

Oddities & Entities

Roland Allnach



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PRAISE FOR *REMNANT: AN ANTHOLOGY*, by Roland Allnach

Finalist, Science Fiction, 2011 National Indie Excellence Awards

"Each of the three novellas is a beautifully crafted gem of a story." Douglas R. Cobb, Bestsellersworld.com

"Allnach's writing style can be described as smart, elegant, and addicting." San Francisco Book Review

"An interesting read. "Remnant", especially, is one story that all individuals should read and strive to understand." Amy Lignor, Feathered Quill

"Remnant: an anthology' will appeal to those who enjoy science fiction novels, particularly military science fiction. Allnach's intelligent writing style is quite appealing and I expect we will see more from him in the future." Kam Aures, Rebecca's Reads

"("Remnant") is a book well both the reading and the thinking that comes with the reading. If you're interested in a somewhat different tale of what's ahead, this is a 'Must Read'." Donn Gurney, BookReview.com

"Roland Allnach is destined to become recognized for his contributions in whatever genre of writing he may choose." Richard R. Blake, Reader Views

"With "Remnant", Roland Allnach presents three novellas that promise to haunt the reader long after the cover has been closed. A nearly perfect gem of sci-fi." Peter Dabbene, ForeWord Clarion

"With plenty to ponder and plenty to keep readers reading, "Remnant" is a fine assortment of thought, highly recommended." Willis M. Buhle, Midwest Book Review, Reviewer's Bookwatch

To all the little voices

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BONEVIEW

Before Allison knew the meaning of words or the context of visions, she knew the Curmudgeon. It was there, lodged in her earliest memories, the memories that imbed themselves deep in the psyche to shadow all future memories. When she lay in her crib as a pale and lumpy baby, she didn't know to cry when it came in her room, when it passed through her walls as if their existence were some unsubstantiated rumor rather than studs, slats, and plaster. And though at any greater age she might have cowered and screamed, in her unclouded infantile mind there was no reference for fear or judgment, only the absorbance of what was. Perhaps the Curmudgeon knew this but, then again, perhaps not. As the years passed, it was a matter of little importance.

She remembered her first years of school. She was different; this realization was as stark as the full moon visits of the Curmudgeon were fantastic. When other children clamored to play in the sun and warmth, she found herself possessed by an ever-present chill. She felt most comfortable wearing black, without perceiving any conscious decision to that end. She preferred to stay inside, or in places of deep shade or shadow, and gaze out at the light. It wasn't that she shunned the warm light of the Florida sun, but the glare seemed to scald her eyes with its white intensity. Her eyes were her source of distinction, after all. Vast for her narrow face, their luminous, sea green irises formed tidal pools about the tight black dots of her pupils. Her stare was one that few could bear for long. Children and teachers alike found her unblinking silence a most uncomfortable experience, and her mute distraction in school led to the inevitable conclusion that she wasn't very bright.

She had no friends. Her world, though, wasn't as lonesome as it may have seemed.

She lived with her grandmother, a reclusive widow of Creole descent, who wandered about their old manor house singing under her breath in her broken French dialect. Allison loved the old house, despite its state of disrepair and the ratty look of its worn exterior, with the few remaining patches of white paint peeling off the grayed wood clapboard. The oak floors creaked, but there was something timeless about the place, with its high ceilings, spacious rooms and front colonnade. The house was surrounded by ancient southern oaks; they were broad, stately trees, the likes of which one could only find in Florida. Their sinewy, gargantuan branches split off low from the trunk, with gray-green leaves poking out between dangling veils of Spanish moss. The trees shielded Allison from the sun, and provided a home for squirrels, chipmunks, and birds. The Curmudgeon would leave their cleaned skulls on her windowsill as gifts

when the moon waxed in silvery twilight.

Her parents loved her—or so they claimed, when she would see them. They seemed more like friends than her elders. She often watched them with curious eyes, peering from her window at night as they frolicked about the front lawn. Her mother, very much a younger vision of her grandmother, had long dark hair, hair that would sway about her as she danced naked under the trees at night. Her father would be there with her, dancing naked as well, the strange designs tattooed down his back often blending with the swaying lengths of Spanish moss. They claimed to be moon cultists, though Allison had no idea what that meant. It was of no matter. Soon enough they became part of the night, passing to her dreams forever.

The memory of that change was the first emotional turmoil of her secluded little life. She was seven, and her parents had come out for the weekend. It was one of those times when her parents sat under the sprawling branches of the oaks, drinking and smoking throughout the day until they lay back on a blanket, their glazed eyes hidden behind their sunglasses. The hours drifted by, and the day faded to the lazy serenity of a Florida evening. Beneath long, golden rays of sunshine they began to stir, rising from their stupor to a restless sense of wanderlust. They came in the house after dinner, settling themselves at the table and exchanging small talk as Allison ate a bowl of vanilla ice cream with rainbow sprinkles. They smiled over Allison's drawings, complimenting her budding artistic skills, and talked to her grandmother about some plans for the next weekend. Even at her young age Allison could tell her grandmother humored them. Her parents didn't have a false bone in their body, but they were not reliable people. Free spirits, her grandmother would say.

