

INTRODUCTION

“Lee, why is your fiction so dark?” a reader once asked. Good question. Why *is* my fiction so dark?

Despite my photogenic smile on the back cover, I’ve endured a life-long struggle with depression. Nothing new. Writers and non-writers alike suffer debilitating moods.

Whether creative types are prone to feeling down, I can’t say for sure. But when inspiration is focused through the lens of hopelessness, in my case, dark fiction results. It’s the natural byproduct of seeing the world through an organic filter of horror.

It’s like one perpetual nightmare after another. You think you’ve finally awoken, but you’re merely on to another dark dream, one more miasmic tale that segues into one more diabolical debacle.

I’m also a happy guy who’s pleased to announce this collection of all my short fiction as of 2016—and a few poems. These pieces range from horror to crime, supernatural thrillers to dark fantasy. And a few in between.

I began writing a long time ago. “GTO Judge” first appeared anonymously under the title “Trick or Treat” because of an editor’s mistake in the Brookville *Jeffersonian-Democrat*

newspaper, about 1978, I think. I was sixteen years old then. That story went through a lot—and I mean a *lot*—of iterations over the next almost forty years. It appeared in *Night Monsters* for Kindle in 2013. In the story, Justin wants to be cool like Drew, so he tags along to throw corn at cars on Halloween night. When a 1970 GTO Judge stops on the country road and its ghastly occupants pursue them, he wishes he'd gone trick-or-treating instead.

Another early story, never-before published, is “The Summer House.” Greg is haunted by what happened thirteen years ago. He returns to the summer house where he lost his sister. He finds her again—with a nasty surprise.

“Mama Said” was published for Kindle in 2013 and is by far my most popular short. On his thirteenth birthday, Buddy gets shipped up north by his religious mother, who can't cope with his sister's teenage pregnancy. As he resigns himself to spend the summer at Gram's farm caring for kittens and cows, his bitter sister Brinda arrives, ending his peace and solitude. When her boyfriend Jackie shows up and turns his attentions to Buddy from his bride-to-be, Buddy must do what Mama said—or take matters into his own hands.

“Poor Old Soul” first appeared in *Mirages: Tales from Authors of the Macabre* (Black Curtain Press, 2012), edited by Trent Zelazny. Nevah Stevenson finds meaning in her old age caring for an invalid and her great-grandson. Nice people, she thinks. Think again.

Along with “GTO Judge,” three other shorts appeared in 2013's *Night Monsters*. In “Keeping Cool,” after a late night at work helping hospitals handle the strange flu sweeping Pittsburgh, Terry finds he's run out of options to get himself home. Searching for a working phone to call his wife, he

encounters a deserted diner—and another way to stem the tide of disease. Chilling!

Wyatt is looking for a no-strings fling in “Savoir-Faire.” When he meets the beautiful and sexually voracious Natalie, all his fantasies come true... until he discovers that unseen strings are more entangling than he bargained for. This story first appeared in the anthology of horror and crime I edited titled *Thou Shalt Not...* (Dark Cloud Press, 2006).

“The Worst Thing” is inspired by a childhood experience and set in my hometown of Berne, Indiana. Petie’s first sleepover seemed like a good idea in the daylight. But after dark at Nate’s house, he can’t fall asleep. Braving the terrors of the night to make it home, he finds he must face the worst thing that could happen—and sacrifice what he treasures most to save his parents from a horrible fate.

Severed Relations outed some old-style pulp slasher stories in 2012: “The Butcher’s Reunion” and “Almost Betrothed,” both about “til death us do part.” A cuckolded butcher slaughters his wife and seeks her lover only to find he cannot escape dire and prophetic justice. And a timid woman unlucky in love finds the courage to break what her daddy thinks is a promising engagement when she discovers he’s Mr. Wrong. Dead wrong.

In 2013, “The Vacant Lot” and “How I Was Cured of Naïveté” came out in *Desperate Spirits*, the same year my supernatural crime novel, *Death Perception*, hit the market.

In “The Vacant Lot,” a supernatural presence beckons from the empty neighborhood lot. Calvin’s curiosity leads him to an aged portrait painter with a terrible secret about a dead undertaker and his missing wife, who seeks eternal release. A seemingly innocent spirit appears in the foyer of

Calvin's home in "How I Was Cured of Naïveté." When he discovers her fate, he sets her free—only to find that little girls aren't always made of sugar and spice. Snick, snick!

Two pessimistic poems are included from my college days: "Slice of Life" and "Country Graveyard." You've been warned.

"Stray" is a strange little tale that I published and then unpublished. But it's included here to make the collection complete—and to show you how weird I can get. Tad has a problem: he ran away from home only to find he has no place to stay in the big city. What will he forfeit for a bus ticket home?

"The Big, Dark World of Commerce" was my first present-tense story, but one of many dealing with mental illness. Will Mr. Claudera find comfort? Read it and see.

"Mixed Breed, Loves Kids" is about a boyhood pooch that's not so ideal as those in Scott's father's stories. This short first appeared in the mammoth 2012 antho, *Hazard Yet Forward*.

Nine stories are new to this collection. "The Summer House" was already mentioned.

"Alone and Waiting" could be classed with *Severed Relations*' matrimonial tales. Fia checks her house religiously every night, for she doesn't want an intruder. Or does she?

Debbie Antonelli is only trying to help her mother adjust to her father's untimely death in "The Gloves and the Glasses." When she learns what the neighbor man is up to, she realizes she's the only one who can stop her mother's nightmares.

"Vain Imaginations" is about an old woman's fantasies. When they coincide with a stranger's, the worst happens.

"The Taste of Lime" is a culinary treat, and that's all I'll say about this micro-short.

“Kevin MacGruder’s Last Gamble” is about a would-be dandy in 1863 who finds the wrong way to settle his gambling debts.

Another historical piece, “I’m Just Wild About Harry,” tells the saga of Mona Daly, who’s so crazy about her husband she can’t stand on her own two feet.

Stuttering birds? There’s one in “Chickadee-Dee-Dee,” who gives Maynard a run for his karma.

The collection ends with a ray of hope called “The Messenger,” drafted way back in the 1980s. It’s not horror, although some may think it’s fantasy. I call it reality and wish more people acted like Phillip.

Here they are. I hope you enjoy these early stories. I always appreciate hearing from readers, especially in reviews. You can find my contact information under “About the Author” on page 321.

Now, on to the nightmares...

—*Lee Allen Howard*



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