean, I don't really have the room. And the landlord won't like it. But maybe I can get him to find us a larger space. But I'll work it."

"Johnny, let's go grab our guitars and bring them up along with Franklin."

"Who's Franklin?" asked Bryan.

"Oh, my dog," said Stan.

Bryan shook his head. "We're not supposed to have pets here."

"We'll work it out," said Johnny. "I've got a good feeling about this. This whole band thing will work out."