Yet as those thoughts rolled about Allison's head her eyes seemed to blur, and she stared at her parents with that unnerving, unblinking gaze of hers. Her heart began to race, her skin tingled, and then it came to her: not a shadow, but a different kind of light than the sun, a light that seemed to seep from within her parents, until the tactile periphery of their bodies became a pale shadow over the ivory glow of their skeletons. She trembled in her seat as the sight gained clarity until she could see all their bones in all their minute detail, but then it changed, changed in a way that froze her blood in her veins. Black fracture lines spread across the smooth ivory like running rivers of ink, until every bone in their bodies was broken to jagged ruin.

Her grandmother called her name, snapping her out of her stupor. She blinked, then screamed and ran from the table to the living room. Her parents and grandmother came after her, but she buried her head under the couch pillows. Despite the pillows, the moment she opened her

eyes she could see them, right through the pillows and couch, standing there in their shattered translucence. She ran for her room, scratching at her eyes, and that was when things changed. Her grandmother charged after her, following her to her room, and tore through every drawer until she found the small collection of skulls Allison kept—the tokens the Curmudgeon had left her. Her grandmother stuffed her in her closet, closed the door to her room, and sat outside the door. She could hear her grandmother's voice, even in the dark of the closet. She clamped her eyes shut; it was a desperate final measure to blot out the sight of her parents. She could see them, through the walls, through the floor, through the trees, as they hopped on her father's motorcycle and raced off.

She screamed for them to stop, but she was a child with a trifling voice, stuffed in a closet.

She cried herself to sleep.

SHIFT/CHANGE

"You know, I did this, back in the army," Eldin said with a chuckle as he rested against the side of the elevator. "Uncle Sam said that where my abilities was best utilized. Now who he to judge me? I guess seein' where they put me, they was sayin' I got no abilities." He shook his head. "So what about you? Why you wheelin' stiffies in the deep dark night?"

The man standing across from Eldin shrugged. "I don't know," he said with a confused look, "but I'm here now."

Eldin laughed. "The man don't even know why he here! Boy, you look like you fell from the sky and hit every branch on the way down. Now, what you say your name was?"

"You can call me John."

"You know, I had a boy worked down here before you, look like you and him could be brothers, like opposite sides of a coin, see. Is that the way it is?"

John shook his head. "No."

Eldin shrugged. "Well . . .okay, you know, whatever, right? He gone, you're here."

John rubbed his forehead. "So it seems."

The elevator bumped to a halt, and the doors opened to reveal a dim corridor. Eldin glanced at the paper in his hand before looking to the gurney between them. "Selma Sawyer?" He grinned, poking the body with a finger. "See that? Don't see that name much no more, Selma. Now I know this here is an old stiffy without even lookin'. So how about that?" he said with a self-congratulatory tone. "And the big men told me I got no ability. Look at that! The stiffies may be dead, but the story still go on."

John stared. "Selma Sawyer," he repeated under his breath.

Eldin snapped his fingers. "I know that tone, so listen up—she *was*, not she *is*," he said, guessing at John's thought. "Don't go weird on your first night, John-boy. Then I got to wait until they find another replacement. I hate to wait. Don't matter, though. Time don't mean nothin' down here. Way I see it, we either dead or soon to be dead, so it don't make no difference anyhow, right? Right and wrong, that's just a waste of time. Take old Selma here. Maybe she was good, maybe she was bad, but one thing for sure now, she dead." He grabbed the side rail of the gurney and tipped his head for John to follow suit. "Stiffy Sawyer's last ride," he said with a push to get the gurney moving. "Goin' to the place where name don't mean nothin', don't mean nothin'," he went on in a singsong and then fell into a hum as they walked the length of the corridor.

The lights flickered as a deep rumble sounded over them. It was a damp corridor, cold— more a tunnel than a corridor, despite the hospital's attempts to mask the age of that old path. It ran beneath the city street in front of the hospital, and beneath the subway line that lay beneath the street, to link to the sub-basement of an abandoned warehouse. The hospital, in its financial decrepitude and physical disrepair, couldn't afford to expand, so space was rented where forgotten city planners had once deemed it necessary to create, in the belly of the urban underworld.

As the corridor opened to the mortuary crypt John looked about in disbelief, to which Eldin simply nodded. "Lots of stiffies, John-boy. Got no family, got no money, and now got no life, so they stay here until the city come and do pick-up." He nodded to himself. "Lots of stiffies, yes sir."

John's eyes played across the little rectangular doors set in the crude concrete walls. His nose began to tingle.

"Natural refrigeration," Eldin said, pointing to their misting breaths as he picked up a clipboard from his small desk. "Always cold down here. Real cold. Well, what we got? Two months of summer, then deep-freeze all year? Ain't like home, John-boy." He chuckled to himself as he noted the morgue's newest admission. "Ain't gettin' warmer here unless Mister Devil-man decides to run up the fires down below, you know what I'm sayin'?"

John stared at him.

"Ah, now don't tell me you one of them Bible types," Eldin said with a sigh. "If you is, well then you be helpin' the Lord do His work, John-boy. He the Creator, we the desecrator; His makin' leaves a mess, we clean up more the less. Now what you say to that?" He shoved John's shoulder before letting out a great booming laugh that reverberated in the cold crypt.

John frowned. "I say we should put her away."

"He agreed to this?"

"Said he understood, said he was ready. I don't trust it, Pete."

Pete shrugged and rested his head against the frame of the one-way window to study the man sitting in the little stark room on the other side of the glass. The man—the suspect—appeared quite at peace as he sat in that room, writing on the legal pad Pete had left with him. "You sure about this? You checked?"

"I checked," came the tired reply. "Read him his rights and offered him a phone call. I went through the drill and he just sat there. Then he

looks at me, same empty expression, and says he wants to 'write my tale,' and that I should tell you he's doing it freely."

Pete looked to his partner. "'Write my tale?' Who talks like that?"

"This guy does." Pete's partner, Frank, crossed his arms on his chest. He looked at his watch. "Why do these things always happen at night?"

It was an empty question, but it lingered as Frank looked back at their suspect.

"I don't like this," Pete thought aloud.

"That's got to be the tenth time I've heard that," Frank said. He tipped his head to either side before his eyes settled on Pete. "So what are you thinking? Thinking we got something more on our hands?"

"No, but something isn't right."

"That's an understatement. The hospital has no record of him as an employee. We don't have an address for him. His prints pulled up a big fat nothing. Hospital doesn't have any record of an employee past or present with the name on his work badge. They don't know how he got the badge, but he managed to pass himself off as a legitimate employee. Maybe he's got a fetish," Frank said with a shrug. "Hospital said the last guy who worked before him got fired after getting caught messing with some dead hooker. This guy looks like he could be his baby brother, but the necrophile dropped off the face of the earth. No records on him after being fired. No family. Probably dead somewhere." He shook his head. "People are sick. Getting on a dead hooker. That's just plain evil." He fell silent, realizing Pete wasn't listening to him, his forehead wrinkled in thought. "What?"

"What's the chance of a hospital as old as that dump never having an employee by this guy's name? It just doesn't sit right."

"How's that?"

Pete opened his hands. "We have nothing on him, not a single solid trace of his existence. So who is he?"

At that their suspect looked up, peering at them through the mirrored glass as if there was no window at all. Frank leaned away in surprise, but Pete stared at the man, his forehead still furrowed. "He said something to me when we brought him in."

"Said he didn't do it." Frank snorted, turning from the window as their suspect resumed his writing. "Everybody says they didn't do it."

Pete shook his head. "No, it was something he said to me. I mean, he purposely turned to me and said it when I brought him in the room. He said he'd be going before the night was over."

Frank waved it off. "Head games. Where can he go? Nothing to it."

MY OTHER ME

The labels were distasteful, but their potential evolution perhaps more so: stalker and sociopath, sadist and murderer.

Noel sat in his car, alone in the vast, empty expanse of a commuter college parking lot. His knapsack was on the passenger seat and, resting on top, the results from the personality survey he had completed for one of his professors. It was supposed to be an elective assignment for an elective class, a paid exercise for volunteering his time, but those notions were lost. He had considered his misgivings, but he needed the money. When he sat in the computer library to fill out the survey his doubts had resurfaced, as his opinion of his nature wasn't all that positive to begin with. Intuition wouldn't let him down. He deemed himself weird, but the idea of being a threat had never entered his mind.

It was a small comfort. It was a big lie.

He shifted in his seat. Rain pattered on his windshield from the empty darkness above.

His mind wandered. An hour passed, maybe more. It was of little importance.

It wasn't easy being a math major. The classes were difficult, the workload was enormous, the international cast of professors was often difficult to understand, and his fellow students formed an eccentric breed. But even in that domain, he was a loner. He'd been drawn to math because he was an abstract thinker, but he didn't see himself fitting within the host of greater mathematical minds. Archimedes, Pythagoras, Leibniz, Newton: they were great classical thinkers—not only mathematicians, but philosophers as well. Noel didn't consider himself a philosopher. Many of those great predecessors were artists as well and, in that regard, Noel felt some kind of connection. But even there, it was a strain. It wasn't the subtle complexity of Nature's intricate patterns and rhythms that drew him, but rather the way things were connected—in a more precise context, the way in which things could be disconnected, to betray the underlying ligatures.

The world was a mystery to him, and he found himself as a greater mystery within the curiosity known as existence. The relativistic sense of his identity as defined by those around him gave a temporal sense of perspective, but that measure only served to reinforce through all its complications the very simple conclusion he'd already reached.

He was weird. There was no getting around it.

He rubbed his face and looked at the survey. How could he explain those results? The last thing he wanted in life—the very last thing—was to draw attention, and now he felt the coming glare of a thousand searchlights of condemnation. Even in the dark seclusion of his car he felt his cheeks warm as he blushed in humiliation. He was quiet, he stayed to himself, and he had no friends. He knew the common, inevitable conclusion to those facts was that he was weird. But the survey, that stupid set of questions that should have been an inconsequential exercise, was going to give him the appearance of something nefarious. His professor would see it, and the can of worms would open from there. There was no faking it, no going back to change his answers. The survey resided on the university's intranet servers, and had closed upon completion to forward to his professor.

All for a few dollars. If only he didn't need the money.

His skin crawled. His heart raced. He slammed a hand on the steering wheel and started the car. He wanted to get drunk; he wanted to die.

Oh no, there's something else you can do.

He slammed his hand on the steering wheel again. "No, that's got me in enough trouble already. Besides, I could get caught."

It's dark. It's late. No one will see. No one will know.

He frowned, debating with himself. His gaze darted about before he nodded. "You know, you're probably right. You usually are."

He drove across the university grounds until he came to a set of dorms and, once there, he snaked through the parking lots until he found the unlit corner of his choice, over by Hastings Quad. It was an open lot, so there was no risk of yet another parking ticket he couldn't afford. He turned the headlights off, steered to a stop toward the dorm buildings, and killed the engine. After several moments he opened his knapsack, pulled out a sketchpad and pencil and, leaning the pad against the steering wheel, flipped to a clean page. It was dark, but enough light seeped into the car from a distant lamp pole to provide an amber glow. He slumped in his seat and looked up to the dorm building, his gaze rolling across the windows. A number still shone with light as students worked into the late hours.

Which window is hers? He tapped the pencil's eraser against the sketchpad. She wasn't his girlfriend—such a thing was unknown to him—but she was without a doubt the object of his fancy, his Miss Moonpie. The name came to him as a culmination born of the circumstances around her entry into his life. He saw her walking across campus one day as he ate a pretzel, and he'd followed her every since. He

had no idea who she was, or what she did, although he guessed she was some kind of biology student, as she seemed to frequent the bio buildings. She often walked alone, so he decided she was single, and titled her with 'miss'. He often thought of her at night, when he felt most alone and desperate, so his thoughts of her were painted with the stark light of the moon. As for the 'pie', it was a childish notion, as he found her to be the only palatable thing in his life, even if his obsession with her seemed a rather unsavory thing.

But there he sat and, for a few minutes at least, he forgot about the survey, he forgot about his classes, he forgot about his assignments. Life could be simple; simple the way he thought life should be simple, between a man and a woman of his interest. He couldn't conceive a more common pursuit. In days of old it was a romantic notion for a woman to have a secret admirer. Times had changed, though, and perspectives as well. The survey drew a telling portrait.

He looked to the pad. He'd sketched her before, but there would be no sketch now. He was too tired. Before he knew it his chin sank to his chest, and he fell fast asleep.

The next morning he sat up in bed and stared at his bedroom wall before shuffling downstairs. The door to his father's art studio, the Inferno, was closed. It was a sure sign his mother had a bad night, another echo of the stormy relationship between his parents. Even now, with his mother alone, the memories welled up from the abandoned studio like whispering ghosts.

He found her sitting at the kitchen table, staring out the window, her hair disheveled and needing a good wash, her night coat drawn about her thinning frame. Her chin rested in one hand, the cigarette in her other hand a wilted chain of untapped ashes. Two plates were on the table and, between them, a frying pan with some scrambled eggs. An open bag of bread sat next to the pan. It was the usual breakfast, what his mother referred to as the 'psych nurse overnight special.'

He waved a hand to clear the smoke and sat at the side of the table. He looked at her in profile and, as his gaze lingered, she blinked and turned to him. "You came in late," she said, her voice hoarse.

He scooped some eggs onto his plate. "I was doing work in the library."

She looked to her cigarette and with a frown stubbed it on her plate. Another one came out of her pocket, which she lit. Her eyes narrowed as she took a long pull, scrutinizing him as his gaze darted about his eggs. "Is this Friday? You're going to that freak fest tonight, right?"

He kept his eyes on his plate, but stopped eating. "Horror convention," he corrected.

She flicked her ashes on the floor. "Maybe you'll meet one of those undead girls."

"They're called Goth girls." He tossed some eggs in his mouth. "And no, probably not."

She stared at him. "Maybe you'll meet one of those Goth guys."

He put his fork down and sat up straight. He stared out the window to the shabby mess of the backyard. His mother had a particular way of freezing him in the past, by heaping his father's sins on his shoulders. He had some odd memories from when he was little, times when he had trouble sleeping, when he would tiptoe down the hall to peer into the Inferno. It seemed his father never slept. Sometimes, Noel saw his father painting his mother—not a likeness on canvas, but painting *her*, before the two of them dissolved in a knot of naked limbs. There were nights, when his mother worked extra hours, that he peered in the door and saw the same scene, but with one of his father's art crowd friends. And then there were those other nights, when his father just sat on a stool, talking to himself.

Noel took a breath before meeting his mother's cold gaze. "I've told you, I'm not like Dad." He stood and put his plate in the sink. "Don't bother waiting up for me."

GRAY

It started with a speeding ticket.

Dave had finished a rough day, the engineering firm at which he worked plagued with the madness of looming deadlines and broken budgets. His mind was a dizzying swarm of numbers and three-dimensional projections framed about his obsessive tendencies, so he was never aware of his speed as he flew down the freeway until flashing lights filled his rearview mirror. The trooper was a model of efficiency, his crisp little statements and flat tone deflating any personal sense of urgency within Dave's chest. For all the rebelliousness his subconscious had relished by speeding, his conscious mind fumed at the inescapable tentacles of order that constrained such a petty outburst of his will.

He rolled into his driveway exhausted and exasperated. When he walked in the door of his townhouse he pulled off his tie, went straight to the kitchen, and opened a beer. A therapist once told him that he shouldn't drink, but he forced that memory away. Only after two long gulps did he care to turn around and let the mess of his living room register with his senses.

Snorkel, his cousin Peter, was sprawled on the couch among a mess of water bottles, empty bags of soy chips, and paper wrappers from Ray's Smokey Dogs, the outdoor cafe down the street. It was late in the afternoon, and the sun was still high in the sky, but Snorkel was snoring away, a wet rattle in his throat that escaped between his stubble ringed lips.

Dave was about to kick Snorkel's feet off the coffee table when a young woman came in through the sliding glass doors at the back of the townhouse. She was a curious creature, eccentric in her drifter's lifestyle, much in the vein of Dave's cousin. It was only fitting that she was Snorkel's girlfriend, but her bright eyes and wide smile were always there to welcome Dave when he entered her sight.

She gave him a lazy wave and giggled when she heard Snorkel's snore. She walked over to the couch, her bare feet silent on the carpet. Only a cropped shirt and a peach colored bikini bottom covered her body, leaving most of her lean, tanned frame open for view. Her name was Pixie. When she felt Dave's stare she giggled again, waving her hands by her head to get his attention. "Should we wake him up?"

Dave thought of the ticket. He hated his job, hated the doldrums of his life. He glanced at Pixie's thighs. "Let's get out of here," he said, and with that, kicked Snorkel's feet off the table.

An hour later they sat outside Ray's under an umbrella. Dave and Peter each held one of Ray's trademark smoked pork dogs, while Pixie got her usual soy dog. The breeze carried the scent of the Pacific Ocean, drawing Snorkel's head up as his nostrils widened to take it in. "Man, I love that," he said with a sigh. He glanced at Dave. "So you got another speeding ticket?"

Dave nodded as he chewed his dog. "It's a conspiracy. They're after me. I know it."

Pixie shrugged. "I don't believe in driving cars. They make people just like those hot dogs you two eat—processed meat stuffed in a manufactured casing." She raised a finger. "Oil for hay. Everybody should be horses."

Dave stared at her, but Snorkel bobbed his head in agreement. "Yeah, I like that. And you could pay some homeless dudes to clean up the crap." He sipped his soda and pointed his pork dog at Dave. "Look man, you have to use your head, you know? These guys, they got, like, computers and stuff in all their patrol cars, so you need an advantage."

Dave tapped his forehead. "I already have a plan. I'll slouch in my saddle next time."

Pixie stuck out her tongue before sharing a little laugh with Dave.

Snorkel shook his head. "No, I'm serious. Get yourself a radar jammer."

Dave's face fell. "Why didn't I think of that?" he thought aloud. "Oh, that's right. Because they're illegal, genius."

Pixie nudged his leg with her foot. "Or you could slow down, Mister Type A."

"Slow down? How can I slow down? I can't slow down." Dave shook his head. "Not an option." He regarded her, feeling that tiny tingle in his head that made him want to jump her right there at the table. Her life was so different from his she could've been from another planet, but that only made the ruinous temptation all the more irresistible. Her little sarcastic barbs seemed like open invitations in the innocence of her flirtation, yet it bothered him whenever she prodded him—it reminded him how uptight he could be when life got under his skin.

"I'm not a type A," he said, failing to keep his anxiety in check. "I'm not like those people."

She sipped her iced tea as she rolled her eyes in silent laughter.

Dave looked away, disappointed with himself. He looked over the evening crowd at Ray's, and soon found his attention focused on a little boy several tables over, sitting with his back turned to the table and the mess he left of his meal. He was blowing bubbles, giggling as they shimmered and drifted away on the breeze. The boy glanced at Dave and waved his bubble wand as one of the bubbles popped in the air over his

head.

Pixie followed Dave's gaze. "Do you want some bubble juice?" she said with a grin, even as he glared at her. "Even a type A can't help but be happy blowing bubbles."

Snorkel slapped a hand on Dave's shoulder. "Look, we'll go out tonight and get you something for your car. Like, super stealth or something, you know? I know a guy down the way. Met him on the beach. He's got all sorts of stuff. Then we can get some beers and kick back behind the house. We'll watch the stars, or the moon, or something. It's Friday. Enjoy it, man."

Dave opened his hands. "I bought beer the other day."

Snorkel laughed. "You're all out, man. I drank 'em down!"

ELMER PHELPS

I'm not what I would consider a 'bad' man. If you would only understand my predilections, I think you would see that I have a sense of morality. It's just that given my predilections—my needs—my moral perspective is perhaps somewhat different from what you would call the 'norm'. I have to feed and, until you overcome your revulsion for that basic reality, you won't understand me.

Common wisdom states the obvious truth that there is only one first impression, yet there is a subliminal truth of subtle wisdom that first impressions tinge all things that follow. An early memory, a dramatic moment, an indelible impression, such a thing can imprint itself on the subconscious lens of perception within one's mind, haunting every whispered thought and inclination, lurking in every shadowy corner of dreams and nightmares, hovering over the daytime world as an unseen, and barely perceived, shadow. And even though that memory may have conscious form, the roots of its complexity can delve the deepest parts of awareness to the subconscious core of the mind, mingling with the firmament of self-perception until the two are inseparable, linked in an inescapable cycle of cause and effect.

Elmer's first vivid memory was such a thing, a thing of black leathery wings spreading across his sight in the humid darkness of a summer camp. He woke to the double sting of bat fangs sinking into the back of his neck as he slept on his cot, gleaming yellow eyes peering down at him as pain lanced his body. His senses at once filled with the screams of other children and, as he rolled over, the bat that had assaulted him fluttered over his face before he swatted the thing in terror. His hands seemed to multiply over him, only for him to realize his sister had jumped from her cot to defend him. The bat swooped away, joining its fellows in a chorus of shrieks to escape the camp house through the open skylights. Elmer sank under his sheets, clutching one hand over the bite on his neck and the blood seeping from the wound, his eyes wide with fear.

His sister, one of the house counselors, stood by his bunk, waving a white sheet to get everyone's attention and calm the shouts and cries of frightened children. But when Casey turned, Elmer trembled, for he saw a wound on her neck similar to what he had suffered.

Five were bitten, but only Elmer and Casey had wounds that seeped blood. Over the next few days it was clear by the swelling, the odd coloration, and the short fever they both endured that their wounds were

different from the others. There was some concern, and the camp supervisors called Elmer's parents, but no sooner had the symptoms seemed to climax than they subsided, and with stunning speed the wounds withered away, leaving a pair of tiny pale dots where the fangs had punctured skin.

Casey took it in stride. Their parents held the opinion she was of stronger stuff than Elmer, what with his shyness and reclusive nature. Elmer was only ten, but he was inclined to agree. In the end, it was of little importance. He was never able to put his finger on the exact nature of it, but in the months and years that followed, he knew one thing for sure.

Somehow, in some way, he was not the person he was before the bite. Neither, for that matter, was Casey.

Casey was five years his elder but, in many ways, she seemed much older. Those years after the incident at camp were marked not only by her transformation to a young woman, but to a thrill seeker as well. Her grades at school soared, even though she never mixed too much with the scholastic crowd. Elmer had no idea who she ran with at night, but he knew well enough her growing habit of sneaking out after dark. Clever in her boldness, she remained a step ahead of everyone around her, so she was never caught, she was never punished, and the corner of her mouth rose in a crooked grin at the vague utterance that followed her in school: *Cassandra Phelps is trouble*. And though she never told Elmer the secrets of what she did on those late nights, she held him in trust. They were siblings, and she would often say they had no one else but each other as allies.

She was always quick to defend Elmer, as he was often bullied for his quiet, reclusive way, and ridiculed for the size of his long nose. Growing up in a small town was a savior in that there was only one school, with all grades in attendance, so she was there for him. On the other hand, growing up in a small town was a curse, as there was no escape into the senile mass of a larger population. The same buffoons that bullied him in his childhood kept it up straight through his teen years. He had no friends. He wasn't smart enough to be in with the brainy kids, he wasn't interested in sports, he wasn't tough, he wasn't artistic, he wasn't stylish, he wasn't witty; he was just pale, shy Elmer. He hated homework, so his lagging grades went nowhere. His only interest lay in the solitude of his walk home and the cramped basement of his parent's house, where he would hole up in comfortable seclusion, stretch out on a couch beneath a blanket, and doze before dinner while watching various nature

documentaries. When he turned thirteen Casey was out of school, and that only made things worse. The few friends she knew had some younger siblings, but in Casey's absence they were unwilling to rise to Elmer's defense.

Not that he asked for such sacrifice, or looked in vain for such aid. Deep down, he knew he was on his own. Deep down, he knew he wasn't like anyone else in that school. As the other children bloomed into their teens with the endless vigor of youth, he seemed to wither as the years went on, his pudgy body lengthening but gaining little weight, leaving him a pallid, lanky sliver of milky skin, so unlike Casey and her boundless vivacity. His parents took him to the few doctors in town out of concern for his health, but those 'professionals' only suggested he take more vitamins, and refused to consider anything of greater consequence. Small town; small minds. He took so many vitamins his urine turned fluorescent yellow, and then pale green. He forgot to flush the toilet one time when Casey was home visiting, and she suggested with a laugh that he work for the highway department pissing glow-in-the-dark road lines.

In the years after Casey graduated her visits were always a welcome and wary surprise. Welcome, as he knew they shared a kinship on some level perhaps neither of them completely understood; and wary, as she seemed to be drifting into ever more questionable pursuits in life. She'd gone off to college near the city, and Elmer often wondered if it was the image of the city's bright lights reflecting on the vast body of a great northern lake—just as the college's brochure depicted—that had somehow seduced her but, whatever the cause or the path, there was a growing flippancy in her ghostly gray gaze that both unnerved and thrilled him. She, too, suggested he join a sport to get some sun and strength, but failed to restrain her laughter at the silliness of the thought. It wasn't as condescending as it may have seemed because, with her, he had the ability to laugh at himself, and at the oddity he'd become.

One day, near the end of his senior year, he walked home on a chilly wet day to find Casey's duffel bag dumped in the foyer. He tossed his coat on the couch and dodged through the tight little confines of the house to find her sitting at the kitchen table. She met him with a wide smile and, after they embraced, she opened the refrigerator and popped open two bottles of beer. When he hesitated, worried their father would be upset if he caught Elmer drinking in the afternoons again, Casey waved off his concern and tapped her bottle to his in toast. "Drink up, milk-boy," she said with a tip of her head, and waited until he took his first sip.

He lowered his bottle from his lips. "What's up? Do Mom and Dad—"

Casey slapped a hand on the table, her bottle resting against her lips. She motioned with her eyes to his bottle, waiting until he took it in hand

before raising her fist and counting off her fingers: one, two, three, bottoms up! They chugged away until their bottles were empty, Casey slamming her bottle on the table a moment before Elmer. They laughed together as they exchanged a series of raucous burps. Casey reached up to pull her hair back and secure it in a ponytail, letting its brown length hang over her shoulder. "So how's life, Elmer?"

He shrugged. "The same, I guess."

She frowned as she nodded. "Still sucks, huh? I figured as much." She reached behind her to open the refrigerator, tipping her seat back so that she could reach for two more beers. She put them on the table and, to Elmer's surprise, she popped off the caps with her bare fingers. He blinked, his gaze darting to her smiling eyes. "Elmer, I'm going away."

He blinked again. "What, back to graduate school?"

"Screw that. Better. I've been recruited by an enforcement organization."

He coughed. "You're going to work for the FBI?"

She took a breath, studying him as she held her smile, her gray eyes boring into him, the fingers of one hand running through her pony tail. "Sort of," she said at last. "I can't tell you about it. Mom and Dad, either. Rules. I'm going to tell them I'm giving up on organic chemistry to join the field sciences division of a classified enforcement agency. It won't be that big of a lie, actually." She put an elbow on the table and leaned toward him. "I'll get to carry a gun. I'm very excited; it's very exciting."

He rubbed his forehead. "Don't agencies have rules, or something? I mean, you've got two drunk driving charges, there were the fights, and there was that time with the knife—"

She shook her head. "Not important. You'll have to trust me on this, Elmer." She let her gaze bore into him until he squirmed in his seat. "Elmer, you do trust me, don't you?"

He slouched and cleared his throat before nodding.

She mirrored his gesture before snapping her fingers. "Good, that's good." She leaned over in her chair to reach into the refrigerator and take out a plate covered in foil. She put it on the table between them and pulled off the foil to reveal a slab of uncooked cow's liver. The smell met their noses at once, and Elmer swayed in his seat. His mouth filled with saliva. Despite himself, his gaze was drawn, locked, onto that raw pile of organ tissue. It disgusted him, repulsed him in the same way the strip club by the train station and the seedy, seductive secrets within its walls repulsed him, even as the club drew his stare whenever he passed: the more he tried to refute his interest, the more it devoured his imagination.

Temptation.

He had no idea how far forward he was leaning until Casey put her forehead against his to stop his slow nose-dive into the plate. "Are you

listening to me?" she whispered.

"I'm listening. Can I have a piece?" he heard himself say.

"That's it. You don't know why, but you want it, don't you?"

He squeezed his eyes shut. Growing up, with his father's meager income from a plumbing factory and his mom's irregular pay as a substitute at school, they had survived on simple dinners. Chicken would come across their table, sometimes pork, but when money permitted his mother would buy some steak from the butcher in town and get it fresh, bringing it home wrapped just then to put it in the refrigerator. Elmer was always convinced he could smell it right through the refrigerator's metal casing, and it would make him restless for a sight of it, a smell of it, maybe, maybe, just a taste, a little taste of it uncooked, still red raw and juicy with the last remnants of diluted blood in the grain of the meat. But he would always get in trouble, because somehow his mother would go for the meat and find a small piece missing, and blame him, even though he never had the nerve to touch the uncooked flesh.

The room spun about him as the memories flashed through him. The trouble stopped after Casey moved out. The conclusion was, at last, inescapable.

Casey had stolen the meat. Why'd she do that?

She snapped her fingers. "You still with me?"

Against all his will, he felt his head bob in an anxious nod.

"Listen to me, listen to every word," Casey continued in a hiss, her eyes meeting his as his lids popped open. "Once a week, you need to eat something raw. I don't care what it is, what it comes from, but you have to eat something raw. Do you understand?"

"Why—"

"Once a week," she interrupted, ignoring him, even as he trembled. "Do that, obey that, and you'll never be sick again, never be tired again. You can be strong, like me, okay? You'd like that, wouldn't you? And the last week you're in school, when one of those jock jerk-offs makes some comment, prove it to yourself by kicking the living shit out of him, you hear me?"

He shook his head and closed his eyes. "What? No! I can't, I'm not—"

She took his face in her hands and forced him to meet her gaze. "Trust me, Elmer. I'm helping you in the best way I know. You have to do this, for your own good. Promise?"

He hesitated, but, in the end, the delirious fantasy of being able to stand up for himself was overwhelming, and he nodded, accepting the solemn oath.

She smiled, brushing the tears from his eyes with her thumbs. She looked at him then, her gaze full of warmth, before she leaned forward to kiss him on the cheek. She held there for a moment, the warmth of her

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lips on his skin, before she slid away to resume her seat. He rocked forward a bit, flowing into her wake, before his eyes popped open to find her waiting gaze. Her smile returned and, with it, she stood from the table. "Tell Mom and Dad I love them," she said, and backing away from the kitchen, grabbed her bag and went out the door.

He looked at the liver. He devoured it without a second thought.

APPENDAGE

Purity.

At least that's what the villagers called it, or to be more specific, what it sounded like to those not acquainted with their tongue. The word was ancient, passed down for generations, perhaps extending to the time of the step-pyramid builders and their mysterious mountaintop cities. Randal never heard what the exact wording was, or what the translation might be; he had little care for either, even when times were better. But somewhere in those rugged tropical jungles of southern Mexico, in mist clad heights where only the slow Indian chants kept any real record of events, it had a meaning that went past anything he thought he could perceive.

His body shook with convulsions. His skin, becoming more stiff and leathery with every passing breath, pulled across his trembling muscles in waves of agony. Something would have to give. It was an impossible situation. He wanted to scream, but only a hoarse wail registered with his ears. His vocal chords tightened in his throat. His tongue flattened against the top of his mouth, contorting around the plastic tube thrust between his teeth to prevent him from choking. He could taste something, something beyond the bitter flavor of his blood.

It was a moldy taste. It was the taste of bark.

He couldn't open his eyes. Wide leather straps bit into his wrists and ankles as he contorted in the peak of the convulsions. The pain in his side was unbearable. The pressure building inside his abdomen was mounting, mounting—*Christ, let it pop already!*

He slammed his head against the metal table that served as his confinement.

How did it all go so wrong?

It was a pointless thought, but it was a desperate thought as well. He knew the answer, knew it from having seen it in the eyes of those in the past who had the misfortune of crossing his path. The convulsions eased as it came to him. It was a simple thought, and he liked to keep things simple.

It all looks easy until things fall apart.

It was supposed to be a simple job.

Don't break the box.

His operational parameters were non-existent. He could do whatever he wanted. The pay was outrageous. Besides, he'd always liked the

jungle. The jungle was primitive. The jungle was lawless in one way, ordered in another way. Predators could set the tone. It was perfect.

There was only one condition. The jungle, too, had its delineated borders.

Don't break the box.

He was flying one of those rickety little single-prop planes, a little Cessna type that looked like somebody with a box of toothpicks and a bottle of whiskey built it in a garage. It was most likely a stray AK47 round that hit the engine and took it out. It wasn't important, but when the cockpit filled with smoke and the plane began to lose altitude, all his attention was consumed with trying to find a place to ditch. He was in the mountains. He couldn't see. The wings scraped the treetops, and then the world disintegrated around him in a deafening crack and crash of spars and branches. His body was slammed about as the cockpit tumbled through the various tiers of jungle growth until everything came to a sudden, violent halt in an eruption of water.

The cockpit flooded and sank in a muddy river, taking him with it. That's when he tasted *it*, knew it by taste from having smelled it before. And despite everything else, that was the moment he started to panic.

The box broke.

Randal massaged his forehead, trying to quell his lingering headache. The ache only served to remind him of the odd reality before him. He dropped his hand and found his voice.

"How'd you find me?"

Jonah tipped his head back, his eyes hidden behind his sunglasses as he looked up to the brilliant Miami sky. Two plates of hammered Cuban steak and fried plantains sat on their table. The aroma of the steaks, their thin tender length sizzling with exotic seasonings, was a good match to the whiskey in Randal's glass. He swirled the glass, the ice cubes within clanking about.

He didn't expect to see Jonah. His cell phone, the one where he took his work calls, had beeped the night before. He knew the routine. He went to the restaurant at lunch. He ordered two meals. Felix, his handler, would send a contact for a potential employer to sit with him, and terms would be discussed. Simple.

Jonah looked to him and smiled. It was not a friendly smile. "Is it so tough to talk to me?"

Randal shook his head. "Get over yourself. I paid your mother every penny I ever owed, on time and without fail. You know me. Low profile. Not interested in legal problems. Judges, they want explanations."

Jonah leaned over his plate. He waved a hand to waft the aroma of the steak, bobbing his head in appreciation. Instead of eating, he leaned back in his chair and looked to the luxury yachts docked across the inner bay of the city. "Which one is yours?"

Randal blew out a breath. "Okay, so you know about the boat."

"It surprised me. I never pictured you on the water."

"Boating is for idiots. You know what aviators say about floating. Anything you can do when you're dead can't be that hard to do when you're alive."

Jonah's condescending smile returned. "Another philosophical gem."

Randal picked up his fork and pointed it at Jonah before spearing a strip of steak. "I paid for that college degree of yours, so you can take that self-satisfied smirk and shove it up your ass." He tossed the meat in his mouth and kept a steady stare on his son as he chewed.

Jonah leaned on the table with his elbows. He held for a moment, both his and Randal's eyes locked in hidden scrutiny behind the darkened lenses of their sunglasses until Jonah took his off. He narrowed his eyes against the glare of the sun. "I'm in a position to offer you a job."

Randal stopped chewing, his gaze darting about in sudden suspicion. "I thought you were a pharmacist?"

Jonah raised a finger. "Doctorate in pharmacology and biochemistry. I design the medications people get from their doctors."

Randal let out a short laugh. "Then there's nothing to talk about. I don't need a job counting pills." He looked up, his calculating mind derailed by the surprise of being contacted by his son. He took a breath and gathered his wits. "You came to contract me," he thought aloud. "So tell me. How does your world cross paths with anyone in my world?"

"We aren't always well received in the locales where we do field research, despite our investment—"

"Bribes?" Randal guessed, waving his fork at Jonah.

Jonah ignored him. "Despite our investments with the resident population. Even our field research entails installation of significant mobile infrastructure. There is intellectual property as well. All of it needs to be protected."

"Ah, now I see. Security work. Calling on the old man for some muscle?"

"Doctorate in pharmacology and biochemistry," Jonah repeated. "You said yourself I was too smart to get my hands dirty."

Randal's face went still as stone. "There's all kinds of dirt. I've seen them all."

Jonah didn't waver. "We're going off topic. In the circles of contract security you were recommended. I was told to give you a particular word so you would understand."

Randal waved a fork at his son. "And that's it? No terms? I don't work that way. We talk terms, we talk money, we reach an agreement, or we walk away from each other. No exceptions."

Jonah was about to smile, but licked his lips instead. He watched his father loft another slice of meat in his mouth before letting the word fall between them.

"Randy."

Randal stopped short, but then started to laugh. "That son-of-a-bitch."

About the Author



Roland Allnach, after working twenty years on the night shift in a hospital, has witnessed life from a slightly different angle. He has been working to develop his writing career, drawing creatively from literary classics, history, and mythology. His short stories, one of which was nominated for the Pushcart Prize, have appeared in several publications. His first anthology, 'Remnant', saw publication in 2010. It has since gone on to critical acclaim and placed as a Finalist/Science Fiction in the 2011 National Indie Excellence Awards. 'Oddities & Entities' marks his second stand alone publication.

When not immersed in his imagination, he can be found at his website, rolandallnach.com, along with his published stories. Writing aside, his joy in life is the time he spends with his family.

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